



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

TITLE **Asbestos in Schools**

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BY **Leighton Andrews, Minister for Education and Skills**

The purpose of my statement today is to respond to the recent asbestos issues at Cwmcarn High School in Caerphilly, South Wales and the wider issue of asbestos in schools in Wales.

I recognise the very serious nature of recent events culminating in the closure of Cwmcarn High school due to the discovery of asbestos materials in the school.

Health Risks

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous mineral and was used commercially for about 150 years. In particular, it was used extensively as a building material in Great Britain from the 1950's through to the mid-1980's. Many schools built, extended or refurbished in that period are likely to contain some form of asbestos. There are now very stringent statutory controls over the use or interference with asbestos or materials containing it. Asbestos materials in good condition are safe unless asbestos fibres become airborne, which happens when materials become damaged.

Asbestos fibres when they become airborne, and are inhaled, can cause serious diseases. Breathing in high levels of asbestos fibres increases the risk of disease. Regular exposure, which may be experienced by maintenance/construction workers during the course of their work, also increases the risk.

In briefing my department the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) advises that the available data suggests little significant risk at very low level; testing for levels of fibres in the air in buildings where asbestos is properly managed shows that the release of fibres into the air is very low; and provided asbestos is managed properly, teachers and pupils are not likely to be at risk in the course of their normal activities in Great Britain.

The HSE in its briefing also advises that there is no evidence to show that rates of asbestos related cancer amongst teachers are significantly greater than in the Great Britain population as a whole. A research study published in 2009, commissioned jointly by Cancer Research UK and HSE and led by an independent academic, looked at the full set of jobs

individuals did during their working lives (rather than the just the last job). This study reinforces the view that teachers do not stand out as a high risk group. This case control study shows that those who worked with asbestos products in the construction industry during the 1960s and 1970s now have particularly high risks of mesothelima; an asbestos specific disease. The HSE advises that those most at risk to exposure to asbestos work in the construction/maintenance trades.

In relation to asbestos there is a whole regime of legislation in place.

Following a series of inspections at a sample of schools outside local authority control across Great Britain in 2010/11 the HSE's inspection findings were distilled into four key messages I would like to emphasise which are as follows:

- It is very important that schools are clear about who is the duty holder;
- Schools should ensure that they have a school building specific asbestos plan;
- It is critical that anyone who may disturb asbestos is made aware of its location and condition; and that
- adequate asbestos training is given to in-house staff.

Schools In Wales

Since the closure of Cwmcarn High School, there has been debate around the issue of asbestos in schools in Wales .

I fully understand the concerns that Assembly Members have and indeed those raised by parents and those working in our schools. However, it is not practicable to remove asbestos from every school in Wales on a blanket basis. The HSE has always maintained that the best approach for asbestos in sound condition and not likely to be damaged is to leave it well alone, protect it and manage it to prevent damage and exposure to asbestos.

With that said, the Welsh Government's 21st Century Schools Capital Programme will see significant capital investment in the schools infrastructure across Wales, with the first wave of £1.4 billion investment targeting those schools in poor condition; building upon the circa £415 million already being invested in education infrastructure here in Wales under the Transitional Capital Investment Programme. The roll out of this 21st Century Schools Programme will take time; in the meantime we need to ensure that rigorous management of asbestos is undertaken by local authorities.

Local Authorities

In light of the recent school closure at Cwmcarn there is no room for complacency. The Welsh Local Government Association, local authorities and the HSE meet regularly and work collaboratively to ensure understanding of the legal requirements and implementation of a risk based approach for the management of asbestos and I would urge them to continue with this working approach but with greater diligence.

In response to the Cwmcarn situation I asked all Local Authorities to confirm that they were undertaking their statutory duties in accordance with the legislation, along with copies of Asbestos Management Plans and Contingency Plans (in the event of school closures). Further to a review conducted by a Welsh Government Health and Safety Consultant responses were deemed varied. As a consequence, and based upon, the responses received I do not feel sufficiently assured at this stage that local authorities are discharging their statutory duties to manage asbestos and have sufficient plans in place. I intend to ask local authorities that they ensure that Head Teachers and Governing Bodies know and

understand their obligations and duties in relation to legal requirements and that they are following guidance where provided, and that they have reviewed the relevant insurance arrangements in their school. I have requested my officials to work with representatives from the Welsh Local Government Association, HSE, Teacher Unions and any relevant experts to ensure that this is addressed as a matter of urgency and that in the management of asbestos the safety of learners and teachers isn't compromised.

The Schools

The most important element of preventing any release of asbestos fibres is action taken at the schools. Even with the best asbestos management plans and qualified asbestos staff at local authorities, if the procedures at the school itself are not followed problems can occur. Awareness of asbestos and its management is paramount. Training of all school staff and Governing Bodies is vital so for example when works are carried out at schools the right procedures are followed.

It is important that the duty holder, or nominated person, at the school is clearly identified so that there is no doubt as to who has the responsibility at the school to ensure that legal requirements and guidance are followed. Clear lines of responsibility and duties need to be known at each and every level in the school system.