

COMMITTEE ON MEDICAL ASPECTS OF RADIATION IN THE ENVIRONMENT

126th COMARE MEETING, Thursday 9th July 2020

Online meeting

Present

Chair: Dr Chris Gibson

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

Assessors: BEIS
DHSC
EA
FSA
HSE
NDA
PHE
SEPA
SG

Invited attendee: Professor Stephanie McKeown

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

Open Session

1. Welcome & declarations

- 1.1 The Chair commenced the 126th meeting and welcomed members to the first online meeting for the Committee. The meeting was using this platform as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The agenda had been condensed to accommodate the change in format, with the aim of finishing the meeting by 12 pm. Members were informed of protocol for this meeting format. The Chair noted that although no observers would be present during the meeting, it would still be split into an open and a closed session due to the minuting requirements of specific items.
- 1.2 The Chair welcomed Dr Mark Hill to his first meeting with COMARE. Dr Hill is taking up Professor Stephanie McKeown's post as a radiobiologist for the committee. The Chair also welcomed back Professor McKeown, who although she has now retired from the committee, is returning for this meeting to present the updated draft of the MPS(IR) report.
- 1.3 The Chair informed members that since the last meeting Professor Brenda Howard, Professor Stephanie McKeown and Dr Paul Darragh have all completed their terms of office with the committee and thanked them for their work with COMARE.
- 1.4 The Chair welcomed the replacement assessors for NDA and SG and the substitute assessors for BEIS, SEPA and FSA.
- 1.5 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.
- 1.6 Apologies were also received from the assessors for BEIS, DforE, SG, EA, DoH NI, NDA, FSS, FSA and ONS. The Chair reminded assessors that substitutes may attend the meeting.

2. Minutes of the 125th COMARE meeting

i. Minutes, actions & matters arising

- 2.1 The Chair asked for comments or corrections to the minutes from the 125th meeting. The minutes were approved without amendment and the open session minutes would be published on the COMARE webpage.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

- 2.2 The Chair thanked members for their completion of the 360° feedback exercise on the performance of the Chair and the handling of committee processes by the secretariat. The DHSC assessor informed members that all the feedback had been positive for both the Chair and the secretariat. The Chair's encouragement of participation and level of organisation and briefing for the meetings was noted. There was a suggestion to consider online meetings. A summary of the comments will be produced. The Chair was pleased that members were content with the organisation and running of the committee.

[ACTION: DHSC]

- 2.3 The Chair thanked the secretariat for their provision of secretariat support for the COVID-19 public health response. This additional work has impacted on the secretariat work for COMARE, but the importance of the coronavirus work is recognised.

- 2.4 The Chair noted that one of the actions from the last meeting was for BEIS to give a presentation on the new policy paper on radioactive substances. Due to current circumstances, the presentation has been postponed to the November meeting.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

3. Committee matters

i. Membership

- 3.1 Dr Mann formally introduced Dr Mark Hill to the Committee. The Chair informed members that following the retirement of Professor Howard, Professor McKeown and Dr Darragh there were now six vacancies on the Committee. The expertise for each of the posts has been reviewed in line with the work programme and potential future work. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a delay in the appointments process; however, DHSC are aware of the necessity to fill these posts. Members were encouraged to consider potential candidates and promote the details of the Committee vacancies through relevant networks where possible. It was noted that there is a formal appointment process in the election of members to the Committee. The secretariat will forward the vacancy details as soon as they are available.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

ii. Correspondence and communications

- 3.2 The Chair informed members that several items of correspondence have been received since the last meeting and noted that the secretariat would provide copies of any correspondence to members on request.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

