

North Lanarkshire Council Report

Policy and Resources

approval noting

Ref DM/SP

Date 26/09/19

Buchanan and St Ambrose High Schools Campus – Independent Review

From Des Murray, Chief Executive

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the report is to:

- Inform members of the recommendations of the Independent Review into the Buchanan and St Ambrose High Schools Campus, Coatbridge.
- Inform members of the action taken to date and ongoing planned action by the council to implement the recommendations of the review.
- Inform members of additional actions linked to learning from the events at the campus.

Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- (1) Note the primary finding that the campus is safe and any illness experienced cannot be linked to any environmental ground, water or air conditions.
- (2) Note the recommendations made by the review and the action taken by the council to implement these.
- (3) Note the extensive work to ensure ongoing water and air quality at the campus.
- (4) Note the other actions taken – and planned – by the council to go beyond the review's recommendations.
- (5) Note the reflection on, and learning from, events at the campus in order to build resilience and improve our response for the future.

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority Support all children and young people to realise their full potential

Ambition statement (14) Ensure the highest standards of public protection

1. Background

- 1.1 Buchanan High School, St Ambrose High School and Townhead Community Centre form a substantial campus in Coatbridge which opened in 2012.
- 1.2 The campus was built on amenity land adjacent to Drumpellier Country Park following a consultation on site selection. Before becoming amenity land, the site had been used as a landfill, between 1945 and 1972.
- 1.3 Prior to development, extensive ground contamination risk assessments were carried out and independently reviewed by environmental specialists. Subsequent work on the site was also validated by experts. The land has never met the statutory definition of being contaminated.
- 1.4 Since the buildings opened for use there were sporadic reports of 'blue water' coming from a small number of taps. 'Blue water' is caused by copper corrosion. It is not particularly uncommon in new buildings, particularly large ones. Standard industry practice to deal with 'blue water' is to flush the water system through. Records confirm such an action was initially undertaken at the location.
- 1.5 In October 2018, further concerns were raised by staff about 'blue water'. These concerns were exacerbated by the diagnosis of a small number of current or former staff at Buchanan High School with cancer, although copper in water does not cause cancer. These concerns were also raised by the NASUWT trade union.
- 1.6 The council carried out a suite of testing of the water at the campus and found that some samples did have elevated levels of copper. At around the same time, a GP reported to the public health department concerns that had been raised by a member of staff with cancer about the campus.
- 1.7 The council committed to replacing all internal copper pipework with plastic in the campus and had carried out almost all of this work by February 2019.
- 1.8 In May 2019, a national Sunday newspaper carried a news report explicitly linking the incidences of cancer with 'blue water'. This and follow-up media coverage exacerbated community concern. A local MSP organised a public meeting at which senior representatives from the council and NHS Lanarkshire were in attendance to provide a presentation and reassurance. However, this public meeting led to further community concern.
- 1.9 The NASUWT subsequently balloted their members at the campus. The ballots for both schools was in favour of strike action, which took place prior to the end of term. This necessitated the closure of Buchanan High School but not St Ambrose High School.
- 1.10 The council wrote to the Scottish Government on June 11, seeking input to the ongoing community concern. On June 12, following a conference call between the council, NHS Lanarkshire and Scottish Government, the deputy first minister announced an independent review, agreed with the council and NHS Lanarkshire, into the campus. The review was chaired by Dr Margaret Hannah and Paul Cackette.
- 1.11 The review was extensive. Soil, water and air testing was commissioned and the reviewers commissioned experts in gas membrane technology as well as seeking the views of Health Protection Scotland on the claimed health impacts which, by now, included not only cancer but arsenic poisoning.

- 1.12 The reviewers released their report on August 9. Their key findings were that:
- The schools and site are safe
 - People were correct to raise concerns and the council took those concerns seriously
 - Council officers acted at all times in the best interests of pupils, staff, parents and others
- 1.13 The reviewers also had some criticism of the council response. They found that:
- Action was not taken quickly enough in respect of addressing reports of 'blue water'
 - The council's systems were not adequate in this case to ensure that these concerns were raised up the management chain
 - Communication with trade unions was not as strong or frequent as it should have been in respect of the developing concern
 - Communication was not timely enough to address concerns
- 1.14 The reviewers made five specific recommendations, four of which were for the council to progress and one for Scottish Water.

