

Case Study

Disposal of radioactive waste

A public dialogue on the review of the siting process for the Geological Disposal Facility for radioactive waste

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC)

Duration of process:

May 2013 – February 2014 (10 months)

Total public participants involved:

63 in two-day public dialogue workshops in four locations

Total stakeholders involved:

162 in seven one-day stakeholder and sector workshops in different locations

Total experts involved in events:

At least two experts attended each public dialogue workshop

Cost of project:

£440,600 total,
Sciencewise co-funding = £167,440

The Government's policy for the long-term management of the UK's higher activity radioactive waste is geological disposal. In 2008, a White Paper set out the Government's preferred approach to site selection for a Geological Disposal Facility (GDF), based on the principles of voluntarism and working in partnership with willing communities. Three local authorities expressed an interest in exploring the opportunity to host a GDF. However, in January 2013, the decision was taken not to proceed any further with this site selection process.

The Government sought to reflect on this process to see what lessons could be learned and established a review. A call for evidence in May/June 2013 and meetings with stakeholders invited views which fed into the development of an open consultation that ran between 12 September and 5 December 2013. The consultation focused on the proposed changes to the siting process for a GDF for the long-term management of the UK's higher activity radioactive waste.

A dialogue project ran in parallel with the consultation. The purpose of the project was to:

- *inform Government decision-making through a better understanding of public and stakeholder views on the proposed changes to the site selection process and*
- *offer information that would support participants to make submissions to the public consultation.*

The project was commissioned by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), with support from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA – a non-departmental public body), and included a series of dialogue workshops during November and December 2013.

“ *Since the previous siting process, we've done a lot of listening: to the people that were engaged in the previous process; to the scientists, engineers and experts that understand how geological disposal could work in practice, including the independent Committee on Radioactive Waste Management and bodies like the Geological Society; to industry figures such as the Nuclear Industry Association; NGOs and the general public who took part in our consultation process. [...] So we've listened and taken this on board – and that's why the White Paper sets out a new process which will give communities the clarity they need.* **”**

Baroness Verma, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, 24 July 2014

Figure 1 Geological Disposal: Roles and Responsibilities



Key

- Communities**
 Sit at the heart of this process – they can talk to Government and the developer throughout. A geological disposal facility (GDF) cannot proceed without community support.
- Government**
 Owns the policy, sponsors the project and provides funding.
- Regulators**
 Independent bodies will only authorise construction and operation of a facility if the developer can demonstrate that it will be safe, secure and the environment will be protected.
- Developer**
 Responsible for designing, building, operating and closing a facility safely.
- Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM)**
 Provides independent advice to Government and scrutiny on radioactive waste management.

Influence on policy and policy makers

DECC considered the results of the dialogue project as complementary evidence to the formal responses to the open consultation. The results from the workshops added to the range of evidence considered in the formulation of the 2014 White Paper – Implementing Geological Disposal, published in July 2014. DECC confirmed its use of the results in its formal response to the consultation saying “the Government has considered and reflected key themes raised at the events as it developed this revised White Paper.”

More specifically, the independent evaluation of the project, completed in January 2015, found that the impacts of the dialogue included:

- A strong alignment and specific correlations between the reported workshop results and the issues in the White Paper
- Involvement in the project affirmed DECC’s decision to continue to regard the siting process as an ongoing conversation between itself, stakeholders and communities. This led to the choice set out in the White Paper not to attempt to find immediate, specific answers to some of the most challenging aspects of the process (defining ‘community’, setting out governance arrangements, determining community benefits/ investments), but to continue the conversations begun by the dialogue workshops over the coming two years
- The style and content of the White Paper – one that is understandable to lay people, is visually appealing and avoids recourse to lengthy scientific documents. This was influenced by the dialogue workshops and, in particular, by DECC’s confidence that it can talk to the public about the issues in an understandable way, and that members of the public can engage constructively with those issues when given good information and opportunities.

DECC identified further potential influences from the project:

- The experience of the dialogue project has been shared with DECC’s Customer Insight Team and identified as having value beyond the GDF work, meaning a likely legacy of the project will be improved communications across other aspects of DECC’s work

- The developer of the GDF site-selection process (Radioactive Waste Management Limited) has commenced a programme of consumer research with the goal of exploring public perceptions of the UK’s nuclear history. This research will form part of the backstory in future communications about the process, and echoes the importance placed on good communications in the analysis of the consultation and dialogue process evidence
- The results of the dialogue process may be of interest to developers in other countries.

