

DISCOVERING THE MISSING LINK: STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN THE FUTURE UK RADWASTE PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

On March 17th 1997, the UK's deep disposal programme managed by Nirex suffered a complete reversal. Nirex and others have since come to realise that this failure was in part due to a lack of stakeholder participation, especially the public, in the whole external and internal decision-making process. Such participation is a factor in delivering future Government policy and mechanisms are now being developed to ensure that widespread consultation will occur.

The Government is planning to undertake a consultation exercise on radioactive waste management. In preparation for this, Nirex has been seeking new ways to engage with its stakeholders. The work has been developed from Nirex's commitment to its transparency policy and this paper reports three examples of different forms of stakeholder participation that Nirex has initiated recently.

'Peer Preview'

One of the criticisms of Nirex has been that we did not allow open access to our work until it was completed. As a result, under the transparency policy, we have set up a 'Peer Preview' process, which allows stakeholders to comment on work that we are planning to do, before we finalise its specification. This aspect is covered in more detail the Nirex paper *Stakeholder Involvement in the Development of a Strategy for Monitoring and Retrievability* in Session 36 of this conference.

Focus Groups

Focus groups have been conducted around the UK to develop understanding about public perceptions and concerns about radioactive waste. One of the greatest challenges has been interpreting this information and feeding the results into the Nirex programme.

Direct engagement with stakeholders

Nirex is talking to other key players in radioactive waste management including the government, NGOs and the nuclear industry. An acceptable way forward can only be developed if all stakeholders actively engage in the debate and their views are taken into consideration. Nirex is working to facilitate this interaction and our perceptions on this will be presented in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Nirex has a transparency policy, which states that Nirex is committed to achieving transparency through:

1. Fostering openness as a core value;
2. Listening as well as talking to people who have an interest;
3. Making information readily available under our Publications Policy and responding to requests for information under our Code of Practice on Access to Information;
4. Making key decisions in a way that allows them to be traced so that people can see and understand how they were arrived at; and
5. Enabling people to have access to and influence on our future programme.

Point 5 is a first step in developing accountability and as an extension of this Nirex has developed a Corporate Responsibility Policy (1). Nirex has identified three key areas for future consideration: institutional structure, policy development processes and the behaviour of institutional actors, which all impact on the legitimacy of any decisions made. This paper focuses on ways to improve the legitimacy of the development process and make it more open, though some of the results and the methods used do shed light on stakeholders' attitudes to institutional structure and the behaviour of institutional actors. Some of the initiatives that Nirex is undertaking to achieve the commitments made in the transparency and corporate responsibility policies are outlined in this paper, namely peer preview, focus groups and direct engagement with stakeholders.

THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF PEER PREVIEW

We use the term 'preview' to describe the process by which opinion is sought on the scope of a research project, or a research programme, *before* the research is carried out. Its purpose is to allow a wide range of internal and external stakeholders to make inputs to the research programme at the planning stage and to increase the transparency of decision making. By adopting stakeholder preview of the Nirex programme, we aim to set out our vision for our future programme and invite feedback. An example of this is given in the Nirex paper *Stakeholder Involvement in the Development of a Strategy for Monitoring and Retrievability* in Session 36 of this conference and is summarised below:

In May 1999 Nirex co-sponsored a consensus conference on radioactive waste management. One of the outcomes of the conference was that participants felt that monitoring and retrievability are important issues that should be researched (2). In response to this and to similar statements made in the House of Lords report on the Management of Nuclear Waste (3) Nirex has been working on the issue of retrievability, we have also started to plan work that could be undertaken on monitoring. However, as both of these topics are important to our stakeholders Nirex decided to have them preview the work.

The preview process has been undertaken using several mechanisms:

- Sending out an invitation to comment to stakeholders we already interact with;
- Placing information and an invitation to comment on our website;

- Inviting a range of stakeholders to a workshop to identify their issues and concerns.

FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED BY THE FUTURE FOUNDATION

Qualitative research was conducted by The Future Foundation, an independent think tank in the UK, to examine attitudes towards radioactive waste and knowledge of the issues involved in its management (4, 5).

Two sets of four discussion groups were held with members of the public in April and May 2000. In the first set of meetings two groups were conducted in South London, and two were conducted in Newcastle, north east England; during the second set one group was conducted in South London, one in Manchester and two in Edinburgh. The groups included people from a mix of socio-economic and demographic categories.

The groups were selected to exclude anyone who was employed by or connected with the nuclear power industry or the Ministry of Defence or any other government department. The groups were also selected to exclude anyone who had a specialised interest in the issue of nuclear energy through membership of campaigning or environmental organisations such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth. The reason for excluding these was that the aim of the groups was to get a feel for the breadth and diversity of attitudes and knowledge among the 'general public'. If anyone with specialist knowledge participated, they would be likely to have a distorting influence on the conversation. We are not saying that they do not have valid opinions and a role to play in any public debate but simply that they are not, we suspect, typical of the average 'person in the street'.

