
**USE OF MEDIUM DENSITY FIBREBOARD (MDF) IN SCHOOLS – TASK AND
FINISH REVIEW GROUP – FINAL REPORT**

Responsible Cabinet Member(s) - Councillor Stephen Harker, Education Portfolio

Responsible Director(s) - Geoff Pennington, Director of Education

Purpose of Report

1. To report the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee's recommendations on the outcome of the Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) in Schools Task and Finish Group.

Information and Analysis

2. The Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, at its meeting held on 15th December, 2003, established a Task and Finish Review Group to investigate the implications of the re-introduction of the use of medium density fibreboard (MDF) in Schools.
3. The Task and Finish Review Group presented its final report (**attached as an Appendix**) to the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 5th April, 2004.
4. At this meeting, the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendations of the Task and Finish Review Groups, as detailed below, and referred them to Cabinet for consideration :-

That taking into consideration the concerns expressed to the Group by various parties, the Task and Finish Review Group recommend that the ban on the use of MDF in schools be lifted, subject to the following conditions:

- (i) that the Safety Unit carry out an inspection of all secondary school technology departments to ascertain the condition of current dust extraction equipment;
- (ii) that some monitoring of dust levels be carried out to set base line levels;
- (iii) that the Governor responsible for Health and Safety in each secondary school sends details of who currently services their machinery/dust extraction equipment and the date of the last service to the Safety Unit;
- (iv) that in future, schools send a copy of service reports to the Safety Unit;
- (v) that hand power tools purchased for use in schools are to be of a type fitted with dust extraction and current power tools without dust extraction be replaced as

soon as possible;

- (vi) that dust masks, goggles and/or safety spectacles should be made readily available for pupil and staff use;
- (vii) that future inspections of schools by the Safety Unit have a section that focuses on monitoring good practice in dust extraction; and
- (viii) that the progress with regard to the above recommendations be reported to Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee in six months time.

Directors Comments

- 5. The review by Scrutiny Committee has been very helpful in both identifying the key issues and potential solutions. The recommendations made by the Committee are sensible and will ensure that safe practices are in force in schools before MDF is able to be used by pupils.

Outcome of Consultation

- 6. No formal consultation was undertaken in the production of this report other than the consultation undertaken by the Review Group itself.

Legal Implications

- 7. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

- 8. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

- 9. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Decision Deadline

- 10. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that

- (a) The use of MDF in schools be re-instated provided that :-
 - (i) The relevant CLEAPPS risk assessment is implemented;
 - (ii) Schools wishing to reintroduce the use of MDF first demonstrate to the Health and Safety Unit's satisfaction that adequate control measures are in place; and
 - (iii) schools monitor the health of individuals and any concerns reported should be investigated and addressed appropriately.
- (b) That the recommendations of Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Group be agreed.

Reasons

12. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-

- (a) Schools are required to ensure that safe practices are in place before using MDF.
- (b) Schools will be able to use, at their discretion, a material commonly used in other schools in other LEAs.

Geoff Pennington
Director of Education

Background Papers

Reports to the meetings of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 15th December, 2003 and 5th April, 2004.

Lynne Wood : Extension 2287
PB

**USE OF MEDIUM DENSITY FIBREBOARD IN SCHOOLS TASK
AND FINISH REVIEW GROUP**

ITEM NO.

FINAL REPORT

Introduction

1. This is the final report of the Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) Task and Finish Review Group, established by the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee to investigate the implications of a reintroduction of the use of Medium Density Fibreboard in Schools.

Background Information

2. At the meeting of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 15th December, 2003 Members received a report on proposals from the Joint Consultative Committee to review Council policy of a blanket ban on the use of Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) in the Borough's schools (attached at **Appendix 2**).
3. Council policy on the use of MDF by schools was established by the Resources Sub-Committee on 5th November, 1998. The recommendations made by the Committee were that :
 - (a) Schools should phase out of the use of MDF;
 - (b) Monitoring of dust from mechanical processes operated in the school should be carried out to quantify the extent of dust production; and
 - (c) Extraction systems should be monitored for efficiency every fourteen months, as required by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations.
4. At the meeting of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, it was agreed to establish a Task and Finish Review Group to investigate the implications of a reintroduction of the use of Medium Density Fibreboard in Schools and Councillor Nutt, Mr. Egan and Mr. Fryer were nominated to serve on the Group.

