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MoD: Trident submarines cannot be moved from Scotland to Plymouth

Devonport is ruled out as home for submarines, raising questions over future of fleet if Scotland votes for independence

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A Vanguard-class submarine carrying Trident missiles at Faslane naval base in Scotland. Photograph: Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

Britain's nuclear-armed submarines cannot be moved from Scotland to the Devonport naval base in Plymouth because they do not have safety clearances to dock there.

The disclosure has huge implications for the Ministry of Defence (MoD) if Scotland votes for independence and a new government demands the withdrawal of the nuclear fleet.

The MoD has revealed that the safety arrangements for Devonport do not permit the presence of submarines carrying Trident nuclear warheads. The MoD's safety experts are not considering changing that.

The problem is that the dockyard is in a densely populated area and, if there were an accident, thousands of people would be at risk. The worst accident scenario envisaged by the MoD would kill up to 11,000 people in Plymouth and would not meet the official criteria for what is acceptable, according to a new report.

The Scottish government, run by the Scottish National party, has said it would eject nuclear weapons from the Faslane submarine base on the Clyde as soon as possible after Scotland became independent. A referendum on independence is due to be held in the autumn of 2014.

