

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELLAFIELD REPOSITORY PROJECT COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the background to a repository siting information program and how it is being developed at a local level to secure majority support in the community. The paper suggests that attitude research is an important factor in ensuring that the right issues are addressed.

BACKGROUND

"Announce and defend" has been the traditional public relations approach to new nuclear plant siting. To an extent it works in that given time opposition can be subdued by the weight and persistence of a well-funded and staffed information program. In addition, people find new concerns or go back to old ones (Fig 1).

Experience shows however that the best this can achieve is resentful apathy which can boil up into open opposition at unexpected times and for unsuspected reasons.

The early experiences of United Kingdom Nirex Ltd in site selection programs were of the "announce and defend" school of public relations. While the information programs may have achieved limited success in time, they ran out of time and a soundly based technically-led project was abandoned. The fact that the shallow disposal project was abandoned for cost reasons tends to conceal the fact that the eventual high cost of the project was in itself a response to public concern. The industry responded with higher and higher standards, more and more redundancy in systems and higher and higher costs which eventually made the project uneconomic.

In the case of the Nirex shallow disposal program this public concern was fed in to Government via a House of Commons committee but the end result was the same. The committee demanded a "Rolls Royce" solution to low level and short-lived intermediate level radioactive waste disposal problems and the Government agreed. Rolls Royces cost a lot of money.

Eventually it was decided that it would be no more expensive and more publicly acceptable to include low level and short-lived intermediate level waste in the deep repository for long-lived waste planned for some years in the future. This program was therefore brought forward.

This happened in 1987 and it was clear that it would be at least a year and probably more before the shallow disposal program could be wound up and a new deep disposal program got under way. This gave time to recover some of the credibility lost by earlier program cancellations.

The deep co-disposal of all low level and intermediate level waste was a simpler project to sell in public relations terms, as was the concept that waste emplaced half a mile underground in suitable rock must be safer than waste sitting in numerous stores on or near the surface.

There were however a number of engineering variations on the deep disposal theme and various other factors that had to be taken into account in identifying potentially suitable sites. It was decided to put all the choices to the public in a national consultation exercise, led by a booklet "The Way Forward". A short questionnaire to stimulate thought was included and a university contracted to analyze and publish the results.

While criticized by some environmental groups and politicians the document was very well received by the vast majority of the 60,000 people and organizations who studied it.

The document was launched in November 1987 to Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament and Members of the House of Lords.

Subsequently, copies were sent to every County and District Council in England and Wales and every Regional, Island and District Council in Scotland. Several hundred copies of the document were sent to institutions and organizations with an interest in the subject. Seminars were arranged for local authorities throughout the UK, in order to provide an opportunity to question Nirex more closely before preparing their formal responses. Ad hoc meetings were attended with specific authorities requesting them and seminars were also arranged with Trades Unions, environmental groups, protest organizations, industrialists and learned institutions. Copies of the document were sent to libraries and national press advertising was undertaken to stimulate public awareness of, and participation in, this important initiative.

The specific items of interest included:-

1. Which engineering options command most support?
2. What factors should be taken into account in site selection?

Nirex is studying safety, transport, population density, environmental issues, constructability and costs. What is the relative importance of these issues and have any been omitted?

3. Should high amenity areas, such as National Parks, be eliminated from the search?

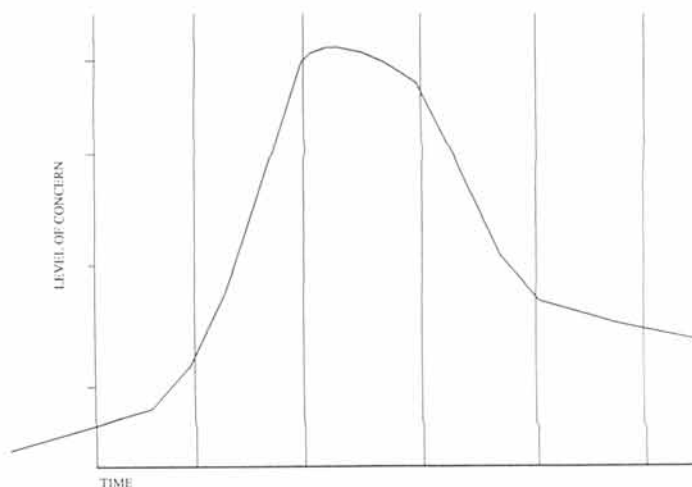


Fig. 1. Issue lifecycle.

