



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

NFLA Media release - for immediate release, 28th July 2014

NFLA believe Government White Paper on radioactive waste management dilutes local government's decision-making role; and risks conflict between a decentralised 'voluntarism' process and the centralised national infrastructure planning process

Though the NFLA welcomes part of the UK Government's White Paper on 'Implementing Geological Disposal' around the area of national geological site selection, it believes the White Paper leaves many key issues unresolved, seriously downplays the pivotal role of local government in decision-making and it risks conflict between the desire for a decentralised 'voluntarist' approach and the centralising nature of the national infrastructure planning process.

The Government's policy launched a White Paper on "Implementing Geological Disposal". This provides information on:

- How geological disposal has become UK Government policy;
- The radioactive waste that will be disposed of in a 'geological disposal facility' (GDF);
- Aspects of the design of a 'GDF', its construction and regulation. (1)

The NFLA remains in principle opposed to 'deep geological disposal', primarily as it does not involve the possibility of the retrievability of waste. A recent serious fire and radiation leak incident at the deep underground radioactive waste repository in Carlsbad, New Mexico, United States has highlighted the serious problems of 'disposing' of high and intermediate levels of radioactive waste in this manner. (2) The NFLA is much more amenable to the Scottish Government's 'near site, near surface' policy for managing radioactive waste and remains disappointed that the UK Government has not used this opportunity to reconsider the Scottish policy or the issue of retrievability.

The NFLA broadly welcomes the Government's decision to establish an upfront process of national screening based on known geological information; that would then be evaluated by an independent review panel. However, much more information is required on whether this will be a cursory look or a serious in-depth consideration of the geology of England and Wales. One of Cumbria County Council's main reasons for withdrawing from the previous 'Managing Radioactive Waste Safely' process was its concern that the county did not contain the most suitable geology for a deep underground store.

NFLA believes a national screening site selection process needs to be fully open and transparent and should include independent critical voices within it, such as the Nuclear Waste Advisory Associates (NWAA). (3)

In undertaking this detailed process, 'independent technical advice' advising a community that decide to go to the next stage and develop a more detailed secondary geological screening process will come from 'Learned Societies'. This is not likely to again bring in bodies like NWAA, who have outlined hundreds of relevant technical and scientific uncertainties in developing a deep underground radioactive waste repository. (3)

Since the Government was previously of the view that a GDF in Cumbria could still be 'made to work', despite several eminent geologists advising that the geology was unsuitable, NFLA argues that there still needs to be a national debate about whether the objective is to look for a site with the 'best available' geology for the development or whether to use mediocre or poor geology and rely more heavily on engineered barriers. (4)

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT VOICE ON NUCLEAR ISSUES



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NFLA are fundamentally concerned about the dilution of the decision-making role of local authorities in the White Paper. County Councils have lost their 'veto' role and the suggestions around recording community consent for a repository look to the NFLA as quite vague, unresponsive to the concerns of the wider community and not providing local government with sufficient involvement and influence over a development which would impact on it at the local, county and regional level.

The NFLA is also concerned that the development of a future 'GDF' will be developed through the Government's National Infrastructure Planning (NIP) process. In the NFLA's view, the NIP process is a highly centralised planning system reducing the amount of local decision-making on projects deemed to be in the national interest, which could create real tensions with the more decentralised and consensual voluntarist system that a 'GDF' siting process should be trying to encourage. It has the potential as well to create confusion over the primary role of County / Unitary Councils as Waste Planning and Minerals Planning Authorities under the NIP process, with the decision-making role for a 'GDF' siting process being given to District Councils in this consultation.

Finally, NFLA believes the Government has ducked the question of whether the huge levels of existing radioactive waste, added to potentially large levels of new waste from a new nuclear reactor programme, will require more than one 'GDF' to be developed, or whether multiple 'GDF's' are required.

NFLA Chair, Councillor Mark Hackett said:

"I am quite disappointed with the Government's new White Paper, which I believe will also disappoint all types of Councils concerned over how a decentralised voluntarist system can work within a highly centralised national infrastructure planning regime. The national regime failed completely to allow local community groups to raise fundamental objections with the Hinkley Point C planning application and it was unresponsive to many legitimate concerns over safety, emergency planning and public health. The Government had a great opportunity to show it had learned from the continued failure of previous radioactive waste policy processes. I fear it has failed yet again, and this process is unlikely to see the development of a deep underground waste repository garnering wide local community consent."

Ends

For more information please contact Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary on 0161 234 3244 or Pete Roche, NFLA Policy Advisor on 0131 444 1445.

Notes for editors:

- (1) UK Government White Paper, "Implementing Geological Disposal", 24th July 2014
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-geological-disposal>
- (2) Hazard Ex News Extra, "Fire and radiation leak could cause closure of US underground nuclear waste repository", 2nd June 2014
<http://www.hazardexonthenet/article/77962/News-Extra-Fire-and-radiation-leak-could-cuase-closure-of-US-underground-nuclear-waste-repository.aspx>
- (3) See Nuclear Waste Advisory Associates <http://www.nuclearwasteadvisory.co.uk>
- (4) NFLA response to the Government's consultation on siting process for a 'GDF', Dec 2013
http://www.nuclearpolicy.info/docs/radwaste/Rad_Waste_Brfg_45_MRWS_GDF_Siting_Final_Response.pdf

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT VOICE ON NUCLEAR ISSUES