Key messages from the participants

Five key principles appeared to underpin public participants’ opinions of the revised GDF siting process:

- Awareness and education**
 This was a key requirement for nearly all public participants. Workshop participants felt they initially knew very little (if anything) about radioactive waste and the agreed policy of managing it. They felt that if voluntarism was to succeed, then the wider public needed to understand the challenges of managing our radioactive waste and what the impact of a GDF might be for a community.

“The community should be educated on what a GDF is and about nuclear waste.”

Public participant

- Transparency and openness**
 Participants felt it was important that Government was open and transparent about the need for a GDF, including what the potential risks could be from implementing it (or not). They wanted the siting process to be run in a similar vein, with community representatives sharing the information on the potential impacts of a GDF and taking any decisions in the open.

“People will want to know how is this going to affect their communities.”

Public participant

- **Local**

Participants referred back to the importance of ensuring the views of the 'local community' and 'local people' were heard, even though they generally struggled to define 'community' in relation to a GDF.

“There should be maybe not one person, but a few people from each community who have been elected by their peers to represent that community.”

Public participant

- **Fairness**

The participants frequently spoke of fairness. For most, this meant ensuring that the process represented and involved everybody in the community. It was generally felt that the process should hear the views of those who opposed a GDF as well as those who supported the facility. Fairness also meant that the information that was presented to the community and its representatives needed to be balanced and impartial.

“I think it should include all groups – all sides of the argument. They should all have the same TV, literature, all the rest ... If [the community] are given the information, they can make an educated guess.”

Public participant

- **Efficiency**

There was a clear call from participants for the process to be run as efficiently as possible. They were keen to find efficiencies that could lead to cost savings. In particular, this principle underpinned responses around the calls for screening and targeting resources on specific communities (if possible), and queries around the timeline.

“Scientists should determine a short list of sites and communities could volunteer to come forward after a learning/education stage.”

Public participant

The dialogue activities

Overall, the dialogue project comprised a number of engagement events with the public and various stakeholders during November and December 2013 at locations in England and Wales.

The objectives for the public dialogue were to:

- Explore and understand the general public's awareness of geological disposal and the site-selection process
- Obtain feedback on the proposals for improving the current site-selection process for a GDF
- Enable the public's views to be fed into the development of an improved GDF site-selection process.

To ensure independence and oversight, DECC convened a small 'stakeholder reference group' (SRG) that met before, during and after the workshops. The three external organisations involved in the SRG represented three sectoral stakeholder groups – non-governmental organisations, the nuclear industry (the Nuclear Industry Association) and local authorities (Nuclear Legacy Advisory Forum – NuLEAF). The SRG advised on the provision of balanced and objective information, the participants to be invited and on the reporting of the events.

The public dialogue

The public dialogue was run by Ipsos MORI and involved a series of reconvened workshops in November and December 2013 at four locations – Nottingham, Bridgwater, London and Penrith. The four locations were selected to include different types of communities (urban, rural, etc), including two in close proximity to nuclear power stations. At each location, the workshops took place over two consecutive Saturdays, with each workshop lasting a full day. The first workshop in Nottingham was used as a pilot to test proposed format for the workshops.

Participants were recruited to ensure a broad mix of local residents was represented. A total of 63 local residents participated across the four locations. Each participant was offered a payment of £120 (£50 after the first day and £70 after the second).

The first day of each workshop was designed to give information and build understanding around the issues involved. The second day enabled consideration of the issues through discussion of the proposals set out by Government. The workshops were structured around the key themes set out in the consultation document compiled for use in the formal public consultation. The basic model used in the workshops was of structured inputs in bite-sized chunks from DECC, followed by brief questions and answers (Q&A) in plenary and group work (two groups). Each group session was concluded with headline feedback to all delegates. The majority of the stimulus materials used over the two days were presentations compiled by DECC and Ipsos MORI. Technical presentations were delivered by experts from DECC and the Radioactive Waste Management Directorate (RWMD) of the NDA.

Between the first and second days, participants were asked to complete a homework task – either interviewing friends or family about the issues involved or undertaking internet research on the topic.