Acknowledgements

5. Mr. J. Bowes, Hummersknott Language College
Christine Bates, Democratic Support Officer
Allison Carling, Democratic Support Officer
Andrea Catterick, Solicitor
Peter Dodman, Health and Safety Executive
Mr. McCann, Branksome Comprehensive School
Dominic Passman, Health and Safety Manager

Methods of Investigation

6. The Task and Finish Review Group have met formally on two occasions and a detailed record of topics discussed at those meeting is contained in the notes produced following each meeting (**Appendix 3**) and also undertook a visit on 2nd March, 2004 to Branksome and Hummersknott Comprehensive Schools to look at the dust extraction methods currently in use within the workshops and also to examine the device testing in place.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)/Consortium of Local Education Authorities for the Provisions of Science (CLEAPPS).

7. There is clear guidance available from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Consortium of Local Education Authorities for the Provision of Science Services (CLEAPPS) on the control measures that are necessary to ensure safe working with MDF. Schools adopt CLEAPPS risk assessments to help control the hazardous substances used or generated during school curriculum activities. The relevant CLEAPPS risk assessment is attached at **Appendix 4** (for information).
8. The Review Group approached Mr. Peter Dodman from the Health and Safety Executive to attend the Meeting on 16th March, 2004, and although Mr. Dodman declined from attending the meeting as he felt that guidance from the Health and Safety Executive on the control measures to be adopted was well documented, however he did speak to Mr. Egan on the telephone regarding this matter.

Conclusion

9. There is clear guidance from the HSE and CLEAPPS for the use of MDF in schools and the adequate control measures to be adopted and the Health and Safety Executive are of the opinion that MDF can and should be used in schools were adequate control measures are adopted. It is also the opinion of the HSE that it is valuable for young persons to gain experience of working with MDF as it is the most common material in use in the wordworking industry and therefore any young person entering this field of employment needs the skill to work with it safely.
10. Following consultation with the Council's Solicitor for Education and Community Protection, the Group have some concerns with continuing the ban on the use of MDF in schools following her response to questions raised by the Group on the use of MDF in schools. (**Appendix 5 refers**)
11. Darlington remains the only Authority to ban the use of MDF in schools which indicates that other authorities must be satisfied with its use.

12. The Health and Safety Executive have not been informed of any health problems in schools related to its use.
13. 1997 media concerns about hazards of substance were primarily aimed at long term industrial use, not at the extremely limited time spans of exposure to pupils.
14. The legal health and safety standards applicable to MDF are the same as those required for soft and hard wood dust. From the Groups deliberations and visits to Hummersknott and Branksome Schools, it is believed that adequate safeguards are either in place, or can be modified to ensure that health and safety standards are far above the minimum required for use of all materials in woodworking.

Recommendation

15. That taking into consideration the concerns expressed to the Group by various parties, the Task and Finish Review Group recommend that the ban on the use of MDF in schools be lifted, subject to the following conditions :-
 - (a) that the Safety Unit carry out an inspection of all secondary school technology departments to ascertain the condition of current dust extraction equipment;
 - (b) that some monitoring of dust levels be carried out to set base line levels;
 - (c) that each secondary school sends details of who currently services their machinery/dust extraction equipment and the date of the last service to the Safety Unit;
 - (d) that in future, schools send a copy of service reports to the Safety Unit;
 - (e) that hand power tools purchased for use in schools are to be of a type fitted with dust extraction and current power tools without dust extraction be replaced as soon as possible;
 - (f) dust masks, goggles and/or safety spectacles should be made readily available for pupil and staff use;
 - (g) that future inspections of schools by the Safety Unit have a section that focuses on monitoring good practice in dust extraction; and
 - (h) that the progress with regard to the above recommendations be reported to the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny in six months time.

