

'Hundreds at risk' from old gasworks

GOVERNMENT scientists will this month warn the environment minister, Michael Heseltine, about the dangers of building houses on the derelict sites of old gasworks that scar Britain's cities. The scientists will report that most of the sites contain toxic and cancer-causing chemicals including cyanides, toluene, phenols, arsenic, lead, asbestos, coal tars, spent oxides, methane gas and even radioactive wastes.

An early draft of the report, circulated privately earlier this year, brought a storm of protest from British Gas, which called it alarmist. The draft claimed that councils had made big mistakes in redeveloping sites of gasworks—especially in building houses on contaminated soil. The report's authors, from the Building Research Establishment and the environmental safety group at Harwell, believe that the health of hundreds of families is at risk.

Several local authorities last week said that the report could be crucial in determining how they handle their own gasworks sites. Gateshead Council, for example, is in the middle of a long dispute with British Gas over the Redheugh site, on prime development land beside the River Tyne. British Gas says soil contamination is "no worse than one would expect from an industrial site". As if to prove the point it allows horses to graze on the land.

But a consultants' report for Gateshead council recommends massive reclamation works. These would include moving huge amounts of poisoned soil, excavating underground tanks, reservoirs and ducts, and covering the whole area with 1.2 metres of inert material such as pulverised fuel ash from power stations.

If British Gas wins the argument it

might expect to sell the land for more than the £33 million that the Greater London Council paid for Wandsworth gasworks eight years ago. But the consultants warned that if their advice is accepted, "the value of the land may be very much less than the purchase price which British Gas has in mind".

Despite the pleas from councils such

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as Gateshead for a detailed evaluation of the dangers of old gasworks, the Department of the Environment said last week that it had not decided whether to publish the Harwell report. "It will depend on how useful it might be," a spokesman said. One council scientist commented: "The fact that ministers have taken the report under their wing implies that political expediency might become involved."

The report examines many old gasworks, from the vast tracts of derelict land at Greenwich and Beckton in East London (the heaps of works waste are known locally as the Beckton Alps), to smaller works in residential areas that have often been redeveloped for housing. In the first draft of the report, scientists at Harwell concluded that most gasworks land had dangerous coal-tar residues. Handling coal-tar produces tar warts on skin which may develop into skin cancer. And tar products such as phenols cause other cancers.

The latest crop of disused gasworks, abandoned after the arrival of North Sea gas, may be just the tip of a toxic iceberg. In 1920 there were 1300 gas undertakings in Britain. Since then hundreds of works have been torn down and forgotten. There are now homes on many of these sites.

The London Borough of Greenwich has spent £500 000 decontaminating three small housing estates built on old gasworks tips close to Charlton Athletic's football ground. It found concentrations of 20 000 parts per million of lead and cadmium at 850 ppm in children's playing areas along with lumps of toxic oxide wastes containing distinctive blue ferric ferrocyanide—known as "blue billy".

Other councils are less concerned. Ten years ago 60 houses were built on the former Oakham gasworks site in Rutland. The council made no attempt to remove contaminated soil from the site or to keep water pipes or back gardens away from the most polluted parts. It did not even make a survey of contamination and there are no plans to do so even now, according to council officers. The passage of time will not help, because most gasworks poisons stay put forever.

Civil servants say privately that past mistakes such as these should be forgotten. It would cost too much to put them right. Martin Beckett, secretary to the government's land contamination committee, says spending cuts mean that councils are skimping surveys on newly-vacant sites. The GLC, which bought Wandsworth gasworks for housing, has decided to cut its losses and sell the undeveloped land for industry. Expensive decontamination work will now be left to the new owners—if it gets done at all.

Ministers, meanwhile, are looking for cheap dramatic ways to revive inner city areas by developing derelict land. The temptation for them to ignore the expensive and dangerous hazards on gasworks sites, by refusing to publish their scientists' report, will be considerable. □



The site of the Redheugh gasworks at Gateshead is polluted—but the council wants to build homes there