Letter to LAs: Management of asbestos in system built schools

I am writing to update you on the outcome of last year’s joint Department for Education and Health and Safety Executive survey of arrangements for dealing with asbestos in schools.

Local authorities like other non-domestic property owners have a legal duty to manage asbestos, where the local authority is responsible for the repair or maintenance of their non-domestic buildings – including school buildings.

The survey was specifically concerned with system buildings, and in particular those which have structural columns fire-proofed with asbestos materials and enclosed by metal casings or cladding.

The majority of local authorities responding to the survey were able to satisfy HSE that they were managing asbestos effectively in their schools. In a number of cases, inspections were necessary to obtain more information and provide assurance that the authorities were complying with their legal responsibilities.

Despite the broad picture of compliance, a number of issues have been identified that all authorities will want to consider. The enclosed report sets out important messages for the management of asbestos that are relevant across any school buildings that contain asbestos, and asks that you take the opportunity to seek assurances that asbestos management arrangements are effective throughout your school property portfolio.

The effective management of asbestos in schools is an ongoing requirement for authorities and other duty holders across all schools. Set out below are the issues that you and your senior management team can check when visiting schools or meeting with head teachers and primary contractors:

- Every school where asbestos is or may be present should have a site specific written asbestos management plan. Asbestos may be present in premises built up to 2000.
- When work is undertaken on school buildings the asbestos management plan should be made available to contractors and maintenance staff.
- Anyone whose work could foreseeably expose them to asbestos containing materials should have asbestos awareness training.
When a school transfers to new ownership e.g. when a Foundation school is established, details of the building stock and associated asbestos management issues should be brought to the attention of any new ‘duty holders’.

It is important to stress that if asbestos is properly managed, and remains undamaged and undisturbed, then its presence alone should not be a cause for concern. This is an important message for school staff, pupils and their families, and your own councillors.

Teachers and pupils are not likely to be at risk in the course of their normal activities. Those most likely to be exposed to asbestos are tradesmen, including potentially school caretakers, who could disturb it through drilling and sawing.

I hope that the enclosed information is helpful to you in reviewing and maintaining effective asbestos management arrangements. The information, along with a summary of findings for all of the education local authorities involved, will be posted on the HSE website at http://www.hse.gov.uk/services/education/information.htm#asbestos on Tuesday 21 September.

Yours faithfully,

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