



Developing asbestos risk communication guidelines

**Report on stakeholder workshops to inform the
development of the guidelines**

16 April 2021

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Background and Context

The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) is producing a risk communications guideline for asbestos.

The aim of the Asbestos Risk Communications Guidelines (the Guidelines) is to help government agencies, businesses and non-government organisations produce effective risk communications. This will assist individuals, organisations and the community to better understand asbestos exposure, and in turn adopt appropriate preventative behaviours.

The Guidelines will also provide practical guidance for risk communication for asbestos, which will assist and inform actions when dealing with the public after an exposure event.

Why did we hold the workshops?

Biotext was engaged by ASEA to conduct a series of online workshops to consider asbestos risk communication. The aim of the workshops was to inform the development of the Guidelines by exploring communication needs and challenges in various contexts around asbestos exposure.

The workshops were facilitated by Double Arrow Consulting.

Holding workshops with a variety of stakeholders was important as it allowed ASEA and Biotext to hear the communication challenges stakeholder face and gather a range of viewpoints and experiences before drafting commences.

The key communication challenges that were raised during the workshop discussions were:

- how to give equal weight in the guidelines to preventative communications and incident response communications
- how to deal with different perceptions and understandings of risk
- how to deal with the disconnect between the objective assessment of risk by professionals versus the subjective assessment of risk by individuals
- how to identify the factors that influence the public perception of risk asbestos.

This is discussed in further detail below.

The views of participants expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of ASEA or Biotext and may not be reflected in the guidelines.

Workshop and Guideline development process

The workshops involved the following:

- 1 **Communicators workshop** (held on 14 December 2020) – a panel of communicators from relevant agencies dealing with asbestos communication considered scenarios and developed preliminary communication principles.
- 2 **Public workshop** (held on 16 February 2021) – a panel of individuals representing various groups in the community (including those who have been affected by asbestos and those who may be

affected in the future) considered the same scenarios and discussed their communication needs, and provided input to the preliminary communication principles.

- 3 **Focus group with people affected by asbestos-related disease** (held on 10 March 2021) – a number of individuals from the public who are affected by asbestos-related disease (either themselves or someone they care for) discussed effective asbestos risk communications.

The discussions and outcomes from this focus group have not been included in this report, as much of the content was very personal in nature. The issues discussed, however, will be considered carefully when developing the Guidelines.

- 4 **Combined workshop** (held on 16 March 2021) – participants from previous workshops came together to refine the communication principles and provide further input for the draft Guidelines.

Each workshop was opened with an introduction by ASEA to provide an overview of the project and explain the purpose of the workshops as part of the collaborative process for developing the Guidelines.

At the final (combined) workshop, participants agreed on the following broad principles for communicating about asbestos risk (further details included in the combined workshop report):

- Invest in proactive communication.
- Understand audiences and tailor communication.
- Give people respect and agency.
- Build relationships.
- Plan for effective communication.

Communicators workshop

The views of participants expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency. This is a workshop report – not all content expressed will be seen in the final Guidelines.

Participants

Participants were from the following organisations:

- La Trobe Valley Asbestos Taskforce
- Asbestos Free Tasmania Foundation
- WA Health
- Australian Government Department of Health
- Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
- SafeWork NSW
- Master Builders Association
- Victorian Asbestos Eradication Agency
- Australian Council of Trade Unions.

Pre-workshop survey

Participants were sent a link to an online survey shortly before the workshop; this was completed by 7 participants. Key responses included the following.

Briefly describe your most challenging experience in asbestos communication:

- Dealing with the '1 fibre can kill' mentality.
- Being able to communicate risks associated with low-level exposure.
- Dealing with people at both ends of the 'fear' spectrum.
- Communicating with those with known exposures to asbestos-containing materials (ACM).

What is one key piece of information you think the public should know about asbestos:

- That non-friable asbestos in good condition poses a very low risk to health.
- There are activities that can increase risks associated with exposure.
- The risk of disease is associated with both the quantity of respirable fibres in air and duration of exposure.
- Asbestos-containing materials should never be described as safe. ACMs can be described as low risk but only when they are labelled, information in an asbestos register is accurate and accessible, ACMs are in good condition, not friable and are not at risk of being damaged or disturbed.
- You have to take all precautions to minimise/eliminate exposure but if there is inadvertent exposure, disease is not inevitable.

- Don't touch it.
- It can kill and it takes a while to do it.

How might a good set of communication guidelines help you in your job?

- Awareness of the risk and the use of licensed professionals is almost always better than doing it yourself.
- To advise of exposure risk and ensure that appropriate precautions are taken to prevent or minimise exposure to asbestos. Including prioritised removal of asbestos still in use.
- Clear, consistent, fact-based communication of asbestos risk by all asbestos regulators and stakeholders.
- I deal with concerned people on a regular basis, mostly in my government job and as a university researcher. It is important to help people understand risk.
- Standardising messages can improve the impact.

Workshop introduction

Justine Ross opened the workshop by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which participants were meeting and their continued connection to land, sea and country, and paying respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Tamsin Lloyd provided an overview of the project. The aim of the project is to develop clear and useful guidelines that any organisation can use to communicate asbestos risks. The final product will include guidance on how best to deliver messages (including mediums and timing), what type of information the public is likely to expect in different situations and what questions need to be answered. The guidelines will not include the actual wording for these messages (as this will vary substantially depending on the situation) or advice on correct processes beyond communication. ASEA is committed to the Guidelines being developed in a collaborative process, and this workshop is the first step in developing the Guidelines.

Challenges in asbestos communication

Participants introduced themselves and shared their biggest challenge in asbestos communication. Comments included the following:

- trying to balance scientific information and research with the public's social knowledge of asbestos in a way that is respectful but also true to the science
- communicating the dangers of asbestos exposure so that people take it seriously, but balancing this with understanding what is and is not a risk
- reaching people with preventive messages who might not be aware of asbestos risks, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- communicating with people who have an overwhelming fear of disease or who panic after a potential exposure
- communicating with people who have had significant past exposure but now can do nothing about it, and managing their anxiety about their future
- funding for communication activities
- complacency among some groups of people about potential exposure risks
- difficulties in assessing potential exposure risks without real-time monitoring data

- sensitivities around access to registers for asbestos-containing materials by governments and the public
- communicating that asbestos was used in the past more than people realise, and that people should not assume that asbestos is not present in older buildings.

Scenario discussions

Participants were given a set of scenarios. These scenarios were intended to elicit principles for communication about asbestos risk, not to discuss the detailed process of responding to the incidents. Participants were asked to think outside their job or agency and consider the features of asbestos exposure that make communication challenging, the different perspectives of the people involved and the messages that could provide the public with confidence, from the communication that they receive.

For each scenario, participants were asked to consider:

- Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?
- What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?
- What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

Participants worked in groups of 4 on two scenarios, then reviewed the other sets of scenarios in a round robin and added to the previous groups' comments.

