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The all-party parliamentary group calls for a national asbestos removal strategy for schools, hospitals and public buildings

ALAMY

Ban asbestos giant from government contracts, MPs and peers say

An all-party parliamentary group says Altrad should contribute £10 million to research on related diseases or be barred from public sector work

[Hugo Daniel](#)

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A construction company whose asbestos products were used in schools, hospitals, public buildings and offices should be banned from government contracts, MPs and peers have said.

Altrad — which bought Cape, one of Britain's biggest manufacturers of asbestos products, in 2017 — should be excluded from all public sector work unless it donates £10

million towards research into the cancers caused by the building material, a report by the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on occupational safety and health found.

Asbestos is Britain's biggest workplace killer, responsible for 5,000 deaths a year. It causes asbestosis and [mesothelioma cancer](#), both incurable.



Protesters outside the High Court in October 2002 as Cape was ordered to pay £21 million in damages to 7,500 workers

CHRIS YOUNG/PA

Earlier this year, a public hearing heard evidence from 11 witnesses of the “disastrous legacy” of Cape. On Tuesday the APPG will publish a report on Cape describing its “corporate denial, suppression of vital health information, and a refusal to accept responsibility” and recommending a government ban on awarding contracts to Altrad, which made £4.5 billion in revenue last year.

Since 2012 Altrad, which sponsors the French and New Zealand rugby union teams, has won 60 public sector contracts in the UK worth a combined £1.67 billion, according to data provider Tussell. They include 18 contracts, worth £1.5 billion, with Sellafield for remediation of the nuclear site, a £30 million contract for decommissioning Berkeley nuclear power station

that also involved asbestos removal, as well as deals with the ministry of defence, universities and local councils.

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Last year a [Sunday Times investigation](#) revealed how Cape knew that exposure to dust from its boards, a product called Asbestolux, caused cancer but played down the risk for decades to protect profits.

Campaigners have called for Altrad to donate £10 million towards mesothelioma research — but so far it has refused. Three of the world’s top medical experts on asbestos cancer, as well as the chief executive of Asthma + Lung UK, the respiratory health charity, have previously explained to its chief executive Ran Oren that a £10 million donation would be “transformational”.

At the public hearing in March, which Oren declined to attend, it emerged that [the Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum had rejected Altrad’s offer](#) of less than a third of the £10 million sought by campaigners, which included a stipulation that all legal claims and criticism of the company stop.

The forum’s founder, Tony Whitston, read out the “stringent conditions” outlined by Oren in the negotiation. He said the company refused to accept moral responsibility and appeared to be motivated by avoiding bad press and sought to “silence” mesothelioma victims.

The APPG report says in light of the evidence “it is clear to the panel that Cape/Altrad has not and will not acknowledge its role in the widespread harm caused by its asbestos products and will continue to conceal its involvement. It is therefore incumbent upon the government to intervene for the benefit of public health.”

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As well as the call for a ban on Altrad contracts it also asked the government to establish “a national asbestos removal strategy by developing and funding a phased removal of asbestos from all public buildings, starting with schools and hospitals”.

The Sunday Times campaign has also called for the phased removal of asbestos, a national strategy to identify all buildings with asbestos and for routine monitoring of air quality in buildings with the material.

Nearly 18,000 school estates in England and Wales still contain asbestos. Sarah Lyons, lead officer for health, safety and environment at the National Education Union (NEU), said [more than 400 teaching professionals had died from mesothelioma since 1980](#), probably an underestimate. “The NEU plainly stated that this policy of ‘managing asbestos in place’ does not work in schools,” the report says. The hearing was also told that “pupils are at risk simply by being in the classroom, due to asbestos in crumbling ceilings or heating ducts”.

Altrad, which employs 12,000 people in the UK, has paid out more than £60 million in compensation to former employees who developed cancer as a result of exposure to asbestos and has set aside a further £70 million for future claims. It says it has paid 100 per cent of eligible claims and is the only company to have a compensation scheme, while other companies became insolvent and left uninsured victims without compensation.

The APPG panel of six, including Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs, two Labour peers and a crossbench peer, will now write to Liz Kendall, the secretary of state for work and pensions, the education secretary Bridget Phillipson and the cabinet office minister Nick Thomas-Symonds, urging them to consider its recommendations.

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Ian Lavery MP

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Labour MP Ian Lavery, who chairs the group, said: “I hope this report and its recommendations will be considered and ultimately accepted by our government, and by Cape, in the interest of justice for asbestos victims and for the health and safety of the public.”

A government spokesperson said: “We have a robust system in place to make sure government contracts are fit for purpose. The Procurement Act allows government to exclude organisations from being awarded contracts where there are cases of misconduct or similar.”

Altrad said: “We are deeply disappointed by the APPG’s recommendation, which amounts to nothing less than coercion under the guise of public health advocacy. The suggestion that government contracts should be withheld unless a private company makes a specific financial donation — outside of any legal or regulatory framework, or indeed any finding of legal culpability — is not only inappropriate, but tantamount to extortion.

“Altrad has consistently acknowledged the historical legacy of Cape, a company it acquired in 2017 — decades after the manufacture of asbestos products had ceased.”

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