2. The review recommendations and the council response

- 2.1 The independent review commissioned an expert firm to carry out soil testing across a number of locations on the campus. These samples did not reveal anything of significant risk to human health. One sample, on the periphery of the campus, did reveal levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). The review recommended that this small area was dealt with before the schools opened.
- 2.2 The council acted immediately to remove a quantity of soil and to slab the small area in question, thus removing any possible pathway between PCBs and human contact, with the work verified and validated by an independent firm of environmental specialists. Further work to the area will be carried out during the October school holiday to reinstate the landscaping. In addition to this work, as part of the ground monitoring a small area was also discovered to have a raised level of lead. This was separate from the area containing PCBs and although not contained within the recommendations of the review, the council has also taken the precautionary approach to remove this soil during the October week.
- 2.3 The review commissioned water sampling from Scottish Water. This found that all drinking water in the school met relevant regulatory standards. However, the review recommended that the drinking water be further tested before school returned for the new session, during the October week and during the Christmas holidays. The testing was carried out in advance of the start of the school session beginning, with the results showing that the drinking water supply met relevant regulatory standards.
- 2.4 The campus building has a membrane underneath the structure to protect from the possibility of elevated levels of methane and carbon dioxide entering the building. The review recommended that the council undertake work to validate the operation of the membrane and publish ongoing monitoring results from the sensor system. The council has published the monitoring results on its web page dedicated to all matters relating to the campus and will continue to do so.
- 2.5 The review recommended the establishment of an independently chaired site recovery group with representatives from across the campus communities including staff, pupils

and parents. The council has established this group, with Mr Terry Currie DL being appointed as chair. Mr Currie is currently the chair of the State Hospitals Board and a depute lieutenant of Lanarkshire. His professional career includes work with British Steel and Sottish Enterprise and he has extensive experience as a non-executive director. In addition, Dr Christine Davidson, reader in pure and applied chemistry at the University of Strathclyde, has agreed to be the independent scientific advisor to the group.

- 2.6 The group met for the first time on Tuesday September 10. At its first meeting, the group heard presentations from senior council officers about the work carried out to implement the recommendations and other work the council intended to undertake. The group agreed that air testing, which has been carried out to measure levels of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide within the building (see paragraph 3 below) should be extended to include volatile organic compounds. This has been agreed by the council and will form part of the ongoing testing and monitoring regime. The group also agreed with the council's view that testing of the drinking water supply should be more frequent than that envisaged by the independent review.

3. Other actions

- 3.1 The council has undertaken a number of current and planned actions at the campus in response to both the independent review and a review of its own systems and processes.
- 3.2 In respect of water quality, the independent review noted some anomalies in the results from a small number of outlets in the non-drinking water supply. The council has initiated a significant examination of the non-drinking water supply and how this works with the other water sources to the school. This has involved more than 1000 samples and ongoing plumbing work to remove 'dead legs', pipework connected to the system which is no longer used.
- 3.3 During the ongoing examination of the non-drinking water supply, some anomalies continued to be detected in respect of water temperature and sporadic bacterial results which, while not presenting a hazard to health, led to the council engaging the services of a water quality consultant. This consultant has informed the ongoing work and will be responsible for devising a comprehensive water quality management strategy for the campus in the coming months. Additionally, the council will undertake, on expert advice, some physical changes to the water systems to ensure ongoing water quality.
- 3.4 Although not a formal recommendation of the review, the reviewers did suggest that the council may wish to carry out follow-up air monitoring for carbon dioxide, temperature and carbon monoxide. The council has undertaken this work using in-air sensors, with all results meeting required standards. However, as noted at 2.6 above, the site recovery group has asked the council to extend this testing to include volatile organic compounds. A testing regime for this has been devised and will be included in future air quality monitoring. In addition, permanent air quality sensors will be added to the building management system.
- 3.5 In respect of the gas membrane, the council is working with specialists to ascertain whether the monitoring systems can be added to the building management system. This would allow the council to directly access monitoring reports on an ongoing basis.

- 3.6 The review found that the council did not deal with the incidences of 'blue water' quickly enough. Changes have been made to property maintenance systems to ensure that any repeated issues are escalated to the appropriate senior officer so that timely decisions can be made.
- 3.7 The council is actively working with staff at the campus and their trade union representatives, both through the site recovery group and with additional staff briefings about the ongoing work.
- 3.8 Much of the parental concern was raised through closed Facebook groups, to which the council does not have access. However, the council has examined the pattern of social media and media comment and will put in place improved systems of 'social listening' in future. Social listening is the method by which social media comments are monitored for keywords to indicate growing comment on any particular issue, allowing a more timely response.
- 3.9 The council is examining the original design and construction work to ascertain if any inherent defects were built in at the original build stage. If that is deemed to be the case, the council will pursue the matter appropriately. Equally, an examination is also being undertaken in relation to key property design and maintenance personnel involved in the original response to concerns relating to the school and community campus.

4. Implications

- 4.1 Financial impact
Additional costs incurred in works at the campus are met through existing budgets.
- 4.2 HR/Policy/Legislative
None
- 4.3 Environmental impact
None
- 4.4 Risk impact
While work continues on the implementation of the independent review's recommendations, there is an ongoing risk of loss of confidence in the actions of the council at the campus which could lead to a downturn in pupil attendance.

5. Measures of success

- 5.1 That the recommendations contained within the independent review and the other actions set out in this report are delivered in full.



Des Murray
Chief Executive