



Home Office

Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP  
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Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP  
Chair of the Science and Technology Committee  
By email

11 May 2018

Dear Norman,

Thank you for your letter of 17<sup>th</sup> April in which you asked whether the recommendations of the Select Committee had been addressed in the context of the incident at Salisbury.

Given that this is an ongoing investigation I may need to limit my replies to some of the issues at this time.

Specifically you asked:

1. **“Was the Salisbury incident classified as a Hazmat or a CBRN incident? Which organisations led on the response and clean-up operation?”**

The incident in Salisbury was classified as a criminal investigation into a suspected nerve agent poisoning and attempted murder of two members of the public. Given the circumstances the capabilities held at readiness for a CBRN incident were employed as they were the most appropriate capabilities to respond to the circumstances. The HAZMAT term is applied where the Fire and Rescue service lead the response the incident was not classified as a HAZMAT event as the police led with the investigation.

Following the recommendations of your Select Committee report the Home Office has been working with our partners to ensure that the distinction between Hazmat and CBRN incidents does not materially impact on the delivery of an effective and efficient response. We recognise that there is still further work to do to ensure all partner organisations fully understand this and are able to recognise response triggers regardless.

2. **“Has the Government completed the further consultation with Local Resilience Forums regarding the distinction between Hazmat and CBRN events as promised in its response to the Committee’s report? What was the outcome?”**

The Government circulated its analysis of the Resilience Capabilities Survey it had conducted with Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), in December 2017. The survey found that of the 42 LRFs in England and Wales, 11 felt that the distinction between Hazmat and CBRN had caused unnecessary difficulties. The majority of those 11 LRFs had not however encountered recent difficulties. The government continues working with stakeholders to emphasise that the consequence management of Hazmat and CBRN events should be similar, although there are important nuances relating to investigations, as well as mitigations.

3. **“What science advice was sought in relation to the clean-up operation and the communication with residents in Salisbury?”**

Locally the Police triggered a Science and Technical Advice Cell (STAC) on the 5<sup>th</sup> March to provide scientific advice to support the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG). Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was convened on the 7<sup>th</sup> March to provide expert scientific and technical advice to COBR. On 11<sup>th</sup> April Defra convened a Decontamination Science Assurance Group (DSAG) to provide expert scientific and technical advice to the Remediation Cell on decontamination and clean-up, and provide assurance to the Ministerial Recovery Group that sites are safe to return to public use. From the outset the Government and relevant departmental Chief Scientific Advisers were fully involved with the incident. They provided both continuing informal advice and briefings to departments as well as advice through the SAGE mechanism.

Due to the nature of the incident a communications hub was set up by Cabinet Office to harmonise all communications, including scientific advice. See question 9.

4. **“Was the ECOSA (Emergency Coordination of Science Advice) mechanism triggered for this incident?”**

The incident in Salisbury did not manifest itself in the manner that a contamination event is usually envisaged. ECOSA is in place to provide the Emergency Services with coordinated scientific advice in the early stages of a contamination event before the STAC can be formally stood up. Like the STAC, ECOSA is a function made available by government for the local emergency services to use, but can only be triggered at the request of the local level.

In this instance the point at which a malicious contamination event was recognised to be the concern, the local level were sufficiently stood up with Public Health England, DSTL Porton Down and the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) all engaged. Therefore at that stage of recognition the local Emergency

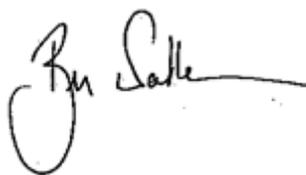
Services moved straight into a Strategic Coordination Group (SCG) and rapidly stood up a STAC removing the requirement for ECOSA.

5. **“The previous Committee argued that ‘the need to provide timely and accurate information to the public and the media could in itself be a prompt for setting up a SAGE’. The Government stated that it agreed with the Committee’s recommendation. Was the SAGE mechanism triggered in this case?”**

The SAGE mechanism was triggered following an initial Ministerial COBR on 7 March covering the Salisbury Incident. SAGE advice to COBR informed public communications activities that were coordinated by the Cabinet Office.

6. **“The previous Committee recommended that all future SAGEs should include a dedicated independent scientific press officer to ensure that the communication of science to the public is as good as it can be during an emergency (paragraph 67 and preceding discussion). The Government response states that it agrees with this recommendation but it also states that consideration is given to whether additional communications experts should be included to help SAGE communicate potentially complex concepts and key messages”. I would be grateful for your assurances that the substance of the Committee’s recommendation – that this person should be independent and have experience specifically of getting good science into the media – has not been overlooked here.”**

Due to the national security implication of the incident and associated sensitivities, COBR determined that all communications (scientific and otherwise) should be coordinated centrally, through a Cabinet Office lead communications hub, but owned and delivered by the respective government department. Cabinet Office were represented at the SAGE meetings to provide the link between the hub and SAGE. This proved particularly necessary since there was a narrow pool of communication expertise available for this particular situation that needed to be shared across the whole response. This proved invaluable for example where the Chief Medical Officer was able to communicate the most up to date advice to the residents of Salisbury.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ben Wallace', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP**

**Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime**