

Nuclear clean up

How can councils help deal with the legacy of half a century of nuclear power? **Stewart Kemp** has some ideas

A new local government network has been formed through the Local Government Association to respond to the challenge of nuclear site clean-up and radioactive waste management.

The special interest group (SIG) on radioactive waste management and nuclear decommissioning aims to provide a focus for local authorities concerned about the impact on their areas of future national nuclear waste policy and clean-up practice.

There are currently two major initiatives underway that are attempting to get to grips with the 50-year legacy of the UK's nuclear programme.

First, 19 nuclear sites across Britain presently owned and operated by the UK Atomic Energy Authority and British Nuclear Fuel will pass to the ownership of a new government public body from 1 April next year.

The nuclear decommissioning authority (NDA) will appoint contractors to clean up the sites, but the task will not be easy and is expected to span many decades and cost, on current estimates, some £48bn.

The second government initiative is aimed at finding an acceptable public policy for the management of more intensely radioactive wastes: those that cannot currently be disposed of in the national shallow burial site at Drigg, south of Sellafield in west Cumbria, and are held at 34 temporary sites across the UK.

In 2003 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs established a committee on radioactive waste management (CORWM) to investigate and make recommendations to ministers by the end of 2006 about how to deal with this problem.

So-called 'back end' nuclear issues, arising from both civil and military nuclear programmes, raise huge questions about where to store or dispose of wastes. They also raise questions of intergenerational equity and environmental and public safety.

Can the historic 'not in my back yard' attitude towards radioactive waste be overcome? If so, how? What can be done with thousands of tonnes of lightly-contaminated demolition materials from decommissioned nuclear sites?

What are the transportation implications of different management options? Can any demolition materials, such as scrap metals, be recycled? If so, how is this to be managed?

What level of site clean-up should be pursued? What degree of precaution is required

when the risks posed by exposure to radiation remain unclear and continue to be a matter of scientific controversy?

These are just some of the difficult issues that must now be addressed.

Both the NDA and CORWM are committed to open, transparent and publicly accountable policy development and both recognise the importance of proactive consultation and the key role local government plays as a major community stakeholder.

However, the desire for engagement with local government has to be matched with the resources needed to enable engagement. This issue remains unresolved, although the SIG continues to press for central funding.

Over the past year, 63 local authorities and four national park authorities in England and Wales have given support to the SIG. Four Scottish authorities have also linked with the group, reflecting the country-wide approach required on nuclear legacy management. The nuclear-free local authorities network has also given its support and many of its members are actively involved in the SIG.

Regardless of individual views on the future prospects for nuclear power, all agree that the legacy of the past must be dealt with.

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Councils urged to host Europe debates

At November's Committee of the Regions session, the committee's president urged local authorities to involve residents in discussions about the EU. Germany's Peter Straub claimed that without public support, the treaty signed by EU leaders in October could fail, robbing ordinary people of a Europe that took more account of local opinions. He wants councils in the 25 member states to hold 1,000 debates on the union, of which 130 should be in the UK. To date, no UK council has organised a debate.

Brit calls for anti-discrimination measures

European local and regional government representatives backed a call by Sheffield councillor Peter Moore for greater action at European level to tackle discrimination against lesbians and gay men. Committee of the Regions members agreed that a lack of targeted legislation to implement anti-discrimination pledges was failing sectors of the community. Cllr Moore argued that the protection offered by the EU treaties was meaningless without specific implementing measures.

Regions committee changed the face of Europe, says Delors

Former European Commission president Jacques Delors led celebrations to mark the 10th anniversary of the Committee of the Regions. Mr Delors, a French finance minister during Mitterrand's presidency, described the committee as "an indispensable addition" to the EU's decision-making structure. "The committee is a vital link between the grassroots and Brussels and vice versa," he said. Mr Delors was a driving force behind the creation of the Committee of the Regions.

Constitution 'is good for local government'

The European constitutional treaty offers big gains for local government in terms of decision making, members of the Committee of the Regions agreed. Voting in favour of a paper by London Assembly member Lord Tope, they welcomed the obligation the treaty places on the European Commission to consider costs for local authorities of any proposed EU legislation. It ensures local authorities will be consulted automatically on legislation affecting them.