

Asbestos Risk Communications Guidelines – Outline and Process

Providing a clear and easy to use guide about communicating the risks of asbestos to the public.

Asbestos is present across the Australian built environment. As the largest user of asbestos per capita in the world until 1990, there is still a great deal of asbestos in situ around the country. This means a range of organisations often find that they need to talk to public about asbestos risks; either pre-emptively – when planning construction work, for example – or, unfortunately, in response to an incident where people may have been exposed.

These guidelines will help any organisation – government, non-government, commercial business or employer – to ensure that they are communicating clear and correct information, in a way that the public expects.

Overview of project

This project will create a set of guidelines specific to communicating the risks of asbestos. Asbestos is in many ways a unique environmental hazard – it is often mistaken for something else, its fibres are invisible to the naked eye, and the lag time between exposure and potential disease leads to an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality – with risk often pushed down the road of concerns.

Additionally, there is a strong social narrative around asbestos in Australia, thanks to social campaigns in the 1990s – 2000s, which led to the national asbestos ban enacted in 2003.

This unique combination of challenges means that communicating about asbestos risk is very challenging – an issue that these guidelines will go some way to addressing.

These guidelines are currently under development. The development process – outlined below – relies on extensive consultation and contributions from a wide range of stakeholders. Information on how to get involved is below.

Goals

- Any organisation can access clear guidelines for best practice asbestos risk communications.
- Asbestos risk communications become standardised around the country, leading to less exposure events and better public health outcomes.
- The public understands how they can stay safe and protect themselves from potential exposure.
- That when exposure events do occur, everyone involved is given the clear, correct information that they need and is their right.

Project stages

Stage 1: Targeted consultation

Four workshops held to seek thoughts, experiences, discussion of challenges.

1. Workshop with asbestos professionals (working group)
 - Experts from a range of professions, including work health and safety regulators, Departments of Health, employer and employee representatives, and environmental regulators.
2. Workshop with general public
 - Members of the public who have had an asbestos exposure experience. These included teachers, workers, Mr Fluffy homeowners, asbestos removalists.
3. Workshop with asbestos disease sufferers and advocates
 - Discussion with asbestos disease sufferers and their community advocates.
4. Workshop with professionals and the public
 - Participants from workshops 1 and 2 come together, to talk about their similarities and differences, and seek to understand each other's points of view and experiences.

Stage 2: Drafting of guidelines

Informed by outcomes of the workshops, the Guidelines are drafted by Biotext <hyperlink> in consultation with the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency.

Stage 3: Targeted consultation on draft guidelines

The first draft of the guidelines go to consultation with the core working group (see workshop 1 above). Notes and feedback is incorporated.

Stage 4: Public consultation

Draft Guidelines are made public for 6 weeks, for submissions and feedback. The Agency will proactively contact a wide range of stakeholders in the asbestos space to encourage them to provide submissions.

Stage 5: Incorporation of public feedback

Biotext and the Agency collate all the public feedback and submissions. This is incorporated in the document, or noted and explained when it is not incorporated.

A full report on each submission and what has been incorporated or not incorporated (with explanatory notes) will be made public.

Stage 6: Guidelines are finalised

Guidelines go to the working group for finalisation.

Stage 7: Endorsement sought

Final draft Guidelines are published. Endorsement is sought from a range of stakeholders:

- the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Council
- Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities (the heads of all state and territory workplace regulators)
- Heads of Environmental Protection Agencies (the heads of all state and territory Environmental Protection Agencies)
- the Environmental Health Principal Protection Committee (Department of Health)
- Asbestos Disease Support Network
- employer peak bodies (ACCI, AiG) and employee peak bodies (ACTU).

Stage 8: Guidelines published

Upon endorsement, Guidelines are published.

Contact us

To get in touch with us regarding this project, please email engage@asbestossafety.gov.au with the Subject Line – Risk Communications.