Scenario 1A School building

Brian's children go to the local primary school in their small town. Brian has just found out that some residual loose-fill asbestos has been discovered in the roof cavity of the main school building, which is quite old. The children have been attending the school for several years.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Children and parents – outrage and fear. There will likely be a vociferous group here that may or may not represent the whole parent community.
- School staff – likely a range of responses. A small group of staff will be very concerned and will want to shut the school down, another small group will want business to go on as usual, but most staff will be in between and waiting for information about the risk. Reactions will depend on individuals' personal exposure to asbestos issues.
- School principal – has responsibility and a duty of care, and will be the primary source of information for the school community. The principal may want to calm the issue down, but this can sometimes be counterproductive and could be seen as downplaying people's concerns.
- Department of Education, Minister for Education – these people may not get involved but they will be notified or briefed about the issue. They will be worried about risk management and media involvement. The department media office will probably handle media issues.
- Education union – will become involved if requested to by their members. Depends on strength of union membership at the school and how concerned members are. Strong involvement of the education union was important for developing the program for eradication of asbestos in schools in Victoria.

- Tradespeople who worked on the school, especially in the roof space – likely to have a range of reactions. Some may shrug their shoulders, others may be concerned.
- Houses around the school, anyone who is or has previously been part of the school community – reactions are likely to be variable and also depend on the context of the school within the community. The messaging to this group about the risk and how it can be managed is critically important. A clear line of communication from the school principal will help.

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

- Initial communication must include an acknowledgment that asbestos has been found.
- Inform the public about who is involved – for example, the issue is being dealt with through the Department of Education, Department of Health, WorkSafe or other relevant bodies.
- Every parent will ask ‘has my child been exposed to fibres?’ Need some reassuring words that any exposure is likely to be very low.
- The principal might not have all the information immediately. It is important that they are open and honest, and tell people if they don’t know the answer yet.
- Strategies and methods for communication will depend on the context of the school and community. For example, if there is an active parents’ group, messages could be disseminated through them.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- Individuals with the strongest response to the situation will be the “noisy end” of the spectrum of reactions and are also usually the most organised group.
- How can we tell people about low risk without “fobbing them off”?
- People will do their own research and find that the World Health Organization says there’s no safe level of exposure. We also need other messages to explain that on a practical level.
- Some people will want information beyond the health risk, including how the exposure happened (given that the asbestos should be listed in a register) and how the system broke down.
- People want to know what they can do, but there’s not much they can do. They can see their GP if they’re worried or record their potential exposure in the register.

Scenario 1B Neighbour’s roof

Ranjeet noticed two people on the roof of his neighbour’s house across the street who were cleaning the roof with a high-pressure hose. Some time after they finished, Ranjeet noticed several trucks, people in hazmat suits, as well as a news crew in the street. The street was barricaded off. Ranjeet saw a news story later that day that said that the neighbour’s roof contained asbestos, which had been disturbed during the high-pressure washing. The story also said that exposure to a few fibres of asbestos was not harmful – Ranjeet was confused, because the hazmat suits made it look very serious.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- People living in the street
- People doing the cleaning
- Local community

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

- For immediate neighbours, their property may have been contaminated and they are at risk of exposure.
- For other community members, the risk is low, but don't do anything to increase your exposure. The risk of exposure is low, and the risk of disease is even lower. The clean-up is serious, but the risk of exposure during the clean-up is low.
- In NSW, social media has been used to raise awareness of the dangers of pressure cleaning. However, there have been difficulties reaching CALD communities.
- Be proactive about issues when you expect there will be public interest. Everyone should have every piece of information they need to respond to any enquiries. In a government setting for example, prepare situation reports and notes for the minister to answer any questions taken on notice.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- Telling people it's a small risk when they're seeing a big clean-up effort. The neighbours will be concerned, but we can't do anything except allay their fears about long-term outcomes.
- Keeping children and animals away from contaminated areas is challenging, and they may bring debris from the street into the house.
- There can be a lag of 2 weeks or so between the actual incident and when authorities are notified (and decide who will pay for the clean-up).
- May be difficult to work out who is responsible for which aspect of the incident, and who is communicating about it. No single agency has overall responsibility in this scenario, which makes it difficult for people involved to know what to do and who to go to.
- Different people may go to different places for their information (eg workers may go to WorkSafe, neighbours may go to the local council, or CALD groups may go the local migrant resource centre) – identify these trusted sources and channels, and feed information through them. Messages need to be tailored to the community.
- Messages should be in all the right places all the time, so that people can access information when they need it (and may remember seeing information about asbestos in the local council, for example, so would call the council first).
- Can use media attention to raise awareness of the issue.

Scenario 2A Waste station

Nicko works as a processor at a waste transfer station. One day, Nicko is sorting through a load when they come across what looks like broken fibro sheets, mixed in with other demolition waste. Nicko stops work immediately, tells the team to stop work, and reports the incident to their manager.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- People at the waste station, including Nicko and team
- Person who brought the load in
- People along the road to the waste station
- Wherever the asbestos came from

- Chain of people along the way, depending on where it has come from and whether the load was secured appropriately

The first group who discussed this scenario considered that 'who was affected' depended on whether the asbestos waste came from a domestic or commercial source. If it was a commercial source, this would be governed by workplace health and safety regulations at the source, but this would not be the case for a domestic source. To help focus the discussion, the first group decided that the waste had come from a commercial childcare centre, and they completed the rest of the scenario accordingly. Subsequent groups pointed out that the source may not be known.

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

This scenario would trigger WorkSafe authorities straight away.

Communication with the transfer station:

- Is this the first time asbestos has been dealt with at the transfer station?
- Communicate about hazard identification – where did it come from, is there any more there?
- Communicate about exposure assessment – how much exposure has there been?
- Is there any more asbestos contamination at the site?
- Do they have a risk assessment strategy in place?

Communication with the childcare centre:

- Phone call straight away to the director of the centre, direct them to a portal or source of truth, give advice on who to call. Hope that the director informs themselves and passes information on to parents (this is their responsibility).
- Ensure that people (eg director of childcare centre) have the right information to communicate, and know who to contact to get information.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- Not enough understanding in the community about the dangers and consequences of asbestos exposure. A whole generation of Australians have missed out on asbestos messaging and they do not understand the risk.
- Balancing fear with fact.
- How to become a trusted source? By being open and transparent.
- Some messages come out and you wonder where they got their information from; there is not a clear source of truth.
- It is important to let people know where they can go to get the right information. However, if there are many agencies involved, people might get passed from local council to WorkSafe or the EPA or others – they often don't get told 'here's where you need to go' but just 'it's not us'.
- Privacy issues – communication with parents must come from the director of the childcare centre because no one else can have access to names and numbers.
- Can be difficult to separate the management from the communication sometimes.
- How you give people these messages can make a difference for next time. For example, if someone gets turned away from a transfer station because they won't accept the load of

asbestos, but the person is not told why, they will just take it somewhere else or illegally dump it. This would be a missed opportunity for education.

