



Warning about the potential risk from hidden asbestos in system built schools

The Joint Union Asbestos Committee⁽ⁱ⁾ (JUAC) is warning school leaders of all system built schools built between 1945 and 2000 that staff and pupils may be exposed to hidden asbestos when it is unknowingly disturbed by everyday school activities, contractors, flooding, water ingress, draughts and weathering. This potentially places staff and pupils at an increased risk of developing mesothelioma, an asbestos related cancer, in the future according to recent research.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

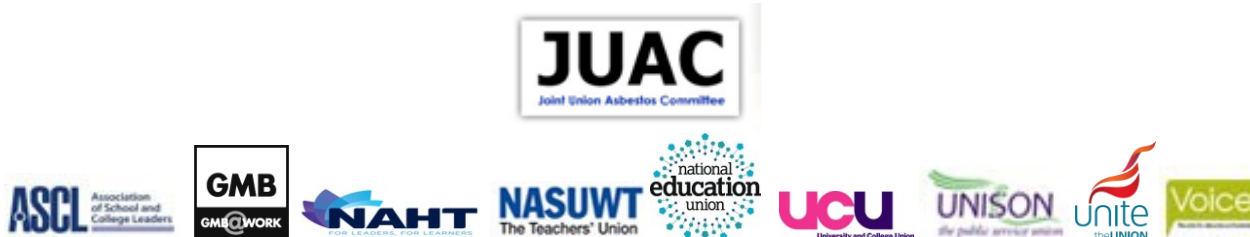
The JUAC warning follows the exposure of pupils and staff at Hetton School (a CLASPⁱⁱⁱ system built school) to significant levels of hidden asbestos when ceiling tiles lifted on windy days. According to the former head teacher they had to go through a 'fumigation' van to be hosed down on several occasions. When questioned by the Public Accounts Committee about this in March 2017, the Chairman of the Educational Building and Development Officers Group said this was 'fairly typical' while the Education, Skills & Funding Agency said they were unable to comment on how typical the asbestos exposure scenario at Hetton school was because they had not yet carried out a national asbestos condition survey.^(iv) Exposure continued until the school obtained the funding needed for demolition and replacement of the unsafe building.

JUAC warns that the current guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE)^(v) and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)^(vi) was ineffective at Hetton School and potentially at many other similar system built schools because it does not advise how disturbed hidden asbestos in all locations can be identified effectively and removed or sealed. There are about 12,000 system built schools and the HSE acknowledges that there is wide variation between the location and condition of hidden asbestos in buildings of the same type, as well as between different types. The current HSE guidance (2008) is based on the investigation of less than 0.5% of all system schools.

Recent research shows children are far more likely to develop mesothelioma after exposure to a given amount of asbestos and an alarming 62% of women who develop mesothelioma were found to have been exposed to asbestos in the built environment e.g. school buildings.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

JUAC therefore urgently advises school leaders to:

- A. Comply with 2008 HSE guidance on asbestos management in school system buildings^(v) but also ensure that surveys and tests for disturbed, hidden asbestos are carried out in accordance with the HSE guide *Managing my asbestos*^{vii} and undertaken by an HSE approved (e.g. UKAS^(xi)) accredited surveying organisation with experience of asbestos management in system built schools including:
 - a. A knowledge of where hidden asbestos is likely to be located in system built school buildings;
 - b. The identification of any asbestos that is unsafe because of disturbance by everyday school activities, vibrations, water ingress, draughts lifting ceiling tiles and contractor activities.
 - c. The replacement of broken and missing ceiling tiles.
- B. Ensure that pupils and staff are kept out of any area(s) with disturbed asbestos.^{(vii) page 14}
- C. Inform staff, parents and guardians of any asbestos exposure.^{(vii) page 6}
- D. Notify the HSE about any exposure. **This is a legal requirement under RIDDOR.**^{(viii), (vii) page 14}
- E. Ensure contractors working with asbestos comply with the Control of Asbestos Regulations and HSE guidance.^{(vii) page 10-13}
- F. Consult with Union Health & Safety Representatives (This is a legal requirement under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977)^{(vi) page 6}



Support and funding

Currently the school funding formula does not take account of factors such as asbestos.^(ix) This places schools with substantial amounts of asbestos at a considerable disadvantage compared to other schools because the cost of maintenance and renovation is likely to be far greater.

School leaders and duty holders who have been unable to gain the necessary funding for renovation and maintenance work involving asbestos or have concerns about the safety of the asbestos in their schools should contact their union for support and advice.

JUAC action

In the meantime JUAC has called for^(x) the Education & Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to provide earmarked funding:

- For the removal of all asbestos in schools, starting with the most dangerous first.
- For the demolition and replacement of buildings in which asbestos cannot be managed safely, and
- For increased support for duty holders to allow them to manage their asbestos safely until it is removed.

ⁱ JUAC brings together all the teaching and support staff unions in the education sector to campaign for improved asbestos management to protect children and staff

ⁱⁱ Education Committee - Minutes of Evidence by Professor Peto. Session 2012-13. HC 1056; Gilham C, Rake C, Burdett G, *et al* Pleural mesothelioma and lung cancer risks in relation to occupational history and asbestos lung burden. *Occup. Environ Med* 2016;73:290-299

ⁱⁱⁱ CLASP (Consortium of Local Authorities Special Programme) was formed with the purpose of developing a method of building, which did not rely on traditional building skills, to provide fast and efficient permanent buildings. The systems were developed as either proprietary contractor owned products or Local Authority Consortia designs. Of a total number of 3134 CLASP contracts in the UK there are more than 1400 sites with CLASP built schools (some comprising more than one contract), distributed among 81 LEA/Children's Services Departments/Scottish Local Authorities. Independent schools own a small number of CLASP buildings.

^{iv} House of Commons. Public Account Committee. Capital Funding for Schools. 57th Report of Session 2016-17

^v HSE. Asbestos in system buildings. Control of Asbestos Regulations. Guidance for Duty Holders. Updated 2008.

^{vi} Education & Skills Funding Agency. Managing asbestos in your school. February 2017.

^{vii} <http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/managing/index.htm>

^{viii} Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013

^{ix} National Audit Office Report. HC 1014 SESSION 2016-17. DfE Capital Funding for Schools. Page 37 para. 2.19

^x <http://www.juac.org.uk/why-unsafe-asbestos-could-still-be-in-schools-in-2050/>

^{xi} <https://www.ukas.com/news/accreditation-of-asbestos-surveyors/>