

TACKLING THE NUCLEAR LEGACY

Article for Public Servant, Fred Barker, 6 September 2006



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The Government's commitment to tackling the UK's civil nuclear legacy seems undiminished. Having established the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) to provide a strategic focus on decommissioning and cleaning up nuclear sites, it will shortly set out how it intends to implement a new policy for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive wastes.

This commitment is welcome, but raises challenging issues about how and where radioactive wastes will be managed over the next few decades and in the longer-term, and about the arrangements for ensuring local authorities and affected communities are able to engage effectively in discussions and decision-making.

The question of how higher activity wastes should be managed in the long-term has been addressed by an independent advisory committee – the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM) - which submitted its recommendations to Ministers at the end of July. CoRWM recommends geological disposal as the end point of strategy and robust storage in the interim period, including provision of contingency against delay or failure in reaching the end point. The recommendations also address implementation issues, highlighting the need for partnership with communities willing to participate in a siting process and provision of support packages to facilitate that involvement.

In welcoming CoRWM's recommendations, Environment Secretary David Milliband stated that the Government is committed to develop a strong voluntary partnership with local communities in identifying a site for geological disposal, and that it understands the importance of independent oversight as the programme is taken forward. A full response from Government is expected towards the end of October.

NuLeAF – the LGA's Nuclear Legacy Advisory Forum – is broadly supportive of CoRWM's recommendations, particularly the need to empower and incentivise

local authority and community participation. To help address the challenges, NuLeAF will be looking to identify:

- appropriate models of local partnership (taking into account the learning from current partnership schemes);
- appropriate arrangements for support packages (taking into account existing UK practices, including operation of the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and the Sullom Voe Capital and Harbour Authority Reserve Funds); and
- ways of integrating siting processes with planning and regulatory requirements (including the potential need for a Planning Policy Statement).

Government has also been consulting on policy for the management of solid low level waste (of lower activity but higher volume), where it is seeking a more flexible approach based on a range of management options. DEFRA has recently informed consultees that analysis of responses is taking longer than expected. The Government's response is now expected towards the end of the year.

Developing strategy for the decommissioning and clean-up of civil nuclear sites, and how and where radioactive wastes should be managed in the shorter term, is the responsibility of the NDA. It has initiated a range of reviews that could lead to significant changes to current practices.

These include appraisal of approaches to the interim storage of Intermediate Level Wastes, raising the possibility of consolidating storage on a smaller number of nuclear sites or at a national facility. This review is likely to involve discussion with stakeholders before the end of the year.

For Low Level Waste, the NDA has expressed a preference, where possible, for existing nuclear sites to host their own disposal facilities. It expects that Site Licence Companies will submit proposals around the turn of the year, followed by a period of consultation.

The NDA is also reviewing site 'End States' with stakeholders. This review aims to identify the physical condition that a nuclear site should be left in when the NDA has finished its business. The End State (or states) will influence the end uses that are possible on a site. The outcome of the review will be incorporated into revised NDA strategy during 2008. NuLeAF is encouraging local authorities with sites to get involved early in discussions, not least because alternative end uses may raise issues in relation to local development plans.

Notably, the NDA is required by the Energy Act to encourage and support activities that benefit the social or economic lives of communities living near

its sites. It therefore wishes to work with Regional Development Agencies, Local Enterprise Networks and others to help create a sustainable future for affected communities. To this end, the NDA is about to consult on a draft socio-economic strategy.

With so much change in the offing, the NDA places great emphasis on the need for stakeholder engagement. It has established a National Stakeholder Group to discuss key aspects of its strategy, and encouraged the transition from Local Liaison Committees (LLCs) to Site Stakeholder Groups (SSGs) to increase engagement with local communities. The NDA has expressed a commitment to strengthening the membership and communication with SSGs so that they become “the main engagement vehicle for local stakeholders”.

The extent to which SSGs are currently able to provide this is unclear. Many are making good progress, while others have not moved much beyond the traditional information-receiving role of the LLCs. NuLeAF is currently seeking feedback from its member authorities with nuclear sites on the effectiveness and development of SSGs.

Policy makers are well aware that tackling the UK’s civil nuclear legacy requires the active involvement of local authorities and the communities they represent. One of NuLeAF’s key tasks is to help ensure that effective arrangements are put in place to enable this to happen.

NuLeAF aims to represent the views of member authorities in discussion with national bodies and to build capacity within local government to engage with nuclear legacy issues. It is organising a programme of regional seminars in late October and November for local government officers to discuss the issues raised in this article. For further information visit the NuLeAF website at www.nuleaf.org.uk.