Scenario 2B Construction site

A large construction project is under way in the city. Excavations of the site to lay some pipes found small pieces of asbestos. Further investigations found more small pieces all over the site. One of the construction workers is worried and calls the union to report the asbestos. The union shuts down the site. The employer calls WorkSafe. In the meantime, the media has become aware of the situation and is reporting on the story.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Everyone at the site
- People in surrounding area (eg notify them that asbestos has been found and is being tested and they will be notified if they need to do anything). Keep people in the loop
- Delay to project leads to costs

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

- Communicate that this is not unusual and there are processes in place to investigate and manage it. The site would have a safety management plan and workers would have been inducted into it. The event would trigger the plan. The risk is very low.
- Even though the risk is low, procedures are still put in place to deal with it.
- Communicate with site supervisor and ensure you communicate with the right people, and with the right authorities.
- Need to get information out quickly ahead of the media to reassure them that requirements are already being dealt with.
- Manage who the media can speak to.
- Deliver messages to adjacent properties in a timely way so that they hear it from a central source before hearing it from the media. Messaging must be factual and accurate. Keep them up to date, give them peace of mind that it's being handled, there's a process, it's nothing to worry about.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- "Media can be a loose cannon, like to be sensational to get people to read their stories." [quote from workshop]
- Communication management should be part of the WHS plan.

Scenario 3A Train station

A busy train station has a tunnel that runs between platforms. The tunnel is used by hundreds of people every day. The maintenance team noticed that the asbestos lagging of some exposed pipes in the tunnel is in poor condition. The tunnel will need to be closed off while the asbestos is removed.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Highest exposed – removal team, maintenance team who may have been exposed, other people who accessed the tunnel (employees of transport system). Is there a risk of longer-term exposure? If so, the relevant industry association will be involved.
- Passengers – need to be updated.
- People who the tunnel will be closed to (passengers and public) will have the strongest reaction.

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

- Use data from monitoring and background levels to show that there is little exposure for people, and then ongoing monitoring.
- Be honest and upfront about the risk to gain their respect. Authority can be undermined if not honest. Answers need to be based on a risk assessment.
- Give everyone a website to visit or a phone number to call if they have questions, including an interpreter for other languages.
- Maintenance teams – use existing workplace structures, OHS meetings, toolbox meeting, induction training, maintenance training. Deal with it as business as usual.
- Public – signage on the site informing people about what is happening. Using signage as first point of alert, but for more information use QR codes to guide them straight to a factsheet. FAQs are helpful for these types of situations. Consider using multiple languages. Key messages include: removal is occurring, the risk is extremely low and the removal is to ensure safety in the future. For most people, a very low level of intermittent exposure puts them at very low risk of an asbestos-related illness.
- Transport company uses communication for service disruption information – build on this as a way to communicate this information, through the transport company website or linked channels, including social media.
- WorkSafe will put out safety alerts about damaged asbestos, to help people be alert and use it as a timely reminder for similar situations in other workplaces.
- Industry association will have circulars that cover the relevant information for workers.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- A lot of time will be spent trying to tell the public/passengers.
- Challenge is dealing with uncertainty, which the public is not comfortable with. The public doesn't need to worry, but we can't guarantee anything, we have no data. We can't communicate all scenarios that exist. The public wants certainty and we can't give that.
- Ensure that messages reach everyone, including CALD communities. Use plain language, and lean towards behavioural outcomes.
- The right level of detail is important to minimise uncertainty about where the asbestos was.
- Dealing with the legacy of governments not informing the public – people would immediately assume that there's a problem.

Scenario 3B Bushfire house

Julie and Jeff's house was one of many houses destroyed by a recent bushfire in a small coastal town. Julie and Jeff had safely evacuated before the fire, but were anxious to return to their house to search for valuables and start cleaning up.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Incident response personnel. Can be difficult to define risk for first responders – they need to know that asbestos is there before they turn up, otherwise it's too late. Volunteer firefighters may not be as prepared with PPE or as knowledgeable about asbestos risks as professional firefighters.
- Police and SES because they are controlling access to places.
- People in the area during and after the fire, and before any dust control is implemented.
- Owners (Jeff and Julie) – will be emotional.
- Neighbours and volunteers trying to help.
- Insurance companies.

What are the main messages you would want to get across? What communication strategies might you use?

- People want quick remediation of their sites, but you need to make sure it's safe. Need to go through the proper stages and risk assessment. This often seems to be lost during bushfires. You need to ask authorities what the likelihood is of asbestos exposure. Tradespeople want to go in and help, but they don't go through the proper channels because it's a widespread emergency situation.
- In all air monitoring during bushfires, we haven't had issues of asbestos levels above certain acceptable, mandated levels. It's more about re-entry and uncontrolled disturbance of the site that puts people at risk. Use air monitoring results to show that people are safe, and communicating the results would help to calm the community. This could include through social media pages and local government/council.
- Factsheets, QR codes, upfront meetings with people, get police and other support. We can help you go back into your property (eg with PPE). Always use town meetings to provide these bits of information.
- Asbestos crews are spraying foam and this happens almost immediately after a fire. PVA glue is always sprayed down first as part of a controlled management plan and everything is treated as contaminated waste.
- Communication tools need to distinguish between controlled asbestos and disturbed asbestos, as these have a very different level of risk.
- Volunteer firefighters/SES and police – communication by face to face meetings, and include them in town meetings etc. Provide information about the likely risk to them, based on the work they did in the area.
- Use social media – this is how people communicate these days and everything is through these platforms.
- Ensure that messages reach everyone, including CALD communities.
- Give everyone a website to visit or a phone number to call if they have questions, including an interpreter for other languages.

- Important opportunity for prevention messaging – fix it now before it becomes a risk. Timely removal of asbestos while it's in good condition is a really important message for bushfire preparedness.
- As the situation comes to an end, communicate what happened in the day or 2 between it being a potential risk, and then it being safe.

What are the communication risks, challenges or concerns?

- People don't know who to ask and where to go.
- Have to know about the sheer scale of numbers of asbestos-containing homes in bushfire scenarios.
- Can be very challenging to deal with the emotions of people wanting to get back to their home and retrieve items.
- Length of time before the site can be remediated – it will take time and homeowners need to be aware of this. It matters because homeowners will or won't go into their property before it's safe.
- The response is that everything is contaminated, which scares people. How do you reconcile that with the message that there is a low risk?

Key lessons about effective asbestos risk communication

Participants were asked to describe one thing they learned from the scenario exercises about making asbestos communication effective, and any points of tension. Comments were analysed after the workshop and categorised under the following themes.

Transparency

- The correct information needs to be available and accessible. This would mean there will be no misconceptions about risk and no-one will assume that information is being withheld.
- Be proactive in communications, keep everyone up to date and consult from the outset to minimise sensationalism.

Responsibility

- A clear chain of communication is important in some situations. For example, the school scenario had a clear chain with the school principal at the top, but the neighbour's roof scenario was more complicated, with multiple groups involved. People need to know where the communication chain starts, and where they can go to get information.
- Many government and non-government agencies have an interest in asbestos communication, but there is no agency with sole responsibility, and no clear lines between agencies. This can mean that people do not get the information they need when they need it, or they are passed around to different agencies.
- The community needs to know where to go to find information. It would be easier if there was a single source that could keep all asbestos-related information up to date.

Trust

- It may be preferable to talk about a 'trusted source' rather than a 'source of truth'. For example, governments are not always a source of truth, but can be a trusted source. However, this is not

always the case – several participants noted community distrust in government messages, or that people may think the situation is more serious than it is because the government is communicating about it. Many areas of government are moving to a more open communication style, but others are not yet there.

