



Cleaning services is one of the major service areas in the FHE sector to be the subject of contracting in recent years. A UK study found that 88% of all public sector organisations contracted out at least one such service. This trend has been noted as having potentially significant effects upon working conditions in terms of remuneration, workers rights, training and health & safety. The poverty implications of the procurement cleaning services are predominantly UK based, though the manufacture of chemicals may take place in parts of the developing world. This information sheet therefore provides a brief overview on cleaning chemicals and also focuses upon issues related to contract cleaning.

Issues

Cleaning chemicals and manufacture

Chemicals used for cleaning may have a number of adverse health and environmental effects. Environmental effects can include chemical products entering the atmosphere and local water systems during production, use and disposal.

In the UK the handling use and management of cleaning chemicals are subject to regulation under COSHH (Care of Substances Hazardous to Health), the monitoring of which is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive.

Amongst the different functional elements of cleaning chemicals are:

Surfactants: Short for “surface active agents”, these help to reduce the surface tension of the water used in cleaning, thus enabling it to mix with it and remove dirt more easily. As a result of their surface-active properties, surfactants are relatively toxic to aquatic organisms.

Chelating/complexing agents: These are included to counter the effects of “hard” water which reduces the effectiveness of detergents. Phosphates and EDTA have traditionally been used as chelating agents in cleaning products.

Builders: These have a similar effect to chelating agents, and are used to upgrade and protect the cleaning efficiency of surfactants, they help to soften the solution and to break up oily and greasy dirt. Phosphates have often been used as builders.

Solvents: These help to break up dirt particles and dissolve them in the water solution.

Preservatives: These help to increase the lifetime of the product by preventing bacteria from spoiling the solution.

(Text in the paragraph above sourced from: www.ungm.com/Publications/sp/Background_Cleaning.pdf).

Contract cleaning – working and employment practices

As noted above, key social and health implications of contract cleaning services are related to the handling, use and storage of cleaning products. In addition, the following are also fundamental issues:

- Conditions of employment, including union representation
- Fair wages
- Training in materials handling and Health & Safety

Conditions of employment

The rise of contract cleaning has highlighted concerns that, as workers move first from public sector employment, and then from employer to employer as contracts change hands, conditions can be eroded, including the freedom to join a union and the nature and security of employment.

Fair wages

The issue of fair wages in the cleaning sector has been a major focus for action in recent years, with a special focus on cleaning contractors in London. The Living Wage campaign focused upon the wages paid to contract cleaners in a variety of sectors, including



FHE. Information on the campaign at the School of Oriental and African Studies can be found at: www.mercury.soas.ac.uk/unison/slwc/news.htm.

Training and Health & Safety

Due to the hazardous nature of cleaning chemicals the quality and amount of training given to cleaning staff is critical to ensure both worker safety and the safety of students and staff.

Possible solutions

Cleaning chemicals

The Procura+ Sustainable Procurement Campaign of the ICLEI has the following strategic guidance for the procurement of cleaning products:

- Exclusion of certain substances or ingredients: For the cleaning agents, the products and ingredients suggested for exclusion are those most hazardous to the local environment and human health, and effective alternatives are available for all. The classifications referred to, are those laid out in EC Directive 1999/45/EC and Council Directive 67/548/EEC. Further information on the substances excluded is available from ICLEI.
- Dosage devices and instructions: In many cases excessive amounts of cleaning products are used because users are not aware of the appropriate dosage or do not have usable measuring devices. A great deal can be saved through the inclusion of dosage devices and instructions



Text above sourced from: www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=4622

Contract cleaning – working and employment practices

The Procura+ key criteria for contracting cleaning services focus on the following aspects:

- Exclusion of certain substances or ingredients: For the cleaning agents, the products and ingredients suggested for exclusion are those most hazardous to the local environment and human health, and effective alternatives are available for all. The classifications referred to are those laid out in EC Directive 1999/45/EC and Council Directive 67/548/EEC.
- Responsible cleaning practices: Cleaning staff are constantly in touch with substances that contain chemical components than can be irritating, corrosive, etc. Therefore in order to guarantee safety conditions, staff have to be trained and clear procedures must be in place.

Text above sourced from: www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=4622

Recommendations

- ⊙ *Ask prospective cleaning contractors for their policy on the reduction of hazardous chemicals.*
- ⊙ *Ask prospective cleaning contractors for their policy on the use of “environmentally preferable” cleaning chemicals.*
- ⊙ *Ensure cleaning contractors provide adequate chemicals handling and COSHH training.*
- ⊙ *Ensure that cleaning contractors allow staff the right to join a labour union.*
- ⊙ *Ensure that cleaning contractors respect employment rights and wages equivalent to an appropriate comparator directly employed by your FHE institution.*

REFERENCES/FURTHER INFORMATION

ICLEI, guidance on sustainable procurement of cleaning products: www.iclei-europe.org/index.php?id=4622

ICLEI, detailed guidance on sustainable procurement of cleaning products: www.iclei-europe.org/fileadmin/template/projects/procuraplus/New_website/Detailed_Product_Information/Cleaning_-_Procura__Key_Criteria.pdf

International Labour Office, Guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems. OSH – 2001 www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/cops/english/download/e000013.pdf

UNEP Sustainable Procurement Guidelines for Cleaning Products and Services Background Report: www.ungm.com/Publications/sp/Background_Cleaning.pdf

United Nations Suppliers Code of Conduct: www.ungm.org/SustainableProcurement/toolsSuppliers/tools.aspx

This sheet is part of a series of 14 on different commodities written for EAUC's Promoting Poverty Aware Procurement project to enable universities and colleges to be more aware of poverty issues when they make procurement decisions. For more information about the project visit www.eauc.org.uk/promoting_poverty_aware_procurement_on_campus



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