

Local government's key rôle in civil defence

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Chief executives of local authorities will be the key figures exercising the powers of government in the event of nuclear war. As 'Controllers' of counties and districts their responsibilities will go beyond local government's existing powers and resources, writes Roland Freeman.

Although there will be an emergency committee of three elected members to assist controllers, they will be regional officials responsible to a new form of regional government.

The basic planning assumption is that in nuclear war government might cease to operate from London and it would be impossible to rely on the continuation of the existing pattern of central-local government arrangements or even the present relationships between different branches of local government.

So, according to a summary document presented at a GLC private seminar on civil defence 'a new form of government for domestic and internal purposes would come into being'.

All functions of government will be decentralised and concentrated in ten Home Defence Regions. Each region has two sub-regions and, the document remarks, 'for some time after attack these would probably be the highest level of effective government.'

The paper is not clear on the nature of authority at regional and sub-regional level, but it is likely that senior civil servants will be Commissioners in the sub-regions, while Ministers may be given overall regional responsibility. Local government officers take charge at the county and district level, with special groupings for London.

Within the sub-regions, whose boundaries are co-terminous with groups of counties, Controllers (ie normally the local authority chief executives) will be appointed for the existing county and district areas. In London, a region in its own right, the 32 boroughs will be divided into five groups as they already are for peacetime emergencies such as Thames flooding.

Each group will be headed by a senior LC official as Controller, with powers similar to those of a county controller elsewhere, ie much wider than the peacetime county council functions. Individual boroughs will also have their own Controllers (again usually the chief executive) with full powers to govern internally.

It is at this tier of wartime government that the three-man emergency committees of councillors would operate. However, their functions are much more

limited than those of the Controllers.

Borough emergency committees (and presumably the same applies to districts outside London although the paper does not say so) 'would be appointed only in respect of the peacetime functions of the borough council'. By contrast the rôle of the Controller is almost unlimited. The document spells this out in the following passage:

'Controllers would be appointed by the Minister as part of the three-tier system of regional government. The powers of these controllers would not be restricted to the assigned statutory responsibilities of their own boroughs but would, in the context of services essential to the life of their communities, include those existing responsibilities, the powers (eg requisitioning) which emergency legislation would have created, further powers which the regional commissioner would have granted by regional ordinance and, finally, any other directions given by the group (or county) controller'.

Controller's power

In effect the local controller is not responsible to the councillors, but to his group or county controller, and through him to the sub-regional commissioner. Where only part of a region remains after an initial nuclear attack, or where communication breaks down totally between the three tiers, the local controller is effectively the civil government for his area.

Already, in preparation for an emergency, training schemes are underway at the Home Defence College.

Although maximum use of volunteers is implicit in home defence planning, and Air Marshall Sir Leslie Mavor has been appointed to co-ordinate voluntary effort, the only trained volunteers who are part of the establishment at borough or district wartime headquarters are the scientific advisers.

All the London boroughs have now designated wartime headquarters equipped with special Home Office communication systems. Many have also made contingency plans to devolve authority still further down to 'sectors' and below that to 'community care centres'.

The document draws a distinction between the preparations for conventional and nuclear war and the rôle of the armed forces, the fire and police services in each situation.

For example, in conventional war the

potential enemy is expected to 'infiltrate special forces as saboteurs, some of whom would be highly skilled'.

Dealing with them is apparently to be a police function and even where the military are called in to help, they would be 'subject to rigorous political control'.

In nuclear war, however, assuming that the deterrent policy of the western alliance had failed completely 'there would be gigantic problems of survival and recovery'. The function of the armed forces in the post-strike period cannot, the paper admits, be predicted with any certainty.

An external conventional threat in these circumstances is thought unlikely and the main task would be to 'assist in the recovery of the nation within the framework of the (new) system of regional government'.

In practice this means, initially, first-aid and rescue, organising civil labour 'in conjunction with the civil authority' (ie the county and district controllers except where a whole region remains intact), evacuation from contaminated areas and generally helping with the restoration of transport services on road, rail and water.

Fire services, whether in conventional or nuclear war, would be redeployed away from the main target area.

The present chain of command is retained in conventional war, but, following a nuclear attack, the rôle of the fire-fighters is not necessarily to fight fires.

Police duties are in principle the same as in peacetime. However, like the fire service they would, in nuclear war, be formed into small groups called Police Support Units under the command of an Inspector with about 36 men divided into three sections.

Up to, and if possible beyond, the point of attack they would be responsible to the Chief Constable for the present police authority area.

Key decisions, including matters of life and death, where a city is cut off from central or regional government will probably be taken in practice by a small group of senior administrators including the local authority chief executive, the highest available police and fire officers, and the army commander for each part of the country surviving nuclear attack.

Ministers are also pressing local authorities to complete their arrangements for preparing wartime headquarters and building up emergency planning teams.

These are likely to be doubled in the near future (although present strengths are only about half a dozen or so in each county outside London) with the Government paying 75 per cent of the bill.

A circular on this aspect of the preparations may be issued shortly according to a ministerial answer in the House of Lords last month.