

Written evidence from the UK Hazards Campaign (ASB0020)

As the chair of the UK Hazards Campaign, I am making this submission on behalf of the Hazards Campaign.

The UK Hazards Campaign is a UK-wide network of resource centres and campaigners who work tirelessly to support and advise workers on occupational health and safety issues and organise and campaign for justice and safety at work. We advocate on behalf of all workers in all sectors.

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

All workers and others who enter that workplace are potentially at risk of exposure from asbestos, where asbestos is on the premises and in a state where fibres are released. We have been contacted on numerous occasions from workers who have been potentially exposed, including:

- workers who were asked to clean down pipes in a boiler room, the pipes were lagged in asbestos and had previously been identified as a dangerous area, needing asbestos removal, but this was not known to the workers, they then went home to their families in their work clothes and one had young children at home.
- A teaching assistant who found asbestos dumped at the bottom of the school playing field
- Teachers and parents who witness their school premises in a state of disrepair and know that there is asbestos on the estate and worried about exposure to themselves and their children
- Workers in social housing who find out there is asbestos in their homes because of work they are having done

Many workers do not know if there is asbestos in their workplaces, where it is, what state of repair it is in, or when or if it is going to be removed. They are fearful for themselves, their families and for other people like students and pupils who come on their premises.

On many occasions workers only find out about asbestos when they turn up for work and there is an asbestos removal van there. They aren't told about what has happened, how it is going to be removed safely, and the credentials

of who is removing it and are expected to continue to work in areas where removal is taking place.

Workers are also exposed when they work on domestic premises where they do not know if asbestos is present. There is an increase in casual workers doing odd jobs in houses, many untrained workers and certainly not aware of the dangers that asbestos in some of the homes they work in and with no employer to ensure the risks of exposure are controlled or even identified.

We know that many women are becoming exposed in their occupations – working in public buildings and education establishments where maintenance is lacking because of funding problems or still being exposed because of their partners occupation and washing and handling work clothes.

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

Workers continue to be exposed and develop asbestos related diseases including mesothelioma. As asbestos has been banned since 1999, the growing number of cases is indicative of an ineffective management of ageing and deteriorating asbestos.

The Hazards Campaign demand an immediate national register of all asbestos in domestic and non domestic premises with considerable consequences for those not registering asbestos (fines/imprisonment) on their premises. This must include a recorded certificate of safe maintenance until its removal. We also demand the planned removal of asbestos from all premises as this is the only way to ensure the safety and health of workers in all settings.

In the mean time until removal (where a recorded safe removal plan must be logged and followed) the HSE should conduct proactive inspections to ensure that asbestos is being maintained safely until removal.

There continues also to be concern about sites such as the former Turner Brothers Asbestos site at Rochdale which is described as ‘time ravaged wreck shrouded in controversy and mystery’. For people living in the surrounding area, their health continues to be a concern. The buildings and land steeped in asbestos fibres have long since been abandoned but have been subjected to

arson attacks, trespassing and fly tipping. Councils seem unable to be transparent in their handling of the sites and instead of putting themselves up to public scrutiny as they try to deal with the sites are secretive and leave many of the families who have lost people to asbestos diseases, who live nearby and worked there, concerned about their own health and their families health.

The Hazards Campaign, continues to support some of these families.

All regulatory authorities with some jurisdiction over the demolition, future redevelopments and planning consent for land contaminated with asbestos are currently failing to protect the health of local residents, workers on site and future residents of such developments.

How does HSE's approach to managing asbestos compare to the approach taken in other countries? Are there lessons that the UK could learn from best practice elsewhere?

As other countries plan for the removal of asbestos from all buildings, the UK Govt still has no plan in place. We are also aware of increasing pressure from countries that continue to export and profit from asbestos. These countries/companies are lobbying Governments around the world to reverse the ban, seeding doubts of the different types of asbestos and their dangers. There needs to be a clear plan of removal of all asbestos, the robust testing of products to ensure they do not contain asbestos and proactive inspections and testing of domestic and non domestic premises to ensure all asbestos is documented.

There have been a number of products that are sold on the internet which have been found to contain asbestos such as makeup and the also the recent Johnson Talc cases in the US. People need to be made aware of where asbestos is and the dangers of exposure as well as prosecution of those selling products containing asbestos.

Does HSE keep adequate records of asbestos in public buildings?

No. All buildings should have a record of asbestos held in a central register. A register that is available to access by anyone owning or working in a building. This must include domestic buildings as well as public and commercial

buildings. All buildings should have to keep a register at the premises/on website to identify where asbestos and a record of when it was checked and who by.

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

The board comprises of board members representing workers, who are the victims of asbestos exposure. There are also many other organisations who campaign against asbestos and who support individual victims. Board meetings where asbestos is being discussed should be open to all stakeholders to attend including worker representatives and representatives of victims of asbestos exposure.

The HSE is the major enforcer of the asbestos regulations and continues to be chronically underfunded and understaffed to provide enforcement. Workers should not be exposed to asbestos in their work, in non domestic premises or in domestic premises. Workers are not the only ones exposed anyone in those premises where asbestos is not being maintained properly could be exposed. There needs a duty on employers and building owners to be transparent about where asbestos is and how it is being maintained and when it is planned to be removed. Workers need to be trained on the dangers of asbestos in all workplaces and especially young workers. In addition more accurate occupational records need to be kept for people of all ages, to ensure that occupational health information is traced back to employers and employment. Finally whenever asbestos is discussed at HSE there needs to worker representation to ensure that victims are central to any discussion on asbestos.

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