- Agencies need to become trusted sources of information, and not simply pass people on to another location for information.
- Honesty is the best policy.
- A point of tension was whether people who have been potentially exposed should talk to their GP – some participants said they would not bother referring someone to their GP because nothing can be done, but others said they would encourage this as the GP would be a trusted source of information (although not all GPs would have experience in managing potential asbestos exposures) and it gives the person some agency.

Flexibility

- Every situation is different, and there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to messaging. Communicators need to be flexible and adjust according to who they are communicating with and what information is available at the time.
- Risk perceptions vary depending on a range of factors, including the person’s individual experience (for example, a person who has had multiple exposures in the past is different to a person who has had one very low level exposure), whether children are involved and etc.
- There will almost always be a range of reactions among the people involved – some will be very concerned, some will not be concerned, and others will be unsure but waiting for information about what to do.
- Tailor the message to the situation and ensure that the level of alarm is proportionate to the level of risk.
- Give people what they need at the time they need it.

Clarity

- Clear, concise, consistent messaging is key, especially if there are multiple groups involved.
- Give people clarity by stepping them through the process as it unfolds (for example, this is the information we have now, this is the information we are waiting for, this is what will happen next).
- Approved or agreed risk terminology should be used so that people are not confused by the same concept being described in different ways.
- A point of tension was that there can be a disconnect between awareness-raising messages about preventing exposure because of the dangerous consequences, and reactive messages after a potential exposure when the risk is often described as low.

What the guidelines should include

Participants were asked to consider principles for processes that would help communication to be more effective in a range of different contexts and circumstances. Participants identified ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’ for effective communication, as well as points to explore further.

(Only one ‘should not’ was identified, and this has been reframed as a ‘should’ in the following list.)

Acknowledge uncertainty

- Be clear if there are unanswered questions (eg waiting on results of air monitoring). Must be clearly explained so people understand there may be multiple instances of communication.
- For early communication that might precede all the information we have or need, acknowledge that communication is based on the information at hand now.
- Explain the process to people and let them know when they can expect to hear more about what is happening.

Give people respect and agency

- Give people an action or a thing to do.
- Have a contact point or somewhere to go for more info, questions, immediate concerns.
- Must acknowledge that people will have other questions and there's a possibility of further questions, must be clear for them and not dismissing their concerns.
- Cover the whole spectrum of the situation from start to finish, even when the situation is over, give people a link or somewhere to go if they need more information.
- Should deal with all concerns, not dismiss them.
- Be respectful of everyone as a person and their personal experiences. People come from a range of backgrounds and experiences that creates sensitivities around this issue.

Understand audiences and tailor communication

- Identify all stakeholders who need communicating with, as well as their area of focus, communication needs and what type of language to use. Keep adding stakeholders as you learn more about the situation.
- Identify your stakeholders' preferred communication channels (eg online, PDFs, social media). Use multiple channels to get the message out.
- Whoever delivers the message must make it clear and digestible (eg not reporting levels more or less than 0.01, people don't understand this language). Phrasing is important. But this depends on the audience (eg if you're talking to a group of construction workers, you'd better know the fibre levels). Sometimes technical information is appropriate.
- Have enough knowledge about your audience to predict the questions. Know who you're communicating with.
- You can give the same message to different people with different levels of information.
- People have different levels of concern, which may be based on past experiences with asbestos issues or people with asbestos-related diseases. You can never treat someone's concern as though it shouldn't be dealt with, because they will go somewhere else to find their information.
- People go to GPs as a medical source, but this group is often left out. We need to identify them as a source of information for the public, and we provide them with the information they need to help people, and a way to keep them updated.
- Consult with people if you're developing new materials ahead of time.
- Communication should use plain language, and be clear, simple and concise. It must be digestible and readily accessible by a broad range of people, especially after an exposure incident.

- Communication should be honest, timely and targeted.
- Go to community groups and stakeholder groups individually to reassure people.

Clarify processes and responsibility

- When multiple agencies are involved, determine who is responsible for communicating and ensure this responsibility is clear. There must be an agreed process, regardless of who the message is coming from.
- Make sure all communicators know where the latest information is. This is an important administrative function that can often be underestimated.
- Communicate early and often. If the incident happened today, the first communication needs to go out today. Don't wait until you have all the answers. Always be on the front foot.
- Consider the different processes for workplace issues compared with public issues. Workplaces are governed by WorkSafe, which has regulations, processes and established ways of communicating. Processes may be less clear in non-workplace situations.
- If it is a large workplace incident, the site contractor on the site should have information about it on their website, and also circulate more information to stakeholders. Very large sites may have their own dedicated website (eg Hazelwood mine deconstruction).
- Consider doing a mapping exercise to identify who is involved and who needs to be involved in different situations (eg if it's this type of situation, call the EPA; if it's that situation, call WorkSafe). People don't always know who is involved and in what capacity, or who should be involved if they're not yet involved.

Be consistent

- Ensure messages are consistent within each incident, but also across incidents.
- Risk of exposure versus consequences. These are the same for all situations, and these are the two bits of information people really want for all situations. We can create consistent messaging for this.

Points to explore further

- These Guidelines will be tweaking a system that we already work within, and we do it reasonably well most of the time.
- How do we involve people in the process to build trust, because communities will often only get involved if there is distrust (see 'Trust' in the 'Key lessons' section about distrust in government).
- The balance between informing people and scaring people is difficult. The biggest issue is that some people don't think it's about risk at all. There's still a perception from the community that 'any amount can lead to disease'. That's always the dilemma – the balance between informing and scaring people.
- It will be difficult to develop one set of guidelines for such a diverse group. There are so many different levels involved, from federal government to individual building inspectors or surveyors.
- Environmental health guidelines already exist (eg for PFAS) that can be used as examples or templates. Also guidance on doing public consultations for contaminated sites.
- It depends who has the regulatory authority. For residential incidents, the local council usually has authority, but if a contractor was engaged to do cleaning for example, then it becomes a

work site and WorkSafe would be involved as well. There is work to be done to ensure consistency in the approach. (*Note: this is more about process than communication.*)

Workshop close

Overall, participants said they found the workshop useful and were pleased with the process. Participants were reassured that they were 'all on the same page' about issues with asbestos risk communication.

It was noted that lessons could be learned from the body of work that has already been done with other environmental hazards in terms of communication and effective community consultation. Others agreed that the Guidelines should not 'reinvent the wheel'.

It was suggested that the draft Guidelines could be circulated to groups such as HWSA (Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities), HEPA (Heads of Environment Protection Authorities) and other state associations to encourage collective adoption of the Guidelines across jurisdictions.

Participants were thanked for their time and informed of the process and timeline for developing the Guidelines.

Public workshop

The views of participants expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency. This is a workshop report – not all content expressed will be seen in the final Guidelines.

Participants

Participants in this workshop had the following occupations and affiliations:

- electrician, QLD
- teacher, NSW
- parent and homeowner, ACT
- communications consultant, ACT
- asbestos removal contractor, ACT
- built environment consultant, ACT
- Master Builders Association, ACT
- former Mr Fluffy house owner, academic in communications, ACT.

