

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

# Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan 2011 - 2016

# Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Flow diagram .....	4
Main aspects of the Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan.....	4
The aim .....	6
The importance of broad stakeholder input to this plan.....	6
The WHSQ business units contributing to the aim of this plan.....	6
Strategic Actions.....	6
Strategy 1 - Communication.....	6
Strategy 2 – Education and training.....	7
Strategy 3 – Partnerships.....	7
Strategy 4 – Compliance verification.....	7
Strategy 5 – Government leadership .....	7
Strategy 6 – Research.....	8
Priority areas .....	8
Occupations .....	8
Demolition and asbestos removal workers .....	8
Licensed asbestos work.....	8
General trades, information technology and telecommunication technicians, installers of plant such as air-conditioners, building, and construction workers .....	8
Apprentices .....	9
Waste collection and disposal workers.....	9
Community .....	9
Asbestos related work within schools and other educational institutions .....	9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.....	9
Asbestos management and control in government buildings .....	9
Residential property owners and managers .....	10
Workplaces in general .....	10
High profile activities .....	10
Prohibited activities such as using power tools or high pressure water to clean asbestos containing materials .....	10
Cleanup of asbestos containing materials following events such as floods, storms, and cyclones, and fires .....	10
Asbestos in soil.....	11
Government leadership on asbestos .....	11
Improving the Queensland Government interagency management of asbestos related matters.....	11
Maintaining the capacity of the WHSQ Inspectorate to intervene regarding asbestos matters.....	11
Deliverables.....	11
Monitoring and reporting .....	12
References .....	12

# Introduction

The Queensland Government through its partnership with industry, unions, organisations advocating asbestos safety, and the community has been promoting the message of effective control of potential exposure to asbestos.

This *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* outlines what Workplace Health and Safety Queensland<sup>1</sup> (WHSQ) will continue to do to reduce exposure to asbestos fibres arising from work related activities over this five year period.

History and research has taught us that sufficient exposure<sup>2</sup> to asbestos fibres can cause disease and therefore, a precautionary approach toward asbestos exposure has been adopted by the Queensland Government.

There has been consistent promotion of the message that if you are unsure of whether the product contains asbestos, you should presume it does and apply the same protective measures you would as if you were handling asbestos.

The use of all asbestos containing material has been banned Australia wide since 31 December 2003. However, asbestos containing materials are widespread especially within Queensland buildings and structures built or renovated prior to 1990. Asbestos containing materials were also installed in items of plant, such as gaskets, up until the end of 2003. Therefore, exposure to asbestos fibres can occur when existing asbestos containing materials are disturbed. This type of exposure can arise from unsafe removal techniques, maintenance or renovation type work (such as drilling and surface preparation) where poor or inadequate controls are in place to prevent the release of asbestos fibres. People who may be exposed to asbestos fibres during such activities include the workers performing the work and other persons in the vicinity.

Although this plan is primarily focussed on workplace exposure, the plan importantly acknowledges the critical role that well informed homeowners can play in identifying asbestos in their homes. These homeowners may then be able to warn tradespeople and others who perform work that may disturb those asbestos containing materials.

Homeowners and workers who are likely to be involved in tasks that may disturb asbestos containing materials (ACMs) are at different levels of risk from exposure to asbestos fibres. Due to their potentially longer and more frequent exposure, workers are at a higher risk and can require quite detailed and specific guidance on how to work safely with asbestos. However, as workers and homeowners sometimes carry out the same kinds of tasks with asbestos (e.g. DIY home renovations), homeowners may find some of the asbestos management information products that are outcomes of this plan useful.

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<sup>1</sup> Workplace Health and Queensland are the Queensland Government's Regulator of workplace health and safety.

<sup>2</sup> In Australia, occupational asbestos exposure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different from that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as tasks performed with asbestos containing materials in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are likely to involve much lower asbestos exposure. The scientific literature indicates the amount of asbestos exposure needed to cause mesothelioma is currently not known, but could be as low as 0.15 fibre/ml/years. [Rodelsperger et al, 2011]. It is clear, though, that there is no scientific evidence for the "one fibre kills" theory [enHealth monograph 2005, Management of asbestos in the non-occupational environment].

A fundamental principle of this plan is that friable asbestos be removed where it cannot be managed safely in its current state within a workplace. Bonded asbestos containing materials if managed in good condition can be left in situ<sup>3</sup>, and must not be disturbed unless proper controls are used. Removal from workplaces should only occur if the asbestos containing material is in poor condition, likely to sustain damage, or during renovations, refurbishments or demolition. Removal can only occur where the safe work practices are used (as outlined in the work health and safety legislation and removal code of practice) and with appropriate training, supervision, and licensing.

