

Written evidence from Asbestos Support Central England (ASB0008)

Asbestos Support Central England

We are a small charity working with people in the West Midlands and Central England. We have three staff members who between them support approximately 225 service users each year to apply for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit etc. because of exposure to asbestos at work. We also offer general advice about the hazards which asbestos poses and support people with asbestos related diseases and their families and carers.

- **What are the current risks posed by asbestos in the workplace? Which groups of workers are most at risk?**

Traditionally the people deemed to be at highest risk were tradespeople working directly with asbestos. However, although asbestos has been banned for more than 20 years, we are still encountering service users who were recently exposed to it in their work environment. A typical example is the man who for 17 years until 2020 was required to store his equipment and overalls in a boiler house lagged with asbestos. Many people still work in factories with asbestos rooves. One young mother in her 30s died recently after exposure to damaged asbestos rooves in two warehouses where she was a picker and packer. She has left behind an 18 month-old toddler. Her family are distraught.

- **How effective is the current legislative and regulatory framework for the management of asbestos?**

See above. These upsetting cases suggest that the current legislation is not as effective as it needs to be. Often the asbestos still in situ is not being managed properly. Sometimes current proprietors and managers do not even know that it is there. A typical example would be a school where a staff member asked to see the asbestos register and no one in the school office or on the management team could advise them of its whereabouts, let alone tell them what risks they were currently being exposed to.

- **Does HSE keep adequate records of asbestos in public buildings?**

If the HSE is keeping adequate records they do not seem to be freely available to employees or contractors entering these buildings, to the parents of school children attending the many schools containing asbestos or to the patients and visitors in hospitals which still contain asbestos.

- **Is HSE making best use of available technology and systems to monitor the safety of asbestos which remains in buildings?**

This depends on the definition of best use. Records and monitoring should be as transparent and as accessible as possible given the possibilities created by modern technology.

- **Does HSE commit adequate resources to asbestos management in line with the level of risk?**

This seems unlikely. None of our service users has ever referred to seeing or being aware of the HSE's guidance on asbestos and where to find it.

- **How robust is the available data about the risks and impact of asbestos in the workplace? What gaps in evidence need to be filled?**

There is an arbitrary cut-off point of age 75 after which deaths related to a particular trade or profession are no longer recorded. Given that most people succumb to the asbestos related diseases in old age, or even advanced old age, this creates a false impression that the risks are lower than they really are. The majority of our service users are aged 75 plus but many were active and in good health until their asbestos related illness began. Typically, they were still working part-time or making a very useful contribution to society as volunteers, carers or doing unpaid maintenance work until they were diagnosed with illnesses such as mesothelioma or asbestos-related lung cancer.

- **How effectively does HSE engage with external stakeholders and experts about its approach to the regulation of asbestos?**

If 'stakeholders' include managers, employees and people required to use the buildings affected on a day to day basis then the HSE is clearly not engaging effectively because there is very low awareness of its guidance about asbestos until people have become unwell, by which time it is too late. Typically our service users tell us that they can't imagine where they were exposed to asbestos. A forensic examination of their work history then quickly identifies that they have in fact been exposed to asbestos in the workplace, often on multiple occasions. For instance, a forklift truck driver did not realise that driving past a kiln might expose him to asbestos dust, and a ceramic pottery decorator did not realise that having her work station next to the kilns might be equally hazardous. They had never seen any of the HSE's guidance before starting these jobs.

There is increased awareness now among tradespeople in the construction and maintenance industries, because of the health and safety training they receive as apprentices and so on. Even then, many people still working in the construction industry and as maintenance workers are only vaguely aware of the risks they face and we have very many interesting conversations with them when they find out what I and my colleagues do for a living!

We do receive regular updates from the HSE, because we have signed up to them, and we do use the HSE website for reference. Although we would like the government to adopt a 'zero asbestos' policy the HSE website does effectively explain the current policy, but our service users were generally unaware of its advice until they found they had been exposed to asbestos.

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