



A nuclear submarine at the Devonport dockyard in Plymouth

Cuts at nuclear weapons sites put public at risk, says MoD

Rob Edwards

Staff shortages and funding cuts at nuclear weapons sites across the UK have put the public and the environment at risk, according to the Ministry of Defence's nuclear safety watchdog.

The analysis, marked "restricted", points to 11 "potentially significant risks" at bomb-making sites and ports housing nuclear submarines, documents seen by the Guardian show.

They warn that efforts to reduce radioactive risks have been "weak", safety analyses "inconsistent" and attempts to cope with change "poor". Formal regulatory action has been taken at two naval dockyards: Devonport in Plymouth and Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria.

The reports also reveal that there is "no funded plan" for the decommissioning of Britain's 16 defunct nuclear submarines. Nine are moored at Devonport and seven at Rosyth on the Firth of Forth.

The reports cover 2006 and 2007 and were written by Rear Admiral Nigel Guild, chairman of the defence nuclear environment and safety board, an agency within the MoD that oversees nuclear safety. They were released in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act.

Guild identified 11 "potentially significant risks" at sites across the UK, including the atomic bomb factories at Aldermaston and Burghfield in Berkshire and the nuclear submarine and weapons bases on the Clyde near Glasgow. The workforce, the public and the environment were all being put at risk, he warned.

A 10% shortage of suitably qualified staff was "one of the greatest challenges to the sustainable future of the defence nuclear programme", he said.

Even before the spending squeeze on Whitehall under the coalition government, cuts in funding were hampering the MoD's ability to ensure good safety performance, according to the documents. "Often, in government, the management approach is to first impose a reduction in resource, and only then to assess its implications," Guild stated.

Fulfilling the legal requirement to reduce radiation exposure to "as low as reasonably practical" was often weakened by "excessive" cost estimates and delays, he said.

Guild described the MoD's response to major organisational changes as "generally poor and significantly below best practice in the civil nuclear programmes". In 2007 he judged the risks posed by the MoD's lapses to be "degrading".

Guild stressed that none of the risks were "an immediate safety or environmental concern". But there had been failures to comply with safety procedures.