

# As Safe as Houses? Dealing with Asbestos in Social Housing

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## **The report examines how UK social housing providers (in 2009) were dealing with in-situ asbestos**

Looked at:

Formal regulatory procedures and informal DIY

Legal frameworks for housing and the regulatory roles of the HSE

How housing providers deal with asbestos (Decent Homes) and its meaning for residents

Legislation to protect workers and deal with industrial usage of asbestos, large- scale demolition and removal – employers and the self-employed required to minimise workers' exposure to asbestos.

Housing providers' obligations to manage asbestos in common areas:  
determine where it is, how much is present, and what condition it is in

Duty to inform maintenance workers of the presence of asbestos but not residents

**How do people turn their rented houses into homes?**

# The Questions regarding Risk

General UK approach: downplay public concerns and focus on those 'most at risk'

Deciding who is 'most at risk' is based on scientific research which assumes asbestos is left undisturbed

This provides statistics like 1:100 000 for 10 years occupancy will develop asbestos illness

This science is presented as conclusive and neutral, allowing authorities to state with confidence that asbestos encapsulation is the most effective approach

**But:** This scientific proof is meaningless if the aim is to protect people who live and work in houses because:

- Maintenance activities increase asbestos exposure
  - Every day life increases asbestos exposure
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## Questions regarding Risk: Economic Considerations

The scientific calculations of risk suggest it is economically unviable to remove asbestos,

Housing providers are not given additional resources to deal with asbestos in domestic settings and have no way of assessing the cost of its removal,

Companies contracted to work in social housing have no economic incentive to identify and appropriately remove asbestos,

Residents doing DIY are unaware of the possibility of exposing asbestos and are financially unable to deal with the cost implications

### **BUT:**

Eventually something will have to be done with the asbestos ...

In the meantime, people are being inadvertently exposed ...

We should measure this against the long-term cost of asbestos diseases



***There is never enough money for the council to do everything and there is a designated amount relating to asbestos. Money will be found if a problem comes up” (UK Council Employee).***

# Regulations and Responsibility

The Decent Homes policy assumes that creating appropriate homes also creates citizens who behave responsibly.

Housing providers enter into agreements with companies which assume maintenance and day-to-day management

- Companies have a legal obligations to inform workers, but not residents of asbestos (Wirral 2023 - striking housing maintenance workers advised not to discuss asbestos with residents)
- Most housing providers provide an asbestos register based on surveying a proportion of the housing stock and detailing common areas, downplaying residents' involvement or concerns over asbestos

**BUT:**

Residents can't behave responsibly because they are not informed about asbestos

# Regulation & Responsibility: Housing Providers' Performance

Housing providers' decisions are strongly influenced by budget priorities and short-term performance indicators which have implications for health and safety

Maintenance in 'void' homes is over-shadowed by a 21-day turnaround time.

Which means: can't deal with asbestos because of the HSE 14-day notification requirement

Housing providers are assessed by the Audit Commission Inspection Team which doesn't specifically look for asbestos.

Which means: if housing providers are working on asbestos-related issues and it comes up in these assessments, it tends to be negatively assessed

When residents raise the asbestos alarm, this is seen as a management problem

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***We want to establish a sector in which tenants have real choice over their housing, where they can take responsibility for their homes in the same way that owner occupiers can; where tenants are empowered in the decision-making processes that affect their homes rather than being pushed into them' (DETR 2000a: 56).***

# Good Practice to Protect Tenants and the Workforce

Social housing legislation provides security of tenure & residents are entitled and encouraged to do improvements subject to written approval

Housing providers have to inform workers of the presence of asbestos,

## **BUT:**

- Unauthorised DIY work
- Widespread awareness that it is happening, but no legislative way of dealing with people's safety
- Residents largely unaware of asbestos exposure (putting up shelves, sanding & painting)
- The definition of 'improvements' changes over time: artex

# Good Practice to Protect Tenants and the Workforce

2012 Control of Asbestos Regulations puts greater emphasis on:

- training workers, employees to be aware of asbestos
- reporting and record-keeping e.g., medical surveillance and non-licensable work

Should not expect asbestos removal projects to be easy: management headaches, large-scale negotiation, emotional stress, yet overall outcomes can be positive

- City Corporation of London – Windsor House Capital works project

When residents raise the asbestos alarm, this should be seen as a success not a problem

- Milton Keynes – Residents informed of asbestos and raised alerts

**The best approach is a multi-pronged one that seeks to capture all those likely to encounter asbestos**

**Any Questions...**