Energy Innovation Basecamp 2026
Problem Statement EIP171

Asbestos in Older Multi-Occupancy Buildings Restricting Safe Riser Work

The following problem statement has been developed by the innovation teams within the UK's Gas and Electricity Networks for the 2026 Energy Innovation Basecamp.

Theme: Building Better and Faster

Network Areas: Electricity Distribution, Gas Distribution

What is the problem?

Asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) are widespread in older Multi-Occupancy Buildings (MOBs). Their presence prevents safe drilling or riser modification, causing delays, increased cost, and inconsistent safety assessment that creates disruption for customers. SGN must inspect and maintain approximately 62,000 risers, many of which are located in buildings containing ACMs in stairwells, service risers, cupboards, or service ducts.

A large proportion of these buildings have incomplete, outdated, or inaccessible asbestos records, which means SGN often cannot confirm the presence, type, or condition of ACMs before arriving on site. Current working practices require intrusive asbestos surveys, which introduce long delays—particularly when access arrangements are complex or when specialist licensed contractors are needed.

There is currently no effective, scalable method for rapid ACM identification, risk scoring or low-disturbance riser installation. Without innovation, asbestos will remain a major constraint to SGN's ability to upgrade risers at pace.

What are we looking for?

We are seeking innovative solutions that enable SGN to safely identify, assess and work around asbestos-containing materials during riser installation or modification, without causing delay, excessive cost or customer disruption. Ideas could evolve around :

- Asbestos risk prediction based on building age + records
- Unified asbestos information-sharing platform with local authorities.
- Non-intrusive drilling or fixings suitable for ACM substrate.
- Remote sensing or imaging to identify ACMs before entry.

What are the constraints?

All solutions must comply fully with HSE asbestos regulations and SGN's safety case requirements , recognising that building asbestos documentation is often incomplete, inconsistent or unavailable. Innovators must account for highly variable building conditions, including confined riser routes, narrow voids, limited stairwell access, and the presence of concealed ACMs behind boards or ducting. Any proposed approach must minimise disturbance to asbestos, avoid creating new safety risks, and operate effectively in buildings where access is restricted by residents, housing associations or building layout.

Who are the key players?

SGN Network Asset, Mob and operations team, HSE, local authorities, housing associations, asbestos consultants, universities developing new materials / imaging, technology providers.

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Does this problem statement build on existing or anticipated infrastructure, policy decisions, or previous innovation projects?

HSE Asbestos Regulations (CAR 2012) impose strict controls on disturbance of ACMs during utility work, significantly impacting SGN's ability to complete planned riser upgrades.

Grenfell Inquiry recommendations and UK Government policy require enhanced risk assessment and safety interventions in high-rise and MOB housing.

What else do you need to know?

SGN operates approx 62,000 risers with many of our older MOBs contain ACMs in stairwells, service risers and ducting.

Innovator submissions to this problem statement will be open on the Smarter Networks Portal from 4th February to the 13th March, but we encourage you to submit your response as early as possible, as networks will be able to review submissions as soon as they come in.

You can also use the virtual Q&A on the Smarter Networks Portal to ask for more information about this problem statement. Questions may be answered online or at the ENA Problem Statement Launch on 4th February 2026. More information on last year's Basecamp programme can be found on the Smarter Networks Portal.