



Work and Pensions Committee

House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 8976 Email workpencom@parliament.uk

Mims Davies
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Minister for Employment
Department for Work and Pensions

8 September 2020

Dear Mims,

I recently attended a Respublica webinar about UK policy on managing asbestos in buildings, in comparison to approaches in other countries, and undertook to write to you about the issues raised.

Air testing in the UK is only conducted when asbestos is removed or treated. We test using Phase Contrast Microscopy (PCM), an older method that cannot detect thin asbestos fibres which are known to be carcinogenic. In France, by contrast, asbestos management has long since been reformed. Routine, periodic air monitoring is mandatory. Transmission Electron Microscopy is used. It is much more powerful, and can distinguish between different types of airborne fibres.

France implemented its reforms despite having fewer recorded deaths from asbestos per year than the UK. ResPublica reports that the UK death rate from asbestos-related illness is the highest in the world. Deaths from asbestos-related illness have been increasing among occupations such as teachers and nurses.

I agree with ResPublica and the Airtight on Asbestos campaign that HSE's regime should be reformed. It should match best practice elsewhere. In line with its legal duty, set out in the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), to apply the "best practicable technique", we should:

- test routinely for harmful airborne asbestos fibres in buildings;
- adopt modern microscopy techniques for the purpose;
- follow France, Germany, and the Netherlands in adopting a safe limit for air testing;
- establish a national database recording the quantity, condition, and type of asbestos in buildings, as Poland has done;
- use modern technology - QR codes for signage, and smart phone apps - to store asbestos surveys centrally and make them available online to users of public buildings;
- embark on a risk assessment process and phased removal of the most harmful asbestos, in line with other countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Poland.

I support HSE's policy to "manage in-situ". This is pragmatic and risk-based, given that we have so much asbestos in the UK. However, we need better management tools and systems. Do you agree that the UK approach should be reformed?

I am copying this letter to Sarah Albon, CEO, and Sarah Newton, Chair of HSE.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Timms

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Timms". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the name.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
Chair, Work and Pensions Committee

CC: Sarah Albon, CEO, and Sarah Newton, Chair, Health and Safety Executive