

EXTRACT: Condition of the Palace of Westminster.¹

Asbestos

63. The Palace of Westminster is riddled with asbestos. The Pre-Feasibility Study noted that asbestos is believed to be present in almost every riser (98 vertical shafts that carry services between floors, most running the full height of the building), as well as in many plant rooms, corridors and under-floor voids. While encapsulated asbestos is deemed to be safe while undisturbed, it is extremely dangerous when it is damaged and fibres become airborne. Such damage may be caused by leaking steam or water, or by drilling, cutting or vibration, which is unavoidable when significant building work is carried out. Accessible asbestos has been encapsulated to make it safe, but it has not always been encapsulated where pipes pass through walls and voids, or under floors. Furthermore, where the encapsulation is damaged, or where cables pass through risers and voids and dislodge asbestos dust and debris, it can present a significant danger.⁵²

64. One example of the danger posed by asbestos was brought home in 2015 when it was thought that asbestos fibres might have been present in the air provided to the House of Commons Chamber. During upgrade work on one of the air ducts which supplies air to the Chamber, a small section of duct was removed and asbestos dust was found to be present within it. Subsequent tests demonstrated that the risk was negligible on that occasion.⁵³ However, if the results were different next time and asbestos fibres were found to have contaminated air ducts, it is easy to see how one of the Chambers, committee rooms or other essential offices might have to be closed down immediately and could be out of action for a significant period of time.

65. The presence of asbestos in the Palace therefore impedes not only the remedial works themselves, but the preparatory investigation and survey work which is necessary to establish the current state of the assets. Asbestos removal must be undertaken in many areas before further work can even be planned. Furthermore, there is a continual threat of cleared areas being re-contaminated from uncleared areas.⁵⁴ A thorough renovation of the Palace would allow this asbestos to be removed safely and more cost-effectively.

¹ Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster. *Condition of the Palace of Westminster*. September 8, 2016. http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201617/jtselect/jtpow/41/4102.htm?utm_source=41&utm_medium=fullbullet&utm_campaign=modulereports