

IS YOUR ASBESTOS MANAGEMENT SURVEY FIT FOR PURPOSE?

The health impact from exposure to asbestos is significant. In 2017 there were 77 asbestos related deaths in Northern Ireland with asbestosis or mesothelioma being the cause of death. While some may see this as a legacy of what has gone before, through poor management of what asbestos still remains, Northern Ireland runs the risk of adding to those figures in the future.

Asbestos can be effectively managed in workplaces, and as an employer the management of asbestos as a work-related hazard must be an important consideration. As a regulator, the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) continues to target the risks associated with asbestos along with other hazards that contribute to occupational cancers and lung disorders. These areas, in addition to work-related stress & musculoskeletal disorders, form the workplace health priority areas on which Health and Safety Inspectors are currently focusing. Up until 1999 large amounts of asbestos containing materials (ACMs) were used for a wide range of construction purposes in both new and refurbished buildings.

Today, tradespersons carrying out repairs and maintenance work are most at risk from ACMs, particularly ACMs that are in poor condition or are disturbed or damaged when work is taking place. Asbestos fibres may be released into the air, which, if breathed in can cause serious illness.

The effective management of asbestos is the responsibility of the 'dutyholder', the person legally responsible for managing the risks from asbestos in non-domestic premises such as shops, offices, factories etc. In most cases this will be the employer or building owner.

Workers engaged in building maintenance are often unaware of the risks from asbestos simply because the dutyholder has failed to ensure a suitable asbestos management plan has been put in place. One of the first stages of developing such a plan is the asbestos management survey.

The purpose of an asbestos management survey is to provide accurate information on the location, amount and condition of ACMs. A survey report that doesn't give this information is less useful and ultimately may result in contractors and others being placed at unnecessary risk.

A dutyholder that has requested an asbestos survey might expect it to be fit for purpose but unfortunately this is not always the case.

A recent review of asbestos management surveys carried out by HSENI identified a large difference in the quality of reports.

So what are some of the key issues that HSENI found and that dutyholders should be aware of?

- **Providing basic information is always a good starting point.** A good asbestos survey will contain key information regarding the building being surveyed including its age, structure and what the building is used for. This information should be obtained by the surveyor during the initial planning stage.
- **Asbestos survey reports are not always presented in a way that is easy to understand.** A good quality report will enable the survey user to see very quickly where the asbestos containing materials are in the building and will follow a logical order of the building layout.
- **Good quality photographs and clear building plans are essential.** Unclear photographs and poorly annotated building plans add little value. Asbestos: the survey guide (HSG264) provides an example of a building plan which clearly shows where ACMs can be found as well as any areas not included in the survey.
- **Surveyors are not always able to access all areas.** It's not unusual for rooms to be locked, meaning a surveyor cannot provide information as to whether asbestos is in this room or not. A dutyholder should prepare carefully to ensure the surveyor can access all areas of a building.
- **Caveats within asbestos surveys are common.** The scope of a survey can be seriously limited as a result of a caveat e.g. the survey does not extend to areas above 2 metres. In some cases caveats may be required however these should not be the norm as they reduce confidence in the survey.

Good preparation and communication between the dutyholder and surveyor at an early stage is vital and will go some way to avoiding the pitfalls that can be all too common.

Being able to understand a survey report and easily identify areas where ACMs can be found in a building are strong indicators as to whether or not an asbestos survey is fit for purpose. If this is not the case, the advice is: Go back to your surveyor, don't accept poor work that doesn't address key issues.

Obtaining a good asbestos survey requires a competent surveyor. Good surveyors will understand the needs of their client, carefully plan the survey, investigate the building and provide clear information as to the extent of any ACMs they find. HSENI strongly recommends the use of accredited or certificated asbestos surveyors.

The legal responsibility for managing asbestos falls to the dutyholder and cannot be delegated to another person, not even an asbestos surveyor. More detailed information on asbestos surveys can be found within Asbestos: The survey guide (HSG264). Information on managing asbestos within non-domestic premises can be found at www.hseni.gov.uk/articles/duty-manage-asbestos

