

11 Jan 2010 : Column 734W—continued

### **Schools: Repairs and Maintenance**

**Paul Rowen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families (1) how many schools have been refurbished through the Primary Capital Programme; how many of them were found to have asbestos in the course of the refurbishment; and how many had that asbestos removed; [309983]

(2) how much has been spent on refurbishing schools through the Primary Capital Programme; how much has been spent dealing with asbestos during such refurbishments; and if he will make a statement. [309984]

**Mr. Coaker:** The Primary Capital Programme was rolled out to all local authorities from April 2009, supported by funding allocations of £755 million in 2009-10 and £893 million in 2010-11. In 2008-09, 23 regional "pathfinder" authorities received funding of £149 million and 32 exemplar projects—20 new build and 12 refurbishment—have already been completed. The programme commits to renewing at least half of all primary schools by 2022-23, and national output assumptions are that 5 per cent. of schools in the worst condition will be rebuilt or taken out of commission and 45 per cent. refurbished.

Responsibility for prioritisation and procurement of specific projects rests with individual local authorities and information on those that involve asbestos removal will not be held centrally. Information on spend is not yet available and the Department does not collect data on spend in relation to the removal of asbestos.

## Removal of asbestos during BSF and PCP refurbishment

It is unacceptable that the Minister is not able to state how many primary schools that have been refurbished contained asbestos, how many had it removed and how much it cost to remove it.

His answer about the refurbishment and asbestos removal in primary schools has to be examined and compared to the policy in secondary schools.

- Primary schools are being rebuilt and refurbished under the primary capital programme, PCP.
- There are approximately 17,000 primary schools in England.
- 5% will be rebuilt and 45% will be refurbished over the course of fifteen years.
- The primary school budget for 2008 to 2011 is £1.8 billion.
- 11,850 primary schools were built between 1946-1975 when the use of asbestos was at its height.<sup>1</sup> Many more were refurbished.
- Secondary schools are being rebuilt and refurbished under the building schools for the future initiative, BSF.
- There are about 3,400 secondary schools.
- 50% of the secondary schools will be rebuilt,
- 35% will have major refurbishment and 15% minor refurbishments.
- The secondary school budget for 2008 to 2011 is £9.33billion.<sup>2</sup>
- 2,360 secondary schools were built between 1946-1975 when the use of asbestos was at its height.<sup>3</sup> Many more were refurbished.

Asbestos removal is potentially a major cost in a school's refurbishment. The policy is to remove the asbestos in major rebuilds in the secondary schools, whereas there are insufficient funds to even identify the asbestos in the primary schools. That is because the BSF project for secondary schools is considerably better funded than the PCP project for primary schools.

Both BSF and PCP are huge financial projects and therefore detailed financial estimates would have to be made in the very early stages by the Government if they are to have any certainty of fulfilling their ambitious targets. Despite that a number of pilot projects have been completed and yet the Minister states that his Department does not collect data on one of the potentially major costs. It would appear that he has failed to take this into consideration, for just three months ago he also refused to carry out an audit of asbestos in schools claiming that there was no need for his Department to know how much asbestos is in the nation's schools as that is the responsibility of the

---

<sup>1</sup> DETR Asbestos and man-made mineral fibres in buildings. Schools P14

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/resourcesfinanceandbuilding/capitalinvestment/guidanceindex/BSFprogramme/>

<sup>3</sup> DETR Asbestos and man-made mineral fibres in buildings. Schools P14

local authorities and diocese.<sup>4</sup> Consequently neither he nor his Department know the extent, type or condition of asbestos in the nation's schools. And yet they have embarked on a multi billion pound project without attempting to assess what will inevitably be one of the major costs of the project. For instance removal of asbestos from just the pipe lagging in the attic of a junior school, and the associated remedial work cost £700,000.<sup>5</sup> In a primary school £300,000 was allocated to remove asbestos lagging from heating pipes in under floor ducts and to replace the damaged contaminated materials.<sup>6</sup>

During school refurbishments it is common for more asbestos to be found than had previously been identified, and in some projects this has led to considerable cost overruns, with the unexpected asbestos work costing a third of the refurbishment costs.<sup>7</sup> For example the costs of remedial work when previously unidentified asbestos was found during a school's refurbishment, was £4million.<sup>8</sup> Therefore it is essential that the asbestos has to be identified so that the remediation or removal can be factored into the total cost of the projects. However, according to the Minister, twelve pilot refurbishments have already taken place and yet his Department does not know how many of the schools contained asbestos, and they don't even intend to collect data on how much it cost to remove it. This would seem irresponsible at the very least as the data would give his Government some idea whether they are likely to achieve their ambitious targets, without it they have no idea.

During a Parliamentary debate in March 2009 the DCSF Minister stated that the Government's policy for secondary schools is that : *"Major refurbishments undertaken under BSF would normally include the removal of all asbestos..."*<sup>9</sup> But she failed to mention primary school policy. However this was confirmed a months later in a letter from the Schools Minister who stated the policy : *"It is usually safer to leave the asbestos in place and manage it until the building has reached the end of its useful life."*<sup>10</sup> Therefore the policy for secondary schools it to remove the asbestos and for primary schools it is to leave it in place.

If priorities were made based on risk then the younger children are more vulnerable to the dangers of asbestos and are therefore more likely to develop mesothelioma, consequently the primary schools should have the asbestos removed first.