Challenges in asbestos communication

Participants introduced themselves and were asked ‘What is your reaction when you hear the word “asbestos”?’ Comments included the following:

- I feel sad because I think of all the people who were affected by asbestos in the power station near where I grew up in South Australia
- I’m sure asbestos is in the roof of my house and it’s a pain, if not now, then in the future when we want to do any renovations; a pain and a worry
- No exposure is the best exposure
- I want to work to keep people safe, especially workers and tradespeople
- Uncertainty and fearfulness; a lot of people don’t know much about asbestos
- I think of Mr Fluffy when I hear ‘asbestos’
- I think about how it affects different communities differently (eg Mr Fluffy in Canberra vs in rural towns).

Scenario discussions

Participants were given a set of scenarios. These scenarios were intended to elicit principles for communication about asbestos risk, not to discuss the detailed process of responding to the incidents. Participants were asked to think outside their job or agency and consider the features of asbestos exposure that make communication challenging, the different perspectives of the people involved and the messages that could support public confidence in the advice they receive.

For each scenario, participants were asked to consider:

- Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?
- What is good communication for? Why is it important?

Participants worked in 2 groups on 2 scenarios, then reviewed one other scenario as a whole group.

Scenario 1A School building

Brian's children go to the local primary school in their small town. Brian has just found out that some residual loose-fill asbestos has been discovered in the roof cavity of the main school building, which is quite old. The children have been attending the school for several years.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Children and staff at the school.
- The person who did the maintenance work in the roof cavity.
- Any contractors, people who visited the school.
- Reactions would likely be anger, upset, worried and scared, especially because there are children involved.

What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?

- I would want to know straight away about the level of risk and what is being done about it.
- I would want to know it's being assessed as soon as possible, and the school should be closed off until it's safe.
- Do we need health assessments if we're affected? Is there any legal action we can take?
- Emails, plus a person who you can talk to. It's important to talk to someone because you can't allay everyone's fears otherwise.
- The first communications should be face to face, with opportunities to ask questions. This should be made available online for those who can't attend
- There should be a website with all questions answered.
- I would want to know if the level of risk is different for different people (eg staff who have been there for longer, or the people who were in the roof). It needs to be clear how much of a concern it is to all the different groups, including people who have been there in the past.

What is good communication for? Why is it important?

- Someone needs to be responsible for all communications, including face to face, to make sure it's clear who is taking responsibility for the situation, who is doing what, and who can be contacted for more information
- Communication shouldn't be defensive, shouldn't sound like someone is trying to save their job. There needs to be concern for the people affected

Scenario 1B Neighbour's roof

Ranjeet noticed two people on the roof of his neighbour's house across the street who were cleaning the roof with a high-pressure hose. Some time after they finished, Ranjeet noticed several trucks, people in hazmat suits, as well as a news crew in the street. The street was barricaded off. Ranjeet

saw a news story later that day that said that the neighbour's roof contained asbestos, which had been disturbed during the high-pressure washing. The story also said that exposure to a few fibres of asbestos was not harmful – Ranjeet was confused, because the hazmat suits made it look very serious.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Cleaners – fear or anger that they weren't informed
- Homeowner
- Neighbours, community in general – also fear or anger
- Families of neighbours – people might share information and receive it second or third-hand. People can react very strongly to things that happen around their homes, but it depends on their connection to place (home vs neighbourhood) – everyone looks through their own lens.

What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?

- Letterbox drop from the contractors to explain what's happening.
- Emphasis on risk management, including barricading around the property and 'do not enter' signs, to make people aware and so the contractors look like they're doing the right thing.
- If I just saw a snippet of information, or if the news wasn't reflecting what I was seeing, then I'd be suspicious.
- I want someone to give me a number I can call so I can ask what's going on. I don't want to hear about it in the media. I want someone to explain exactly what happened and what risk there is. I want to know that they have taken the right measures to address it and it's under control, and tell me what I need to do now. Then I wouldn't need any more information.
- I want to be able to talk to someone so I can ask my specific questions. I want that person to come with expertise, not just authority. I trust their processes and their expertise, but I want to be able to hold my own in conversation with my neighbour if they're saying something different.
- If there is uncertainty about the information, this should be communicated. The fear of the unknown is always greater than what will actually happen. Don't say you don't know or give a false answer, say there is uncertainty and these are the steps we're taking to reduce that uncertainty.

What is good communication for? Why is it important?

- Good communication includes trusted and reliable information.
- Communication needs to be responsive to the situation. I don't want information from a template that doesn't fit. It needs to be tailored.
- Information needs to be clear, so I can understand it.
- Communication should give me a number to call or a website to look at to get more information if I need it.
- Good communication is timely. It's not good enough to give me information today because the people in hazmat suits are there – I might have wanted information 3 days ago. And I might want different information in a week's time or 2 weeks' time to tell me what's happening now.
- I don't think there can be too much communication either before or after. If there's any suspicion that it's been covered up or there's no communication, it always gets found out and then people get angry. If you communicate upfront, it can be managed much better.

- Good communication recognises that everyone gathers information in different ways – some people research a website, others want a simple dot point summary, others find it easier to speak to someone.
- It's always essential that communication goes 2 ways.

Scenario 2A Waste station

Nicko works as a processor at a waste transfer station. One day, Nicko is sorting through a load when they come across what looks like broken fibro sheets, mixed in with other demolition waste. Nicko stops work immediately, tells the team to stop work, and reports the incident to their manager.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- The team at the transfer station, the manager, their colleagues, their families.
- The whole organisation at the transfer station. If it's government-owned, there might be a broader policy discussion. If it gets in the media, they might ask how this happened and suggest that they're not doing their jobs properly.
- The contractors who were picking up that waste.
- People at the place where the waste came from, but you might not be able to determine that.
- It's not unreasonable to expect that this would occur regularly at a waste facility. This is something they know they have to deal with, they should have safety checks and procedures in place, and they should be ready for this situation. It sounds like Nicko knows the protocol.
- It depends if this is the first time it's happened in 12 months or the third time it's happened this month. They might be disappointed ('here we go again') but probably not surprised, and probably less fear or concern as other scenarios. It's a different reaction to scenarios where it's very rare.

What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?

- If I worked there, I'd want to know how this happened, where was the breakdown in the chain of waste disposal, and what can we do to make sure it doesn't happen again.
- I would want to know if there's any further action I can take. I don't know about the medical implications of fibro sheets, but I would want Nicko to be confident to know if he needs to see a doctor or needs some extra training in these situations. There should be some kind of reflection and lessons learned.

What is good communication for? Why is it important?

- It's all about communication within the workplace. The public doesn't need to know because there's no broader public health risk.
- It's a bit of a judgment call. There's no black and white answer as to what the public needs to know about. If the broader community doesn't need to know, then don't say anything. But if it's in an environment where people were expected to know better, if you're not open about it and the information gets out later, then that's different. It needs specialist consideration.
- The waste station needs to take responsibility for what happened, talk to their employees about the breakdown in the chain, what they're doing to address it and how they'll do this better in the future. They need to take responsibility and give reassurance. This needs to happen quickly.

- The waste station (or whoever is responsible) needs to look at how they communicate with construction companies or whoever put the asbestos waste there, so they know they shouldn't do it and should dispose of it at a specialist place. There needs to be some education about that.
- If it becomes a learning opportunity to tell the construction companies how to manage their waste, you could go public with that angle and say this is what we found and this is how we managed it. Use it to reinforce policies. This requires that you can control the story. You need to consider the context and make a judgment call about whether to go public.

