

Case Study Citizens' Panel on radwaste

Country United Kingdom

Date of Latest Update: August 2013

Background Information

Following the failure of an earlier siting process for a repository for long-lived low and intermediate level radioactive wastes in the UK, the implementing organisation, NIREX, and the Natural Environment Research Council, provided funding in 1999 for the establishment of a Citizens' Panel.

Phase of decision making process

Initial discussions to obtain public views, following earlier policy failure.

Formal framework of decision making process

Informative, but not policy making as such. This was intended to feed into development of a new radwaste management policy.

Objectives of process

This was intended to inform policy makers about the views of the general public, but then to close out debate.

Which tool was used?

In 1999 a Citizens' Panel questioned a number of 'experts' (or 'witnesses'), which it had selected, on the issue of radioactive waste management through a range of pre-determined questions. Before the Conference the Panel was provided with balanced background information. The Panel attended two preparatory weekends. The Conference was a four-day event, open to a wide audience.

During the first two days of the Conference heard brief witness presentations, followed by further discussion and debate between the Panel and witnesses. Members of the audience were able to submit written questions throughout these two days. On the third day, the Panel retired behind closed doors to write a report on their conclusions and recommendations. On the final day the Panel presented their findings to the Conference and answered questions from the audience and media. Key figures from government, industry and environmental groups were invited to respond to the report.

The Panel then assessed the responses, discussed the issues raised, and reported its conclusions at a press conference. The Panel represented a genuine cross-section of the public who gave their opinion on the issues. None of the Panel members had any significant prior involvement in the area of radioactive waste management. The whole process (other than the preparation of the report), took place in front of an audience of interested persons. The Panel's report was circulated to key-decision makers in the government and industry and to other interested parties.

Status

Complete

Objectives and outcomes of stakeholder engagement

The Panel presented their findings to the Conference and answered questions from the audience and media. Key figures from government, industry and environmental groups were invited to respond to the report.

The Panel and the associated Consensus Conference was successful in raising the profile of the issues around radioactive waste management. In addition, it was able to get the participants to deal with a contentious and difficult subject matter in a considered way. The Panel was reconvened to present a response to the Green Paper in 2001.

Involved Stakeholders

Four thousand people, selected at random from the national electoral register, were invited to take part, without knowledge of the subject to be discussed. 120 people responded expressing their interest. Of

these, 70 responded again when told the topic, and 16 were selected at random (one dropped out). The experts were selected by the panel, on the advice of the organisers

Implementer of the participation process details

Consultants acting on behalf of the UK government and UK Nirex

Financing

UK CEED estimates the overall cost of the exercise was £120,000 (at 1999 prices).

Points to consider

The 'experts' that were selected were somewhat problematic. It was difficult to find independent views, either pro-nuclear or anti-nuclear. That said, the remit was limited and did not allow discussion of new build issues. The debate was limited by this framing. In addition, it was felt by some observers that the briefing weekends were biased; the panel members were not able to develop an alternative management strategy to the one presented (deep disposal) and the sponsors used the outcome (a report) to close off further public debate prior to policy development.

An essential aspect of a Citizens' Panel is the use of an oversight group formed with the agreement of interested stakeholders, with the remit of ensuring balance and fairness in the information presented and the conduct of the process.

Further tools used in this case study

A Consensus Conference was held at the end of the process.