The discussion was divided into two halves. The aim of the first session was to probe respondents' spontaneous attitudes towards and knowledge of radioactive waste. The session began with a general discussion of what respondents felt were the most important issues that face society as a whole in the 21st Century. The issue of radioactive waste was then raised if it did not come up spontaneously. Respondents were encouraged to discuss their associations with the words 'nuclear' and 'radiation'. They were then probed for their knowledge of and attitudes towards radioactive waste, including who they thought currently had responsibility for its storage and who they thought should oversee its storage.

In the first four groups at the end of the first session, respondents were shown a fifteen-minute video that had been prepared specifically by Nirex and The Future Foundation for the occasion. In the second set of groups the respondents were given text adapted from the latest draft of Nirex's brochure. The first half of the video and text dealt mainly with radioactivity and the generation of radioactive waste. The second half dealt mainly with the role of Nirex and its communications strategy. Respondents were asked to read each section in turn and were then encouraged to give their views on what they had read.

The aim of the second sessions was to probe people's responses to the video or the text:

- What information was new to them;
- What they did or did not believe;
- What they did or did not understand; and

- Whether or not the information provided had altered their understanding and attitudes.

Initial Reactions to the Subject

The group discussions produced a broad spectrum of opinions and responses, so that no clear 'story' of public opinion emerged from the exercise. This can be explained partly by the fact that respondents, by their own admission, knew little about the subject matter. The participants did not have strong, fixed views, and their views changed in the light of other people's comments.

Respondents were asked to list the most important issues that face society as a whole in the 21st Century. While many respondents included 'the environment' in their list of concerns, hardly anyone made direct reference to radioactive waste. Among the few who did, none gave it a prominent place in their list of concerns. When prompted on the issue radioactive waste was seen by many to be a global issue that had consequences for all.

Many respondents considered the issue of radioactive waste to be too big for them to grasp. They felt impotent in the face of such a global, long-term issue and were, by their own admission, content to 'let someone else sort it out.' There was considerable faith that science and scientists would, sooner or later, come up with a solution.

For some people, the issue remained distant not only in terms of geography but also in terms of timescale. Radioactive waste would not become an important issue to them until such time as it had a direct impact on their lives.

Awareness of Radioactive Waste Issues

The groups were asked to make a list of words and phrases that they associated with the terms 'nuclear' and 'radiation'. Though many of the associations were negative, there were some positive associations:

BNFL plc	Dounreay (UKAEA nuclear research site in Scotland)	contamination
Sellafield (home of BNFL plc)	Chernobyl	danger
Sizewell B (a PWR in Suffolk)	Hiroshima	pollution
weapons	bombs	accidents
cause of cancer	harmful	sterilisation
death	meltdown	risk
destruction	end of the world	secretive
evil	mobile phones	medical
X-rays	cancer treatment	source of energy
clean fuel		

People felt that they knew very little about radioactive waste or nuclear issues. People did not know what radiation was or what is involved in the decay of radioactive waste. People felt that scientists do not fully understand radiation and were still learning. However, many people still felt that scientists would find a solution to the problem eventually.

Many respondents were unwilling to separate the issue of waste disposal from the issue of waste generation. For them, the main issue that needed to be addressed was the safety of nuclear power itself, not the waste that is produced by the industry. Other people, however, were prepared to consider waste generation and waste management as separate issues. They appreciated the argument that existing waste needed to be dealt with regardless of whether or not more would be produced in the future. They felt, furthermore, that it was the responsibility of today's generation to tackle the problem of the waste that already existed.

The lack of knowledge people felt made them feel unable to engage with the issue, this points to the need for clear information to enable people to understand about radiation, so that they can debate the issues.

Awareness of Nirex

There was almost no awareness of Nirex – either in terms of spontaneous awareness or when respondents were asked directly whether they had ever heard of Nirex. The only awareness was among a couple of respondents who had vague memories of the rock characterisation facility planning refusal – and, even then, they misremembered the name of the organisation as 'Ninex'.

Response to the Video

Before watching the video, respondents were encouraged to overlook its obvious production inadequacies and to focus on the issues that it raised. In practice, however, many people were unable to separate their negative response to the video's production values from the message that the video was intended to convey. This suggests that a video will only be a useful channel of communication if the video is of corporate-brochure standard.

Although respondents felt that the video had managed to convey plenty of information, there was scepticism among many people that it had given them all the available facts. Some people felt that they had not been told the whole story and that they had only been told as much as Nirex wanted them to know.

