

Calls for new clear thinking on UK energy

The Tsunami which left much of Japan in a state of devastation in March of this year is having an impact on the UK's shores.

The catastrophic failure of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima has led to a pause in government plans for 10 new nuclear reactors while it reconsiders safety implications.

Rob Green reports.

Somerset County Council leader Ken Maddock has already nailed his colours to the mast and is hoping that a redevelopment of Hinckley Point will bring jobs and money into the local economy (C'lr June 2011, p26). However Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA) says the time is right for a complete rethink of the UK's energy strategy.

Proponents of a nuclear powered future see clear benefits from pushing ahead with plans for a new generation of reactors to harness the undoubted power of nuclear fission. The recent disaster in Japan has not changed the fact that carbon based power – coal, oil and gas – are dirty and will one day run out. The

nuclear lobby say that, provided safety is a prime concern, generating power from the atom is the best solution to a problem that is only getting worse. Global warming, the increasing cost of fossil fuels and pollution make nuclear the best option, they say. And a new programme of building will also provide a much needed boost to the economy.

According to the association of councils that make up the NFLA however, that view is not only potentially dangerous to millions of people it is also incredibly short-sighted. Euan McLeod is the organisation's vice chairman and says choosing to go down the nuclear route will lead the UK down a technological dead-end with no real long-term benefits for the country. There is a better way that would put the UK at the leading edge of a new global industry, according to NFLA.

Euan, a member of Glasgow City Council, said: "If the UK goes down the route of nuclear then we will be relying on technical expertise from France and the US. There will be little UK design or manufacture involved – most of the work will have to be exported and that does not benefit the UK economy.

"The other option is that the UK is the centre of alternative energy and that it exports technology and expertise around the world, with British companies holding patents for new products."

Glasgow is already benefiting from a policy that sets out the city's desire to be the greenest in the UK. That has brought investment from energy companies looking to explore alternative technologies. Euan said it is these new technologies that will prove to be the big money spinners in the future. He agrees with

Somerset leader Ken Maddock's desire to bring in new jobs to boost the local economy, but says nuclear is not the way to do it.

"Ken Maddock is absolutely right to lobby for investment and jobs in his area and I'm sure that if he didn't voters would let him know what they thought. But we would question the value of the jobs that would be created through a programme of nuclear power generation. The cost of nuclear is extortionate and we think it could be much better invested.

“If we fall behind in alternative energy technology now it will take at least 20 years for us to catch up.”

"What NFLA would like to see is every council in the country given a share of the nuclear subsidy to invest locally in renewable power that would bring long-term employment as well as solutions to power generation."

Sharing the subsidy, which a report for Greenpeace put at \$2.885 billion per year in the UK, among local authority areas would allow for diverse solutions to the country's energy concerns. By leading the way in innovation UK research and manufacturing industries could become world leaders in the alternative energy sector. Germany, Switzerland and Austria have already signalled a desire to move away from



Glasgow Councillor Euan McLeod, vice-chair of NFLA



The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant

AP/Press Association Images

nuclear technology and into alternatives. If the UK does not follow suit now it could be left behind, said Euan.

“In Glasgow we are quite clear that we want to be the UK’s greenest city and to that end we are securing massive investment and attracting new technology. We have seen Scottish and Southern Energy open an energy research centre in the city. That type of investment opportunity and commitment could be open to all local authorities. And it is not just the technological and research side of things – there is manufacture and marketing opportunities.

“The UK would benefit as a whole if we were to become the world leaders in alternative energy technology. In the past, two thirds of the world’s ships came out of Glasgow and there is now an opportunity for something similar with the UK being at the leading edge and exporting around the world.”

NFLA has shaken off its past history as a protest organisation and is now heavily involved with advocacy for local authorities and lobbying at a national level. The advice for local authorities goes beyond action plans for a nuclear free future and looks at practical ways of cutting carbon emissions at a local level through energy saving and insulation.

It now has cross party membership and Euan said: “The emergence of new technology will take time but we have been lobbying very hard and offering advice to local authorities across the country on how they can get involved. I would urge cabinets across the country to get in touch and see just what we are able to offer them.

“The NFLA is a chance for people to get involved in the debate. We want to show that local government can make a change.”

Among NFLA’s members are Manchester City Council, which started the movement in the 1980s, and Cardiff which joined just a couple of years ago. Both are now seeing practical benefits from their membership. Councillor Mark Hackett at Manchester said NFLA allows local authorities to be heard at a national level.

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“NFLA is very current and is at the heart of the energy debate we are having as a country,” he said. “When the Bridgewater Canal opened and the price of coal dropped dramatically that showed how technology can have a direct impact on energy. It’s been absolutely crucial for Manchester and we want to remain at the forefront of developing new technology.

“At present we are in danger of being left behind by countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland where they are saying nuclear cannot be a component of their energy production. It’s too expensive and too dangerous.”

He added: “If we fall behind in alternative energy technology now it will take at least 20 years for us to catch up. These are the jobs of

the future and it will be criminal waste if we miss the opportunity.”

Cardiff Councillor Ed Bridges said that NFLA membership sends out a clear message to companies looking to invest in the alternative energy sector. Cardiff’s proximity to Hinkley – a proposed site for a new generation nuclear power station – also means nuclear is an issue that is close to home for the council.

He said: “We have been trying to promote Cardiff as a city that welcomes companies that are going to invest in renewables, so our membership of NFLA does help in that respect. It shows we are committed to that. Sharing best practice from other local authorities on things like energy saving and renewables is also incredibly useful. People think it’s a protest group, but the work it does for local authorities is actually about renewables and alternative energy sources.

“Then there is the lobbying side of things where the NFLA can put in far more time to tell government about local authority concerns with nuclear. There is no way an officer would be able to spare the time to lobby in the same way.”

NFLA members realise that alternative energy is not a quick fix, but with a lead in time of decades for new nuclear that will not solve energy issues overnight. Question marks over uranium sources and how to dispose of nuclear waste have not been answered well enough to satisfy many in the debate.

Ed adds: “The question we have to ask is where do we want to be in 100 years time. If what we want is cheap, sustainable energy then the time to act is now. Rather than a short term fix, which is what nuclear is, we should be investing in new technologies.”