Stakeholder events

The stakeholder dialogue events were run by 3KQ. They consisted of four national stakeholder workshops that were held in November 2013 in Penrith, Llandudno, Exeter and London.

Invitations were issued to a range of stakeholder organisations with experience of or interest in the siting process for a GDF. The workshops were supported by representatives from DECC, NDA RWMD, the Environment Agency and the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR). The Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales also supported the workshop in Llandudno.

The workshops, which were attended by a total of 96 stakeholders, began with presentations from DECC outlining the history of the Managing Radioactive Waste Safely (MRWS) process in the UK, the key messages from their review of the siting process and a summary of the proposed revisions to the siting process. Participants were then divided into small groups to discuss the proposals and the consultation questions. The

workshops were structured around the proposals outlined in the consultation document and the related consultation questions. Discussions focused on questions of clarification to gain a better understanding of DECC's proposals and developing participants' thoughts on how they/their organisation would respond to the consultation questions.

Sector events

The three sector-specific workshops were guided by independent facilitators from 3KQ and were held in November 2013. The workshops took place in Warrington (industry) and London (local authorities and NGOs). Invitations were issued to representatives of the nuclear industry, local authorities and NGOs. In total, 66 stakeholders from a wide cross-section of those organisations attended the events.

DECC staff gave a presentation on the consultation and provided support throughout the day. Representatives from other organisations such as the NDA, the ONR, the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management (CoRWM) and the Environment Agency were also on hand. They aided discussions around individual tables for each of the workshop sessions and, where appropriate, to explain what their respective roles might be in a siting process.

The structure for the day involved an optional introductory presentation on the history of the UK's involvement with civil nuclear power generation, followed by a discussion on each of the questions posed in the consultation.

What worked especially well

Conducting a pilot of the proposed workshop format was valuable and would be advisable in future dialogue projects. The review of the pilot event was useful in making adjustments that improved the quality of later workshops.

The delivery model used (two full Saturdays, one week apart plus a homework task between the days) was effective in ensuring retention and in enabling engagement with the subject material. Levels of engagement were good across the workshops, with over 80% of participants across the workshops reporting that they were fully able to contribute.

The public dialogue model used (structured bite-sized inputs, brief Q&A in plenary, group work, feedback in plenary) was effective in generating good-quality public dialogue. This was aided by:

- Clear objectives and structure (taken from the consultation document)
- Clear and audience-appropriate input materials
- Neutral presentation of the inputs
- Access to an appropriate range of informed experts
- A friendly and approachable style from the facilitators and experts.

“The materials used were fair, clear, informative and helped people to get up to speed quickly and participate in a positive manner. The discussions were well managed and the flow of conversation was generally good.”

SRG member.

Focusing the public dialogue activity on the consultation document was a constructive means of encouraging debate and ensured that the vast majority of discussion was relevant.

The SRG offered a constructive and valued contribution to the project, providing practical advice and a level of independent scrutiny. The SRG reported on the level of involvement in its own report of its work. The SRG offered a wide range of advice and guidance, which included factual corrections, identifying areas where clarity could be improved, advice on how history and policy might be more constructively or neutrally framed, and how technical issues such as the siting process or the design of the proposed GDF might be presented. At the end of the project, the SRG provided its own report on the project (published as an annex to the independent evaluation report). The value of the SRG would have been even greater if its period of operation had been extended to include the initial design stage of the work and the final policy development stage.

What worked less well

DECC was keen to understand public participants' existing levels of knowledge and understanding of the issues through dialogue, meaning participants were not expected to undertake preparation in advance of the workshops. Advance preparation may have added value, though may also have discouraged attendance and compromised DECC's wish to begin without prior knowledge. It is likely that advance preparation would need to be included in the scope of any incentive payments if included in future dialogue processes. Similarly, participation in follow-up evaluation activities (levels were low in this project) may benefit from inclusion in the scope of incentive payments.

In addition, the timing of dialogue activity was towards the end of the consultation period, which did not give public participants and stakeholders much time to formally respond. In future, where possible, the timing for dialogue activities should allow a reasonable period following involvement for participants to respond to the consultation.

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Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/review-of-the-managing-radioactive-waste-safely-mrws-siting-process/