

# AVSGF • UK

## ASBESTOS VICTIMS SUPPORT GROUP FORUM

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### **Press Release: For Immediate Release**

Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum (AVSGF) marks 100 years of the first victim, Nellie Kershaw, recognised to have died from asbestos exposure in the workplace, while asbestos still remains the no.1 cause of work related deaths in the UK in 2024.

*AVSGF calls on the UK Government to implement the findings from the 2022 Work and Pensions Select Committee [report](#) and tackle the avoidable loss of over 5000 lives every year from exposure to asbestos.*

On the centenary of the first person recognised as having died from workplace asbestos exposure, AVSGF is calling on the UK Government to confront the stubbornly high number of deaths still caused by asbestos. A first step is the implementation of the recommendations in the 2022 Work and Pensions Select Committee report that underlines the need for a national register of asbestos and a timetable for the removal of asbestos from public buildings.

People continue to be exposed to this category 1 human carcinogen at an increasingly younger age, with death rates for female teachers and nurses rising at a rate that is higher than for the general population. It is estimated that asbestos is present in 80% of schools and 94% of hospital trusts. This is due to a large number of schools and hospital buildings constructed between 1945 and 1980 using system build techniques, for example CLASP schools, where asbestos is an integral part of the construction and difficult to remove without demolishing the building. Alarminglly the official statistics from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) severely underestimates the risk of exposure and the number of cases mesothelioma for former workers.<sup>i</sup>

Emerging evidence suggests there are approximately 87 cases of mesothelioma per year for former hospital workers (over seven times more than the official HSE statistics) and 89 cases per year for former school workers (almost six times as many as the HSE statistics).<sup>ii</sup> And that

there are just over eight cases of asbestos-related lung cancer for each recorded case of mesothelioma. This is much higher than the HSE's current working assumption of a 1:1 ratio between asbestos-related lung cancer cases and mesothelioma cases.<sup>iii</sup> As these public buildings deteriorate the numbers will increase.

Chair of AVSGF, David Ellis OBE said: **“Today, as we mark the centenary of a young Nellie Kershaw’s passing from occupational exposure to asbestos, we are still dealing with cases in the thousands in the UK with a growing number of young people exposed to asbestos.**

**It remains in the purview of the Government and Health and Safety Executive to act and improve the enforcement of asbestos regulations in the UK and further protect the public. We urge them to re engage in dialogue with the asbestos surveyors and removals industry, alongside those in the third sector, who are supporting victims and their families to deal with the deadly consequences of asbestos exposure.”**

Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, Sir Stephen Timms stated that **“As we mark the centenary of Nellie Kershaw’s death at only 33 years of age as the first acknowledged victim of occupational exposure to asbestos, the true toll of asbestos is becoming increasingly clear. We are seeing the evidence of exposure in schools and hospitals, and a changing pattern in asbestos related disease. The all-party Work and Pensions Select Committee has called for a deadline to be set for removing all asbestos from UK workplaces, a national plan to deliver it, be and a central digital register of all the workplace asbestos in the country to enable the plan to be compiled.”**

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Notes to Editors:

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About Nellie Kershaw:

On March 14<sup>th</sup> 1924 Nellie Kershaw a 33 year old Mother and textile worker from Rochdale passed away from pulmonary asbestosis, leaving behind a young child. It is thanks to Dr William Edmund Cooke who recognised Nellie’s case as one of occupational exposure to asbestos and first published it in the British Medical Journal that finally led to the first set of regulations for the Asbestos Industry in 1931. But her plight was consistently ignored by her employer Turner Brothers with Nellie dying in poverty and buried in an unmarked grave.

## About the Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum:

The Asbestos Victims Support Groups Forum is a national charity, founded in 2005, that works to bring together support groups from across the UK – who provide free and independent support to people with asbestos-related diseases.

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<sup>i</sup> 2023, Clearing the Air: The costs and benefits of removing asbestos from schools and hospitals

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