



# Asbestos in Public Buildings

A true picture of the ongoing risk



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# Introduction

Experts estimate around 87,000 public buildings still contain asbestos. Our workplace illness experts are calling for more to be done to eradicate it after the Government rejected a 40-year removal plan.

We contacted 20 of the highest populated council areas under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act to gain a true picture of the ongoing risk. This report details the findings of our FOI requests, shares stories from families affected, and highlights the amount of work that still needs to be done.

## Foreword

At Irwin Mitchell we've represented people affected by asbestos-related disease for decades. We have the largest specialist legal team in the UK supporting thousands of victims each year. We see the devastation it causes families both during illness, and the grief of a loved one passing away too soon.

We've campaigned for years to highlight the number of public buildings that still contain asbestos. Most people associate it with historical exposure in factories or construction work, but our research shows that the deadly substance poses extensive risk in everyday buildings used by the public.

Schools are one of the main problem areas. Densely populated with pupils, teachers, and other staff for long hours at a time, it's extremely worrying that so many still contain asbestos – essentially putting children at risk every day.

Asbestos that's not yet deemed harmful can quickly become dangerous once it's disturbed or in a state of disrepair. The age of our public buildings and stretched maintenance budgets make it a huge concern.

The data shows that asbestos remains a clear and present danger. It was deeply disappointing that the Government rejected the call put forward in April 2022, to set a 40-year deadline for its removal. While we understand the logistical and financial scale of the challenge to remove it safely, it simply can't be left in situ.

Asbestos use has been outlawed for more than 20 years but removing it from our schools is an ongoing debate. It's also concerning that the recommended 40-year deadline isn't enough to complete removals at the current pace.

More needs to be done and we call on the Government to approve the recommendations of the Select Committee Report, accelerate the removal process, and ensure asbestos is extracted from all public buildings within the given timeframe – or preferably sooner.



**Adrian Budgen**  
Head of asbestos disease  
at Irwin Mitchell

# Key Findings



Experts estimate around **87,000** UK public buildings contain asbestos.

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**4**

Schools are the largest category of buildings affected, making up almost a quarter of the total number. This is followed by the likes of community centres, agricultural and park buildings, office space, libraries, leisure facilities and residential settings.



More than **4500** public buildings across 20 of the largest UK local authorities still contain asbestos.



In April 2022, MPs recommended a **40-year** deadline be set for the removal of asbestos from the estimated 300,000 public and commercial buildings that still contain it. However, the report from the Work and Pensions Committee was rejected by the Government.



Estimates show the speed of the asbestos removal process needs to be **doubled** to meet the recommended deadline.



The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) latest data shows there are more than **5,000** deaths from asbestos-related disease each year, including mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis.



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The legacy of asbestos in public buildings and the subsequent exposures of people working in or passing through these asbestos sites is an ongoing national tragedy.

**Liz Darlison**

Chief Executive Officer of national asbestos-related cancer charity, Mesothelioma UK

# Summary of Results

More than 4,500 public buildings across 20 of the highest populated council areas in the UK still contain asbestos, our research reveals.

The figures were provided by local authorities as part of new research undertaken by our legal experts, who support clients affected by exposure to the hazardous substance. For many, exposure leads to a diagnosis of mesothelioma, a terminal cancer of the lung lining, or the chronic lung disease asbestosis.

In April 2022, **MPs recommended a 40-year deadline** be set for the removal of asbestos from the estimated 300,000 public and commercial buildings that still contain it. However, the report from the Work and Pensions Committee was rejected by the Government.

Following the announcement, we contacted the 20 largest local authorities by population in the UK to gain an insight into the true picture of asbestos in public buildings.

## FOI response

The response to our FOI requests shows that **4,533 public buildings across the 20 councils** – ranging from Glasgow to Cornwall – still contain asbestos. The average is around 225 buildings per local authority.

The largest category of buildings affected is schools, which make up almost a quarter of the total number. This is followed by community centres, agricultural and park buildings, office space, libraries, leisure facilities and residential settings.

Our legal experts believe that if the data's repeated across the 387 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales combined, **around 87,000 public buildings will be found to contain asbestos.**

The figures also show that only 291 buildings across the 20 local authorities had asbestos removed in the last five years, despite 3,263 having a survey in the same timeframe.

We estimate that at the current rate, only around 2,300 of the 4,500 buildings would have asbestos removed within the 40-year deadline. This means **the speed of removal needs to be doubled to meet the requirement.**

Over the past 20 years an increasing number of people have developed asbestos-related illnesses from indirect sources, such as family members washing work clothes covered in asbestos dust, or non-industrial exposure.

