

Residents oppose official cover-up of Grenfell fire toxic contamination

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Survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, along with concerned local residents, have demanded answers as to why no action has been taken over soil sample tests showing levels of toxicity in the vicinity of the inferno.

The tests, conducted by toxicology expert Professor Anna Stec, indicated potentially carcinogenic chemicals, which could have long-term health consequences. Stec had independently undertaken the tests, responding to concerns of survivors and residents.

She compiled the preliminary findings in February and informed Public Health England (PHE), the Department of Health, and Kensington and Chelsea Council, suggesting that people living in the tower's vicinity be tested to ascertain any potential health risks.

The PHE, however, decided not to act on the findings until Stec's full report is published next year. Stec's findings were finally reported in the *Guardian* last month.

Survivors and residents are rightly outraged at the potential dangers and the continuing inaction and indifference of central and local authorities. To try and contain criticism and allay concerns, the authorities were forced to arrange an emergency meeting open to concerned residents. It was held October 29 in the Hilton Holland Park. Several hundred people attended, and such was the response from residents that the meeting filled a large room and overflow room.

A panel of five faced questions from Grenfell support organisations and residents. The five were Yvonne Doyle, PHE regional director for London; John Ashton, interim director of Public Health for Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster; Barry Quirk, chief executive officer at Kensington and Chelsea council; Rupert Lewis, director of the Government Office of Science; and Paul Nathanail, a soil expert at Nottingham University.

Although specifically called to discuss the issue of soil toxicity around Grenfell Tower, the meeting provided local residents with a rare opportunity to express their pent-up anxieties, fears and disgust at the way they have been treated and to pose the question of responsibility for what they had undergone.

A representative from the Care Parents forum raised concerns about asbestos in the environment following the fire and what plans were in place to safely remove it. Despite assurances from Doyle that the asbestos in the tower either remained in place or would have been burnt up and that only two particles had been found in the course of air monitoring, concerns remained. This was especially so regarding the risk posed to schoolchildren at the Kensington Aldridge academy, which lies in the shadow of the tower. The representative from Care Parents forum raised the issue that the lack of a secure cover enveloping the burnt-out tower meant debris could easily cover the surrounding area.

Many residents fear that bags of debris from the tower stored in garages at Hurstway Walk, near the tower, could contain asbestos. Doug Patterson, chief executive at Bromley Council, is acting as manager for the tower and site group charged with the clean-up and future development. He was challenged as to who had given permission to store the debris in the garages, where they have been for 16 months. He told the meeting that the bags were sealed but that he would arrange for their removal.

Joe Delaney, for the Grenfell Action Group, who lived in a flat adjacent to Grenfell Tower and who has fought both prior to and after the fire for safe and decent housing, attended the meeting. He raised concerns about the methodology of the air-testing regime employed following the entirely preventable

tragedy.

He specifically cited from a 2016 report by the American Thoracic Society on the political implications of the 2001 Twin Towers tragedy in New York. This states: “We must be realistic in assuming that political leaders in future facing new large-scale disasters may be deterred from prompt action by the prospect of enormous financial costs and other political factors and that a real scientific response will always be needed as a counterweight.”

To enthusiastic support, Delaney challenged Doyle to show how she had put public safety first, rather than government interests. Asking whether lessons from the Twin Tower collapse and its long-term effects on health had been drawn upon, he pointed out that air-monitoring equipment set up in the immediate area of the New York atrocity had become clogged up because of larger-than-expected particles. Air-monitoring equipment nearest to Grenfell Tower had similarly become blocked and out of commission for some time.

When Doyle asserted that this was not the case, she was challenged by a chorus of “that’s true” from some of those in attendance at the meeting.

In response, Rupert Lewis of the government science office said experts would be consulted as to the findings of the soil samples. Delaney challenged him as to whether American experts would be brought in, saying to applause: “British ones would be considered too close to the government.”

Natasha Elcock, chair of Grenfell United, demanded the panel give a date on when the soil sampling would start. “Can we get commitment that this testing is going to start with immediate effect. ... We need it to happen yesterday. ... I need a commitment that it is going to start in the next two weeks.”

A speaker from the floor questioned why soil sampling had not taken place from the start and why it had not begun when Professor Stec raised her concerns.

Another speaker from the floor denounced the efforts of the media and the official government inquiry to scapegoat firefighters for the fire. Earning a round of applause and cheers, she asked: “When are we going to get to the truth...when are people going to be prosecuted...when are we going to get justice...in other words, whose side are you on?”

Terry Edge introduced himself as a government whistle-blower over the suppression of truth on the

toxicity of fires. He explained he had worked for many years with Anna Stec, telling the meeting that she had told him she believed Public Health England was operating a cover-up over this issue. He described the Grenfell fire as “the most toxic domestic fire in UK history. The reason being the tower is full of flame-retardant material which when it burns is extremely toxic. ...”

Another speaker from the floor called for health screening to start immediately for residents and especially the children. One former local resident reminded the panel that people had perished in the fire, and that residents and survivors had been failed by the council and the tenant management organisation. She said she had to leave the area after the fire because she suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and had succumbed to the “Grenfell cough.”



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