

P-04-544 Asbestos in Schools – Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 06.05.15

Dear Chair

I am grateful for the continued consideration of the Petitions' Committee with regard to the Asbestos in Schools Petition.

I am also pleased that the Minister clearly sees the subject of Asbestos in Schools in Wales as an important issue and I look forward to his response once he has been able to consider the report of the Department for Education. A copy is attached for the benefit of the Committee.

As the Minister is aware the Department for Education Asbestos in Schools Steering Group was established to improve the asbestos management in schools. Its members are drawn from a wide range of disciplines and expertise. It is chaired by a senior civil servant and reports to the Minister. The Group both recommended that an assessment should be made of the asbestos risks to children and also that a review should be carried out of asbestos policy in schools. It then played an active part in the review. I enclose a copy of the Steering Group's terms of reference which I hope are useful.

It would seem that the Minister's letter is indicative that Welsh Government is taking responsibility for asbestos in schools which I very much welcome. I have of course previously asked via the Petitions Committee that the Minister consults widely here in Wales. I would very much urge the Department for Education and Skills to set up a similar Steering Group, so that when deciding upon policy it benefits from the wisdom and experience of many different voices.

In particular such a group should be led by the Department and include Assembly Members, members representing local authorities, governors, trade unions, health professionals, the HSE and asbestos experts.

Education review, and indeed lessons be learnt from it to benefit schools in Wales. However I would also suggest that policy for schools in Wales should not be based solely on a lead taken by the Department for Education, which after all is rightly focussed on Schools in England. Members of the Committee will know far better than I of the differences between our education system and school funding here in Wales and that in England. More importantly those who work within that system in whatever capacity should be involved in framing future policy for asbestos in schools.

Finally I am attaching the combined response of the Joint Union Asbestos Committee and the Asbestos in Schools Group to the Department for Education Review. The response welcomes the report and sees it as a positive step forward, making a number of constructive proposals and concessions that previously had not been publicly made. The response is seen as a firm foundation on which to build future policy.

However it should also be noted that the Joint Union Asbestos Committee and the Asbestos in Schools Group are critical of Government failure to assess the scale of the problem and introduce the fundamental long term strategies that are needed to eventually eradicate the problem of asbestos from schools in England.

I hope that the Committee is able to pass on my comments to the Minister.

Kind regards

Cenric

Cenric Clement-Evans

Senior Solicitor