- 3.3 The Chair advised members that an invitation that had been received for a representative to join the Public and Community Oversight Group (PCOG) for the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU) in Chemical & Radiation Threats and Hazards. Dr Simon Mann informed members that HPRUs have their origins from the time PHE was formed and are essentially umbrellas under which collaborative research is carried out. A first set ran for around five years and a second iteration of the units is underway. The Chemical & Radiation Threats and Hazards HPRU is one of three in which PHE's Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental hazards is involved. Its aims are to address the most pressing chemical and radiation threats and hazards, look at how these affect health, and influence policy. The PCOG will ensure that the public and community voice impacts the research strategies, projects and functions making sure the research is accountable, transparent and relevant to the public. There was strong support for this work, with some members expressing interest. The secretariat would provide further details to members and members were asked to register any expressions of interest with the secretariat.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

[ACTION: Members]

- 3.4 The Chair informed members that COMARE has received details of a preliminary report, *Radiation and reason; the impact of science on a culture of confusion*, by the Low Level Radiation Campaign (LLRC) for the charity Children with Cancer UK (CwC UK). This report suggests that risks from exposure to ionising radiation has been historically underestimated and does contain references to several COMARE reports. COMARE have not been asked for comment on the report. The report is available on the LLRC website.

- 3.5 The Chair informed members that a further submission had been received from the UK & Commonwealth EMF Action Group for consideration. The submission contained comments on COMARE and would be made available to members on request.

[ACTION: Secretariat]

4. Working group reports

i. Contaminations Working Group (CWG)

4.1 The Chair drew members' attention to the two briefs provided by EA and SEPA.

4.2 The EA assessor provided an update on Sellafield beach monitoring for radioactive particles. PHE have advised that risks to members of the public from the radioactive particles in the environment near to the Sellafield site are very low and that no additional controls are needed. The routine monitoring programme was revised for 2020. The programme commenced at the start of 2020 and ran to the end of March. It has been put on hold since April due to the coronavirus pandemic but is expected to restart towards the end of July. It is anticipated that the programme for monitoring 105 hectares will be completed by the end of the calendar year as planned. The findings to date do not suggest any change to PHE's risk assessment. Sellafield's three yearly review of Best Available Techniques (BAT) for beach monitoring is underway and should be delivered to the CWG in Autumn 2020. EA are also hoping to share the ecological risk assessment with the CWG at their next meeting.

[ACTION: EA]

4.3 The Chair asked about the beach occupancy levels during the period with no monitoring. The EA assessor estimated that the occupancy would have been very low at Sellafield beach, but may have been higher at St Bees. The available information on beach occupancy would be checked. Members noted that occupancy of beaches around the UK had been more intense following relaxation of lockdown; however, it was noted that the highest occupancy of the beaches around Sellafield are local users, who access them on a regular basis. Members suggested that if the target for the monitoring programme can be completed by the end of the year, and the risk to the public remains low, there should be no concern regarding the delay in monitoring due to the lockdown.

[ACTION: EA]

4.4 The EA assessor provided an update on two previously reported leaks at Sellafield. Work has been carried out through the winter and spring to empty a redundant settling tank, used for the treatment of sludge from the First Generation Magnox Storage Pond. This work is almost complete, and it is expected that a new concrete floor will be in place by the end of July 2020, which will give a permanent solution. There is also a leak from a Magnox Swarf Storage Silo and the leak rate appears to have nearly doubled since the end of April. The first direct evidence of leakage into the ground has recently been detected. Possible solutions are being assessed to stop the leak; however, these will take years to implement. Both EA and ONR continue to investigate the leak. Members were informed that site visits were postponed during lockdown, but ONR has been back on site and EA have conducted remote audits. Members were advised that it could be many years or decades before any activity from this leak to ground reaches the site boundary, but close scrutiny continues. It was noted that this is an aging site and consideration is needed on strategies to deal with these types of issues. Future updates on the situation would be welcomed.

[ACTION: EA]

4.5 The SEPA assessor informed members that for Dounreay, monitoring had been successfully achieved by the site operator up to the point of lockdown in March and the operator is planning to restart and catch up on missed surveys from July onwards. Social distancing considerations will be required for recommencing the monitoring procedures. The work of PRAG(D) and the requests made by PRAG(D) on the site operator have been paused during the lockdown. There were plans to use the Sellafield monitoring equipment for a comparison exercise. This work is now planned for 2021 to ensure the regulatory monitoring requirements have been met at Sellafield following the lockdown

delays. The beach occupancy at Dounreay was also questioned during the lockdown period. The SEPA assessor agreed to check on this.

