

COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL ASPECTS OF RADIATION IN THE ENVIRONMENT

129th COMARE MEETING, Thursday 8th July 2021

Online meeting

Present

Chair: Dr Chris Gibson

Members: Dr Jane Barrett
Professor Frank de Vocht
Professor John Harrison
Dr Mark Hill
Dr Colin Martin
Professor Stewart Martin
Dr Richard McNally
Professor Paul Pharoah
Professor Graham Smith
Professor James Smith
Professor David Sutton
Professor Roger Taylor
Professor Mireille Toledano
Dr Chris Westcott

Assessors: DHSC
EA
FSA
NDA
ONR
PHE
PHS
SEPA
SG
WG

Secretariat: Dr Simon Mann (PHE)
Dr Emma Petty (PHE)
Mrs Samantha Watson (PHE)

Open Session

1. Welcome & declarations

- 1.1 The Chair opened the 129th meeting and welcomed members to the fourth online meeting for the Committee, due to the COVID pandemic. The Chair informed members that although his term as Chair does not finish until the end of October, this would be the last main committee meeting that he will chair. The Chair thanked the secretariat for their support and assistance in dealing with the Committee processes. He also thanked all members for their time, input and support into the work of COMARE during his time as Chair. Both members and the secretariat recorded their thanks for his work as Chair and noted that it had been a pleasure working with him. It was noted that during his time as Chair, he had moved the committee to more open ways of working, recognising and responding to different perspectives fairly while keeping the committee's work on track.
- 1.2 The Chair advised members that the agenda had been condensed to accommodate the change in format, and that the meeting is not being opened to observers to ensure meeting security. The meeting would still be split into an open and a closed session due to the minuting requirements of specific items.
- 1.3 The Chair noted that there have been several changes in the assessors for COMARE. The assessors for BEIS, HSE and ONR have changed due to changes in roles in these organisations. The Chair thanked the outgoing assessors and welcomed the new assessors. The Chair also welcomed substitute assessors for EA and NDA to the meeting and also welcomed a representative from the FSA who was attending to provide an update on their risk assessment review. Members were informed that the HSE assessor had sent apologies but had noted that HSE expect to publish the post-implementation review of the Control of EMF at Work Regulations 2016 very soon. COMARE will be notified when the publication is available.
- 1.4 The Chair reminded members of the private nature of the Committee's proceedings and that papers marked "For Members Use Only" should be kept in members' own hands. Members were also reminded that they should disclose any relevant interests to the Chair either now or before the items concerned.
- 1.5 Apologies were received Dr Ray Kemp and Professor Malcolm Sperrin; and from the assessors for BEIS, DHSC, HSE, DforE, DoH NI, ONR, SG and WG. The Chair reminded assessors that substitutes may attend the meetings.

2. Minutes of the 128th COMARE meeting

i. Minutes, actions & matters arising

- 2.1 The Chair asked for comments or corrections to the minutes from the 128th meeting. A correction was requested that the reference to ISD should be Public Health Scotland (PHS). The minutes were approved with the correction, and the open session minutes would be published on the COMARE webpage.
- [ACTION: Secretariat]**
- 2.2 A query was raised about the difference between assessors and members. Attention was drawn to the [COMARE code of conduct](#) which explains the roles and expectations for the Committee.
- 2.3 The Chair noted that an action was previously placed on BEIS to provide details of the consultation on the draft policy on radioactive substances. Due to the additional work BEIS needed to do to refine the consultation proposals, the plan now is to publish the consultation after summer recess. BEIS will provide further updates to the committee.

[ACTION: BEIS]

3. Committee matters

i. Membership

- 3.1 The Chair informed members that the 2021 recruitment campaign was for five expert member posts on the Committee and the position of Chair. The applications window has now closed. The DHSC assessor reported that there has been a reasonable number of applications, though there have been no applications for the public health physician or clinical oncologist positions. The selection panel will be reviewing the applications and holding interviews in due course. The position of Chair will be decided first, followed by the members, and those appointed to posts should be in place by the next meeting.
- 3.2 Unfilled posts would be carried over to next year's recruitment campaign. Members were urged to share adverts via professional networks when they are issued and to encourage colleagues to apply. It was noted that public health professionals and clinical oncologists are likely to be especially busy at the moment due to the COVID pandemic, but that candidates may be available in the future.
- 3.3 The Chair thanked members for their submissions of the annual 360° feedback exercise on the performance of the Chair and the handling of committee processes by the secretariat. Any members who have not yet responded are still able to provide feedback to DHSC. The secretariat will provide a copy of the submission form to members if required.