Risk management principles and awareness of specific community concerns have been addressed as the priority areas outlined in this plan. This plan also outlines achievements to date and our commitment to future actions.

## Flow diagram

### Main aspects of the Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan

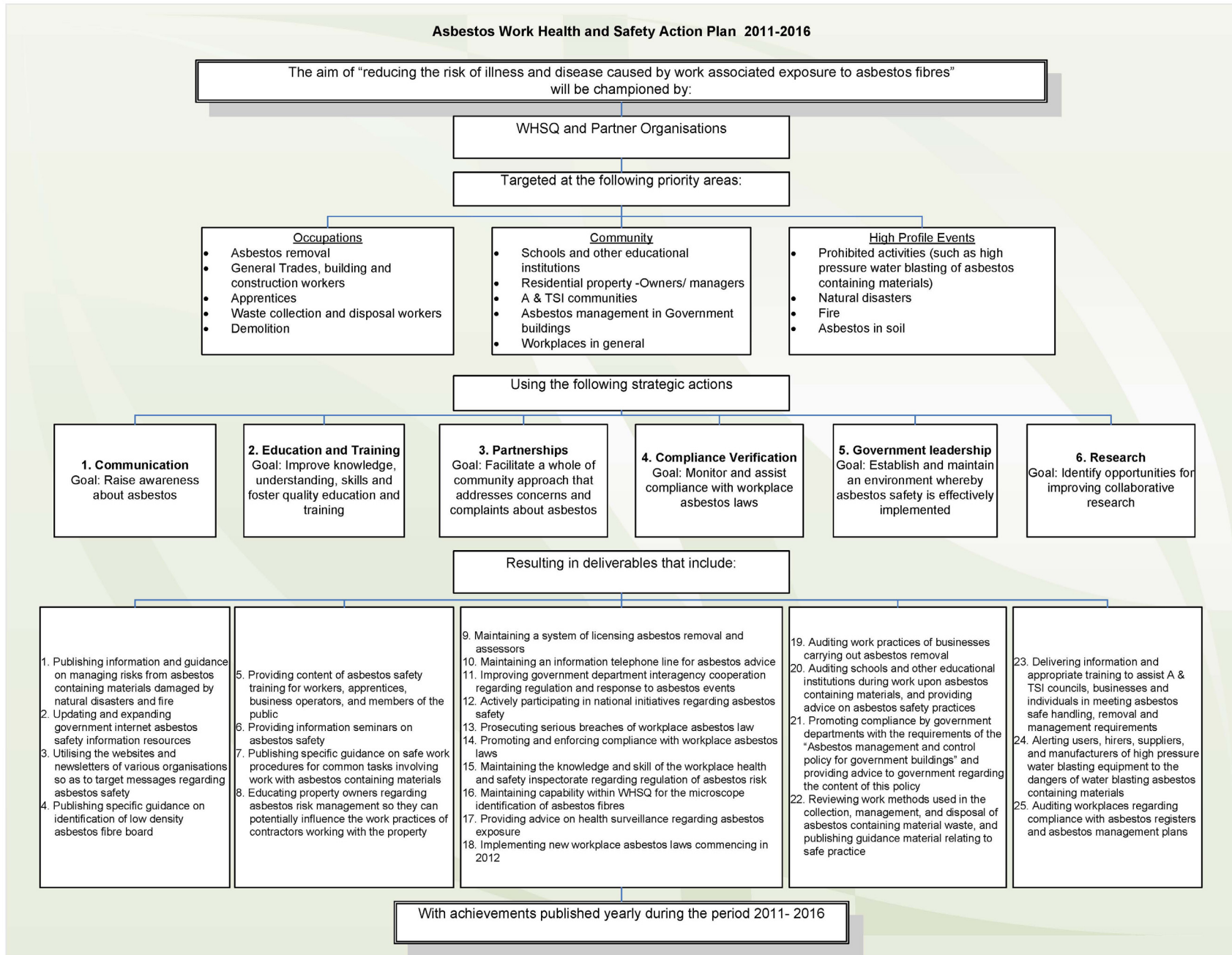
The main aspects of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* are outlined in the flow diagram on page five. A description of these aspects, including the priority areas, strategic actions, and deliverables is included in the pages following the flow diagram.

To download a copy of the flow chart that is suitable for printing, please [click here](#).