4. Should an adequate site which enjoys local support be preferred to an apparently superior site which does not?
5. How can Nirex be a good neighbor and bring benefits to the local community?

The last issue is particularly important. The local community must be represented at every stage of the development so that benefits to local people can be maximized and disadvantages minimized. Nirex will set up a local liaison committee consisting of Nirex members, local authority and community representatives to discuss the fine detail of such a process once a suitable site, or sites, has been identified.

In all, some 60,000 copies of "The Way Forward" were distributed during the course of the discussion program, which drew to a close at the end of May 1988. The 2,500 responses received were forwarded to the University of East Anglia for detailed analysis.

In particular some positive responses were received from the Sellafield, Cumbria area and the Caithness area of the Highland Region of Scotland.

Almost two-thirds of all County and Regional/Island Councils in the UK took the trouble to respond. One third of all District Councils and more than a hundred Parish/Community Councils gave us the benefit of their views. Some 40 Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament and Peers also added their opinions to this debate, through formal presentation of their views.

The opportunity for comment on Nirex's plans contained in the discussion document was widely welcomed, particularly by local authorities and local authority associations. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities welcomed the recognition that radioactive waste management "must have public support and that there must be openness in the debate about the disposal of nuclear waste material". In the same vein, environmental groups including Friends of the Earth also welcomed the principle of consultation, expressing a hope for much wider involvement in the future.

Analysis of the response showed few surprises. We were pleased to note strong support for our program and proposals from bodies such as the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, the Association of District Councils, the Association of County Councils, the Trades Union Congress and the Lords Sub-Committee looking into waste management in Europe.

It is also clear however that while many District Councils supported our program in principle, none outside Copeland and Caithness Districts* was prepared to consider local proposals other than with outright objection.

Several Counties however left the question open and indicated that they would consider a planning application on its merit.

Generally therefore, support in principle is coupled with rejection in detail by bodies with a patch of territory to defend.

Looking at the response overall there was a disappointing tendency for people and organizations to take a very parochial or ritual view of the discussion process. This was particularly true of individuals and petitioners who frequently made it clear that they had not the slightest interest in taking part in discussions on a matter of national requirements and inter-

ests, but only to ensure no solution was proposed in their clichéd Back Yard.

The Environmental Risk Assessment Unit of the University of East Anglia was contracted to provide a full independent analysis of the responses received. The analysis was published as a report "Responses to The Way Forward" in November 1988(18). Its main findings were as follows:

- There was a clear welcome for the consultation exercise among local authorities and the majority of responding organizations. There were also several reservations concerning the nature of the consultation and the extent to which the Company would take the results of this consultation into account.
- There was no overall unanimity of view. While there was a level of support for the Company's approach among a number of local authorities, there was also some support for the alternative of on-site storage of wastes.
- Those local authorities with existing nuclear installations did not on the whole, however, support storage, nor did the various scientific and advisory bodies.
- There appeared to be little support for disposal at an island or offshore. There was a general concern that any possibility of radioactive contamination of the sea should be avoided.
- Safety was judged to be the paramount factor by all those who responded, though clearly views differed as to how best to achieve this. The safe transport of wastes was the next major area of concern.
- Views differed as to whether areas of high amenity value should be excluded from consideration at the outset, though the majority view was that they should. The relevant statutory bodies were clear that the presumption should be against development in such areas.
- The monitoring and recoverability of wastes was generally deemed to be important. It was a principal concern for those who proposed above-ground storage of wastes. It was perceived as a key aspect of safety assurance by many of the replies.
- Possible damage to the local economy associated with the public perception of radioactive waste disposal was also a key concern, especially in those areas dependent upon tourism, agriculture and fishing.
- There was opposition from local authorities and environmental groups to the use of the Special Development Order procedure for obtaining planning permission directly from Parliament for either investigative drilling or subsequent development. There were strong calls for an early commitment to the holding of a local public inquiry.
- Further consultation was welcomed and a commitment on the Company's part to continue open discussion and provision of information was encouraged.

The information from their extended opinion research exercise supported deductions which had been made by

* Caithness District Council subsequently withdrew their invitation to investigate sites in their area.

front-line information officers during the previous campaigns. In particular those factors that provoked opposition were identified; a "bolt from the blue announcement" and a "remote" announcement in London. It also became clear that a more or less equal volume of protest could be expected from anywhere in the country identified as a potential waste disposal site.