Use of Medium Density Fibreboard in Schools
Task and Finish Review Group

**LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15TH DECEMBER, 2003**

ITEM NO. 5

USE OF MEDIUM DENSITY FIBREBOARD (MDF) IN SCHOOLS

Purpose of Report

1. To enable Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee to investigate proposals, from the Joint Consultative Committee to review Council policy in relation to the use of MDF in schools. This matter is brought to the Committee following issues raised by a member of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee.

Information and Analysis

2. Council policy on the use of MDF by schools was established by the Resources Sub-Committee on 5th November, 1998. The recommendations made by the Committee were that:
 - (a) **Schools should phase out the use of MDF** (All schools have phased out the use of MDF since introduction of the policy. Six out of seven secondary schools would wish to reintroduce MDF if they had adequate health and safety controls in place).
 - (b) **Monitoring of dust from mechanical processes operated in the school should be carried out to quantify the extent of dust production** (The Health and Safety Unit is not aware of any dust monitoring having been carried out since introduction of the policy).
 - (c) **Extraction systems should be monitored for efficiency every fourteen months, as required by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations** (It is known that four out of seven schools have contracts for the testing of extraction systems. Since the introduction of the policy two schools have or are in the process of having new extraction systems installed).
3. Darlington Borough Council is the only local authority known to have adopted a blanket ban on the use of MDF by schools. There is clear guidance available from the Health and Safety Executive and the Consortium of Local Education Authorities for the Provision of Science Services (CLEAPPS) on the control measures that are necessary to ensure safe working with MDF. Schools adopt CLEAPPS risk assessments to help them control the hazardous substances used or generated during school curriculum activities. The relevant CLEAPPS risk assessment is attached at Appendix 1 for information.
4. The Education Department and the Health and Safety Unit have received several requests from secondary schools wishing to use MDF to enable pupils to gain experience of working

with what is a very commonly used material. The schools believe MDF is a very practical material and most would wish to use it if they had adequate health and safety controls in place. Pupils may work with MDF at home and educating pupils in the safe use of MDF at school could improve health and safety practice within the community.

5. Some concerns about the use of MDF in schools have been raised and letters from Bob Egan and G. Smith are attached at Appendix 2 and 3 for information. If adequate control measures are implemented health and safety risks to employees and pupils can be addressed. By reviewing the policy, schools that can demonstrate adequate control will be not be unfairly restricted due to lack of investment in health and safety by other schools. By introducing the revised policy there is an incentive for schools to invest in health and safety to improve conditions in workshops that will benefit the health and safety of all regardless of the materials used.
6. One issue raised concerns the implications for the health and safety of pupils who may be asthmatic. Clearly such issues are very much dependant on the nature of an individual's condition and medical advice should be sought on the nature of any condition reported and on any additional measures that would be appropriate. It is prudent and proper for schools to monitor both employee and pupil health and reporting of health issues should be encouraged.

Proposed Revision to Policy on MDF

7. It is proposed that the usage of MDF in schools should be allowed as long as the relevant CLEAPPS risk assessment is implemented.
8. Schools wishing to reintroduce the use of MDF must first demonstrate to the Health and Safety Unit's satisfaction that adequate control measures are in place. In demonstrating adequacy of control measures concentration is to be given to local exhaust ventilation and its effectiveness as a means of controlling levels of dust. This in effect requires schools to have addressed the concerns raised in the current policy as detailed in points 2b and c above.
9. The above revision in policy has been formulated following discussions with Peter Borrows the Director of CLEAPPS and the Health and Safety Executive.
10. Schools should be encouraged to monitor the health of individuals and any health concerns reported should be investigated and addressed appropriately.

Legal Implications

11. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

12. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those
-

functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Recommendation

13. It is recommended that :-

- (a) The Lifelong Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider if they would wish to support the reintroduction of MDF in those schools that can demonstrate the adequacy of control measures in place.

**Geoff Pennington,
Director of Education**

**Paul Wildsmith,
Director of Corporate Services**

Background Papers

The report to the Joint Consultative Committee on 14th October 2003 was used in the preparation of this report.

Dominic Passman : Extension 2111
SG