

From the frontline

The scandal of incinerator ash in Byker, Newcastle

Tyne Bridge Friends of the Earth has been closely involved in the campaign to stop the expansion of the Byker Reclamation Plant in Newcastle. In 1999, the group became aware of plans to double the amount of waste incinerated at the site. Tyne Bridge Friends of the Earth decided to organise a series of meetings where various experts, including a foetal toxico-pathologist and an environmental consultant talked to local residents about the possible impacts of the plan.

Press coverage began to grow, as did the number of local people involved in the campaign. A petition was started, and stalls held in various locations to inform people what was happening. It soon became clear that the people of Byker had been unhappy with the incinerator for years, and were willing to support the campaign to fight it.

The Council finally agreed to a public meeting to discuss the issues and proposals. Following extensive campaigning, leafleting, press stunts (including setting off a distress flare in a chimney of tyres outside the Civic Centre) more than 200 people turned up to the meeting and made it clear to the Council representatives that they didn't want the incinerator, but they did want a full public inquiry into the plans. As a result, a working group of residents, other concerned people, various agencies, and Council representatives was set up to re-examine the issues and proposals, and

present a report.

Meanwhile, a toxic time-bomb was ticking away. Campaigners found out that since 1994 the Council had been using a mix of bottom and fly ash from the incinerator as path material for allotments and at a number of other sites around Newcastle. In all, 2,000 tonnes had been spread city wide. Despite repeated claims by the Council that the ash was safe, some testing showed high levels of heavy metals. It was only after intense campaigning pressure and constant press coverage that the Council agreed to carry out tests on the ash around the city through the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne.

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Campaign against incinerators

The results were devastating. The final report showed that on some sites, the levels of dioxins in the ash were almost 800 times the background level in Newcastle. Sites which had not had ash dumped also showed raised dioxin levels, suggesting that chimney stack emissions had contaminated them.

This is believed to be the worst case of dioxin contamination to have ever occurred in Britain. As a result the Council was forced to advise allotment holders to keep children under two away from the sites, not to eat eggs or poultry from the affected sites, to carefully wash and peel vegetables before eating them, and not to grow any more crops.

The Council is now carrying out further soil tests, and tests on allotment produce and The Environment Agency is carrying out an investigation with a

view to prosecution. The campaign has since hit the national headlines in various papers, as well as appearing in a *Panorama* programme.

The campaign carries on still. The ash issue will certainly run for months, if not years. In the meantime, the working group continues its deliberations, the campaigners continue to keep local people informed, as well as trying to keep press coverage focussed on the issue, and persuade the council to call a public inquiry, or preferably scrap the incinerator plans and start again.

The key moment in the whole campaign was the public meeting. At that point it became clear to the Council that trying to dismiss the campaigners as crack-pot greens unrepresentative of local opinion, was never going to work. The battle isn't won yet, but people power means victory is within sight, and with continued support, waste incineration will hopefully end on Tyneside.

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