

Save Spodden Valley Campaign
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PRESS RELEASE

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Rochdale Asbestos Mill fire – concerns of a “Public Relations smokescreen”?

Commenting on Friday’s asbestos factory fire, Jason Addy – Save Spodden Valley campaign co-ordinator and PHD researcher of occupational and environmental law – says:

“For over 8 years the Save Spodden Valley campaign has called for the former TBA asbestos factory site to be treated with the utmost respect. We have repeatedly warned of the need for a meticulously controlled demolition of the remaining factory buildings.

“Friday’s fire raises a number of extremely serious issues that must be answered. In particular, the apparent, immediate dismissal of any public health risk by certain officials must be subject to rigorous scrutiny. The people of Rochdale deserve to know all the facts. Concerns are being raised of a “Public Relations smokecreen”.

“The most dangerous asbestos fibres, with the potential to cause terminal cancer decades after exposure, are invisible to the naked eye. Such nano-sized fibres require an electron microscope for accurate identification and assessment. Such sampling can only be reliably conducted by way of robust air monitoring procedures. Facts and conclusions about risk and safety must be fully accountable – and based on reliable scientific evidence.

“This may not have been just an ordinary fire at a normal factory site: there was the potential for the airborne release of respirable asbestos fibres within any smoke plume. This was the site of the world’s first, then largest asbestos textile factory. Asbestos fibres were processed at TBA for over 100 years – with peak production occurring in the 1950s and 60s.

“The building that appeared to be worst affected by Friday’s fire was known as “E Block”. This area once had an important role in the processing and manufacture of asbestos textile. Archived T&N documents and eye-witness accounts confirm that this was a dusty part of the asbestos factory complex until the 1970s. It is reasonable to consider that wall cavities and roof voids within such an old building, that had been subject to such a dusty industrial process for decades, would contain substantial amounts of accumulated, fine, loose asbestos dust and fibre that could be released by the updrafts into the smoke of the fire seen on Friday.

“In addition to the historic context of this being a former asbestos production site, the roof of E Block appeared to be clad in modern metal sheeting that, at first glance, may not have been considered a contamination danger in the fire. However it is

known that under this cosmetic sheeting, fitted in the early 1990's, were the remains of thousands of very old, friable, asbestos cement tiles. Accounts from former TBA maintenance workers suggest that these tiles had been left in-situ because many were crumbling and in a very poor state. Encapsulation was seen as a prudent step in the 1990s so that careful removal could be conducted at a later date. This was the roof that has now been destroyed by fire."

Given the former use of the premises and the scale of the fire, it is reasonable that extra precautions should have been taken to protect public health from the fallout of the fire. Jason Addy explains what happened:

*"Just before 8am on Friday morning, Rochdale's MP Simon Danczuk spoke live on BBC Radio Manchester. He called for immediate air monitoring of the site. **I sincerely hope that his urgent request was acted upon.***

*"A few minutes later on BBC Radio Manchester, Paul Etches from GM Fire & Rescue Service gave what appeared to be a confident assertion that the smoke contained no asbestos fibres and the advice to keep windows and doors closed was merely standard advice for any large fire. This reassuring tone was then repeated by Leader of Rochdale Council Coun. Colin Lambert whilst the fire was still raging. **What evidence was relied upon at 8 a.m. on Friday for such a confident dismissal of any health and contamination risk?"***

ENDS

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