GUIDANCE NOTE, GN023

WORK ON THE FABRIC OF BUILDINGS – GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS AND SUPPORT UNITS

The University has strict controls over who can carry out work which affects the fabric of our buildings. These controls apply to all University buildings regardless of the age of the building, its condition and who occupies it.

Work upon the fabric of the buildings may be carried out only by Estates staff or Estates contractors and not by Schools, support units, individuals or their contractors.

Why do we have these restrictions?
The purpose of these restrictions is to prevent inadvertent disturbance of asbestos. Estates staff know where the asbestos is. Schools and support units do not. (They might know where some of it is but they do not know where all of it is.) Recent prosecutions of universities and their staff highlight the consequences of disturbing this asbestos in addition to the increasing number of asbestos related deaths.

What is “work upon the fabric of the building”?
The term covers work which results in the disturbance of any part of a building and to any items of equipment which are fixed to it. The scope is very wide because asbestos can be found in the most surprising places. Examples of work on the fabric of the building include putting up shelves or signs, installing fixtures, drilling into walls or doors, installing locks, carrying out of decorative work such as painting, fixing blinds to windows, replacing flooring and floor coverings, running cables along walls or through partitions, lifting or moving ceiling tiles, and opening electrical switch boxes.

What does this mean in practice?
If you are planning work which will be undertaken by your staff or by a contractor and you anticipate that it will involve work on the fabric of the building, you MUST discuss the work in advance with the Estates Clerk of Works for the building. Estates will then make arrangements on your behalf for the work on the fabric of the building to be carried out. Estates will supervise these works. You should not get involved in the works yourself. For example, if contactors arrive on site to carry out the works you must not give permission for them to commence. Instead the contractor must be told to contact Estates who will give necessary permissions and then supervise the works.

Consider also the following circumstance. You arranged for one of your contractors to carry out some work on freestanding equipment which is not part of the fabric of the building. Once the work has begun the contractor discovered that some work is required on the fabric of the building. This had not been foreseen. You must not allow this part of the work to proceed. Instead you should contact the Estates Clerk of Works for the building who will then make necessary arrangements for the part of the work which involves the fabric of the building.
The Clerk of Works will never tell you that it is OK for your contractor to proceed with the work on the fabric of the building. The Clerk of Works will always discuss the work with your contactor and will then either

- Allow the contractor to proceed with the work on the fabric of the building under Estates supervision; or
- Arrange for another contractor to carry out the work under Estates supervision.

Estates staff will use their best endeavours to provide a prompt response to requests for such work, especially if you already have a contractor on site. However you should recognise that an immediate response might not always be possible due to Estates staff having other commitments. It is much preferred if you anticipate such matters. At the planning stage, and before contractors come on site to carry out works, you should always consider whether there will be a need for disturbance to the fabric of the building. If there is any doubt at all, discuss the matter with the Clerk of Works.

Asbestos and its effects on people’s health has been a cause of great concern over the last 30 years and, while it is true that asbestos has the potential to be dangerous if damaged, it must be remembered that asbestos is only dangerous when disturbed. If it is managed safely and contained, it doesn’t present a health hazard. The purpose of our restrictions is to prevent asbestos being disturbed.

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