

COMARE – Annual Report 2023

What we do / our role

The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) is an expert scientific advisory committee for the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) that provides independent advice to the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations on a wide range of public health issues associated with radioactivity and radiation.

The main Committee meets three times a year, either online or in-person, and the minutes of these meetings are published on the [COMARE webpage](#). Observers are welcome to attend the in-person meetings, as detailed in the [procedures for open meetings](#). COMARE's working groups, subgroups and specialist subcommittees meet more often to consider evidence and prepare materials to support the main Committee. Much of the work is done outside the formal meetings.

The main Committee hears, considers, questions and discusses reports from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), the Environment Agency (EA), and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) among others. The Committee also receives submissions from third parties.

Membership

At the close of 2022, the Committee comprised of sixteen expert members and two lay members.

Three members were reappointed for a further term (Dr Mark Hill, Professor Frank de Vocht and Dr Colin Martin). At the close of 2023, the Committee membership remained at sixteen expert members and two lay members.

Expert members are drawn from a broad range of scientific and medical disciplines to support COMARE's technical work. Lay members have a specific role to represent the public interest aspects of the Committee's work and to advise accordingly. All members have equal status on the Committee.

COMARE Meetings

In 2023, the main Committee meetings were:

- 134th meeting – 8th March
- 135th meeting – 4th July
- 136th meeting – 23rd November

The 134th and 135th meetings were held using an online platform. A hybrid format was used for the 136th meeting.

Subcommittees, working groups and subgroups:

[Details](#) of the various subcommittees, working groups and subgroups can be found on the COMARE webpage.

The Cardio-/Cerebrovascular Effects Subcommittee (CCES) held one online meeting in 2023.

- 6th CCES meeting – 18th April

The Contaminations Working Group (CWG) completed its two annual meetings. Both meetings used a hybrid format.

- 21st CWG meeting – 4th May
- 22nd CWG meeting – 22nd November

The ICRP Recommendations Subgroup (IRS) and the EMF and Health Subgroup (EAHS) each held three meetings in 2023, which were conducted using an online platform.

- 2nd IRS meeting – 2nd February
- 3rd IRS meeting – 20th June
- 4th IRS meeting – 5th October
- 2nd EAHS meeting – 9th February
- 3rd EAHS meeting – 5th June
- 4th EAHS meeting – 18th October

The Authorisations Working Group (AWG) conducted its work via electronic correspondence. No meetings were held by the group.

Progress on 2022-2023 work programme

Subcommittees:

Cardio-/cerebrovascular effects of ionising radiation

There is increasing evidence of cardiovascular and cerebrovascular effects from radiation exposure. The subcommittee established by COMARE is reviewing evidence of the potential health impacts that may be caused by low doses of radiation. A draft report completed during 2023 has been reviewed by external experts. The report will be completed during 2024 and will advise DHSC on possible implications for the UK.

Working groups:

Contaminations

The Contaminations Working Group (CWG) met twice in 2023 and considered updates on two beach monitoring programmes: at Dounreay in Scotland and Sellafield in Cumbria, noting the radioactive particles detected at each site. The CWG also followed the monitoring work and remediation programme being undertaken at Dalgety Bay in the Firth of Forth. COMARE published a [statement](#) welcoming the completion of the remediation in September 2023.

Authorisations

The Authorisations Working Group (AWG) is responsible for COMARE's standing commitment to advise on discharges of radioactive materials when applications are received for new or revised authorisations. The Working Group responds to relevant consultations on draft authorisations and keeps the main Committee aware of its proceedings. The AWG continued to conduct its work online throughout the year.

In 2023, the AWG drafted a response to the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero consultation on proposals for a revised UK-wide policy framework for nuclear decommissioning and the management of radioactive substances, including radioactive waste. The response was finalised and submitted by COMARE in May 2023.

The AWG also responded to the Environment Agency consultation on a Radioactive Substances Activities (RSA) Environmental Permit Variation Consultation for the Sellafield site.

Additional items under consideration by the committee

- The Committee received and considered two updates from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) at its 136th meeting on 23rd November – one on radon issues and the second on EMF and health issues.
- Updates on the work with the Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU), based in Imperial College, London, on the surveillance of childhood cancer incidence in the vicinity of nuclear installations in Great Britain were provided to COMARE. This study has been submitted for publication.
- The Committee received updates on the DHSC-commissioned epidemiological study to investigate any association of thyroid cancer incidence with Sellafield discharges, in particular those associated with the Windscale nuclear reactor fire in 1957. This study was proposed in recommendation 3 of the 17th COMARE report and is being prepared for publication.

Correspondence

The Committee received and responded to correspondence regarding public concerns on issues of relevance to COMARE's work. In 2023 there was one email that required a response. The secretariat took primary responsibility for the response, referring to the Chair as necessary and keeping the Committee informed. Three notification letters were received, having been redirected from an address unconnected with COMARE. The letters were passed to the UKHSA Information Rights team for response.

The Committee received and responded to two Freedom of Information requests in 2023. Both were generic requests for information which were sent to multiple organisations. None were targeted at COMARE's work and COMARE did not hold the information for any of these requests.

COMARE was asked to consider the issue of 'Protecting Female Health Workers from Ionising Radiation at Work' by the British Medical Association. A response was provided noting that the current regulatory arrangements are considered appropriate.

COMARE provided two letters of support in 2023, one for the continuation of funding for the Cohort Study of Mobile Phone Use and Health (COSMOS) research study and the other for the continued provision and maintenance of the Oxford Survey of Childhood Cancers (OSCC) data.

COMARE submitted a [joint response](#) with the Society for Radiological Protection (SRP) to a consultation by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) on Dose Coefficients for Intakes of Radionuclides by Members of the Public: Part 1.

Items of published information provided to members

In addition to the primary papers circulated for discussion at each meeting, COMARE members are provided with copies of relevant peer-reviewed publications and digital links to reports from professional bodies and other scientific committees. In 2023, information papers and links were provided to Committee members for the following topics:

Ionising radiation (IR)	25 items
Non-ionising radiation (NIR)	17 items
Ultraviolet radiation (UV)	4 items

Future meetings and work programme

The meetings dates for 2024 were agreed by the Committee.

- 137th meeting – 6th March
- 138th meeting – 10th July
- 139th meeting – 13th November

The Committee will continue with the major themes of its work during 2024, supported by its Contaminations Working Group, Authorisations Working Group, ICRP Recommendations Subgroup and EMF and Health Subgroup. Updates from UKHSA will be considered, including regular items on EMFs and radon, as will peer-reviewed papers and reports published during the year.

The Committee expects that its report on cardiovascular and cerebrovascular effects will be submitted to DHSC during the year.