[ACTION: Secretariat]
[ACTION: Members]

ii. Correspondence and communications

- 3.4 The Chair informed members that no Freedom of Information (FOI) requests or Parliamentary Questions (PQs) had been received since the last meeting. No external submissions had been received for the attention of the Committee.
- 3.5 The Chair reminded members that following the formal complaint to COMARE not being upheld by DHSC, the complainant submitted the case to the Parliamentary Ombudsman. In April of this year, the Ombudsman closed the case at the assessment stage and is taking no further action.

iii. Committee submissions

- 3.6 The Chair informed members that several submissions have been made by the Committee since the last meeting and thanked members for their input and for responding within the time deadlines.
- 3.7 The submission to the Goldacre Review was made following the last meeting. There is no confirmed indication of when the results of the review will be published, but a response to a recent PQ suggested it may be later this year.
- 3.8 The responses to the questions regarding the UK Health Security Agency (UK HSA) and Office for Health Promotion were submitted in April 2021. There has been no published response to the submissions yet. The transition process is in progress and a consultation of PHE, Test and Trace and Joint Biosecurity Centre staff is underway. PHE staff supporting COMARE are expecting to formally transition into the new agency on 1st October 2021. Continuity will be maintained as far as possible with all transitioning colleagues who support COMARE.
- 3.9 The Chair reminded members that the Contaminations Working Group (CWG) members, together with Dr Westcott, reviewed the FSA risk assessment on the radiological risk to the public in the UK if import controls on imported food from Japan adopted after the nuclear accident in 2011 are removed. The analysis from the CWG was reviewed by the main

committee and an agreed response was subsequently submitted to the FSA. The FSA representative thanked the Committee for their time and effort in producing the response, noting that most comments have now been addressed by the FSA. A draft version will be sent to policy colleagues and colleagues in Japan, with the aim of publishing the risk assessment later this year.

- 3.10 The Chair advised members that the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees (CoPSAC) is currently being revised. COMARE will have the chance to provide input to a public consultation on the updated document. The secretariat will provide details of the consultation as soon as they are released.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

4. Working group reports

i. Contaminations Working Group (CWG)

- 4.1 The Chair informed members that the CWG last met in March via an online meeting. He thanked the CWG members and Dr Westcott for their work following that meeting in reviewing and responding to the FSA risk assessment. He brought members' attention to the note on the particle updates received by the CWG and briefing notes from both EA and SEPA.
- 4.2 The EA assessor provided an update on the Sellafield Beach Monitoring Programme. The PHE assessment remains that risks are very low, with no measures required to mitigate exposure on beaches around Sellafield. Monitoring remains ongoing as per the environmental permit requirements. Until the end of the first quarter the programme was ahead of target with 28 ha of beaches monitored against a final target of 105 ha for 2021. One larger object and 58 particles had been detected and removed. Find rates to the end of May did not require any further analysis or mitigation measures. An ecological risk assessment for non-human species is still in progress and it is hoped to be completed in the autumn. It was noted that the EA webpage on the [Sellafield beach monitoring](#) had recently been updated.
- 4.3 The EA assessor also provided an update on the previously reported leak at the Sellafield Magnox Swarf Storage Silo (MSSS). The investigation into the leak is still ongoing; however, the leak is believed to have recently stabilised. A variation to the environmental permit was issued in March 2021 which required Sellafield Ltd to work on mitigation options and improvements in the monitoring of the leak.
- 4.4 Members recognised that resolving the leak would be a complicated process and asked about the possible impact of the worst-case scenario if the leak is not resolved. It was noted that the evidence currently suggests that the leak is not spreading to threaten aquifers. The EA assessor reported that a lot of effort is being put into safely remediating the facility, removing radioactive liquid and decommissioning the facility safely. EA expect Best Available Techniques to be applied by Sellafield Ltd.
- 4.5 Members noted that the implications and risk benefits of both dealing with the leak and of not doing so should be understood to ensure that taking action does not generate other risks or problems in the future. Further updates to the CWG would be welcomed.
- 4.6 The SEPA assessor gave an update on the current monitoring programme at Dounreay. There have been finds on both the foreshore and on Sandside beach reported. The Particles Retrieval Advisory Group (Dounreay) (PRAG(D)) have requested a trial of the Dounreay Synergy system and the Sellafield Fidler system at both foreshore and Sandside beaches for lower activity Am-241 particles. One week of surveying is planned for the end of July.

