

Insight - a closer look at

Maintenance work in schools





Education

Maintenance work in schools contents

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Maintenance work in schools

Schools can often occupy old buildings and maintenance is a constant issue for the school management team.

Regular maintenance can prevent unplanned problems but in old buildings, especially buildings full of children, there will always be a need for reactive maintenance to repair the building fabric, facilities and equipment.

Maintenance work is linked to many workplace accidents in the UK and there are four main areas to focus on, these are:

- Preventing asbestos exposure
- Falling objects
- Contractor controls
- Falls from height.



Preventing asbestos exposure

Asbestos will be present in the building materials used in many schools. The asbestos is only dangerous when it is disturbed so if the material is to be left in situ it needs to be managed to ensure that it is not disturbed. It is therefore important to consider the location of asbestos containing materials whenever maintenance work is to be undertaken. An asbestos survey needs to have been carried out in the area of the maintenance work. If there is asbestos in the area there needs to be records and drawings for your maintenance team to refer to before the work starts. Thought needs to be given to how the work can be undertaken without disturbing the asbestos.

Important points to remember:

- If in doubt, assume that the building material contains asbestos.
- It may be practical to leave asbestos in place and manage its condition.
- Provide contractors with induction training for working at the school and issue the training on a signed receipt basis.
- Provide the contractors with details from your asbestos management plan and emergency plan. Ensure that the contractor is fully aware of whether asbestos is in the material they are going to be working on or near and provide this information on a signed receipt basis.

Asbestos is a versatile material that is used in many types of building material including:

- Fire breaks in ceiling voids
- Moulded or pre-formed thermal insulation of pipes
- Boiler lagging
- Fire protection to structural steel, ducts, door panels and partitions
- Soffit boards
- Ceiling tiles
- Insulation for electrical equipment
- Asbestos cement used for roofing, wall cladding, gutters, rainwater pipes and water tanks
- Textured coatings such as "Artex"
- Bitumen roofing material
- Vinyl or thermoplastic floor tiles.

Case study

In 2013 a magistrates court fined a school in Birmingham for breach of Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. The school had asked a window contractor to replace some windows. The school told the contractors there was no asbestos in the work area. The contractors found asbestos insulation material used as packing down the side of the windows.

The school had no asbestos management plan and provided no induction training and information on asbestos location to the contractors. The school spent £20,000 on decontaminating the classroom and was fined £7,500.





Falling objects

Health and Safety Executive records indicate that people being hit by falling objects accounts for a significant proportion of fatal accidents. Problems can occur when trying to lift an object that is heavier than anticipated or if the centre of gravity is incorrectly judged or from poor lifting practices etc. There needs to be a clear risk assessment and plan for the work and it is important to realize that the school is responsible for maintenance work and should not assume that contractors will be fully aware of what steps need to be taken.

Key steps to take include:

- 1** Develop a clear risk assessment for the work that covers the risk of falling objects.
- 2** Don't assume that those people involved in the work can handle heavy objects effectively.
- 3** Ensure that the risk assessment considers heavy items that may be dislodged by the maintenance work.
- 4** Stabilise heavy loads so they cannot tip, slip or fall.
- 5** Ensure that lifting equipment used in the maintenance work is adequate and inspected by a competent person.

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Control of contractors

Small maintenance items may be carried out in house but other substantial maintenance activity will need to be carried out by third party contractors. The range of work undertaken by contractors is wide and the amount of work carried out by contractors in the Education sector is growing.

Key issues to consider when managing contractors include:

- Contractors should be asked to provide evidence of their competence to carry out the work at hand. Risk assessments and method statements for the job should also be obtained.
- Ensure that the contractors have adequate public liability cover; your insurance broker can assist in this process.
- Check if the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations apply.
- Ask the contractors about their past health and safety performance and whether they have been prosecuted by the Health and Safety Executive.
- Determine if the contractors will have to sub contract any of the work and if so, ask them who they intend to use.
- Give the responsibility for managing the contractors to a member of staff.
- School staff should be briefed on the details of the maintenance work and whether it will impact on the smooth running of the school.
- Give the contractors important health and safety information and communicate your expectations of them and your emergency procedures before the contract starts.
- Regular communication should be held with the contractor management team. Any hazards created by the contractors should be reported promptly so they can be resolved. Any hazards created from school activities should also be communicated to the contractors.
- Ask if they are assessed by an independent body and ask if they are members of a professional body.
- If contractors are to carry out hot work on site or are to work on electrical systems, the use of a permit to work procedure is recommended.
- Ensure that there is a procedure for stopping work if there is a problem and investigating any incidents as necessary.
- Develop a process for reviewing the performance of contractors once the work has finished. This will assist in you building a panel of contractors who have proven they can work with you.





Work at height

Maintenance work at the school will often involve work at height. This could involve repairing the roof, clearing gutters, cleaning windows etc. Access equipment will be needed to work at height and the key to carrying out the work safely is to select the correct access equipment. Maintenance teams can use tower scaffolds, stepladders, leaning ladders and mobile elevating work platforms to gain access to work at height. Whatever the means of access, it is important for the user to have received instruction in how to use the means of access and evidence of the instruction being provided should be retained. QBE also recommend that once an employee has been provided with training and instruction, that a check on competence is made sometime after the training e.g. a month, just to check that the instructions are being followed. Making a note of this competence check is good practice.

Ladders are useful for short duration work as long as the correct type of ladder is used. Ladders are acceptable for gaining access to work at height if a risk assessment suggests that safer means of access are not justified. A useful rough guide is that if the task will need a maintenance person to stay up a ladder for more than 30 minutes it is recommended that alternative means of access is used.

Ensure that the ladders or stepladders are checked before they are used to ensure they are in good condition. This will include a check on the rungs, treads, feet, locking mechanism and check treads and platforms on stepladders. Ensure that steps are not buckled or contaminated with something that will make the users feet slip.

Practical tips

Here are some practical tips for school maintenance teams to consider when using ladders and stepladders:



Remember to keep your belt buckle within the ladder stiles so you don't over reach.



Make sure the steps or ladder are tall enough for the job. A ladder should reach 1 metre past the point where the work is being undertaken. The user should also not use the top three rungs of the ladder.



Remember also to place the ladder 1 unit out for every 4 units up. A leaning ladder should always be secured or use a stability device.



Always keep three points of contact with the ladder and if this cannot be achieved when using stepladders, alternative access techniques should be considered.



Keep the stepladder facing the work at hand rather than being side on. If the steps need to be side on, avoid bearing on tools or tie the steps to the wall.



Ensure that ladders are used on suitable ground and not placed in a location where they could be hit by a moving vehicle or opening door.



When the ladders and steps are not in use, ensure that children cannot use them or push them over. Ensure that working areas are appropriately fenced off.

Conclusion

Taking the time to think through maintenance work is key. This type of work is often a one off activity and it needs to be planned and risk assessed appropriately. Having the right information at hand and using the right equipment will greatly help ensure that maintenance work is completed safely.

Questions to consider:

- Where are the asbestos containing materials in your building structure?
- What access equipment is available for use in our maintenance work and have our team been provided with adequate instruction?
- Is there an assessment and plan made when items need to be lifted?
- Do we have any areas that could be classed as confined spaces?
- Do we have a permit to work system for contractors to use?
- Do we monitor maintenance work and stop it when there is an issue?

A focus on the key areas of lifting items, falling from height, controlling contractors and managing asbestos with adequate planning and application of resources will significantly reduce the chance of an untoward incident occurring.



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