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<sup>3</sup> The scientific literature indicates that residents and occupants of buildings where asbestos containing materials are present are unlikely to be exposed to more asbestos fibres over a lifetime than residents and occupants of buildings that do not contain asbestos containing materials [enHealth monograph 2005, Management of asbestos in the non-occupational environment].

## Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan 2011-2016



## The aim

The *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* outlines the commitment of the Queensland government to work with unions, industry, organisations advocating asbestos safety, and the whole community to ensure that Queenslanders are made aware of the need for the identification, safe management, and safe removal of asbestos.

**The Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan aims to reduce the risk of illness and disease caused by work associated exposure to asbestos fibres.**

The WHSQ *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* aligns with the Queensland Workplace Health and Safety Strategy, and the WHSQ Occupational Disease Strategy.

By engaging with industry, unions, and the community the government can ensure that resources are focussed toward the aims of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan*.

## The importance of broad stakeholder input to this plan

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ), a business unit of the Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General, will coordinate and lead the implementation of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan*.

A key feature of the Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan is the deliberative broad consultative approach used to develop it.

In order to maximise options to achieve the aim of this plan industry, unions, organisations advocating asbestos safety, and the community have been consulted regarding the content of this plan. Such consultation will be an ongoing part of this plan over the next five years in order to identify ongoing opportunities to improve outcomes.

## The WHSQ business units contributing to the aim of this plan

WHSQ is organised into business units so that specific expertise is directed toward assisting workplace communities to reduce risk. To ensure this expertise is directed toward achieving the aim of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan*, staff from multiple business units within WHSQ will be involved in implementation.

The WHSQ Asbestos Unit will coordinate the implementation of the plan and will provide the training and advice to staff needed to address the various asbestos priority areas.

## Strategic Actions

The *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* has six strategic actions, which are directed at reducing the risk of illness and disease associated with workplace related exposure to asbestos fibres.

These strategies are:

### Strategy 1 - Communication

#### **Raise the awareness of Queensland businesses and workforce**

WHSQ will:

- identify opportunities to access government and industry groups' communication mediums, such as newsletters and websites for advertising and editorial space, and utilise social media forums, for the provision of information and advice, and

- provide specific information regarding asbestos risk management through its information telephone line and internet website, and the media, including social media forums such as twitter, etc.

## Strategy 2 – Education and training

### **Develop knowledge, understanding and skills; and foster quality education and training**

WHSQ will:

- target employers, workers, trainees and apprentices in the industries most at risk, to develop their occupational health and safety knowledge and skills in safe work with handling and removal of asbestos materials
- alert and educate homeowners to encourage them to inform trades people and others to the presence of asbestos containing materials when a trades person or other performs work at the homeowner's dwelling
- develop curriculum material to guide industry training organisations on desired training and skills for industry workers
- provide seminars on specific asbestos safety topics to persons in industries most at risk, and
- develop publications on asbestos safety.

## Strategy 3 – Partnerships

### **Facilitate a whole of community approach that addresses concerns and complaints about asbestos**

- WHSQ will engage with and work in partnership with other organisations, both within the government and private sectors, to achieve the aims of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan*.

Details of other specific partnerships will be detailed annually and made available on the WHSQ internet site.

## Strategy 4 – Compliance verification

### **Monitor and assist compliance with workplace asbestos laws**

WHSQ will:

- implement targeted compliance programs to ensure compliance with workplace asbestos laws
- continue to strengthen the process relating to the administration of asbestos licensing, including an administrative process for the suspension and cancellation of an asbestos licence where a licence holder contravenes the legislation, and
- continue to include asbestos as an enforcement priority.

## Strategy 5 – Government leadership

### **Establish and maintain a policy and regulatory environment whereby asbestos safety is achieved**

WHSQ will:

- address issues at a national level to identify opportunities for an improved coordinated and national approach to asbestos issues and laws, such as participating in the National Review of Asbestos Management
- work with the Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities (HWSA) regarding asbestos issues
- facilitate a whole-of-Queensland Government approach that will address community concerns and complaints regarding asbestos issues
- implement new workplace asbestos laws commencing in 2012

- maintain an asbestos unit
- maintain and build the capacity of the departmental health and safety inspectorate to monitor and enforce compliance with workplace asbestos laws.

## Strategy 6 – Research

### Identify and facilitating collaborative research activities

WHSQ will:

- monitor trends in asbestos related disease using data from WorkCover Queensland and National Asbestos Disease Registers. This will ensure the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* continues to target appropriate priority areas
- work with academic, scientific and medical communities, to address asbestos related issues such as: techniques for the classification of asbestos containing materials (ACM) and low density asbestos fibre board (LDAFB); identification of “new” at risk populations; and identification of any new health concerns arising from current known exposures to asbestos
- monitor the presence of naturally occurring asbestos, and
- monitor studies of work with ACMs so as to review personal fibre concentration exposure.

