

Science Advisory Group (SAG) for the review of potential environmental contamination in Grenfell and North Kensington

Advice to Grenfell Tower Fire Ministerial Recovery Group, 4 March 2019

Minutes of Meeting #4 – 11 April 2019, Grenfell Tower site office

Overview

At its fourth meeting, SAG considered the contractor AECOM's strategy for phase one of the soil investigation (presented by Simon Cole of AECOM) and reviewed the published version of Prof Stec's research paper.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. For AECOM's literature review, SAG agreed that it was appropriate for AECOM to draw on high-quality, relevant review papers and reports that bring all the primary evidence together, rather than starting their own review from scratch. SAG gave specific advice on searching the academic literature in relation to fire. SAG noted that the priority is to understand the environmental position prior to the fire.
2. SAG felt that AECOM does not yet have a clear method for exploratory sampling. SAG proposed that AECOM map areas of most intensive community use, overlaid with areas where the greatest hazard is likely to be found. SAG's view is that this needs to be produced in the form of a map, together with an explanation of the underlying method and principles. Ultimately for Tier 2 it will be important to include a statistical assessment of total coverage.
3. SAG further proposed that AECOM seek input from the community about potential sampling locations. The rationale of the whole approach should be clearly communicated to the community.
4. SAG requested that AECOM define the number of samples required to be scientifically rigorous and meet stated aims of Tier 1. This needs to be checked to establish appropriateness of coverage, especially in key areas defined by both modelling and local knowledge.
5. SAG felt that it was unnecessary for there to be a pilot study simply to demonstrate activity to the community; the exploratory sampling could achieve this aim and should begin soon. SAG's position is that the rationale for a pilot study is only to rehearse the assessment method for Tier 2. SAG advised that, if AECOM needs a pilot study because the exploratory sampling is insufficient to develop a scientifically rigorous method, the contract should be revisited to allow greater sampling under the exploratory sampling.
6. SAG recommended that AECOM should explain its method, and what the results might tell us, to the community before any data is available. AECOM should consult with the community before any sampling is carried out (to do otherwise would not create trust in the process). Building trust in the sampling approach is key.
7. AECOM's technical notes will be the basis for its final report, but AECOM is not responsible for communicating the findings to the community. Responsibility for this action is yet to be determined. SAG's position is that this communication needs to be considered now – and that the community should be consulted on how it wishes the findings to be communicated. This is not a task for SAG. It needs to be done by professionals who understand the science and the communication and are accountable to the responsible body. SAG will review and provide comments and advice.

8. Having reviewed and discussed the published version of Prof Stec's research paper, SAG agreed that there was no reason to recommend changing current public health advice nor the approach to the soil risk assessment. This will be reviewed as new data emerge.

List of actions

ACTION 4.1: Prof Stec to advise AECOM on appropriate search terms covering fire toxicity.

ACTION 4.2: AECOM to urgently produce a clear sampling methodology and description of analytical methods for SAG and provide, for SAG comment, a list of the contaminants it intends to test for.

ACTION 4.3: SAG to comment on proposed list and advise on key compound indicators for contamination, as well as chemicals not worth testing for.

ACTION 4.4: SAG secretariat to share revised PHE risk definitions with AECOM once completed.

ACTION 4.5: AECOM to seek advice on risk interpretation from HSE Chief Scientist.

ACTION 4.6: MHCLG to develop a plan for communicating the results of the soil assessment to the community. SAG will provide support during development of the communications plan.

ACTION 4.7: SAG secretariat to draft a letter to UKRI identifying common themes from the research ideas suggested by SAG members – with a focus on the most important and tractable issues. Draft letter to be discussed at next SAG meeting.

ACTION 4.8: Prof Stec to write to GCSA setting out her thoughts on fire-related research ideas in more detail.

ACTION 4.9: Prof Whitty to share a draft of the open research call with SAG.

ACTION 4.10: SAG secretariat to circulate proposal to SAG members for their involvement in community workshops on April 25 and April 27.

ACTION 4.11: SAG to review at a future meeting MHCLG proposal for presenting the findings of the soil assessment to a) the community and b) the media.

ACTION 4.12: James Rubin to share with SAG a PHE public engagement strategy used during the Salisbury poisonings.

In attendance

Sir Patrick Vallance, chair

Dr Lindsay Bramwell

Dr Alexandra Freeman

Prof Len Levy

Dr Paul Nathanail

Dr James Rubin

Prof Anna Stec

Prof Chris Whitty (in his capacity as Deputy Chief Medical Officer)

Apologies

Prof Ragnar Löfstedt

Prof Robert Mokaya

Prof Sir Anthony Newman Taylor

Prof Sir Munir Pirmohamed

Prof John Warner

Others

Government Office for Science secretariat

Suzanne Kochanowski, MHCLG

Simon Cole, AECOM (for land assessment discussion only)