Asbestos

1. Principle?

Asbestos is a fire retardant material often mixed with other substances to make building materials. If these asbestos containing materials are disturbed and fibres released into the air and inhaled they can cause serious and life threatening diseases (e.g. mesothelioma). It may take many years to develop illness from the inhalation of the fibres. Once an asbestos caused disease is diagnosed it is often too late to do anything for the injured party.

2. How does this affect your organisation?

Left completely alone and undisturbed by impact, moisture or abrasion, asbestos containing materials are not a problem. Disturbance can occur through a variety of activities including demolition, general maintenance work, refurbishment projects, cabling activities and general change work.

Asbestos can be found in a variety of different materials e.g. floor and ceiling tiles, toilet seats and cisterns, in pipe lagging or loose fill insulation material within voids, sprayed onto steel girders as part of reducing fire risk, in partition walls or fire door panels, in textured decorating coatings and asbestos cement fixtures.

3. Who has to do what?

Firstly it is the duty of any organisation to know if they have asbestos containing materials in their buildings and if so where it is. This means commissioning experts to carry out a visual survey of buildings and provide a register of where the asbestos containing material is situated.

If change work is planned that will involve disturbing the fabric of the building, the organisation should first commission an invasive asbestos survey to identify if there are any hidden asbestos containing materials in the area to be worked on (e.g. hidden behind panels, within concrete pillars). If it is found then usually it should be removed by a specialist and competent asbestos removal company before the planned change work is undertaken.

Surveys should include the taking of samples. These samples will require microscopic analysis by competent analysts to confirm that asbestos is present.

The organisation should use the information gained from visual and invasive surveys to assess the
risk of employees and others being exposed to disturbed asbestos. This should lead to the
development of an asbestos management plan. This will include locally specific rules and controls
which will prevent the disturbance of the asbestos containing material by employees, contractors or
others. It will include procedures and other ways of informing employees and contractors where
the asbestos is on site.

The organisation should also develop an emergency plan to cover what to do if asbestos containing
material is accidentally disturbed. This will include the evacuation of the premises and the
engagement of a specialist and competent asbestos removal company to come in and make the
premises safe again.

Some organisations employ trades and technicians who carry out work that could inadvertently
disturb asbestos containing materials e.g. engineers and technicians laying cables, carpenters,
electricians, plumbers and heating engineers, furniture and appliance fitters, roofing contractors,
plasterers. These employees must be taught how to recognise asbestos containing materials and
instructed what to do if they come across it.

4. What training is required?

Tradesman and technicians who may disturb the fabric of buildings while doing their work must
receive training that enables them to recognise asbestos containing materials. The organisation’s
Maintenance, Construction or Facility Managers should be trained in how to use the asbestos
register when planning or commissioning work. General managers and employees should be
trained in what to do if known asbestos containing material is accidentally disturbed.

5. What documents and records do you have to keep?

An asbestos register for each building. An asbestos management plan for each building. A copy of
the emergency procedure. Training records including refresher training if deemed necessary.

6. Where do you go for more information?

www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos
Specialist asbestos consultants or removal contractors.

7. What else might you have to consider?

Even a single drill hole into an asbestos containing wall panel is sufficient to release fibres that may
result in an asbestos related disease, but generally it is repeated or prolonged exposure to high
levels of airborne fibre which will increase the risk of contracting an asbestos related disease.