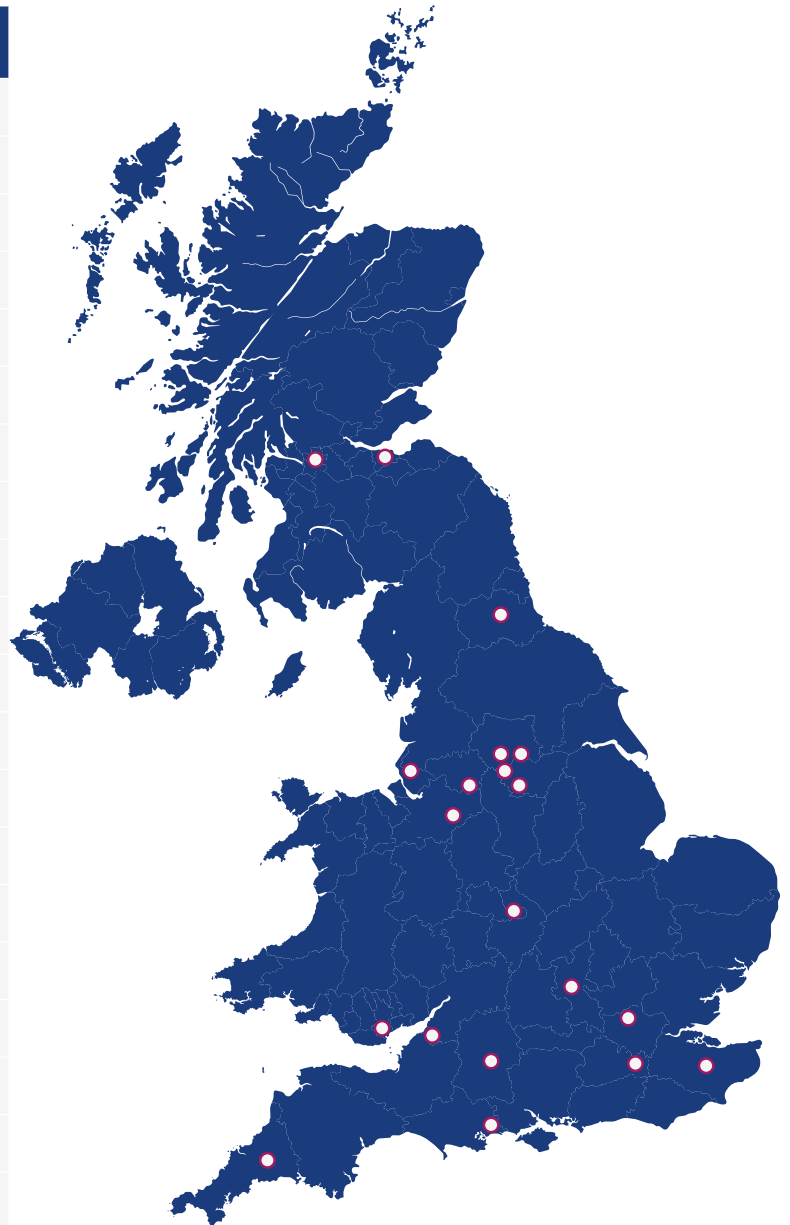
## How the councils compare

Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Council had 1,001 public and non-public buildings with asbestos, and it's been removed from three in the past five years. This was closely followed by Buckinghamshire, which had asbestos in 712 buildings and 75 removals.

Meanwhile, Barnet was lowest with 51 buildings containing asbestos. Leeds failed to provide any data and the council said its records were not held centrally. Birmingham didn't provide specific figures but did state that all its buildings are managed for compliance, with "asbestos being one of the risks considered on an ongoing basis."

### The 20 local authorities we approached were:

Barnet Council
Birmingham City Council
Bristol City Council
BCP Council for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council
Buckinghamshire Council
Cardiff Council
Cheshire East Council
Cornwall Council
Croydon Council
Durham County Council
City of Edinburgh Council
Glasgow City Council
Kent County Council
Kirklees Council
Leeds City Council
Liverpool City Council
Manchester City Council
Sheffield City Council
Wiltshire Council.



# Summary of Key Data

The following tables include data provided by the local authorities we contacted with FOI requests in 2022. We asked them to confirm how many buildings contained asbestos at that time and how many asbestos surveys and removals were carried out between the financial years 2017-2018 and 2021-2022.