- 4.7 It was noted that there have been media reports regarding initiation of the emptying of the shaft at Dounreay. The project is in the early stages and SEPA are in liaison with the site on the work. SEPA agreed to update the CWG on the project.

[ACTION: SEPA]

- 4.8 The SEPA assessor also provided an update on the current situation at Dalgety Bay. Remediation is now underway with the required permit having been issued in May. Beach material is removed and transferred to a compound via conveyor system, then monitored using NaI detectors. The detector system has been trialled to ensure that PHE criteria could be met. Screened material will be returned to the beach and covered by the rock armour, before verification monitoring is conducted. SEPA are currently attending each day that work takes place, to ensure compliance with the permit, but this may reduce as work progresses. The monthly monitoring is continuing and to date shows an increased number of finds, although the activities are remaining low. SEPA is undertaking drone surveys to determine the impact on sediment distribution in the area. The remediation work has resulted in some higher activity items being found, indicating that the remediation work is necessary.

ii. Authorisations Working Group (AWG)

- 4.9 Professor Sutton, the AWG Chair, updated the Committee on the group's work. The Working Group have not responded to any consultations since the last meeting. A consultation has been received from EA for an application from HMNB Devonport to vary its radioactive substances approval. The deadline for response is 27th July 2021.
- 4.10 The Chair reminded members that the Working Group would welcome any members who are interested in joining.

[ACTION: Members]

5. Information papers

- 5.1 The Chair brought members' attention to the ten information papers and the two digital information links. Collectively, these cover a range of topics, both ionising and non-ionising, to reflect the wide remit of the Committee. It was noted that the paper by Yeager et al about transgenerational effects reports a negative finding, which can be hard to publish.
- 5.2 Members highlighted the paper by Crick et al and the role of trustworthy sources and risk perception. There was discussion about how to effectively communicate scientific information to the public, how to build trust in organisations such as COMARE and possibilities for the public face of COMARE. It was noted that trust and familiarity must be built over time, with regular communication, which gives a higher chance of health information being accepted when advice is required. This has been highlighted by the current pandemic situation, where it has been shown that statistics and risk levels can be distorted through the media and misunderstood by the public. Consideration of how risks are communicated and understood is important when discussing radiation risks.
- 5.3 An integrated approach to risk communication was suggested to prevent unintended consequences and help the public understand the need to balance risks. Liaison between scientific advisory groups would be helpful in ensuring consistency in risk communication. It was noted that the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) are undertaking work on the public understanding of risk and looking to design a course on risk communication. The Society for Radiological Protection (SRP) have recently issued a [Guide to communicating radiation risk in support of action before, during and after a radiation emergency](#) and plan to issue further guidance. The NIHR Health Protection Research Units (HPRUs) are also considering risk communication and COMARE may be able to link with this via the Public and Community Oversight Group (PCOG). COMARE may want to look at risk communication, including

radiation risk, and the public profile for COMARE. The Secretariat will review how to take this forward with the new Chair.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

6. Any Other Business

- 6.1 No additional items were raised. The Chair thanked members for their attendance and contributions to the meeting. Members thanked the Chair for his contributions during his term as Chair. The next COMARE meeting will be held on Thursday 18th November 2021. Members were asked to consider their preference for the format of the meeting. The Chair closed the meeting at 12.00 pm.

Abbreviations

AWG	Authorisations Working Group
BEIS	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
CoPSAC	Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees
CWG	Contaminations Working Group
DforE	Department for Education
DHSC	Department of Health and Social Care
DoH NI	Department of Health for Northern Ireland
EA	Environment Agency
EMF	Electromagnetic fields
FOI	Freedom of information
FSA	Food Standards Agency
FSS	Food Standards Scotland
HMNB	Her Majesty's Naval Base
HPRU	Health Protection Research Unit
HSE	Health & Safety Executive
ISD	Information Services Division (NHS Scotland)
NDA	Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
NEA	Nuclear Energy Agency
NIHR	National Institute for Health Research
ONR	Office for Nuclear Regulation
PCOG	Public and Community Oversight Group
PHE	Public Health England
PHS	Public Health Scotland
PQ	Parliamentary Question
PRAG(D)	Particles Retrieval Advisory Group (Dounreay)
SAHSU	Small Area Health Statistics Unit
SEPA	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
SG	Scottish Government
SRP	Society for Radiological Protection
UK HSA	UK Health Security Agency
WG	Welsh Government