

## **P-04-522 Asbestos in Schools – Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Chair, 11.06.15**

Dear Chair,

Firstly I would like again to express my appreciation for the continued consideration of the Petition by the Committee. I would also like to thank the committee for its unanimous support for my call for an Asbestos in Schools Steering Group to assist the Department for Education and Skills as it forms and reviews policy on the issue.

The importance of the issue of Asbestos in Schools was confirmed by the UK Prime Minister no less, on 11 March 2015, at Prime Minister's Questions, in response to a question raised by the then Chair of the Asbestos in Schools group Annette Brooke MP.

**"PQ 11<sup>th</sup> March**

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm150311/debtxt/150311-0001.htm#15031163000007>

**Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD):** Seventy-five per cent. of our schools contain asbestos, more than 20 teachers a year are dying from exposure to asbestos and our children are known to be particularly vulnerable. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the Government publish their completed policy review on asbestos in schools before Dissolution?

**11 Mar 2015 : Column 294**

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which has been well broadcast and covered in the media in the past couple of days. That is why we are carrying out an asbestos review going through all schools. We will publish it in due course, and action will have to be taken."

The review was in fact published on or about 12 March. As can be seen the Prime Minister clearly accepts that it is "a very important issue" and "moreover action will have to be taken". I agree and it is clear that the Committee does so too.

I am grateful also that the Minister for Education and Skills is continuing to review matters. I welcome his continued consideration and wholeheartedly agree that the issues surrounding the management of asbestos are complex. This amplifies the call for a Steering Group to assist with that work now and in the future.

That the issue is complex, is highlighted by the fact that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is investigating the Health and Safety Executive investigation into Cwmcarn High School.

While the Minister rightly points out that every school should have an asbestos management plan in place and that local authorities should be able to supply information on asbestos levels in schools, in our experience, this varies enormously from council to council.

Then, once the parent or guardian or the person (e.g. a teacher) working in a school enquires and has the information and the management plan, they are unlikely to be able to assess the risk and make a judgement on the safety of their local school.

This is why I feel, for a public health issue (and make no mistake this is a matter of health as well as education) that can be so hazardous and can have such devastating effects, the Welsh Government needs to take a lead in providing parents and guardians and those working in schools in Wales, including teachers with easy access to information as well as leading national policy on asbestos management.

I am however concerned by the Minister's final paragraph where he states that he will seek to update further by August. This would not appear to be a firm commitment to provide a final response by that date and the Committee has already expressed its own concern earlier this year, that the matter is dragging on.

The petition in its call for transparency has highlighted the fact that the Welsh Government has not accepted responsibility for the issue of asbestos in schools in Wales. The process has also highlighted the need for a Steering Group in Wales to mirror that in England.

At an earlier meeting the Committee discussed the possibility of hearing evidence on the issue and also calling for a plenary debate. I hope that the petition agrees with the UK Prime Minister that "action will have to be taken".

Yours sincerely

Cenric Clement-Evans

Right to Know Asbestos in Schools Wales/ NewLaw Solicitors

11<sup>th</sup> June 2015