At a meeting in June 2009 the DCSF Minister stated that it was not the Government's responsibility to decide whether asbestos would be removed from primary schools. Instead, she explained the Government consider that the decision rests with the local authorities and school authorities. It was also emphasised by DCSF officials that the primary school programme was less well funded and consequently refurbishment would often be no more than *"decoration."*<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hansard column Parliamentary written answers 12 Oct 2009 : Column 234W, Questions[289818] [289819] Nick Gibb MP/ Vernon Coaker MP Schools asbestos 12 Oct 2009.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm091012/text/91012w0054.htm#09101322005189>

<sup>5</sup> Derby City council corporate Policy cabinet member meeting Report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People item 5 Capital programme –urgent works 24 May 2007

<sup>6</sup> Derby City council corporate Policy cabinet member meeting Report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People item 5 Capital programme –urgent works 24 May 2007

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Select Committee Education and Skills. Written Evidence of Jarvis. June 2003. Re-cladding and refurbishment of 1970's classroom and laboratory block William Parker School Daventry annex 36 case study UK1

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sundaymail.co.uk/news/newsfeed/2008/10/19/cost-of-a-clean-up-78057-20817889/> <http://www.mass-ltd.com/news009.htm> HMIE Walker Road School Aberdeen City Council 2 September 2008 Sunday Mail Cost of clean up 19 Oct 2008

<sup>9</sup> The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for DCSF Sarah McCarthy-Fry Asbestos (Schools) Debate 25 Mar 2009

<sup>10</sup> Letter Secretary of State for Schools Rt Hon Jim Knight MP 30 Apr 09

<sup>11</sup> Lees contemporaneous notes Sarah McCarthy-Fry asbestos in schools group meeting 3 Jun 2009

When asked if all the asbestos would be identified before refurbishment, DCSF stressed that there would be insufficient funds to identify all the asbestos when primary schools are refurbished. A senior asbestos consultant pointed out that as present asbestos surveys do not identify hidden asbestos, this policy means that the schools are therefore expected to continue managing the asbestos without even knowing where it is or whether it is damaged and deteriorating, which clearly is an unsatisfactory situation.

Some authorities also have considerably more schools that contain asbestos than others. It is also known that some authorities have looked after their schools whereas others have not, consequently as the fabric of the school has deteriorated then so has the asbestos material. Often the problem is compounded as the standards of asbestos management are ineffective. However as the Minister has refused to carry out an audit, and has no intention to collate the data on how much the asbestos has cost to remove this situation will no doubt continue with those authorities and schools at the greatest need being given no more priority than those whose schools are comparatively safe. A national audit would identify those schools most at risk and prioritise them for refurbishment in terms of need regardless of which authority owns them. If his Department were aware how much the asbestos removal has cost then having prioritised the authorities, they would also have a better idea how much money was available to give to each of them.

A DCSF statement in February 2009 even stated that it would be “*bizarre*” to prioritise schools for refurbishment because of the presence of asbestos, instead the priority is decided on educational and social needs.<sup>12</sup> However this policy ignores the schools in the worst condition which are also likely to contain asbestos in poor condition. One local authority criticised this policy and stated “*There is no direct relationship between the condition of schools and the level of deprivation or attainment – two of the three schools with the highest maintenance backlog are in affluent parts of the city.*”<sup>13</sup> One must but hope from the Ministers’ latest Parliamentary answer that the policy has changed and that local authorities are now setting priorities because of condition. They must also be prioritised because of the extent, type and condition of the asbestos in their structure.

Once the schools have been refurbished with huge amounts of money, there will not be a second chance to remove the asbestos, instead most will remain in place and it will have to be managed long into the future. Future generations will therefore remain at risk.

The Government’s policy of managing the asbestos rather than removing it is not based on evidence, for that evidence is that a significant number of schools are not effectively managing their asbestos. Their policy of removing asbestos from secondary schools must be applauded, but the fact that their policy is to encourage the local authorities to leave it in place in primary schools is not based on the relative risks, it is based instead on insufficient funds being made available to make the nation’s primary schools safe. It is unacceptable that the asbestos is being left in the majority of primary schools. It is equally unacceptable that a Government Department has refused to determine which schools and local authorities are most at risk and then fails to collect data on the cost of asbestos removal from the schools that have been refurbished.

If the PCP project is to succeed then the Minister’s Department needs to determine how many schools that have been refurbished contain asbestos, and how much it has cost to remove it. If

---

<sup>12</sup> E-mail DCSF spokesman 4 Feb 2009

*“We are revamping the entire secondary school estate, as well as a thousands of primary schools - so over time, asbestos will be removed from buildings. BSF funding is allocated on the basis of educational and social need - and the readiness of a local authority to deliver these big programmes. It would seem bizarre to prioritise areas simply because they had asbestos in their schools - the bottom line is that local authorities and schools already have a legal duty to comply with the law on managing asbestos.”*

13 Derby City Council Primary strategy for change 2008. Para 2.4

future generations of children are to be made safe then the DCSF has to accept that the safety of children in schools is their responsibility and then change its policy so that in future all the asbestos is identified and the data centrally collated so that the schools can be prioritised. The most dangerous must then have their asbestos removed in a phased programme when both secondary and primary schools are refurbished under BSF and PCP.

*Michael Lees*  
*12<sup>th</sup> January 2010*