

Kronospan Incident January 2020

Response to concerns raised by residents

In the early hours of Monday, January 13, a fire broke out in the timber holding area of Kronospan. The fire service responded promptly and brought the fire under control. The fire lasted until Friday, January 17 and as a result there was a lot of smoke that caused concerns to those in the affected area.

In the following days there was a multi-agency response which included a town council meeting on Thursday evening, January 16.

Understandably the incident raised many concerns and questions from residents who felt they were not being addressed.

Those who emailed, contacted the Council and other agencies have been responded to individually but it was thought it would be useful to put together some of the answers to the questions raised in one document.

Complaints that communication has been through social media only

Kronospan issued its first press statement, in agreement with North Wales Fire & Rescue Service, at 1025 am on Monday morning.

The Council took the lead regarding communications on Wednesday, January 15 and from that time regular updates were given via social media and also the print and broadcast media. In addition, the information was sent to the Town Council, library and leisure centre who all agreed to post a hard copy to their notice boards.

Communicating with residents involved in such an incident is not easy and we will be looking at other avenues of communications in the coming weeks that could be used should there be a similar incident in the future.

Health concerns

Public Health Wales understand the concerns raised by residents following the fire.

Their initial advice was given on 14 January and reviewed regularly from then to ensure it was consistent with the ongoing risk assessment.

Some questions were raised at the Town Council Meeting held on the evening of Thursday, January 16.

Are Public Health Wales going to monitoring the health of individuals exposed to the smoke from the Kronospan Fire?

What are the short term health effects of being exposed to the smoke from the Kronospan Fire?

What are the longer term health effects of being exposed to the smoke from the Kronospan Fire?
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Do the chemicals released from burning wet wood cause cancer?

Public Health Wales has prepared a briefing note that explains the pros and cons of carrying out health monitoring following environmental incidents. This note is attached.

The advice given by Public Health Wales once they were aware of the on-going incident was:-

If you are in a place affected by smoke, stay indoors and keep doors and windows closed when affected by the smoke, but open them again to air your home when the smoke passes. If you need to be outdoors, avoid areas affected by smoke or ash, or limit the time you spend in them. Motorists who have travel through the smoke should keep windows closed, turn off air conditioning and keep their air vents closed.

Smoke can irritate airways, the skin and the eyes leading to coughing and wheezing, breathlessness and chest pain. This can also mean that problems such as asthma get worse; people with asthma should carry their inhaler with them at all times. Odours associated with fires can cause annoyance, stress and anxiety, nausea, headaches or dizziness. These are common reactions to odours, rather than to the substances that cause the smell. We are able to detect odours at levels that are much lower than can cause harm to health.

Anyone concerned about their symptoms should contact their GP or NHS Direct on 0845 46 47. The symptoms usually disappear quickly and should not lead to long term health problems.

This advice was based on evidence collected from research and experience of public health agencies from around the world. The short term health effects of a fire can be unpleasant and, as we stated, can range from unpleasant odours to coughing, wheezing, breathlessness and chest pain. However, these effects can be minimised by sheltering, usually disappear quickly and should not lead to long term health problems.

Air Quality Monitoring

Concerns have been expressed by residents that the response from Multi Agency Partners was slow – air quality monitoring took place 2 days after the fire started which missed the worst of the smoke.

There's also questions raised about the availability of such equipment in North Wales.

Wrexham Council worked as part of a multi agency response to the fire. Agencies included North Wales Fire Service, North Wales Police, Welsh Ambulance Service, BCUHB, Public Health Wales, Natural Resources Wales. Decision in relation to the deployment of the Air Quality Cell was made following discussion with all the above agencies.

Air quality monitoring took place from Wednesday 15 January by Natural Resources Wales and Wrexham CBC has commenced air quality monitoring in Chirk. Wrexham CBC will commit to liaise with Natural Resources Wales and Kronospan with the aim of installing Air Quality Monitoring equipment in Chirk that provides real time monitoring data that can be viewed directly by the community.

Investigation ongoing

Following the conclusion of the Fire Service's investigation into the cause of the fire – said to be natural combustion – the Council's Public Protection officers, who are responsible for regulating Kronospan's environmental permit, including the wood pile areas at the factory, will investigate the circumstances surrounding the fire.

This investigation will take time to complete and the outcome cannot be speculated on until all the facts are available.

All agencies understand the concerns raised in the community following the third fire in three years.

Future liaison with the Community

The Chirk Environmental Liaison Group was set up over 20 years ago and includes representation from Chirk Town Council, Wrexham County Borough Council, Natural Resources Wales and Kronospan. The Group's purpose is to provide an open dialogue between the community representatives; the operator and the regulating authorities, to allow relevant information to be passed on to the community. Given the concerns raised by the community after this event, it would be appropriate to review the function and purpose of this group with aim of improving future communication and liaison with the community.

Compensation?

Kronospan has written to those in the affected area to ask for their concerns if they have not already done so. We would encourage you to respond to this letter by emailing them on Office23@kronospan.co.uk or by calling 01691 775497 during office hours.