

Radioactive Waste Management – Coming to a Community Near You?



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It's not just the prospects for new nuclear power stations that will be grabbing the headlines over coming months, says Fred Barker, from the LGA's Nuclear Legacy Advisory Forum (NuLeAF). Radioactive waste management is going to be back under the spotlight as Government launches a bold new initiative to find a site for a Geological Disposal Facility (GDF) for higher-activity radioactive wastes.

After decades of failed attempts to implement policy, the old approach of 'Decide – Announce – Defend' (D.A.D) has been swept aside to make way for a process based on ideas of 'willingness to participate', partnership and community benefits.

The new process is spelt out in the Government's White Paper, 'A Framework for Implementing Geological Disposal'. This invites communities to open up "without commitment" discussions with Government on the possibility of hosting a GDF.

Curious about why any community should want to do this? Well, if you were already neighbour to a nuclear site where radioactive wastes are stored above ground you might think it better that they were safely buried in an engineered facility hundreds of metres underground. And then there's the prospect of negotiating a substantial package of benefits as part of this multi-billion pound project. Any interested community will want to ensure that the package will enhance its social and economic well-being, in return for providing an essential service to the nation.

The setting up of a Community Siting Partnership should also help the process work, giving affected communities a proper say. The advice of the Partnership will inform *major local decisions* in the process, which will be taken by the relevant local authorities. This includes a right to withdraw at any point before work is started deep underground.

Hosting a GDF is not the whole story, as new thinking on the management of Low Level radioactive Wastes (LLW) is likely to impact on a far wider range of communities. The issue here is not that we don't have a disposal site, but that the one we have – near the village of Drigg in West Cumbria – is fast filling up and may have a very limited lifespan.

To help solve this problem, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority is developing a new strategy for managing LLW. This will focus on rigorous application of the Waste Hierarchy (waste avoidance, segregation, volume reduction and re-use/re-cycle) and on opening up new disposal routes.

Commitment to the Waste Hierarchy has to be right in principle. And there are sound arguments for developing more localised approaches to LLW disposal. However, in practice, this could mean greater use of metal treatment plants, incineration, on site disposal and

landfill. Developments of this nature are likely to be controversial and difficult discussions lie ahead.

As with siting the GDF, facilities for managing LLW should not be imposed on local communities. There are no easy answers, but a way forward probably lies in developing a greater public awareness of the LLW problem, of the case for more localised solutions, and in the wider use of benefits packages. On the latter, NuLeAF has recently called for a national framework so that a consistent and proportionate approach can be taken.

NuLeAF is a Special Interest Group of the LGA. It can assist or advise any local authorities that may wish to consider participation in the siting process for the GDF. For further details go to www.nuleaf.org.uk