Scenario 2B Construction site

A large construction project is under way in the city. Excavations of the site to lay some pipes found small pieces of asbestos. Further investigations found more small pieces all over the site. One of the construction workers is worried and calls the union to report the asbestos. The union shuts down the site. The employer calls WorkSafe. In the meantime, the media has become aware of the situation and is reporting on the story.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Workers would stop work, site would be closed, WorkSafe would be called, and an assessor would be there as soon as possible.
- The workers onsite need to go to a safe area until the site is assessed. They need to be assessed for their level of risk and updated every few days.

What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?

- There would be political issues, but the safety issues on the site should be the focus
- As a person who visited the site, what do I need to do?
- What is the strategy for mitigation and clean-up?
- Workers will want to know that processes are being followed, the risk is being assessed and they will be told as soon as we know the level of risk for each person on the site.
- Timing is important – it can't be an endless wait for information, you need to specify how long it will take.
- The WorkSafe authority needs to be on the front foot in this scenario, with a designated person in charge of the incident.

What is good communication for? Why is it important?

- The longer it takes and the more confused the communication is, the more people will feel disgruntled, isolated and without control.
- A lot rides on keeping people in the fold, and letting them contribute and be heard.
- Good communication is important to maintain relationships.
- Good communication happens before the incident happens. Workers need an asbestos white card so they're aware of the risks and processes. This helps alleviate concerns because there's a plan to follow.
- Good communication should be understandable and consistent.
- It's more efficient to do a good job of communicating straight away. This avoids legal issues and reputational risks.

Scenario 3A Train station

A busy train station has a tunnel that runs between platforms. The tunnel is used by hundreds of people every day. The maintenance team noticed that the asbestos lagging of some exposed pipes in the tunnel is in poor condition. The tunnel will need to be closed off while the asbestos is removed.

Who is affected by this scenario? How do you think they might react?

- Maintenance team
- Members of the public
- Train workers
- Cleaning crew that usually cleans those areas
- Buskers
- There will be lots of phone calls to the transport department
- There might be panic. Stories might come out that it's been damaged for a long time, everyone's been exposed and nothing has been done to manage it. There might be lots of other similar tunnels in the city, people might speculate that all tunnels like that have the same issue, so panic could spread.
- But it could go the other way. If you see news articles about illegal dumping on the street, sometimes people feel less panicked than if it's their home or their street. People just put it in the category of 'shit happens, don't worry about it'. Paradoxically, sometimes things that affect a lot of people are less scary than if it's in your own space.

What information would you want? What questions, concerns or needs might you have? How would you like to receive this information (channels, timing, source etc)?

- Need a range of communications because a diverse range of people move through train stations. There might be brochures people can pick up or newsletters. You can access community groups. Information needs to be accessible and in different languages.
- A central point or source of information is crucial. Everyone in these types of scenarios are going to be an expert, so we need a central source to have consistent messaging across the board. That's what we want to achieve with these guidelines – to have a single source with tools and resources to reach everyone from industry to the government to the general public.
- We need to think about who are the many audiences we need to reach, how do we reach them, how do we make sure we give someone the answer they need when they need it.
- It needs to be a tiered approach. Everyone has different channels and perspectives that they see information from, so communication needs to be tailored. You could start with a simple general message, but other information needs to be available for people who need it. People who have questions should be able to engage directly and receive appropriate communication.
- Logistics of communication is also important. The right language and content are important, but getting the message out effectively is about the logistics of dissemination (eg timing and booking things in).
- Anything that looks like marketing that is designed to allay my fears is going to make me sceptical.

What is good communication for? Why is it important?

- The big challenge is explaining how bad it is. People want to know how bad it is for me, how bad could it be and what's the level of uncertainty. There's a choice between using complicated scientific language that gets blasted at people and tells them to be quiet, to making it super simple and saying everything's fine.
- If there's uncertainty, you need to be frank and open about it, not pass the buck. You should tell people how you're working to get that information, how you're trying to reach more certainty, this is what needs to happen before we can get that information, and have clear timelines about when you expect to come back with that information.

This led to a broader discussion about risk and uncertainty. It was suggested that, in this scenario, one response would be to say that it's unlikely you would get an asbestos-related disease after this exposure. If you just walked past the pipes, you're not being exposed to it all the time. The likelihood is insignificant, although you can never say never. If you're worried about it, you can get your airways checked and monitored over time, but you should be reassured that you're unlikely to get a disease. If the 'one fibre can kill' theory was correct, we would all have disease because we're all breathing in asbestos fibres all the time.

Not all participants found this response to be reassuring. It was noted that people have different responses to estimations of risk – for example, some people think that a 'more than 50% chance' of successful surgery is fine, but others do not. One participant questioned whether 'unlikely' means 1 in 20, or 1 in a million, or something else.

Participants discussed levels of risk in other situations; for example, everyone is afraid of sharks but it's more dangerous to cross the road. It was noted that everyone has an innate level of understanding about the risks of electricity, including in the home; children learn not to touch power points from a very young age. Until asbestos is thought of in the same way, it's difficult to remove emotive reactions.

Key lessons about effective asbestos risk communication

Participants were asked to describe one thing they learned from the scenario exercises about making asbestos communication effective, and any points of tension. Comments were analysed after the workshop and categorised under the following themes.

Education

- General education about asbestos is needed to help demystify it. By arming people with information, they can assess the level of risk if there is a potential exposure.
- Most of the general public doesn't know what asbestos looks like or whether it's in their homes. Industry and workplaces receive training about this, but there is nothing for the public.
- People don't have the right information now about how risky it is and what level of exposure has a risk of disease. People will always overestimate or underestimate the risk. The only way to balance informing people versus scaring people is to give them the information from the very start, in school, the same way we talk about other risks like crossing the road.
- Education is something we need to be thinking about in Australia. Asbestos is not going away any time soon, and people need some kind of baseline understanding.
- There are so many preconceived ideas about asbestos, and everyone has an opinion. Education would help us have these conversations.

Action

- How people respond depends on the level of control they have over the situation. If it's in their own house or at work, people feel like they can do something about it.
- A point of tension was whether, in some situations that affect a lot of people, some people just think it's too big to worry about and will not be concerned.
- It can help if communication is action oriented. Some people don't just want to read information, they want to know what to do, where to go for more information, who to call if they have questions. If there's uncertainty or a lack of information, and more information will be coming, it's good to say what's happening and the timeframe it will happen over.
- Communication should give people confidence.

Comparisons

- When someone says the risk is low, you have to ask what they mean. It's good to compare it to something more familiar.
- This was also a point of tension, as some participants asked whether comparisons with other risks would give people more confidence or just raise more questions, because everyone views it through a different lens.

Purpose

- A point of tension was that most of the discussion was assuming that the purpose of the communication is to reassure people that everything is fine. How do we communicate when it's not fine? How do we empower people to do something about it? How do we make sure that someone takes responsibility? How do we manage the fact that this will be an issue in people's lives for the next 50 years?

