

Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) Policy – UNISON report
Requirements in Housing Property Services

Background

All unions worked together to carry out further research on appropriate RPE and consulted with staff affected by this policy to gauge valid concerns, listen to suggestions, and find possible working solutions.

Appendix 3 the “**HSE Respiratory protective equipment at work guide**” provided by CBC was an invaluable tool to help us make changes and shape some of this policy. Section 2 of this document “**What the law says**” from page 9, gives us clear understanding of what we need to achieve from this policy.

Other documents which assisted us with our research are the attached HSE asbestos essentials em6 “**Personal protective equipment**”, em7 “**minor asbestos contamination**”, em8 “**Personal decontamination**”, em9 “**disposal of asbestos waste**” and the Unite “**Beards, stubble and RPE**” documents.

We contacted several manufactures of RPE as well as other union colleagues in neighbouring local authorities for advice, recommendations, and comparisons. We were unable to source a safe alternative to the close fitting RPE for working with asbestos (ACM's). However, during our consultations and research it became evident that a lot more needs to be carried out around COSHH risk assessments, providing more relevant equipment for this type of work and training in addition to the introduction of this policy.

Introducing an RPE policy of this nature is clearly a difficult process for local authorities. There are no other neighbouring authorities that have successfully fully implemented such a policy, yet.

Please see below staff engagement feedback and list of additional considerations following the consultation and research by the unions:

Staff feedback from consultation on 27th May 2022

61 members of staff attended the union consultation sessions on Friday 27th May, this was out of a possible 136 effected by this policy (45 %). Several staff members that were unable to attend also contacted us to express their views. There was a high engagement in this process from staff.

We asked the following four question below, **based on staff suggestions**. Some staff did answer the questions twice as they had mixed feelings about the different scenarios, which has resulted in more votes than attendees, but hopefully this is clear in the table below:

	Q1 Not happy to wear close fitting face masks	Q2 Prepared to wear close fitting face masks if an additional payment was made to recognise this	Q3 Happy to wear close fitting face masks and carry on with 2 tier system as it is now	Q4 No opinion either way	Total votes
Group 1 18 attended	8 (38%)	8 (38%)	0 (0%)	5 (24%)	21
Group 2 12 attended	12 (67%)	6 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	18
Group 3 22 attended	12 (48%)	9 (36%)	0 (0%)	4 (16%)	25
Group 4 9 attended	6 (86%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14%)	7
Total of 61 Staff attended 45%	38 (54%)	23 (32%)	0 (0%)	10 (14%)	71

More than 50% of staff were not happy about wearing close fitting face masks or the proposed policy. However, over 30% of staff would be happy to wear face fit masks if there was a monetary incentive to recognise the risk and additional discomfort (there is a payment for asbestos work in place now, but if average pay is removed then there could be a financial detriment to staff if they carried out this type of work and others did not). It is clear from the consultation and evidenced in the table above, that the staff who are carrying out the current two-tier way of working are not happy to continue and feel this is very unfair.

The Unions request the following points be addressed in conjunction of the introduction of this policy:

- Robust training for staff and managers in risk assessments, equipment uses, cleaning, storage and dealing with asbestos contamination and personal decontamination (as described in the HSE em7 and em8 documents).
- An overhaul of the appropriate PPE needed to work with asbestos fibres (as described in the HSE em6 document) such as boots without laces etc.
- Introduction of a safer way to dispose of asbestos waste (as described in the HSE em9 document) with particular attention to how this can be implemented during out of hours work.

- Provision of suitable cleaning equipment and storage facilities, especially on the out of hours work. For example, class H vacuum cleaners on all vans (there are only two working vacuums in stores for all 136 members of staff at present, resulting in staff having to come back to the depot after possible expose to asbestos fibres to access these for cleaning themselves as well as the contaminated site – this is not acceptable and needs urgent review).
- The British Standard guidance is that an RPE wearer should shave within 8 hours from the start of their shift, but rate of growth will vary with the individual. This could result in staff working on out of hours potentially having to shave three times during the 24 hours period and for other staff needing to shave during their day shift. It is reasonable that we request that CBC provide appropriate facilities and allow paid time for staff to shave if required.

Conclusion

We have attached our recommendations for amendments to this policy and ask for them to be added prior to implementation.

Following consultation and research we accept there is not a safer alternative on the market at present, other than face fit masks for working with potential asbestos. Health and safety is paramount and we are therefore comfortable to support CBC in the introduction of this policy. However, this must be done with operational changes and discussions taking place prior to the implementation of the policy. We also ask that careful consideration is given to staff requesting to have a separate asbestos working group, which is in line with standard working practices at other neighbouring local authorities.

As part of the consultation process with staff we recognise that there is a risk to the council in implementing this policy, as it is in fact a complete beard ban. If operational discussions are not carried out with staff, then there is a potential risk of losing some staff at a time when recruitment is difficult.

We request that the unions are involved with the operational discussions with staff and that we have an opportunity to feedback to members personally regarding the joint working and research process that has taken place.

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