The Response of Seascale Parish Council to the DECC Consultation on the Site Selection Process for a Geological Disposal Facility

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.

We agree that testing public support is vital for the credibility of the process. We also believe that it should take place at both Parish and District level. It must be clear that local levels of support are being taken into account. A test of public support should take place when the response to the test still has a meaningful place within the consultation.

There are many different ways of testing public support: through public meetings, through door-to-door canvassing, through the local media and ultimately through a referendum. Given a possible timescale of up to ten years by the time this test is carried out the methods available will have altered considerably. There will no doubt still be a place for public meetings, but far more use will be made in general life of electronic means of communication and the generation being consulted will be more open to using such means.

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.

The two phased approach might give a better indication to communities of exactly how the consultation and the process itself would progress. Information from the reports would be related to specific communities, which would be helpful.

Parish councils might wish to express an interest at an early stage. We would expect any parish council which had expressed an interest to be directly represented on the Steering Group.

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?

We consider that excluding parish councils on the grounds that many are not in a position to exercise the General Power of Competence under the Localism Act (2011) sets a dangerous precedent. It excludes those representatives who are closest to the electorate. Many parish councils have a combination of elected and co-opted members. While it is of course desirable that every member is elected, the cost of funding even a single by-election within an electoral cycle is a questionable use of the parish precept. Therefore co-opting local members of the community who have skills and enthusiasm is a pragmatic approach. The majority of members of Seascale Parish Council are elected.

It is worth pointing out that during the course of the consultation a number of parish councils which do not at present qualify for the General Power of Competence will come to do so; some parish councils may for various reasons, particularly in order to benefit from the powers bestowed by the Localism Act, decide to amalgamate or federate with others. Such changes would make parish councils stronger, and since many more will come to exercise new powers it would create resentment among councillors and their electorates to exclude them from the consultation or to relegate them to a less than fully participatory role.

A further point is that parish councils are the most stable and permanent of the tiers of local government. While county or district councils are subject to politically driven boundary change or abolition, or may succumb to economic failure, parish councils remain relatively unchanged. Given the expected timescale of the process this should be recognised.

The consultation document acknowledges the importance of parish councils in the Localism Act and we believe that to comply with the Act the process must honour that.

The key point is that parish councils represent the local electorate most closely and without the support of the local electorate consultations over a siting process for a GDF would be considerably more difficult. The MRWS consultation that came to an end on 30 January 2013 showed how problematic it was for higher-tier authorities to exercise a meaningful mandate on behalf of local people. The county council even acknowledged this at the time. The district council, if it wishes to engage in the consultation and to declare itself in favour of local siting will be in need of allies among parish councils which are also in favour. In making the district council the decision making body, without giving equal voice to parish councils, the process risks alienating crucial local support for the siting process of a GDF and the district council might find it difficult to proceed.

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?

We agree broadly with the approach.

Question 5 – Do you agree with this proposed approach to planning for the geological disposal facility? If not, what alternative approach would you propose and why?

We consider that local planning methods are inappropriate for a national infrastructure project of such size and importance.

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?

This document sets out more clearly the types of waste which would be eligible for disposal in a GDF. It does not rule out MOD weapons waste and seeks to extend the possibilities for overseas waste and spent fuel.

At present international law prohibits the transfer of nuclear material between countries except in very clearly defined circumstances e.g. the importation of spent fuel to be reprocessed and returned to the country of origin (the MOX programme). The extension of this would require a change in international law. An interesting point is raised by the possibility of Scotland's potential independent status.

There is currently strong opposition from the some sectors of the local community to the geological disposal of spent fuel; reprocessing options are favoured, such as a new MOX plant, in order to maintain jobs and skills in West Cumbria and for the economic and recycling benefits. This is likely to continue to be the case for the medium to long term future.

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

The consultation document suggests that communities which have expressed an interest should plan early, during the Learning phase, for the type of schemes they would favour for receiving community benefits. It also suggests setting up a Community Fund and that payments would be made into the fund by the government during the Focusing stage of the consultation. It is not clear how the community fund would be administered or by whom; we would suggest an independent legally established body with community representatives who might not have executive or voting powers.

We favour a benefits package which extends the benefits not only to the host community or communities, but to the entire area. It is important that communities which were opposed to the GDF should not be disadvantaged; there will be new generations of residents and councillors in place by the time the GDF is established and nobody would want resentments to simmer for ever. Consideration must be given to large infrastructure projects which will benefit the whole area, such as improvements in road and rail, and laying National Grid connections underground, as well as to smaller local schemes.

The community should be able to benefit early on in the scheme from projects which alleviate any perceived disadvantages to the area of agreeing to host a GDF, something that was termed "blight" in the previous consultation. Even if the GDF were not constructed the "disadvantage effects" would not disappear immediately.

There is a suggestion in the document that the government would retrieve the funds already allocated and spent if finally the GDF was not constructed. This is unacceptable as it stands. Given the timescale maybe a cut-off date should be established beyond which funds could not be retrieved.

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?

We would agree that these issues are better addressed at an early stage and in conjunction with geological suitability studies. They should be closely focussed on particular communities as well as the wider area.

Question 9 Do you have any other comments?

An issue which was discussed in the previous consultation, 'retrievability', is only briefly mentioned in the document, at 1.32.
We believe retrievability to be important and that it commands public support and we would make the point that it needs to be given greater prominence in the discussion. We suggest that the GDF *must* be constructed so that it could be reopened if necessary.

Agreed at the Parish Council Meeting held on 4 December 2013