

House of Commons

[Work and Pensions Committee](#)

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Set 40 year deadline for non-domestic building asbestos removal, MPs say

- Asbestos-related illness ‘one of the great workplace tragedies of modern times’ with thousands of deaths each year from past exposures.
- An increase in retrofitting in response to net zero ambitions means that more asbestos-containing materials will be disturbed in coming decades – a cross-government approach is needed.
- More funding for HSE to boost enforcement activity.

The Government must commit to a strategy to remove all asbestos from public and commercial buildings within 40 years, MPs say today, with the risk to health only likely to increase as buildings are adapted with the move to net zero.

The report from the **Work and Pensions Committee** highlights how despite being banned more than two decades ago, asbestos persists as the single greatest cause of work-related fatalities in the UK. There were more than 5,000 deaths in 2019, including from cancers such as mesothelioma.

Many of these deaths will relate to exposures from 35 or more years ago. The available evidence indicates that cumulative exposures are much lower now for younger age groups but more data is needed to understand the current picture.

With asbestos still in around 300,000 non-domestic buildings and a likely dramatic increase in disturbance from net zero retrofitting, the Committee says that reliance on the current asbestos regulations will not be good enough. It concludes that a cross-government and ‘system-wide’ strategy for the long-term removal of asbestos is needed.

The report calls for the Government and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to back up their stated goal of removing all asbestos by committing to a clear time frame and strategy. The plan should strengthen the evidence base on safe and effective asbestos removal in the first instance before prioritising removal from the highest risk settings, including schools.

The Government must also ensure adequate funding for HSE’s inspection and enforcement of the current asbestos regulations, which has declined in recent years.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, said: *“Asbestos is one of the great workplace tragedies of modern times and while the extreme exposures of the late twentieth century are now behind us, the risk from asbestos remains real.*

The drive towards retrofitting of buildings to meet net zero aspirations means the risk of asbestos exposure will only escalate in the coming decades. Falling back on regulations which devolve responsibility to individual building owners and maintenance managers will not be sufficient to protect people’s health.

Setting a clear deadline of 40 years for the removal of asbestos from non-domestic buildings will help to focus minds. The clock is ticking and the Government and HSE must now come up with a strategic plan which builds the evidence on safer removal and prioritises higher risk settings such as schools.

This is no time for laissez-faire. The Government needs to fund the HSE properly to allow it to reverse the decline in enforcement activity seen in the decade before the pandemic and ensure that asbestos, and its removal, is managed safely and effectively.”

Main findings and recommendations

The asbestos risk today

- While there is evidence that the extreme exposures of the 20th century are behind us, HSE is not doing enough to assess current levels of risk in non-domestic buildings. The Committee heard accounts of recent exposures in the workplace and beyond. HSE should adopt a more structured approach to collecting data on current exposure levels.

A strategic approach to asbestos management

- HSE has been slow to invest in research into the costs and benefits of removal, and to evaluate options for its safe removal.
- A deadline should now be set for the removal of asbestos from non-domestic buildings within 40 years. A new strategic plan should focus on the highest risk asbestos first and the highest risk settings including schools.
- This plan should, in the first instance, commit to improving urgently the evidence around safer asbestos removal and disposal, considering relative costs and benefits.

HSE’s enforcement and campaigning

- HSE issued 60% fewer asbestos enforcement notices annually between 2011/12 and 2018/19. The scale of decline is remarkable when compared with HSE's enforcement activity overall, despite no specific and compelling evidence that compliance with the asbestos regulations has improved dramatically during this time.
- HSE should commit to a sustained increase in inspection and enforcement activity. The Committee repeats its recommendation from June 2020, that the Government should ensure adequate funding for this increased programme of work.

ENDS

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