

UK: Report reveals widespread soil contamination after Grenfell Tower fire

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Large concentrations of harmful toxins have been found in the dust and soil around Grenfell Tower. The toxins, which are potentially carcinogenic and may have long-term health implications for survivors of the fire and for local residents, have been identified in the preliminary findings of a study by toxicology expert, Professor Anna Stec.

Her findings back up the grave concerns of survivors, local residents and health experts of the health impact of potential contamination in the wake of the devastating fire, which killed 72 people last June.

The study conducted by Stec, who is Professor of Fire Chemistry and Toxicity at the University of Central Lancashire and was recently appointed an expert witness to the government's Grenfell Fire Inquiry, analysed soil, dust and residue samples taken from eight sites up to a mile away from the tower.

The early results of her study, which is due to be published in full early next year, indicated that "huge concentrations" of potential carcinogens were present in the dust and soil around the tower, as well as in the burned debris which had fallen from it. High levels of hydrogen cyanide were also found in the soil she analysed.

While Public Health England (PHE), a government agency part of the Department of Health and Social Care, has been monitoring air quality since the fire, no tests have been done into the potential contamination of soil until Stec's study.

In February, the professor briefed health and public authorities on her study, including PHE, the Department of Health, the police and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC). She explained that her study went beyond an examination of air quality, and that she was looking for particles that were much smaller than those analysed by

PHE, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), a group of chemicals given off in fires, which can have health implications and are potentially carcinogenic.

In her brief to the public authorities, Stec said that her preliminary findings indicated "high levels of PAH in the surrounding soil." She warned officials that the most significant threat to survivors and local residents was likely to be from absorbing toxic material through the skin and not from smoke inhalation. The black soot from the fire, for example, is highly likely to be contaminated with asbestos, which is known to have been present in the tower, according to Stec.

She found that the "Grenfell cough," reported by many survivors after the fire, "seems indicative of elevated levels of atmospheric contaminants."

In the light of her findings, Stec called on the authorities to urgently conduct their own tests to assess the potential health risks, suggesting that health authorities should consider taking blood and saliva samples from survivors, local residents and firefighters to monitor possible damage to their DNA.

Despite the seriousness of these concerns, local residents and survivors were not notified of Professor Stec's briefing to health and government officials and received no information about the potential health risks. Former residents of Grenfell Tower and the local community were only made aware of Stec's study when details of it were published in a *Guardian* article earlier this month—eight months after the professor had initially raised her concerns.

Local community groups representing survivors and residents have expressed their anger about having been kept in the dark over these revelations and demanded immediate answers and action from health officials and local authorities.

In a letter to government ministers and to RBKC and

PHE, Grenfell United—which represents the majority of survivors—demanded further information and action from the council and health authorities.

It stated: “This [contamination to the local area] has been a concern that Grenfell United have raised time and time again, and now the community of North Kensington has had to find out through a newspaper article that the area is not as safe as you have led us all to believe. We are deeply disturbed by this.”

The possible health consequences of inhaling toxic smoke have frequently been raised by local residents in the wake of the blaze, as large quantities of highly toxic hydrogen cyanide were emitted by the tower’s burning cladding. Many have reported respiratory problems, including the aforementioned “Grenfell cough.”

Concerns over the safety of the secondary school situated at the foot of the tower have also been raised on multiple occasions. Due to toxicity worries and the traumatic impact on pupils and teachers alike, the school was relocated to a different site in the wake of the fire. But, as of the start of the new school year this September, they have returned to the Kensington Aldridge Academy building, mere metres from the burnt-out shell of the tower.

In September, the coroner leading the Grenfell fire inquiry, Dr. Fiona Wilcox, called for regular screening of those who were exposed to smoke and dust in the fire, including survivors, local residents and firefighters.

In a letter to NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens, Wilcox said that those who had been exposed to smoke and dust from the fire were at risk of developing health conditions, as the burning tower had emitted “multiple toxic substances” and had contained asbestos.

NHS England said it will provide up to £50 million to fund long-term screening and treatment for those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. PHE and RBKC, however, have responded with complacent dismissals of the significance of Professor Stec’s report.

In a statement, RBKC merely declared that they would undertake a “rapid review” to ascertain if any action were necessary, while maintaining that health advice remained “unchanged.” Due to pressure from residents, a public meeting at the end of October has been called by the council to discuss the issue of soil contamination.

On the part of the council, this is yet another exercise in damage limitation aimed at placating anger from the community and will offer no concrete solutions to their concerns.

PHE refuses to even investigate reports of soil contamination until Stec’s full study is published next year, and largely dismissed the concerns the initial findings raise. PHE claimed that soil contamination can come from “a variety of sources,” including historic industrial manufacturing and coal fires, and that it would therefore “be difficult to link it directly with the Grenfell Tower fire.”

The fact that the plume of smoke from the burning tower largely travelled vertically meant that contaminants were unlikely to have been deposited on the ground, it claimed.

The response of local and central authorities to this report, and the fact that the information contained within it was concealed from those affected for eight months, provides further confirmation of the official disregard for the health and lives of the former residents of Grenfell Tower and of the working-class inhabitants in the local area.

The contempt for the working class, manifestly clear in the official response to fire, is the same that created the conditions for the deadly inferno in the first place.



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