

Asbestos still present in 83% of state schools in England, experts warn

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Occupational health experts are warning that asbestos exposure in schools continues to put teachers, pupils and staff at risk of fatal disease, after the Government's latest school estates strategy failed to meaningfully address the hazard.

Asbestos remains present in 83% of state schools in England, with official UK statistics indicating that around 15 school workers die each year from asbestos-related disease caused by past exposure. US research also suggests that up to 135 pupils may be fatally exposed each year.

Despite this, the Government's [Schools Rebuilding Programme](#) and Education Estates Strategy make no substantive reference to asbestos, relying instead on the Condition Data Collection (CDC) process, which explicitly states that it "does not report on hazardous materials (principally asbestos)".

The [Faculty of Asbestos Assessment and Management \(FAAM\)](#), the professional body for those managing asbestos risks, and the [British Occupational Hygiene Society \(BOHS\)](#) are concerned that this approach risks leaving schools ill-equipped to manage one of the most widespread and dangerous legacy hazards in the education estate.

National oversight of asbestos in schools has effectively ceased following the discontinuation of the Government's Asbestos Management Assurance Programme (AMAP). The programme was intended to provide accurate national data on asbestos risks across the school estate, but its removal has left policymakers without a clear picture of the scale or condition of asbestos in schools.

Last year, inspectors from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) served improvement or enforcement notices to one in every 15 of the 421 schools inspected over asbestos management failures. While the regulator has emphasised that this does not necessarily mean staff or pupils were in immediate danger, experts say it highlights the significant pressures on head teachers trying to manage a hidden and technically complex risk.

Under current policy, asbestos is generally considered safer to leave in place than remove. However, under the Schools Rebuilding Programme, the presence of asbestos is only treated as an "exceptional factor" if it has already caused an exposure risk or would pose a direct risk to health unless parts of a school were closed. As a result, relatively few of the 3,000 CLASP schools, widely recognised as posing the highest asbestos risk, are included in rebuilding plans.

Jonathan Grant, Registrar of the Faculty of Asbestos Assessment and Management (FAAM), said:

"Asbestos management requires specialist knowledge, detailed risk assessment and constant vigilance. The loss of national oversight has left schools without the support and consistency they need. Expecting head teachers and school staff to manage this risk alone is unrealistic and unsafe."

[Research by the Government in 2019](#) showed that while three quarters of head teachers had read official asbestos guidance, this dropped to 40% of caretakers and facilities managers, and fewer than one in five governors. Fewer than 2% of maintenance workers in schools who may disturb asbestos had appropriate training, while 13% had not even received asbestos awareness training.

Schools are also not required to inform parents or pupils about the presence of asbestos, meaning school communities may be entirely unaware of potential risks.

Kevin Bampton, Chief Executive of BOHS, said:

"Prevention is the future of occupational health, yet asbestos – a known cancer-causing substance – is being systematically ignored in national school policy. This is not about expensive solutions; it is about transparency, competence and putting health protection at the heart of safeguarding."

FAAM and BOHS are calling for immediate, low-cost and cost-free action to bring schools in line with normal asbestos management principles, including:

- publishing asbestos management plans on school websites;

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- establishing a clear right to know for teachers, parents and pupils;
- providing governors with accessible guidance on overseeing asbestos risk;
- offering centralised specialist support for head teachers and facilities managers;
- making asbestos management a core part of school safeguarding inspections; and
- setting enforceable training targets for school workers likely to encounter asbestos.

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