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**THE SELLAFIELD REPOSITORY PROJECT
INFORMATION PROGRAMME**

P J Curd
United Kingdom Nirex Limited

In July 1991 UK Nirex Ltd nominated Sellafield, Cumbria, north-west England, as the preferred site for a deep repository for intermediate-level (long and short-lived) and some low-level radioactive waste. This was the conclusion of a process that started in early 1987 when the British Government accepted the company's advice that all wastes apart from high-level waste, should be disposed of in a single deep repository. That advice reflected a government decision that short-lived, as well as longer-lived, intermediate-level waste should go to deep geological disposal. The high cost of separate and sophisticated shallow facilities for low-level waste alone was unjustified.

In conjunction with the technical site selection programme, UK Nirex Ltd conducted a national consultation exercise in which the disposal options for ILW and LLW and the technical requirements for a site were clearly explained.

The discussion programme was centred on the wide distribution of an explanatory document and a series of seminars and meetings aimed at elected representatives - national, regional, local and trade union. Organisations and individuals were invited to answer a short questionnaire to establish their preferences, e.g for under sea, coastal or inland disposal, and to comment generally on the company's proposals and programmes.

The 2500 written submissions were analysed by the University of East Anglia who published the results in November 1988. The results held no surprises. Few people or local authorities were enthusiastic about the disposal of waste in their area although objection was at its least and acceptance at its highest in the regions of the country's two largest nuclear plants - the Sellafield reprocessing plant in Cumbria and the fast reactor development establishment at Dounreay in northern Scotland. In both areas local councils expressed a willingness to discuss the project and there was a measure of support from local businesses and individuals.

The technical site selection process had also marked Sellafield and Dounreay as potentially promising. This combination of technical promise and public acceptability led UK Nirex to announce in early 1989 that these sites would be studied first.

If both proved to be technically unsuitable further sites would be nominated.

Local programmes

At this stage locally based information programmes were started in both areas. These built upon the local knowledge of British Nuclear Fuels plc in Cumbria and of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority at Dounreay. Although funded by UK Nirex local programmes were mainly presented by local BNFL and UKAEA information and technical staff.

The programme consisted of project newsletters, meetings, video productions, limited local advertising, the use of a mobile information and exhibition centre and visits to comparable facilities - particularly to Forsmark in Sweden.

In addition to these public relation activities formal links were established with the local and regional councils at technical officer and political level.

The geological investigations proceeded at Sellafield and Dounreay for two years without interruption from those opposed to the project. In both areas opposition centred on the anti-nuclear groups who had been active before the repository proposals were made. In Scotland the Scottish National Party also opposed the Dounreay investigation.

During the studies at Dounreay political pressure and political changes on the local and regional councils led to a hardening of opposition. Caithness District Council which had supported the project by a narrow majority came to oppose it and anti-nuclear, anti-project feeling strengthened on the Highland Regional Council.

This led to delays in the process of obtaining permission for boreholes and other works at the site but sufficient work was completed to confirm that the site geology was good enough to warrant further study if necessary.

Local public opinion was reflected in a survey undertaken by Caithness District Council some six months into the project. Just under three-quarters of those who voted opposed the development of a repository while just over one-quarter supported it. Significantly only 52% of eligible voters recorded their views.

This demonstrated again one of the weaknesses in this type of quantitative research - those opposed are far more likely to vote than those who are not.

Investigation work progressed more quickly at Sellafield and confirmed that the deep geology had good potential.

Preferred site information team

In July 1991 it was decided to concentrate investigations at Sellafield. The principal reasons were minimising waste transport and transport costs (60% of ILW and LLW originating on the site), promising geology and the probability of a reasonable measure of local support for the project. A Sellafield Repository Project team was formed augmented by a joint information team consisting of local British Nuclear Fuels plc and UK Nirex information and public affairs staff.

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 programme 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 programme.

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.

Other opinion research has been undertaken by the County Council and by the Borough Council. The former was undertaken soon after the announcement of Sellafield as the preferred site and before the communication programme could have had much effect.

While contradictory in some aspects the County's research - based on a stratified sample of respondents - showed that feelings about the repository closely paralleled feelings about Sellafield and nuclear power generally. The general "For or against" nuclear power question showed 40% in favour, 45% against and 15% "don't know". Similarly 38% thought it a good idea to build a repository at Sellafield, 33% thought it should go elsewhere and 29% had other views or none. Similarly 39% agreed with deep disposal while 54% were divided between the sea (5%) sending it to other countries (17%) above ground storage (7%), something else or don't know (36%).

Encouragingly 43% thought Nirex were doing a very good or quite a good job, 43% thought not very or not at all good and 13% didn't know. 47% thought the County Council should accept the repository with 42% against and 11% don't know.

These figures show an encouraging base of support and acceptance on which a sensible communication programme can build. The figures were roughly confirmed by the Borough Council's questionnaire-based survey in the immediate area of the proposed site. This was not structured so as to provide statistically significant results and 92% of the population did not return the questionnaire to the local council.

A comprehensive communication programme in Cumbria is a substantial challenge as the population is polarised - 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 centres of population and local government, Carlisle and Barrow-in-Furness, being some 50 miles from the site.

The local programme is therefore concentrating on the smaller area around the site including three small towns and a dozen villages. It is a conventional programme 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 programme including exhibiting and briefing at conferences arranged by political parties, local government bodies, trade unions and professional bodies.

The repository programme 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 programme 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:-

	%	%	%
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	

At first sight the information programme 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 programme. Therefore with only 41% in favour of nuclear power support for the waste programme 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.

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% favoured 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 programme 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.

22nd December 1992