

Nuclear Free Local Authorities

briefing



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No. 63

Subject: Summary of the main points from the NFLA Steering Committee Meeting, Town Hall, Lerwick, 23 June 2007

1. Radioactive Waste Management Policy

The NFLA Secretary and NFLA(Scotland) Policy Adviser reported on developments in radioactive waste management policy. The Government and Devolved Administrations' consultation on policy implementation was expected on 25 June and the NFLA Secretary reported on the issues it was expected to cover including:

- proposals for community volunteerism and community benefits
- process and factors for screening out unsuitable geologies
- process for inviting communities to consider participation in a deep geological disposal programme
- outline repository design concept and delivery programme

The radioactive waste policy implementation consultation was duly published in the terms expected on 25 June with a deadline for responses by 2 November 2007. However, unexpectedly the Scottish Executive decided not to associate with the consultation paper because Scottish Ministers do not accept that deep disposal is appropriate for Scotland. The Welsh Assembly Government decided to associate with the consultation process whilst reserving its position on deep geological disposal of radioactive wastes. A full briefing for members use in responding to this consultation will follow as soon as possible.

A key issue absent from the policy debate since the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM) reported its main findings to Government in July 2006 is progress with research and development to increase confidence in the deep disposal concept. Latterly CoRWM has called for more priority to be placed on this work and the English NFLA's seminar in Leeds on 15 June highlighted some of the main problem areas.

Presentations to the Leeds seminar by Dr Rachel Western, formerly of Friends of the Earth and UK Nirex Ltd, and Pete Wilkinson, a member of CoRWM and a founder member of FoE and Greenpeace, both considered that the technical issues to be overcome in repository development were far more challenging than the public had thus far been led to believe. The text of these two seminar presentations have been circulated separately as *NFLA Radioactive Waste Management Policy briefing papers nos.15 and 16*. Both seminar speakers saw the obstacles as insurmountable if we value the lives of future generations as highly as we value our own.

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Both speakers explained that in the timeframe under discussion – many thousands of years – radioactivity would inevitably leak from a repository and migrate back to the biosphere. UK Nirex Ltd had previously calculated that peak exposures 200,000 years in the future could be 10 times higher than the permitted maximum annual public dose limit of today of 1 milliseivert for exposure from man-made radiation sources.

Concern was also raised at the NFLA Steering Committee about the current haste within the Government programme. This concern was echoed recently in a report published by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. The NFLA Secretary considered that the timetable for radioactive waste policy implementation was being driven, and placed at risk, by the Government's timetable on new nuclear power station construction. It was vital to the Government to be able to argue that a deep geological disposal route for wastes from a new nuclear build programme is going to be available.

The NFLA(Scotland) Policy Adviser reported on an unexpected short consultation that had been launched by the DTI on 'advance allocation of THORP reprocessing products to overseas customers'. It was considered that the 'advance allocation' of products (plutonium, uranium and high level waste residues) already separated by reprocessing may be prompted by moves within the NDA to permanently close THORP. The Plant is losing money and has now been out of service for over two years.

The NFLA Secretary also referred to work in hand to identify the justification behind the Government's decision to announce a tenfold increases in the permitted concentrations of Tritium and Carbon 14 radionuclides in wastes designated 'Very Low Level'. This announcement accompanied publication of revised policy for managing low level radioactive wastes. Dr Ian Fairlie has been commissioned to prepare an NFLA briefing paper on this matter for member authorities and this will be circulated as soon as possible.

2. **New Nuclear Build**

The NFLA(Scotland) Policy Adviser introduced a detailed report to the Steering Committee covering the publication of the 2007 *Energy White Paper* and the *The Future of Nuclear Power* consultation paper. The NFLA Secretary drew the meeting's attention to a concise briefing by Tom Burke, a former environment adviser to Government, which set out seven key issues on new nuclear build as follows:

- There is nothing to stop any power generator coming forward with an application to construct a nuclear station now. The barrier to construction is not the planning system (see next item) or the regulatory system, but uncertainty over future electricity prices. The only alternative for Government, if it wants new nuclear stations, is to reverse its liberalisation of the energy market or find a way to subsidise nuclear power.
- The most likely way the Government will help new nuclear power will be via a carbon tax. Burke suggests a tax of €20 per tonne of carbon will be needed to make nuclear 'competitive' in the market place whereas the current 'floor price' for carbon is less than €1 per tonne.
- The Government is also likely to assist nuclear development by subjecting reactor designs to less rigorous safety assessment (under proposals for 'generic design assessment' – see below) and 'sharing' the cost of long-term waste management.