[ACTION: SEPA]

- 4.6 The SEPA assessor also provided an update on the monitoring programme at Dalgety Bay. A contractor for the MoD undertakes monthly monitoring of the site; however, this has been reduced during lockdown. Monitoring has identified that particles are still being found which demonstrate that sources above 20 kBq continue to exist. Mitigation measures, such as fencing and signage, were checked by Fife Council during lockdown and found to be still fit for purpose. There is some anecdotal evidence that occupancy of the area has increased during lockdown. Due to contractual issues and the lockdown, remediation has been delayed and is unlikely to commence in 2020.

ii. **Authorisations Working Group (AWG)**

- 4.7 Professor Sutton, the AWG Chair, informed members that since the last meeting a response was submitted to the SEPA consultation on the proposed changes to the Letters of Agreement for HMNB Clyde, Faslane and Coulport. In the last week an invitation was received for comments on an environmental permit application for Sizewell C, which closes in October. Members were advised that there are only three members currently on the working group. The Chair encouraged members to volunteer to join the working group.

[ACTION: Members]

5. **Information papers.**

- 5.1 The Chair drew attention to the eight information papers and two digital links and asked members for their comments on these papers. It was noted that two of the circulated papers had also been suggested by external sources for the committee's attention. The Chair highlighted the paper by Tettamanti et al¹, which is from the COSMOS study, and is funded in part by DHSC. The work of the ICRP task group 111 and the issue of individual genetic responses to radiation exposure was noted with the paper by Applegate et al². Members suggested that the timescale for the work of the ICRP task group could be checked.

[ACTION: Members]

8. **Any Other Business.**

- 8.1 No additional items were raised. The next COMARE meeting will be held on Thursday 12th November 2020 at Skipton House, London. The Chair thanked members for attending and closed the meeting at 12.33pm.

¹ Long-term effect of mobile phone use on sleep quality: Results from the cohort study of mobile phone use and health (COSMOS). Environ Int. 2020 Apr 7:105687

² Individual response of humans to ionising radiation: governing factors and importance for radiological protection. Radiat Environ Biophys. 2020 May;59(2):185-209.

Abbreviations

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| AWG | Authorisations Working Group |
| BEIS | Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy |
| CwC | Children with cancer |
| CWG | Contaminations Working Group |
| DforE | Department for Education |
| DHSC | Department of Health and Social Care |
| DoH NI | Department of Health for Northern Ireland |
| DRLs | Diagnostic Reference Levels |
| EA | Environment Agency |
| EMF | electromagnetic field |
| FSA | Food Standards Agency |
| FSS | Food Standards Scotland |
| HMNB | Her Majesty's Naval Base |
| HPRU | Health Protection Research Unit |
| HSE | Health & Safety Executive |
| IAEA | International Atomic Energy Agency |
| ICRP | International Commission on Radiological Protection |
| IR | Interventional Radiology |
| ISD | Information Services Division (NHS Scotland) |
| LLRC | Low Level Radiation Campaign |
| MHCLG | Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government |
| MPS(IR) | Medical Practices Subcommittee (Interventional Radiology) |
| NDA | Nuclear Decommissioning Authority |
| NIHR | National Institute for Health Research |
| ONR | Office for Nuclear Regulation |
| PCOG | Public and Community Oversight Group |
| PHE | Public Health England |
| PRAG(D) | Particles Retrieval Advisory Group (Dounreay) |
| SAFRAD | SAFety in RADiological procedures |
| SAHSU | Small Area Health Statistics Unit |
| SEPA | Scottish Environment Protection Agency |
| SG | Scottish Government |
| WG | Welsh Government |