



Labor



Terri Butler MP

Shadow Minister for the Environment and Water
Member for Griffith

URGENT

The Hon Andrew Gee MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Minister for Defence Personnel
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: minister@dva.gov.au

Dear Minister,

Re: former Red Cross Hall at Greenslopes

I refer to my many previous letters about the former Red Cross Hall at Greenslopes, over many years. I refer also to several documents relating to the site that your government recently made available for the first time.¹

As you are also aware, this site is owned by the Commonwealth and is listed on the Brisbane City Council's Heritage Register and on the Queensland WWII Historical Places Register. It is a site of importance to the local community and to the veteran community.

Ongoing neglect by your government

In the short period since the documents were released, I have sought to review them. They seem to show that your government has, at every turn, throughout your entire period in office, ignored the multiple reports drawing your attention to the state of the buildings and the risks posed by asbestos, lead paint, and soil contamination at the site.

This seems sadly consistent with your government's approach throughout recent crises. In the bushfires, in the pandemic, and even in evacuating people from Afghanistan, your government's delays and inertia have had real, adverse consequences.

I am greatly concerned that your government has taken a similarly slow-moving approach to the former Red Cross Hall site.

Shortly after you took office in 2013 – eight years ago – the Australian Red Cross vacated the premises. At the time, your government received various contamination reports regarding the site that told your government that, inter alia:

¹ The newly available documents have been published by the Environment Minister during a process being undertaken under the environment laws.

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- a site walkover had found fragments of asbestos-containing materials beneath both buildings and in the gardens, lying on the soil and in poor condition;
- asbestos fibres were found in the soils at concentrations that could affect then current and future site users;
- various degraded asbestos fittings on the buildings required remediation or removal;
- paint on the buildings was in poor condition and may contain lead;
- the dangerous organochlorine pesticides aldrin and dieldrin had been identified in concentrations ‘above the nominated investigation levels’ at the site, and that there were leachable dieldrin concentrations in exceedance from allowable leaching levels at the site.

In a letter from the then Finance Minister to the then Veterans’ Affairs Minister of March 2014, which I have seen, the Finance Minister noted that the Veterans’ Affairs Minister had “recommended that the site be remediated to remove hazardous contamination which includes asbestos containing material and lead residues from paint,” and noted that “the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) does not have capacity to fund the costs of the remediation.” He went on to say that he did “not believe that the site should be remediated before we decide on its future use.”

Seemingly oblivious to the zoning of the site he went on to say, in that letter of March 2014, that the site could be sold for residential or commercial development.

In September 2014 your government said that to protect the community from asbestos risk, you had erected fencing, put up signs, and put security patrols in place, which would remain “until the risks from asbestos are removed.”

In February 2015 Asbestos Audits Queensland provided an updated asbestos management plan and register for the site. That document stated clearly that the roofing was in an “advanced state of deterioration” due to the breakdown of a coating that had been previously applied, and because of “hundreds of indentations” due to recent hailstorms. The document said the roofing “should be removed and replaced.”

The same document advised that:

- unpainted and deteriorating paintwork areas needed to be addressed; and
- due to the presence of the deteriorating corrugated asbestos cement sheet the management plan and register should be reviewed at least annually.

This advice appears to have been completely ignored.

In March 2015 your government said you were working towards remediating the site “as quickly as possible.”

The following month, in April 2015, internal documents, which I have seen, claimed that “a new policy proposal” had been “lodged” for funding remediation works. That same month the then Minister told me he was “unable to indicate” how long it would take to resolve all the issues needed to expedite remediation.

In 2017 – three years after the Minister had decided to go ahead and sell the site on the open market without remediating it first, the Department of Finance

decided it would instead support an “off market disposal” – in effect, a private sale to a preferred purchaser, the Brisbane City Council. In August of that year then Veterans Affairs Minister the Hon Dan Tehan MP made clear once more that no remediation had yet commenced.

In 2019, five years after the previous asbestos audit had recommended annual audits, a further audit was finally undertaken. Asbestos Audits Queensland once again stressed that resealing was not enough and gave a clear warning about the whole site. They wrote, inter alia:

“The two buildings have been left to deteriorate since our last inspection in 2015 and asbestos contamination from the roof cladding has spread across the site and built up in various areas particularly pedestrian and vehicle access paths which have blocked or slowed across site water flow and allowed the asbestos to build up.

It is no longer a matter of simply re-sealing the roof cladding the entire site requires remediation and the roof cladding removed (including cleaning of all support beams, ceiling and roof spaces etc.) and a clean-up/removal of the top layer of soil/grounds of the site carried out.”

(emphasis in original)

And now, the documents published last week show that remediation has still not yet begun.

Across multiple years and multiple Ministers, I have made many representations to your government about this site, in writing, in the parliamentary debate, and in person.

Most concerningly, each of the reports about the state of the site, in the years since the Red Cross vacated it, has made recommendations for remediation. But I have seen no evidence that any of those recommendations were ever followed.

To the contrary, the 2019 asbestos report explicitly stated that the recommendations in the preceding 2015 report had not been met. It noted the further deterioration of the site since.

I note that there was testing undertaken in September 2020 to find out whether there was any airborne asbestos in the vicinity. It is a matter of great relief that a test in September last year found that asbestos fibres are not airborne. But that does not address concerns about the risks to the safety of anyone who attends the site, whether authorised or not. (In that regard you may have seen a concern raised by the Asbestos Disease Support Society that young people may have been on the site.

Nor does the absence of airborne fibres in September 2020 provide sufficient reassurance in relation to the potential for asbestos-containing material fragments, fragments of lead paint, or organochloride pesticides (aldrin/dieldrin) to move beyond the site, particularly during the coming storm season.

If you disagree with my assessment that your government has ignored the recommendations made about the site over several years, then I would appreciate your advising me of what steps have been taken to remediate the site, and when.

Most importantly, I ask that you immediately satisfy yourself that the site poses no risk to the community. If any remediation is needed to ensure community safety, please make sure it is undertaken immediately.

Consultation shortcomings

The ongoing neglect of the site by your government, through which you allowed it to fall further and further into disrepair, is distressing. In addition, the documents also reveal shortcomings with the consultation undertaken.

The documents show that your government decided on the demolition of the buildings no later than mid-2020. However, the consultation about that decision, undertaken on your behalf by the local council, did not take place until a year later.

I also note that the consultation, such as it was, did not include me as the local federal MP, despite my ongoing and consistent representations to your government over several years about the site. Nor did it include the state MP. In the absence of any explanation for this curious approach I can only assume the Morrison government's decision to exclude us from this consultation was a political one.

I encourage you to satisfy yourself that the consultation materials provided to you accurately reflect the views of the local community, and of the veterans community.

Offer of land to Legacy Queensland

I note the documents show a proposal to sell the land to Legacy Queensland should they want it. I request that you advise whether this will be a concessional sale. I note that the sale of the property to the Brisbane City Council is on a concessional basis.

I look forward to hearing from you about the foregoing. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, or, in my absence, Mr Jacob Soderlund of my office on 07 3397 1674 or by email at Terri.Butler.MP@aph.gov.au.

Yours faithfully,



Terri Butler MP
Member for Griffith
27 August 2021

cc Hon Sussan Ley MP, Minister for the Environment