## Priority areas

The following areas have been identified for particular attention as priority areas as they are potential at risk groups.

### Occupations

The following occupations have been prioritised for intervention because they are most likely to experience regular exposure to asbestos fibres:

#### **Demolition and asbestos removal workers**

These workers in these occupations are likely to work day after day in removing asbestos containing materials from buildings and other structures. Poor demolition and removal techniques have the potential to expose workers and others. Therefore, it is essential that each time this work is performed, best practice asbestos exposure controls are used.

#### **Licensed asbestos work**

The removal of greater than 10 m<sup>2</sup> of bonded and all friable asbestos must be performed by licensed removalists. These licences are granted when the removalists demonstrate competence against certain skills and provide evidence that specified safe systems of work are in place, including supervision of asbestos removal methods. These requirements are mandated by the work health and safety laws. WHSQ will continue these licensing requirements.

Commencing in 2012 a new licence for an asbestos assessor will be implemented. In addition, monitoring of those registered training organisations providing the licence training, and those people working in the area regarding ongoing compliance to all licensing conditions is required.

#### **General trades, information technology and telecommunication technicians, installers of plant such as air-conditioners, building, and construction workers**

Asbestos containing materials are present in many buildings built and/or renovated prior to 1990 in Queensland. Continued demand for renovation and maintenance of buildings, updating of telecommunication and information technology, particularly domestic buildings, means a range of workers are likely to regularly perform work on or around asbestos containing materials.

The key to appropriate risk management is the ability to identify the presence of asbestos containing

materials, decide if licensed removal is required and identify what safe work procedures are required. A robust framework of practical information and guidance on how to identify and work safely with asbestos containing materials is required. This will be supported by programs within the inspectorate to monitor day-to-day industry activities.

## **Apprentices**

Specific asbestos training is not consistently provided to building and trades apprentices, either on-the-job or within the technical training arena. To build a sustained culture of asbestos safety within the building and trades areas, training about regulations, asbestos registers, safe work procedures, and personal protection must be an integral part of the curriculum provided by all training institutes. One option is to provide specific training materials for delivery by the training organisations.

## **Waste collection and disposal workers**

A paradox arises for the safe removal of asbestos containing materials from buildings and other structures, particularly when correct disposal requires worker involvement during the collection, transport and disposal of ACM waste.

Landfill workers are likely to be working in the vicinity of known and unknown asbestos waste on a regular basis, particularly those workers who work at hazardous waste disposal sites. Some local councils provide kerbside waste collections. Asbestos containing materials may be present during these collections and workers may be required to identify such materials.

Business operators who transport ACM waste are required to implement procedures for the safe decontamination of vehicles used to transport the waste. Safety procedures regarding the receipt, management, and then burial of the asbestos waste must be consistently implemented to minimise exposure to asbestos fibres. Therefore, it is essential that each time this work is performed best practice asbestos exposure controls are used.

## **Community**

The following activities have been identified as priority areas within our community:

### **Asbestos related work within schools and other educational institutions**

Incorrect work with or on asbestos containing materials within school environments has the potential to contaminate the area with asbestos fibres to which students, teachers, and others may be exposed. In addition, such incidents cause public concern. Appropriate safe work procedures and contractor management must always be implemented, managed, and controlled.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

The WHSQ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program (A&TSIP) will work closely with A&TSI councils, businesses and individuals to provide expert advice, information and customised training on workplace health and safety.

Through existing A&TSIP initiatives and the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Plan 2011-2016*, activities will focus on delivering appropriate training and information and advice to assist councils and businesses in meeting asbestos safe handling and management requirements.

### **Asbestos management and control in government buildings**

As an employer, major building owner and service provider, the Queensland Government has an obligation to manage and control risk arising from asbestos containing materials present in buildings controlled by government departments. Risk management practices, registers and the

centralised whole of government asbestos register implemented by government departments must continue to reflect best practice and to be available as a model for other industry sectors.

### **Residential property owners and managers**

Improving the ability of homeowners and residential property managers to identify the presence of asbestos containing materials in their homes/properties also provides an opportunity for the information to be passed on to tradespeople and other workers. This can potentially prevent incorrect work practices that could result in asbestos exposure to the worker and home occupants.

### **Workplaces in general**

Workplace asbestos laws are designed to prevent and minimise exposure to asbestos. Compliance with these laws is mandatory and expected by the public. New nationally harmonised asbestos laws for workplaces will be implemented from 2012.

