

## **Written evidence submitted by Jon Cruddas MP Dagenham and Rainham**

My submission relates to adverse air quality and public health impacts to residents in Rainham Essex from ongoing subterranean fires on a former unregulated landfill site at Arnolds Field, Launderers lane, rainham.

The area in question was formerly used for gravel extraction. When quarrying was completed the then land owner used the site for land fill. This was unregulated and there is no record of what materials were deposited. Approximately ten years ago the first underground fires started at Arnolds Field. Initially these were sporadic but in the last five years they have become more frequent and air borne pollution from the smoke became more intense and problematic for residents. In the **twelve month period spanning 2021 /2022 the London Fire Brigade (LFB) were called out to extinguish fires across the site on 80 separate occasions.**

Over that five year period I repeatedly called upon the London Borough of Havering to take actions to determine the source of the fires and to tackle the problem. Following upon a change of control of the administration at the Council, I repeated the call and in July 2022 the Council at leadership level established regular meetings with LFB and the Environment Agency.

Arising from these, Havering Council commissioned World leading air quality specialists at Imperial College London (ICL) to set up air quality sampling at locations around Arnolds Field. Action is being taken to secure access to the site in order to determine the type of contaminants that are beneath the surface by means of intrusive investigations. A specialist company has been commissioned by the Council to carry out this work. ICL has also approached the NHS to obtain data on current and historical incidence of respiratory and related conditions for the Rainham area.

The issue has come to the attention and been covered in recent months by London ITN and BBC London. ITN engaged University College London to undertake a short study of the air borne pollution. They found during a nine day period particulate matter less than 2.5 microns in size at **three times the World Health Organisation's recommended limit.** The UCL report went on to say that studies suggest that this type of pollution can cause cancer, heart and lung disease as well as strokes. It stated that there is evidence that compounds can enter the brain across the blood – brain barrier. UCL analysed medical data

and found that the **incidence of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is 50% higher in Rainham and across the rest of London.**

Whilst it may be very difficult to demonstrate a direct correlation of the health impacts in Rainham with the smoke pollution from the fires at Arnolds Field over the past ten years, it would seem highly likely that at the very least inhalation of the smoke pollution over such a long period would exacerbate respiratory and related health conditions.

In the course of the televised ITN and BBC reports there were interviews with local residents suffering from respiratory illnesses and cancers who had lived in Rainham for many years and had endured smoke pollution from the fires at Arnolds Field. As the constituency MP I have received numerous complaints about the pollution and distress, which led me to take up the issue with LB Havering over five years ago. I should add that the problem has escalated in the last two to three years.

I raise this issue with Arnolds Field and the ongoing underground fires to draw specific attention to this matter within my Dagenham and Rainham constituency, but also to point out that across the UK there are very many similar examples of unregulated landfills. Places where unscrupulous and possibly criminal activities have taken place for profit with no regard to environmental and public health wellbeing.

The fires that spontaneously combust underground probably occur due to organic material decomposing and forming methane. This organic matter will in all probability be mixed with many kinds of toxic materials that will be released into the atmosphere when burns take place. It is also probable that such contaminants will leach into watercourses following rainfall and attempts to extinguish the fires.

As yet, LB Havering has not determined the method of tackling the fires and how to remediate Arnolds Field in a safe and effective manner. The financial costs involved will depend upon the method selected, but it is highly likely that the eventual costs will be in the order of millions of pounds, at a time when local authority revenue budgets are under extreme pressure. There is a compelling moral and legal argument that the polluter should pay to put right the environmental and health damages, unfortunately the reality is that this is extremely unlikely.

It is unlikely for several reasons, the first is that the time lapse between the illegal dumping and the fires occurring will in most cases be measured in years, during which time the original landowner may have disappeared and / or sold the land. In addition to this, the landowners are very unlikely to have the resources to be able to fund the necessary remediation work.

### **My asks**

- That local authorities be reminded of their statutory duty under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to undertake inspections and risk assessments and to update contaminated land registers.
- That clarification be given in terms of the responsibilities and duties of local authorities and the Environment Agency on the issue of air quality.
- That the Government adopt the World Health Organisation standards for air quality safety.
- That the Government seek advice from ICL or other leading experts on air quality and the public health impacts of pollution from fires taking place in former landfill sites.
- That the Government via the Environment Agency provide the technical support and advice to local authorities on safe and effective remediation methods.
- That the Government looks to strengthen measures to help ensure that the polluter pays the costs of making safe land that has become a risk to public health and the environment.
- That the Government provides any necessary financial assistance to local authorities to remediate contaminated land. It should be noted that such costs will be offset by long term savings to health service and fire and emergency services budgets.

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