- The ‘need’ for new build is argued by Government because of a looming energy ‘gap’ and fears of future dependence on energy from politically unreliable parts of the world. However, no energy ‘gap’ is likely in a liberalised market. Generators will decide how to replace generating capacity depending on market conditions. Currently there is a margin of over 20% above peak electricity demand.
- Raising fears about the security of supply is a ‘scare tactic’. Only a quarter of the gas we burn generates electricity. Nuclear cannot replace three quarters of the gas we use for other purposes. Much of what we burn for electricity generation is at peak times whereas nuclear is a baseload producer that cannot be switched on or off quickly in response to rising and falling demand. Most of our gas for the foreseeable future comes from Norway and if we decide to import Russian gas then the Russians need our revenues more than we have need of their energy.
- Nuclear can contribute little to tackling climate change. Currently nuclear only accounts for about 3.5% of all UK energy consumption. Focusing on nuclear diverts attention from the real issue internationally of developing carbon neutral coal technologies. Huge emissions will result from coal burning in India, China and the United States unless we urgently develop and deploy the technology to capture the carbon.
- The nuclear industry has always under estimated its capital costs. Frequently the industry cites its costs as about \$1,000 per Kw/h but estimated costs of eight reactors under construction in Asia averages out at over £4,500 per Kw/h.

The work of the NFLA Legal Adviser and public interest groups concerned about the Health and Safety Executive’s role in ‘generic (reactor) design assessment’ was reported to the NFLA Steering Committee. The NFLA Secretary also reported work in hand jointly with Greenpeace and UNISON to produce research showing better employment prospects would result from development of a non nuclear energy strategy for the UK.

A full briefing on ‘*The Future of Nuclear Power*’ consultation (closing date for responses 10 October 2007) is in hand. An initial briefing for members use will be prepared and circulated based on the report by the NFLA(Scotland) Policy Adviser to the NFLA Steering Committee meeting. The Steering Committee agreed that it too should make its own response to ‘*The Future of Nuclear Power*’ consultation.

3. **Planning White Paper** (for England & Wales)

A very detailed report from the Legal Adviser was considered at the NFLA Steering Committee meeting. The report explained the proposed provisions in the White Paper and how they would remove local accountability over developments deemed to be of national strategic importance.

For new nuclear power stations and other “key national infrastructure” Government propose that it will:

- produce, following “thorough and effective” public consultation and Parliamentary scrutiny, national policy statements (“NPS”) to provide a clear policy framework for nationally significant infrastructure (“NSI”), including nuclear power stations;

- require developers of such projects to consult local authorities, statutory bodies, relevant highway authorities and the public on proposals for development before applying for consent;
- create an independent “infrastructure planning commission” (“IPC”) (a) to vet that the application was properly prepared and preceded by appropriate consultation and (b) to take the decisions on such projects (thereby ending the role of the Secretary of State in decision-making on a consent application);
- oblige the IPC to approve any project if it has “*main* aims (sic) consistent with the relevant national policy statement.”: a decision to refuse could *only* be made if “adverse local consequences ... *incompatible* with relevant EC or Domestic Law including Human Rights Legislation” existed. Illegality would therefore *alone* prevent the project being approved regardless of qualitative arguments.

The NFLA Steering Committee agreed to use the Legal Adviser’s report as the basis for producing a member briefing paper. The briefing will be circulated shortly. The deadline for responding to the Planning White Paper is 17 August - a timescale that is too short and extends into the holiday period, in breach of the Government’s own code of practice on consultations.

4. **Other matters**

The NFLA Secretary introduced a revised statement of NFLA income and expenditure showing a slightly better outturn for FY 2006/07 than expected. Whereas a deficit of £6,900 had been projected a surplus of £5,700 was recorded.

Reports on the work of the NFLA Forums in Scotland, Wales and Ireland were also received. The next Wales Forum meeting will be hosted by Bridgend County Borough Council on 21 September. A meeting of NFLA(Scotland) is being arranged following changes in councilor representation after the local government elections in May. The All Ireland Forum met in Newry on 5 June and discussed funding opportunities that could help to resource a Secretariat service for the Forum. The meeting considered key policy developments in the UK around new nuclear build and radioactive waste management and decided to commission a response to the nuclear consultation. Full consideration of radioactive waste issues was deferred until the next meeting. Membership has grown to 13 Councils and a number of other local authorities north and south of the border have expressed interest and support for the Forum’s work. This interest will be followed up by the NFLA Secretariat. Due to pressure of time the planned Irish Forum AGM was deferred and will now be convened in conjunction with the full NFLA conference and AGM in December (see below).

5. **Dates and venue for NFLA Steering Committee meetings in 2007**

11.00am -1.00pm, Friday, 14 September 2007, Town Hall, Manchester

11.00am – 1.00pm Thursday, 6 December 2007, venue TBA
(in conjunction with consolidated 10th joint UK & Irish Local Authorities Conference on Nuclear Hazards & 2007 NFLA AGM)

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