The discussion program had however allowed two local authorities to come forward with a willingness to discuss the problem. These authorities, not unexpectedly, were those with the closest links with Britain's two largest nuclear sites - Sellafield, Cumbria and Dounreay, Caithness in Scotland.

In these areas there was also a modestly encouraging response from members of the public and from local business who saw advantage in a \$5 billion investment.

The key factor that separated these areas from all others was 30 years association with the nuclear industry. The communities consisted largely of people who worked at the plants in question and who did not suffer from the exaggerated fears of people without that experience.

This important finding was incorporated into the site selection program and it became clear that these sites should certainly be investigated before any serious thought was given to another round of politically vulnerable, highly controversial site investigations in "unfriendly" parts of the country.

As a result of our discussions with local authorities in the areas concerned and through a pro-active media briefing campaign, the announcement of Dounreay and Sellafield was almost an anti-climax. Nevertheless instead of a London announcement directors of the Company went to the two sites and the formal announcements were made locally and in co-operation with the local authorities.

The current investigation program therefore has a much broader base than previous programs which concentrated only on technical excellence and left public relations as a fire-fighting operation. The level of active support for our program in Caithness and Cumbria may not be remarkably high, but there is a satisfactory measure of acceptance. Politically the program is less vulnerable to changes in Government policy or to changes in Government.

This pragmatic approach was put to the test in November 1989 when a public referendum was held in Caithness at the instigation of anti-project campaigners and members of the local council. The result was a foregone conclusion but a closer look at the figures is interesting.

1. Only 58% of people were sufficiently interested in the matter to vote at all. This is a major change from previous campaigns and two previous referenda in other parts of Scotland where the poll was higher than 95%.
2. Although 74% of those voting were against the project, 26% were positively in favor undoubtedly the only time in Britain and possibly in the world where 3,000 people have voted in favor of radioactive waste disposal in their own backyard.
3. Of the overall electorate (all qualified voters) only 42% voted against the project, 58% being either in favor or abstaining.

While not a resounding success these figures were remarkably different to any previous opinion polls.

During 1990 and 1991 drilling and other investigations took place at Dounreay and Sellafield against a background

of simmering political protest in Scotland and wary acceptance in Cumbria. In July 1991, the Company decided to concentrate resources on the intensive study of Sellafield. Campaigners, most of whom were unknown to us, claimed a famous victory in Scotland while the air of tension increased in Cumbria as the local authorities considered their responses.

A pressure group based on one somewhat unrepresentative local village sprang up and had some initial success in claiming media attention for public meetings which they sponsored. An approach seeking terms from the Company was rapidly thrown into reverse when the proposers came under heavy local pressure.

However, while dancing in the streets was not in evidence conditional support for the project was given by local trade unions, public meetings and a number of opinion polls commissioned by Cumbria County Council and Copeland Borough Council. One published in November 1991 gave the following general picture:

Have you heard of the Nirex proposals?	70% yes	29% no
Agree/disagree with proposal?	38% agree 29% don't know	33% disagree
Is Nirex doing the best possible job?	43% good 14% not good	29% not very good
Good for the area?	42% yes 13% don't know	45% no

There was therefore a lot to play for and a sound platform on which to build support through a steady information program.

The first task was to establish the identity of the Sellafield Repository Project as a local entity separate from BNFL and UK Nirex Ltd. The use of local staff was vital in this as those living and working in an area have more credibility than those who are seen as visitors from afar.

A local information office was established in the nearby town of Whitehaven and once the initial demand for public meetings abated a series of "open-days" was held throughout the County. Project staff set up a manned exhibition in village and community halls, and were available to talk to people on a one-to-one basis and to make a note of their fears and concerns.

Soon after the announcement of Sellafield as the preferred site and as a result of design development and consultation with local authorities the company published a revised repository design that was far less visually intrusive than previous conceptual designs. Local concerns were fully taken into account and the changes were generally welcomed. With the publication of the new design a new consultation program was launched and widely advertised in the County.

RESEARCH

Research on the public acceptability of the new design was augmented by qualitative research to identify concerns and attitudes in order to guide the communication program.

