

1st in a two-part series!




'Plan A' for asbestos

It is estimated that as much as 90% of social housing still contains asbestos. The management of this potentially hazardous substance is therefore a critical issue that can significantly impact the success of residential refurbishment schemes. In the first of a two-part series, Paul Phillips of Global Environmental discusses how adequate planning for asbestos can cut costs, save time and enhance tenant satisfaction.

Since most social housing in the UK was built before asbestos was banned as a building product in 1999, there remains a considerable amount of asbestos-containing material (ACM) in affordable housing stock that is likely to be disturbed or exposed during planned or responsive maintenance and refurbishment. You would be forgiven for thinking, therefore, that preparing for and planning this fundamental element of the refurbishment process would be a key consideration at the outset of a programme of, say, kitchen and bathroom replacements. However, we are often given little or no lead-in time to mobilise our resources for a programme of asbestos surveys.

It appears that the procurement of an asbestos survey team is often something of an afterthought, which is shunted in at the last minute, a few days before the programme starts if we are lucky. Unsurprisingly, this does not give us adequate time to resource the project adequately and often our surveyors start work without the requisite site inductions that would be considered standard health and safety practice for other trades. Notwithstanding our mobilisation issues, there are some other very good reasons





"ENABLING YOUR ASBESTOS CONSULTANT TIME TO PERFORM A DESKTOP STUDY BEFORE THE SURVEY PROGRAMME STARTS IS LIKELY TO SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE A PROJECT'S TIMESCALES IN THE LONG RUN."

why asbestos consultancies should be given a period to prepare before the work commences.

HSE requirements

The Health & Safety Executive explicitly calls for asbestos to be considered in the planning process. Chapter 4 of its surveys guidance document, HSG 264, states:

"For house improvement schemes and other project work, refurbishment and demolition surveys should be incorporated into the planning phase of such work as far as possible. This will avoid delays and disruption etc."

Enabling your asbestos consultant time to perform a desktop study before the survey programme starts is likely to significantly reduce a project's timescales in the long run. Giving them access to the current asbestos register and inventories of any remediation carried out should be an absolute pre-requisite. We would also recommend that your consultant is allowed to evaluate any building plans or other historical information to locate services, heating and ventilation ducts, plant rooms, riser shafts and lift shafts and any access

restrictions they may encounter.

We appreciate that all of this information may not be readily available but even a few hours' research could enable some obvious issues to be identified that can be planned ahead to avoid costly programme delays when they become apparent later on during the survey process.

What a survey involves

While asbestos is a very emotive subject – and understandably social landlords are reluctant to discuss the matter with tenants and risk causing a panic – we do feel that it pays to, at the very least, contact occupants in advance to let them know what to expect from the survey.

A Refurbishment & Demolition (R&D) survey requires the surveyor to take samples and, therefore, involves intrusive works. While surveyors

will be trained and instructed to take care, where possible, not to damage the property unduly, inevitably materials in the property's interior will need to be disturbed – such as samples of floor tiles removed, panels punctured or detached etc. – to gain access to voids and cavities and take samples for analysis. HSG 264 recommends samples with a surface area of about 3-5cm² and through the entire depth of the material. While many survey

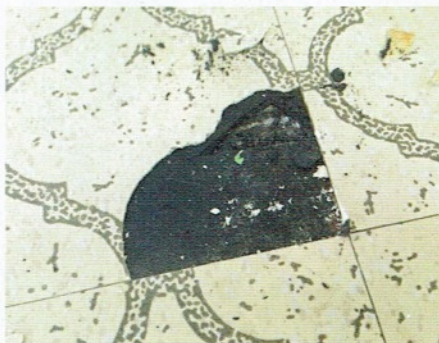
companies now use endoscopes to access voids or behind panels, thus limiting the size of the cavities that are needed, they will still leave 10-15mm holes in the material.