Tailored, responsive communication

- The key is to be upfront, precise and factual, but also show empathy.
- Consider whether it's useful or necessary to distinguish between how it might affect different groups of people. For example, with COVID-19 vaccination, the message is that it's fine, unless you're pregnant or in a vulnerable group. This can be well-intentioned, and it might be important, but you need to be sensitive about it. Public health advice is all about statistics and how likely things are, but there will always be people who want to hear how it impacts them differently.
- You need plain language, and clear, concise communication (eg fact sheets, graphics). You need to provide information in layers, tiered to cater to different audiences, and through different channels.
- Responsibility should mean more than just regulatory requirements. It's about duty of care, not passing the buck.

Principles of asbestos communication

Participants were shown the following categories, identified in the previous stakeholder workshop as what should be included in the Guidelines:

- Acknowledge uncertainty

- Give people respect and agency
- Understand audiences and tailor communication
- Clarify processes and responsibility
- Be consistent.

Participants discussed the following points:

- Communication should be timely.
- Plain language is important, and communication needs to be clear and concise.
- There should be different layers of information, starting with the most simple and expanding for people who want more details. There should also be the option of speaking with someone.
- The Guidelines should include different types of information for different groups. For example, the needs of employers, employees and small businesses may differ. Depending on the audience, the communication could include more scientific detail.
- Use graphics or visuals to engage people.
- Give people a central point where they can get more information.
- Regarding processes and responsibility, this is not just about responsibilities under the law and passing the buck between agencies. It's about giving people reassurance that someone is responsible for and is managing the entire situation, like a duty of care. One organisation needs to be identified as the responsible organisation; people don't like to see too many people taking responsibility for too many parts.

Workshop close

Overall, participants said they found the workshop interesting. All participants agreed to attend another workshop if they were available.

Participants were thanked for their time and informed of the process for receiving their incentives.

Combined workshop

The views of participants expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency. This is a workshop report – not all content expressed will be seen in the final Guidelines.

Participants

Participants in this workshop were from the following organisations or occupations:

- La Trobe Valley Asbestos Taskforce
- A communications consultant, ACT
- Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
- An asbestos removal contractor, ACT
- SafeWork NSW
- WA Health
- Master Builders Association, ACT
- Victorian Asbestos Eradication Agency
- Australian Council of Trade Unions.

Expectations for the guidelines

Participants introduced themselves and were asked ‘In what ways could these guidelines make your job easier or your life better? How could they help?’ Comments included the following:

- The Guidelines will be a great opportunity for people to revisit the way they do their communications, to look at all the options and think about how to do this better.
- There is a need to get the message across in a way that’s effective enough to change behaviour, create enough awareness to make people pay attention and treat asbestos seriously, but not cause hysteria. The guidelines will help us all say the same messages.
- If we achieve more effective communication about exposure risk, we can spend less time reacting to incidents.
- The Guidelines will help make it easier to guide people through how to communicate for workers and employers.
- The Guidelines can be used to check communication activities against the principles and make sure the activities are appropriate.
- The Guidelines will help people who have less experience in health risk communication by giving them a guide to the principles to bear in mind when communicating about risk. Hopefully, tools will also be developed that link to the Guidelines to help people undertake their communication activities.
- The Guidelines will be useful to help us address the risk simply and comprehensibly. Anxiety and psychosocial issues after potential exposure can be significant in some people and last a long time. If the Guidelines are consistently applied, this will help. People who communicate about asbestos have varying levels of experience and knowledge, but they may have been directed to

communicate about the risk, or feel obliged to. They do their best in the circumstances, but it might not be the best communication overall.

- The Guidelines will help people understand the different circumstances and context of asbestos issues. They will help us frame communication and deliver the right responses so people don't underreact or overreact.
- Whenever asbestos comes up in the news, it's all hysteria and danger. The Guidelines will help keep everyone calm and understand what's actually happening.
- Information given to the public about asbestos can be factually incorrect or poorly worded, which can cause confusion or anxiety. The Guidelines will help make communication clearer for the general public.

Draft communication principles

Participants were provided with the following draft communication principles before the workshop, and also in a Google doc during the workshop. The principles were developed from topics that were common to both the communicators panel and the public panel workshops.

Participants were encouraged to review and edit the Google doc in the days following the workshop, to further refine the principles. These comments are included in this workshop summary.

Draft communication principles for discussion

Understand audiences and tailor communication

- Identify and understand stakeholders
- Respect and understand difference in perspectives, responses and needs
- Aim to be clear, concise, use plain language, but recognise the above; consult about and test new information materials
- Find different ways to explain/contextualise risk; use graphics & visuals; provide layers of information
- Use different channels to reach different groups (check that relevant groups have access to channels)
- Acknowledge and challenge assumptions (e.g. asbestos is only an industrial workplace issue)

Give people respect and agency

- Action-oriented communication – explain what people can do, give them options and autonomy
- Give access to further information, an avenue to ask questions
- Listen to concerns – listening is valuable and provides information to shape communication and manage responses (need channels for this)
- Practise empathy, duty of care
- Acknowledge uncertainty (resolvable) – let people know how it will be resolved and when
- Acknowledge uncertainty (unresolvable) – acknowledge that some uncertainty cannot be resolved

Build relationships

- Listen, make communication two-way (need channels for this)
- Attend to values, emotions and stories
- Be open, transparent, honest, empathetic
- Build trust by being trustworthy
- Use a collaborative approach – we're in it together

Plan for effective communication

- Establish responsibility and process (sources, content, formats, channels, timing); aim for consistency – consistent information for each incident/setting and consistent messages about general issues (eg exposure and consequences)
- Give attention and resources to the logistics of communication
- Make connections with communication partners (eg GPs, community organisations, workplace managers, online communities, media); understand the 'communication system'
- Timeliness means planning for communication before, during and after incidents

Invest in proactive communication

- Find ways to educate and raise awareness
- Collaborate towards national education campaigns
- Be positive about precaution and working together

Participants made the following comments about the draft principles:

Understand audiences and tailor communication

- Clarify whether 'different channels' relates to different means of communication (eg digital, in person, text, podcast, graphics), or whether this refers to people having different learning styles.
- Acknowledging and understanding differences in perspectives means that you have to acknowledge the individual circumstances the person is in, and be careful making assumptions about people. For example, a person may not have had a significant exposure, but they may have had multiple small exposures over their life. This needs to be taken into account.
- The principles should explicitly mention information that is targeted to the people and circumstances (eg the information you give to the general public may be different to the information you give to a group with a higher risk of exposure).
- To provide targeted information, you need to listen and collect all the facts about the situation. In some cases, this will mean acknowledging that the concerns are real.

Give people respect and agency

- Participants agreed with these points.
- For the point about acknowledging uncertainty, change to 'let people know how it will be resolved, when and by whom'.

Build relationships

- Participants disagreed with the statement 'we're in it together' – when someone is phoning because they're concerned, you're not in it together.
- It was suggested to add a point about authority and expertise – messages can come from a position of authority or a position of expertise, and these are not necessarily embodied in a single person. This could potentially fit into various principles.

Plan for effective communication

- 'Establish responsibility and process' should also mention the capability and competencies of the person delivering the message. It should also include planning for how you will respond to the information you receive (eg revise communication products in light of feedback), including allocating time and resources for iteration.

