



Nuclear Free Local Authorities Steering Committee

information

Media release - for immediate release, 16th June 2010

Report by Nuclear Free Local Authorities shows that local councils lack knowledge to handle a nuclear weapons accident

Gaps in local council emergency planning knowledge and a lack of training and exercises for an emergency involving a nuclear weapons convoy place public safety at risk, according to a policy briefing issued today by the UK and Ireland Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA).

Convoys containing nuclear warheads and special nuclear materials used in the Trident nuclear weapons system are routinely transported from the Atomic Weapons Establishments in West Berkshire to the Trident naval bases in Faslane and Coulport on the west of Scotland and other locations. Earlier this week two such convoys carried secret cargoes of special nuclear materials from the Atomic Weapons Establishment to RAF Brize Norton for transport to the USA.

The NFLA Policy Briefing (1) builds on work undertaken by the Scottish Government (2) to ascertain knowledge of local arrangements in the event of an accident arising from a nuclear weapons convoy. The Scottish Government surveyed local authority emergency planners in Scotland for their views on the issue, and the NFLA has conducted an identical survey in England and Wales which came to remarkably similar conclusions.

The NFLA survey found that:

- Local Authority Emergency Planning Officers are not informed of nuclear weapons convoys going through their area, despite most of them having security clearance for receiving sensitive information;
- Knowledge of the legislative framework around nuclear emergency planning was patchy and in places quite limited – particularly if there were no fixed nuclear sites in the area;
- Few Emergency Planning Officers had received any detailed briefings on Ministry of Defence (MoD) guidelines for dealing with a nuclear weapons emergency, or been involved in any exercises to test a local response to them;
- No independent assessments of the local risks of an emergency incident involving a convoy appear to have been undertaken, and the risks were only rarely noted on Local or Regional Resilience Forum risk registers;
- Training and exercises organised by the MoD placed too much emphasis on the security of radioactive materials and less on the key evacuation and public welfare issues that Councils would be involved with.

The NFLA is writing to the Ministry of Defence, Department of Transport and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, along with the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales and Government agencies in Ireland to highlight its concerns and call for development of more robust emergency planning procedures at the local level. The briefing is also being sent to local council Emergency Planning Units affected by nuclear weapons transports and Local and Regional Resilience Forums.

NFLA Chair Bailie George Regan commented:

“I am very concerned that Council Emergency Planning Officers are never informed about the regular transports of nuclear weapons through England and Scotland and are not given regular briefings and training events on how to handle a major incident involving a nuclear weapon in transit.

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“Nuclear emergency planning is focussed on fixed nuclear sites and there is a major gap in planning for all types of nuclear transport – whether by road, rail, sea or air.

“The NFLA want to see a strong, robust, effective and UK wide nuclear emergency regime which concentrates on all aspects of nuclear safety. Our briefing highlights the need for urgent improvements and a more pro-active regime on regional briefings and exercises.”

Nukewatch spokesperson Peter Burt added:

“Nuclear weapons are transported on a regular basis along some of the country's busiest highways and through some of our most densely populated urban areas. The risks to the public are obvious.”

Ends

Further information

Sean Morris, NFLA Secretary 0161 234 3244 or 07771 930196

Peter Burt, NIS / Nukewatch 0118 958 8281 or 07790 409339

Notes to Editors:

(1) Further information on these transports can be found from Nukewatch on 0845 45 88 364/ 365.

(2) NFLA Policy Briefing 74 is available with this media release or from the NFLA Secretariat.

(3) Report of the Scottish Government's Working Group on Nuclear Weapons – Scotland without Nuclear Weapons – <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/288148/0088043.pdf>

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