In discussion with representative socio-economic contact groups a number of important attitudes were discovered. Although the repository project could be cancelled if further geological investigations reveal insurmountable problems people believe that it is "fait accompli" and resent any communication that "pretends" the project is still at a preliminary stage. They also feel that if the industry and government want

the project that they will have no say in the decision and resent any suggestion that they have a choice.

The dominant local issue is not however the repository but unemployment and as the provider of a substantial number of jobs the repository is seen by many as a "necessary evil". This leads to a neutral attitude.

Research reveals some contradictions. People say they want more information but make little attempt to obtain it. Material which is delivered unsolicited to households is resented. Local newspaper advertising is an acceptable means of communicating as it requires no effort to obtain but does not suffer from "junk mail" associations.

The prime concern is long-term safety and all communications must address this. The idea of importation of "foreign" waste is bitterly resented and there is no recognition that no waste is imported, only spent fuel. This is clearly a central point for the communication campaign.

A comprehensive communication program in Cumbria is a substantial challenge as the population is polarized - those who support and those who do not support the nuclear industry - and very varied the area being a union of two older counties - Cumberland, a largely industrial region dependant on coal and iron in pre-nuclear days, and Westmorland, a mainly agricultural shire county. It is also a large county with the main centers of population and local government, Carlisle and Barrow-in-Furness, being some 50 miles from the site.

The local program is therefore concentrating on the smaller area around the site including three small towns and a dozen villages. It is a conventional program using tried and tested techniques including a monthly newsletter, periodical publications, information office, "road-shows", sponsorship, video distribution, reactive and proactive meetings, media relations and facility visits. This is supported by a national corporate relations program including exhibiting and briefing at conferences arranged by political parties, local government bodies, trade unions and professional bodies.

The repository program is also featured in schools material produced by educational consultants to fill the requirements of the national curriculum and its attainment standards for children studying geography, sciences and social studies.

EVALUATION

Two opportunities to evaluate this program independently arose in autumn 1992 when both Copeland Borough and Cumbria County Councils published the results of Opinion Research conducted approximately one year after their previous surveys.

The County's survey asked exactly the same questions as had been put a year before and answers were very similar showing that "pro" and "anti" had taken a few points from "don't know".

The main findings were as follows with 1991 figures in brackets (see chart):

At first sight the information program seems to have had little effect but the repository related figures should be viewed in the context of the level of support for nuclear power. It is difficult to achieve a higher level of approval for waste management than for the overall program. Therefore with only 41% in favor of nuclear power support for the waste program of 44% is satisfactory.

More encouraging and more relevant were the results of a strictly local poll undertaken by Copeland Borough Council in the immediate area of the proposed repository and where all the information work had been concentrated.

	%	%	%
1. For or against nuclear power?	For 41(40)	Against 48(45)	Don't know 11(15)
2. Faith in nuclear safety?	Yes 53(53)	No 43(40)	Don't know 4(7)
3. Is industry doing a good job in radwaste?	Yes 39(34)	No 49(50)	Don't know 12(15)
4. Where should waste be disposed of?	Underground 36(39)	Sea 3(5)	Abroad 18(17)
	Above ground 7	Other 26(25)	Don't know 13(11)
5. Have you heard of Nirex plan?	Yes 72(70)	No 27(29)	
6. Do you support repository?	Yes 35(38)	No 29(33)	Something else 36(29)
7. Nirex doing a good job?	Yes 44(43)	No 46(44)	Don't know 10(13)
8. Should County Council oppose?	Yes 46(42)	No 45(47)	Don't know 9(11)
9. Would repository be good for area?	Yes 44(42)	No 46(45)	Don't know 9(12)
10. Is rock laboratory good idea?	Yes 58	No 32	

This showed that 50% of people were prepared to support the project and that a further 34% would be prepared given further reassurance. Only 16% were solidly against. Private research is now underway to establish what extra assurances were wanted.

Despite all the roadshows, advertising, talks and extensive local press coverage of the issue 12% had never heard of it and 43% felt poorly informed.

Safety was named as the most important issue by 63% and in a straight choice between deep disposal and surface storage 56% favored the former, 15% the latter and 28% did not have a preference. 57% thought the project would bring benefits to the area. The research was undertaken by Research and Auditing Services Ltd for Copeland Borough Council.

SUMMARY

The Sellafield Repository Project Information program has been guided by formal research and by feedback through members of the team.

Progress has been made and a significant majority of local people support the project and feel it will benefit the area.