Invest in proactive communication

- It was noted that some communication about COVID-19 is a good example of being positive about precaution rather than being concerned about the risk.
- Participants felt this set of points should be at the top of the list – if you do the proactive communications right, the reactive communication is easier. All agencies should move more towards the proactive communication space.

Other suggestions included the following:

- The principles should be demonstrated through examples that relate specifically to asbestos communication, particularly for proactive communication.
- The principles are missing the importance of knowing the facts when you're communicating, as well as the people you're communicating to.

- The Guidelines (or the ASEA website) could include a list of contacts in each state and territory who can help disseminate communication for both proactive and reactive situations.

Issues and questions

Participants were provided with the following issues and questions to discuss in breakout groups.

What would enable two-way communication?

Communication is generally best when it is two-way. What does two-way communication look like for asbestos incidents and settings? What is needed to make it possible?

Two participants were in this breakout group.

Participants noted that two-way communication is mainly about empathy. It is not just passively listening to what people have to say, but discussing it with them, asking questions and engaging. This can be expressed verbally, but also in a written form (eg if a regular newsletter includes a column about recent issues or questions received by the organisation) to feed back to people about what the organisation is doing and make people feel like they're contributing.

Policies and processes can also be implemented using two-way communication. If people in the community are reacting to policies and processes about asbestos management, there should be a channel for this to feed back to government or the responsible agency, and a process for collating and responding to this feedback. If a new policy or process is being implemented, there should be a mechanism to understand whether the message is getting through – this can be gathered through feedback such as a survey.

Two-way communication cannot happen without a process for recording what you hear. This is the enabler, and it is essential to ensure that communication is documented accurately and that there is a process for reviewing that feedback and reflecting on it to improve future communications.

Training is useful for people who engage in two-way communication. Human interaction skills are an important part of communicating with empathy, whether this is for a person hosting a booth at a trade show, presenting to schoolchildren or talking with builders on a site. Tools to help communicators identify and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues can be helpful, especially in situations where people are emotional.

What is the purpose of asbestos communication? Is it to allay fears? Why should fears be allayed?

Five participants were in this breakout group.

Participants noted that it was important to acknowledge people's concerns, and acknowledge that all concerns are valid from an individual's perspective. Communicators should listen to what people are saying so they can determine what information people need.

Framing of asbestos issues can predominantly be about de-escalating a situation, but sometimes it's necessary to say there's a risk or a problem. The purpose should not be to allay fear, but to give honest and factual information – there is no need for emotion. We know enough about asbestos to know that it's a cause for concern, and we don't need to amplify the emotion around it – just focus on how you can prevent exposure. Communication of preventive messages should empower people to be safe and make it easier for them to be safe.

It is important to give people actions to prevent the situation from escalating. For example, you could acknowledge that you can't tell someone if they will develop a disease, but you can tell them to use the National Asbestos Exposure Register and talk to their doctor.

Communicators could raise awareness about the regulations that are in place to protect people from asbestos exposure. For example, many people doing home renovations put trust in their builder without knowing any of the rules relating to asbestos identification and removal. Messages could include a comparison; for example, that you wouldn't try to fix the electricity in your house by yourself – you need a licensed electrician to do this. However, participants also noted that asbestos removal can be costly, and this is a significant barrier.

Participants noted that the focus group with people affected by asbestos-related disease (conducted as part of this workshop series) had suggested that some amount of fear might be necessary to get people's attention. It was considered that different groups of people would respond differently to that kind of tactic, and there was not one answer for every group. ASEA had previously received advice from a behavioural economist that there needs to be a certain push to change people's behaviour, but if it goes too far, people just block out the message. The right level of push can be difficult to achieve.

How can we give information about risk levels without telling people how to feel or act? Are comparisons helpful?

In the school scenario, there is information about the nature and condition of the material, about the timeframe and potential exposures, and about the air levels. What is the best way to give information about the level of risk to stakeholders?

Ten participants were in this breakout group.

One participant noted that, if a distinction is made between high risk and low risk, then some people may be more likely to do a certain activity because 'it's only a low risk'.

Participants discussed the idea of 2 separate risks – the risk of exposure (preventive messaging) and the risk of disease (reactive messaging) – and these messages should not be combined. We can prevent inhalation exposure and reduce the risk of exposure, but once a person has been exposed, they only want to know about their risk of disease. These are 2 different issues with 2 different bodies of scientific knowledge. Many participants agreed that this was a very helpful way to consider the issue.

Participants also noted that different experts may be required to deliver these 2 different aspects of communication. For example, to prevent exposure, the expert may be an occupational hygienist, but after exposure, the appropriate expert may be someone with medical credentials. This was the approach taken in the ACT relating to Mr Fluffy houses. If communicators only specialise in one of these areas, they can either learn the other area or refer to a different expert.

Participants discussed the importance of providing reliable sources to demonstrate the scientific basis of asbestos communication, with references to primary data where possible. One participant noted that their organisation has a publication on their website that includes asbestos air monitoring data after fire damage. The organisation does not describe whether the risk is high or low, but leaves people to draw their own conclusions from the data. (*Note: This approach is not likely to be accessible or helpful for consumers with no scientific background.*) Participants agreed that being able to link to reliable and credible sources could help build trust and dispel misconceptions. It would be useful to have a list of relevant links, potentially on the ASEA website. Responsibility for

asbestos issues often lies with states and territories, and there can be differences between jurisdictions; however, ASEA could potentially improve the way it links people to individual jurisdictions for this type of information. Some guidance on how to source reliable and credible information (eg systematic reviews) would be helpful in the Guidelines.

Participants noted that, although we talk about uncertainty, we do know a lot about the epidemiology of asbestos-related disease, so we can have certainty about disease risk.

It was suggested that more consideration needs to be given to proactive (preventive) communication rather than reactive communication. The workshops had focused on reactive scenarios because this is where much of the uncertainty about risk perception lies. When communication for reactive situations is effective, then we can see what people need to understand in relation to preventive messages.

Progress and next steps

Participants were asked to describe one thing they were taking away from this process, and anything they thought still needed work for the Guidelines. Comments included the following:

- Communicators need to be mindful that, just because a single incident might be low potential exposure, it doesn't mean that the person hasn't had several of those incidents in their life and may therefore be at higher risk.
- We tend to get caught on the reactive side of communication. We need to balance this with proactive communication to minimise exposure.
- Communication should focus on either the risk of exposure (preventive messages) or the risk of disease (reactive messages), depending on the situation. These two risks should not be mixed up.
- Communication needs to be honest and factual.
- We need to be careful to provide people with actions and options. We all make individual judgments about safety and risk, and giving people actions mitigates some of these difficulties.
- Communication must be really targeted – how I talk to a member of the general public is very different to how I talk to someone in the industry. Tailoring the message is very important.
- The principles need to be clear in what they're seeking to achieve, not abstract concepts. Context is crucial and we need to give people tools to respond. The principles also need to be specific to asbestos, with examples.
- Getting the balance right in communicating uncertainty is important.
- The purpose should not be to allay fears, but to give people facts and clearly say what we know and what we don't know.
- The Guidelines should include a preface or similar to provide context and describe who the audience for the Guidelines is.

Workshop close

ASEA thanked participants for attending the workshop.