Response to the Brochure Text

The text provoked a less cynical initial response than the video. Several respondents read the text and, by their own admission, accepted what they read at face value. There were several important reactions to the text:

- There was widespread agreement among respondents that the issue of radioactive waste was something that needs to be addressed by the current generation;
- There was a great deal in the text that was new to people;
- Some people felt that the text was not telling them 'the whole story';

- A major criticism was that the text glided over the issues. It did not provide enough facts or figures about radioactive waste or enough details about Nirex and the wider industry.
- Respondents wanted the facts and figures to be represented in charts and diagrams they believed that this would decrease selectivity or bias;
- People wanted information to be attributable to someone – to individual scientists or, at least, to particular organisations to increase accountability;
- Most respondents were surprised at the timescales involved in radioactive waste management.

The respondents may have felt more comfortable with the brochure text because they could control how they read the information and go back to previous pages easily.

Perceptions of Nirex and its Role After Having Prompt Material

Reading the text did nothing to abate people's cynicism about the nuclear industry. If anything, it increased their cynicism – and its close association with the industry tainted Nirex.

A further detail that caught many respondents' eye was the fact that high-level waste is managed by BNFL plc. and that Nirex are only responsible for some radioactive wastes.

For almost all respondents, the sentence in the text that most caught their eye was: 'We [Nirex] are owned by the nuclear industry and controlled by the government'. There was strong disapproval of Nirex being owned by the industry – and this was the single fact that respondents kept coming back to. In the present set-up, Nirex was regarded as the public face of the industry – not, as people hoped, its watchdog.

Respondents felt strongly that Nirex needed to be non-profit-making and independent from the interests of the nuclear industry. Its compromised status and the absence of an independent regulator were regarded as the major barriers to public confidence and to ensuring the best solution to the problem of radioactive waste.

Respondents were not entirely negative in their attitudes to Nirex. The respondents with the brochure text appeared more willing to see positive aspects than the respondents who had watched the video.

Some people felt that Nirex should be made completely separate from the nuclear industry and should be an entirely non-commercial operation. As part of its greater independence, the organisation should incorporate representatives from campaign groups such as Greenpeace and also from the general public. Nirex could then become the decision-making/regulating body that was needed to oversee the management of radioactive waste.

Other people felt that Nirex should be more integrated with the nuclear industry so that it was kept fully abreast of developments in the sector. It could, in effect, serve as the industry's 'spokesman' in the wider decision-making process.

For other people, however, Nirex itself should be one contributor among many to the decision-making/regulating body, alongside independent scientists, campaign groups and public representatives; it should not itself constitute the whole organisation.

Views on Decision Making and the Management of Radioactive Waste

A common theme to emerge from the group discussions was the need for a cross-section of interested parties to have a say in the future management of radioactive waste. Respondents felt that involving a variety of interests in the debate would ensure independence, integrity and effective scrutiny. An adversarial set-up was seen as the best way of getting to the 'truth' and balancing out the vested interests of the different parties. Respondents believed that no single group or organisation should have the whole say in the decision-making because no one group or organisation can be totally objective.

Most respondents felt that the **nuclear industry** itself should certainly have some input in to the decision-making process. Its scientific knowledge was invaluable, but self-interest and the profit motive would always taint its contribution to any debate.

There was considerable faith in the honesty and integrity of **academic scientists**. They were seen as the best chance to achieve objective and impartial scrutiny and, therefore, to get at the truth. Some respondents pointed out that they were just as prone as anyone else to be biased towards the interests of their paymasters. Others felt that scientists could be trusted to come up with a range of solutions but that the final decision should not be left to them.

People felt that **environmental groups**, and Greenpeace in particular, have an important contribution to make. Greenpeace were seen to do a good job of throwing light on issues and kicking up a fuss when they found something that they disagreed with. Some respondents felt that such groups should not have any say in the decision-making because they did not have a constructive contribution to make. Whereas other respondents felt that they should certainly be involved in the debate, but that their extreme views and lack of realism needed to be tempered by the other players in the debate.

Some people were strongly of the opinion that any decision-making body/regulator should be kept independent of **politicians**. The issue of radioactive waste was a long-term issue and, they felt politicians were incapable of operating with anything other than short-term gain in mind. However, others felt that it was the government's responsibility to sort out societal issues on their behalf, but that they should involve others in the decision-making process.

On the whole, respondents felt that there were limits on how involved the **general public** could ever be in the decision-making process and the management of radioactive waste. Ultimately, the public needed to entrust these roles to representative bodies. The public could never know enough about the issues – and certainly never as much as the experts. Some suggested that an effective means of ensuring public influence was to appoint 'ordinary people' to a representative body – with members of the public who were able to spend time studying the facts and issues and to keep 'up to speed' with the experts.