The HSE guidance requires that occupied premises are left in a condition that is

'fit for reoccupation' and surveyors will undertake some basic reinstatement. This

Typical places asbestos is found in social housing:

- ▶ Pipe Insulation
- ▶ Voids and risers
- ▶ Textured coatings e.g. artex
- ▶ Door panels
- ▶ Floor tiles
- ▶ Water tanks & toilet cisterns
- ▶ Rainwater goods
- ▶ Bath panels
- ▶ Roof tiles
- ▶ Loft insulation



will typically involve filling and painting over small holes or covering over intrusions with duck tape or polythene.

While this type of temporary repair may be all that is required if the area is going to be refurbished, it often falls well short of tenants' expectations and can be a major source of complaints at the outset of social housing refurbishment which can lead to lingering resentment and loss of reputation for all involved.

Managing expectations

So what can be done to placate the tenants, reduce complaints and ultimately streamline the entire refurb project? The key word here is expectations. In our experience, if the tenant is expecting some minor damage and that they are informed that this is an inevitable consequence of the refurbishment process they are far less likely to complain.

We therefore strongly advise that the tenants are, at the very least, informed about what the survey will entail during the appointment phase. This could be as simple as including a warning statement in the appointment maker's script and/or the confirmation letter, or you could enclose a simple FAQs flyer within the letter.

While surveyors are provided with basic tools and trained in how to use them to carry out minor reinstatement, they are not building operatives and, as such, there will be instances when they will not be able to access certain areas that are obscured by permanent or semi-permanent interior features of a residential property such as electrical appliances, kitchen units and ceramic tiles.

If the surveyor is unable to access a location without causing significant damage that would leave the premises

unfit for occupation then they are duty bound to identify these locations as inaccessible and exclude them from the report. This has caused us issues in the past with the contractor who is, perhaps understandably, reluctant to allow his building operatives to work on areas that are excluded by the report and potentially expose them to ACMs.

There are two approaches to this issue:

- ▶ either the building contractor provides a fitter who accompanies the asbestos surveyor and provides opening-up works and any reinstatement required; or
- ▶ the licenced removal contractor provides trained operatives who accompany the strip-out teams and access the excluded area under semi-controlled conditions.

Neither of these methods are necessarily feasible, not least because they can be prohibitively expensive. The answer lies in using the first approach in conjunction with a series of pilot surveys of each property archetype during the lead-in phase. This will enable the surveyors to identify any recurring inaccessible areas that can be accessed by the fitter, sampled and planned into the survey methodology to reduce or manage the incidence of exclusions and ultimately minimise delays to the programme.

Avoiding recurring exclusions

We encountered this very issue when surveying flats at an estate managed by a London borough's ALMO. Six weeks into the programme the contractor objected to the presence of a recurring exclusion in the reports we were issuing – kitchen risers which could not be accessed. Works were interrupted while our survey teams, accompanied by a building operative,

reinspected a number of properties, accessed the excluded area and sampled the material which turned out to be asbestos after all. Had we been given the opportunity to carry out pilot surveys at the outset, this issue could have been identified and extrapolated as 'presumed asbestos' for this property archetype – saving a considerable amount of time, effort and aggravation.

Pilot studies can also provide the contractor with some prior warning or indication of what ACMs they could be dealing with and whether this could cause delays or impact on the scope of works, such as asbestos insulation board (AIB) which requires a 14-day notification to the HSE.

Providing an opportunity at the outset of refurbishment programmes to allow your asbestos consultant to identify and discuss these issues in advance with the contractor and your Resident Liaison Officers will be time well spent. The lead-in phase for the asbestos surveyor need not exceed two weeks but could have a disproportionately beneficial impact on the overall programme, cut costs and help streamline relations between the surveyor, the contractor and your tenants.

Global Environmental specialises in asbestos management to support social housing refurbishment.

Readerlink 100

Coming up in part 2:

In the March issue of HABM, Paul Clarke-Scholes of Clifford Devlin will explain where efficiency savings can be made during the asbestos removal phase.