## Top 10 UK Councils with public buildings containing asbestos

Council	Buildings containing asbestos
Bournemouth	1,001
Buckingham	712
Kent	394
Durham	368
Cardiff	277
Kirklees	254
Bradford	238
Edinburgh	235
Cornwall	199
Wiltshire	194

## Top 10 UK Councils with schools containing asbestos

Council	Number of schools
Kent	248
Glasgow	159
Buckingham	133
Kirklees	124
Cardiff	115
Sheffield	57
Liverpool	36
Barnett	29
Cornwall	6
Westminster	4





## Top UK Councils with most buildings that have undergone asbestos removal

Council	Buildings with asbestos removed
Wiltshire	120
Cardiff	77
Buckingham	75
Durham	21
Croydon	12
Bournemouth	3
Liverpool	2
Manchester	2

## Top UK Councils with most asbestos surveys carried out in the last five years

Council	Number of surveys carried out
Buckingham	653
Durham	421
Kent	394
Edinburgh	275
Bradford	238
Kirklees	254
Cornwall	203
Cardiff	277
Glasgow	261

# Comparison Table

Council	Buildings with asbestos	Schools with asbestos	Asbestos removed	Survey in last five years
Bournemouth	1,001	No data	3	62
Buckingham	712	133	75	653
Kent	394	248	No data	394
Durham	368	No data	21	421
Cardiff	277	115	77	All annually
Kirklees	254	124	No data	254
Bradford	238	No data	No data	238
Edinburgh	235	No data	0	275
Cornwall	199	6	0	203
Wiltshire	194	No data	120	All annually
Sheffield	174	57	0	174
Liverpool	123	36	2	179
Cheshire	114	No data	No data	No data
Croydon	108	No data	12	173
Barnet	51	29	0	80
Glasgow	No data	159	No data	Average 261
Manchester	93	No data	2	61
Birmingham	No data	No data	No data	No data
Leeds	No data	No data	No data	No data
Bristol	No data	No data	No data	No data



We do not have a cure for mesothelioma, but it's a preventable cancer for future generations with the removal of asbestos from all of our buildings.

**Liz Darlison**

Chief Executive Officer of national asbestos-related cancer charity,  
Mesothelioma UK

# Client Case Study

Pauline Harrison sadly died from mesothelioma, aged 67, after coming into contact with asbestos during her employment at a Bradford school.

Mum-of-two Pauline first felt unwell in November 2018. She had a cold and pain in the left side of her chest. Her GP suspected it was muscular.

A few months later in May 2019, she started feeling breathless and struggled to walk. Her GP referred her for a chest x-ray followed by a biopsy.

On 23 August 2019, Pauline was diagnosed with mesothelioma. She underwent six cycles of chemotherapy.

Pauline instructed our asbestos-related disease experts to investigate where her exposure to asbestos could have occurred. We found it was present in the portacabins where she worked at Crossley Hall Primary School in Bradford, and it was believed to be in other parts of the school as well.

In 1986, Pauline started work as a lunchtime supervisor at the school. Within a year she was working in the classrooms, listening to pupils read. In 1989 she became a school administrator, working in a small office and later the old staff room.

Recalling damage to a roof close to the admin office, Pauline told us that the lagged pipes running from the boiler room also contained asbestos.

Damage and repair works released fibres into the air in the storerooms where she sorted deliveries and put stock away. Pauline also believed that pinning work on the walls disturbed asbestos in the portacabin classrooms.

In November 2019, Pauline's lawyers made a claim against the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council. The local authority admitted asbestos had been present in the cabin-like structures Pauline worked in.



**Pauline Harrison**  
Our client



We hope that by sharing our story it will make others aware of the dangers still posed by asbestos and why it needs to be removed as soon as possible.

**Mark Harrison**  
Pauline's son

We issued court proceedings against the council in September 2020. Pauline died two months later, before the case could be resolved. Her family continued her case through to settlement in her memory, and it was concluded in October 2021.

Pauline was widowed in 1995. She was mum to Mark, 43, and Amy, 40. She also had three grandchildren.

Mark said: “When mum got her diagnosis, it came as a huge shock to all of us. She had been feeling a bit under the weather but not for one minute did we ever expect to be given the news we did.

“We lost her around 15 months later, which was absolutely devastating. We’d already had to cope with our dad passing, and it was incredibly difficult to go through it all again with mum. She fought bravely right to the end while undertaking her quest for answers. Thankfully she managed to get these before she died.

“Once she was gone, we were determined to continue the case through to settlement in honour of her memory as it was the least she deserved. We got there around a year after losing her.

“At the time, finding out her work was to blame was another blow to us all but it goes to show that asbestos is still a very real problem, particularly in public buildings such as schools. It’s incredibly worrying to think that it continues to be present in so many places, and while we can’t change what happened to mum, we hope that by sharing our story it will make others aware of the dangers still posed by asbestos and why it needs to be removed as soon as possible.”



# Our Asbestos-Related Disease Team

Our national team has over 80 members and is the largest team of asbestos solicitors in the UK. We've won several landmark victories that have led to significant changes in the law.

## These include:

- The first settlement including hospice costs as well as compensation.
- Securing deferred payment orders to cover future treatments, including those that hadn't yet been developed.
- We represented June Hancock in the first ever environmental asbestos case, securing her the highest ever award for an industrial disease case at the time.
- We were involved in a landmark case at the Supreme Court in 2012, which meant that insurers could be held responsible for asbestos exposure that happened many years earlier.



**Adrian Budgen**

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