Persons in control of businesses or undertakings must ensure the risk from asbestos containing materials is controlled. An important aspect of the work health and safety laws is the mandatory register of asbestos containing material and implementation of an asbestos management plan.

Registers and asbestos management plans are essential workplace documents that warn people of the presence of asbestos containing materials and outline what safety management is required. They are of particular use for workers who may be required to perform work upon the asbestos containing materials.

Increased compliance with the mandatory requirement for workplaces and the encouragement of such for residential rental properties is required. Persons in control of businesses and undertakings are required to provide people with training on risk management of asbestos containing materials at their respective workplaces.

### **High profile activities**

The following activities have been included as priority areas because these activities can be associated with widespread impact upon surrounding areas and people and can cause widespread public concern:

#### **Prohibited activities such as using power tools or high pressure water to clean asbestos containing materials**

These activities are prohibited because they generate large quantities of airborne fibres that can be dispersed over a wide area. Awareness of the dangers of such activities must be improved and where necessary prosecution of offenders pursued. In particular, WHSQ will influence the supply chain for water pressure cleaners by encouraging manufacturers, assemblers, hiring companies and businesses using pressure cleaners to label the machines.

#### **Cleanup of asbestos containing materials following events such as floods, storms, and cyclones, and fires**

Flood and storm events can cause widespread damage to asbestos containing materials and result in asbestos debris littering large areas and/or the need to remove damaged asbestos containing materials. Although such events are relatively infrequent, when they occur there is a need to provide direction and guidance to recovery personnel and organisations regarding the safe management of the damaged asbestos containing materials. This information will be maintained and kept updated on a website to rapidly response to asbestos issues following a disaster.

In many circumstances it may be impossible to repair asbestos cement sheeting and comply with the asbestos management code. In those circumstances, the additional cost of replacement should be considered when assessing loss. The insurance sector has a role to play when assessing the loss relating to damage to any ACM cement product, in particular asbestos cement sheeting (e.g. roof or wall sheeting). Loss assessors should review whether the wall or roof can be repaired. ACM cement products cannot be reused once removed. Replacement of a damaged ACM roof or wall may be the only available option where there is damage to part of a structure that has an ACM component.

### **Asbestos in soil**

Asbestos can be found in soil. This may result from:

- (i) naturally occurring asbestos deposits;
- (ii) more commonly as a result of debris from a previously located structure that contained asbestos materials and was inappropriately demolished; or
- (iii) asbestos contaminated soil or waste having been deposited on the site.

Asbestos in soil only becomes a risk to health if sufficient quantities of asbestos fibres are made airborne and are breathed in. Risk is therefore related to the use, quantity, and nature of the soil. The potential presence of asbestos in soil causes high community concern and evidence-based guidance on managing risk is required.

## **Government leadership on asbestos**

### **Improving the Queensland Government interagency management of asbestos related matters**

Regulating asbestos is a matter for state and territory governments. Asbestos is primarily regulated by the Queensland Government under several different Acts of Parliament. Therefore, many government agencies have responsibilities in relation to asbestos. Asbestos-related incidents frequently require a prompt response on the part of regulators as they involve people who are concerned about the possibility of being exposed to airborne asbestos fibres.

WHSQ is coordinating a review of government interagency responses to asbestos incidents, as well as how government agencies can improve the overall management of, and response to, asbestos. WHSQ is also participating in a national asbestos management review, and will be facilitating the implementation of new workplace asbestos laws commencing in 2012.

### **Maintaining the capacity of the WHSQ Inspectorate to intervene regarding asbestos matters**

The public expect government to provide leadership and expert advice on asbestos risk management at workplaces, and to respond appropriately to community concerns regarding asbestos matters. A high level of skill and knowledge will be maintained within the WHSQ Inspectorate in order to monitor and assist compliance with workplace asbestos laws.

## **Deliverables**

The 25 major deliverables to be achieved over the five years of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* are outlined in flow diagram on page five. In partnership with the community, priority area asbestos project plans will be developed by WHSQ for each of the priority areas in accordance with strategic actions to achieve these deliverables.

## Monitoring and reporting

The WHSQ Asbestos Unit will monitor and annually report on outcomes of the *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan*. The *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* will be updated to incorporate the annual outcomes of the plan (the first of these updates will be included after early 2012).

The *Asbestos Work Health and Safety Action Plan* and annual outcome reports will be available to the public through the Workplace Health and Safety Queensland website ([www.worksafe.qld.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au)).

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