Information Provision and its Format

People wanted to have information about several issues related to radioactive waste including:

- What is radioactivity?
- How much is there? How much has been produced in the past? In terms that people can understand.
- How is waste being handled now?
- What are the differences between the different classes of wastes, how much is there of each sort, what are their relative strengths; their temperature; their longevity; the method of containment?
- How long does radioactive waste last?
- What is the risk? How will it affect people's health?
- What are other countries doing?

People made several comments about how they wanted the information presented:

- Percentages are meaningless.
- People wanted facts and figures.
- Pictorial representation was considered to be better than text.

People were asked to suggest which mediums should be used to communicate information people suggested:

- Leaflets and brochures, though people admitted they would probably not be read.
- Educational material for schools and universities as people recognised that they often learned from their children.
- Adverts on television giving a phone number and web address, television was seen as a very accessible medium.
- The Internet, some people thought that this was exclusive because not everyone has access and people may not know that the site was available.

Nirex Response to Findings

Nirex is trying to increase the accessibility of its work and reports. To facilitate this it has published a bibliography of all the reports that it has written, this is published on the Internet. Internal workshops on vision and values have been conducted to develop the internal attitudes and culture needed to enable the organisation to engage constructively with its stakeholders (6). The results of the workshops have impacted on working practises and the forward programme. Nirex is currently developing material to answer the questions raised in the focus groups and investigating how the mediums suggested presenting the information can be used. Nirex is developing what are called level 1 and level 2 reports, which are more thematic in nature, so that they are accessible to a wider audience than purely scientific reports. A new corporate brochure which seeks to communicate the new Nirex vision and values to a wider audience has also been produced. The Future Foundation project was part of the development procedure for this undertaking.

DIRECT ENGAGEMENT WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Nirex has been actively trying to engage in dialogue with people who in the past have been seen as antagonists. This has involved arranging one to one meetings and attending forums run by campaign groups who have opposed our work in the past, to engage with them and their concerns and present our current work and way of working. A representative from Friends of the Earth, who is a well-known antagonist, has visited Nirex on several occasions to address issues with our work programme. The meetings have consisted of presentations from Nirex staff on the issue of interest followed by discussion. This format has also been used with other stakeholders to address their concerns.

Nirex has been arranging workshops to bring together people with differing opinions and encouraging them to share their views and identify key issues, as well as common ground. Nirex has also been giving presentations at stakeholder meetings outlining our current research and how they can be involved in it, as well as asking for comments on the work being undertaken.

FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

A key aspect of consultation is how the views and concerns of the stakeholders are to be used by the initiating organisation and what feedback they will receive. Nirex commissioned work by Lancaster University to create productive engagement and feedback mechanisms (7).

The work showed that at the beginning of a consultation process it is important to set out clearly how the results of the consultation will be used and what will happen next. This influences people's engagement with and commitment to the process. In the background material that is usually sent out before a consultation Nirex outlines why the consultation is occurring and how the results will be used.

Nirex is developing internal procedures that ensure that information we receive from stakeholders is fed into our work programme. The procedures will include recording the interaction, responding to it and feeding the content into the Nirex work programme.

A database is being developed that records all the comments and requests that we receive. This will enable us to track our interaction with stakeholders and the issues that they are raising. The information will be fed into the design of communications material that is being produced and into our work programme.

People who take part in consultation mechanisms initiated by Nirex are actively involved in the production of the report summarising the consultation. This is achieved by sending the report direct to the participants and asking for their comments and publishing it on the Internet.

Consultation mechanisms usually require participants to complete a questionnaire to evaluate the success of the process or give them the opportunity to express their opinions about it. This information is used to develop the mechanisms. All these processes are under constant development and will be evaluated at regular intervals to facilitate their improvement.

NEXT STEPS

The key findings of the research undertaken so far show that:

- The public can, will and want to engage with the issue of radioactive waste management. To facilitate this Nirex and others need to:
 - Provide information in a neutral form outlining the pros and cons and including various people's opinions;
 - Use proactive techniques to allow access and space for people to discuss the issues;
 - Demonstrate how people's opinions have been taken into account.
- The only way to find a way forward is to involve people in the debate at the beginning and take their opinions into consideration.

Nirex Work

In response to this Nirex is undertaking several pieces of work:

- Further research into the applicability of consultation techniques;
- Investigating the use of the Internet to engage with teenagers;
- Development of communication material and reports in line with 'best practice' and feedback we have received;
- Focus groups and workshops to identify stakeholder issues on particular topics;
- More peer preview using the techniques outlined earlier.

Government Consultation

The UK Government is planning to issue a consultation paper on radioactive waste management to consider the principles underpinning policy, the size and scale of the problem, how to consult with stakeholders and institutional arrangements during policy development on options for waste management. This will include traditional consultation processes and new methods for engaging with stakeholders. The consultation process itself is estimated to last six months, there will then be a period of analysis followed by a response from Government on the results.

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