Torver Parish Council

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By email: radioactivewaste@decc.gsi.gov.uk
GDF siting process consultation
Department of Energy and Climate Change
Room M07
55 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2EY

12th December 2013

Dear Sir or Madam,

Consultation Paper "Review of the Siting Process for a Geological Disposal Facility", September 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to DECC's consultation paper above. Torver Parish is part of South Lakeland, within the Lake District National Park, and less than 17 miles from the Sellafield site. Our comments are:

Question 1: Do you agree that a test of public support should be taken before the representative authority loses the Right of Withdrawal? If so, what do you think would be the most appropriate means of testing public support, and when should it take place? If you do not agree with the need for such a test please explain why.

Yes, a test of public support must be taken, preferably by referendum, and in sufficient time to allow the host community to be able to exercise its right of withdrawal, should this be the outcome. However, this question hangs on the assumption that the "host community" will be defined by a District Council area. Please see our response to Question 3.

Question 2: Do you agree with the proposed amendments to decision making within the MRWS siting process. If not, how would you modify the proposed phased approach, or, alternatively, what different approach would you propose? Please explain your reasoning.

We are concerned about the apparent lack of community participation and consultation in the early stages of a proposal for a GDF from an unelected local group or organisation. Such are the implications of siting a GDF in any local area, there must be strong and openly expressed community support for any such proposal, and that support needs to be tested at the outset. The very limited "consultative" role for local parish or town councils is a further erosion of democratic principles in these proposals. While we accept the need for sharp and effective decision-making, that should not over-ride the need to ensure proper public support. The proposal that the Chair of the Steering Group should be a member of the District Council assumes a level of capability in which we place little confidence. Given the national importance of the GDF, the Chair needs to be a figure of national stature and proven capability, preferably in scientific circles, and certainly not a politician. Public confidence in the decision-making process is vital, and will not be achieved if the Chair is perceived to be parochial or partisan.

Question 3: Do you agree with this approach to revising roles in the siting process set out in the White Paper? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

Torver Parish Council strongly opposes the proposal that District Councils should be the "representative authority" for host communities. In Cumbria they are not the authority with responsibility for Emergency Powers, Highways, or the Strategic Authority. The relevant District Councils are felt to be inadequate for the task, compared with the County Council. Most importantly, they are not sufficiently representative of the whole Cumbrian public. It is felt that the GDF project is of national strategic importance and requires the strategic area authority (in our case, Cumbria County Council) for its secure management as representative authority.

- The removal of the County Council level from consideration as the "representative authority" has produced considerable cynicism in our community, and accusations of political chicanery. The Government is seen to be manipulating the siting consultation process to remove opposition and ensure a favourable result from the West Cumbrian District Councils in what is being presented as an open national consultation. Residents of Copeland and Allerdale who attended the Penrith consultation meeting expressed considerable concern that a District Council should be entrusted with such responsibilities.

- Torver Parish Council feels that the definition of the "host community" is ill-defined and subject to easy political manipulation to include or exclude interested parties. Given the potential area that the subsurface facility might eventually cover, the definition of the "host community" as being that represented by a District Council was felt to be inadequate, and disenfranchising to communities which may lie above the underground facility but outside the very limited area represented by a District Council.

- Since the Nirex appeal of 1997 was dismissed on grounds of insufficient democratic involvement, the disenfranchisement of all voters from the crucial decision-making processes except those residing in the very limited District Council area surely lays this process open to the same objection .

Question 4: Do you agree with this proposed approach to assessing geological suitability as part of the MRWS siting process? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

Torver Parish Council recognises the necessity to identify a GDF site, and strongly supports the proposal from the floor at the Penrith meeting that, since finding a site is of national strategic importance, the Government should engage an independent assessor with impeccable scientific credentials, such as the Royal Academy, to identify a number of the safest geological sites in England for a GDF. To argue that geologically unsuitable sites can be "engineered" to provide an adequate facility that will remain safe for unimaginable generations, is hubris in the highest degree.

While it may be politically inconvenient to identify, for instance, the Oxfordshire Clays as highly suitable in geological terms, such is the level of risk inherent in any potential failure of a Geological Disposal Facility only the geologically safest sites should be considered, and these should be publicly and objectively identified at the earliest stage of the consultation. The Government should then seek volunteer communities from within those areas. The priority sites for the choice would thus be objectively identified, scientifically sound, and founded on publicly understood safety considerations, not on perceptions of parochial short-term socio-economic gain or the vagaries of local politics.

Torver Parish Council is concerned that there is an underlying assumption across the country and within government that West Cumbria will be seen as the inevitable site, with the result that other potential areas will be discouraged from making bids. DECC representatives at the Penrith meeting denied that there was any presupposition from DECC, but this is not an adequate reassurance.

Question 5: Do you agree with this proposed approach to planning for a GDF? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

See our responses to Question 4.

Question 6: Do you agree with this clarification of the inventory for geological disposal and how this will be communicated with the volunteer host community? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

Torver Parish Council considers that an understanding of the inventory for geological disposal is a matter of national interest and not just a local concern. If the national community can be given a better understanding of the inventory, and the Government's reasoning behind geological disposal, together with both its beneficial and negative consequences for the host community, there may be greater opportunity to generate other volunteer communities than just West Cumbria. There is at present insufficient national media profile for a matter of such national importance, and particularly one with such

long-term consequences. Local opinion suggests that this lack of profile may be a conscious policy, but we consider that it can only be helpful to reduce speculation and myth about what is stored in our nuclear facilities, and to make clear to the country as a whole the policies in place and intended for the management of the inventory as it exists now, and in the future. Failure of a GDF would be not just a local, but a national disaster, and debate about the siting of one must be national as well as local, and not restricted to the DECC workshops but open and apparent to the general public.

Question 7: Do you endorse the proposed approach to community benefits associated with a GDF? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

We have no comment on this question, other than to ask what a community would be paid in perpetuity for hosting a national asset for an unspecified future.

Question 8: Do you agree with the proposed approach to addressing potential socio-economic and environmental effects that might come from hosting a GDF? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

For a community to reach a realistic decision that will commit them and their neighbouring communities to host a GDF in perpetuity, they must have access to all the available information, disbenefits as well as socio-economic temptations. The full report proposed in the learning phase must include input from the local area, and be open to comment from neighbouring parishes and all communities which will be subject to the wider impacts of a decision to proceed.

Question 9: Do you have any other comments?

Torver Parish Council recognises the vital and urgent national imperative for a GDF. We are uncomfortably aware of the closeness of the existing nuclear waste stores on the surface at Sellafield, and are keen to see a less dangerous and more permanent form of management for the future. However, we also consider that this is a national, not just a Cumbrian issue, and would like to see a much higher national profile given to the consultation. We hope to see volunteer communities encouraged from areas in other parts of England, following wide-ranging scientific assessments that seek the safest geological sites, since that must be the most important consideration to ensure the safety of a GDF for the unforeseeable future.

Yours faithfully

L J Higgins

Les Higgins
Chairman
Torver Parish Council