

**County Councillor James Airey**

**Conservative Group Leader**

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5<sup>th</sup> December 2013

**Consultation Co-ordinator**

**Department of Energy and Climate Change**

**Area 6A**

**3 Whitehall Place**

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Dear Sir

**Response to the Consultation – Review of the Siting Process for a Geological Disposal Facility**

Please find below the response to your consultation from the Conservative Group of Cumbria County Councillors

Yours sincerely



Cllr James Airey

Conservative Group Leader

County Councillor for Ulverston West

**5<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

## **Summary**

Put simply, the group's position is that it is strongly in favour of supporting the nuclear sector in Cumbria. It would welcome new build nuclear plant at Moorside, adjacent to the current Sellafield facilities. The current legacy waste at Sellafield represents a concern. Over the sixty or so years of operation at Calder Hall, Winscales and now Sellafield, there does not appear to have been a concerted effort to manage the waste and by-products, nor the site in a way that would reassure the public that waste is being contained safely. This must be the highest priority and the background context for any consideration of what then to do with the legacy high level waste.

Once the current legacy waste has been safely contained, the next step, as indicated in the consultation document, must be to place this in a safe and retrievable storage site so that it is secure. Initial work to achieve this is apparent from the Cabinet member's visit to the site in January 2013. We would urge that the timescale and investment in this interim operation is extended to allow sufficient time for any final solution to be determined.

We are not in favour of any repository or disposal facility where the waste can not be retrieved. This is because we believe that the future burden on local communities of having an unmanaged risk, represented by this high level waste, would be an unjustifiable risk. There are too many uncertainties about the long term viability of a GDF, including the technology available, the geological timescales that are being considered, and the irreversible nature should any leakage occur.

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**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.**

In effect, this question asks whether a community be tested to see whether it is prepared to sacrifice its democratic voice to express concerns for ever. We see this as a profoundly disturbing sleight on the democratic process and there are few less palatable precedents of this retrograde move in British history. The reasoning for asking the question is presumably so that a certainty in governmental decision making can be achieved. But as Cumbria County Council's Cabinet reflected on the MRWS report, there has been a significant loss of trust in the government approach to the whole issue of managing radioactive waste. The suggested approach would simply reinforce this perception.

The representative Authority, or community, as defined in this consultation is the District Council. There are a number of flaws in this logic. Firstly, there are Counties in England and Wales that are unitary authorities, metropolitan councils etc where there is no district voice. To compare the geographic and demographic nature of these

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unitaries to the parochial nature of District Councils in Cumbria is illogical.

Secondly, the impact of such a development, throughout both the exploratory and construction phases, as well as operation of the site, would not simply be felt in the immediate vicinity of the works. For example, the vehicle movements alone to remove the volumes of spoil, envisaged in the MRWS report, would change the nature of some communities throughout the County in an untenable way. We have some experience on the West coast area of Cumbria of the impact a relatively small increase of vehicle movements can make to communities. Wood and timber movements, for example, cause repeated concern to communities along the A595 and A596 roads.

The volumes of traffic generated by the GDF construction would make these pale into insignificance.

Our proposal is that any test should be applied equally across the whole country. The community to test is the County community. This usually encompasses a wider geography, has a more strategic perspective, and includes more of the potential stakeholder communities that could be impacted by such a facility.

An appropriate means of testing public support would be a poll of the whole population of the County. The next election is due in 2015 and this could, for example, represent the ideal opportunity to test the appetite for deciding the matter.

**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.**

There are numerous ambiguities in the processes outlined. 'No specific time period' (2.43), that the Government would 'review the progress of the siting process from time to time' (2.43), the use of the term 'local bodies', the lack of 'any requirement for formal community support' (2.48) and so forth. Leave the reader in a position where again there are too many uncertainties. One lesson that we would have hoped would have emerged from the MRWS process is that the fewer the uncertainties, the more likely the community understand what is being asked.

Not having a decision point is convenient for civil servants to manipulate. There is nothing wrong with having a phased approach, but lessons should be learned from other countries. Only those communities where the geology was promising were then asked whether they would be prepared to host a GDF facility. This question presumes that a major undertaking to understand the geology of the UK is undertaken before any community is asked to consider hosting a facility. Recognising this would take some considerable time; a stopgap solution in the interim would buy that time window and allow a more effective communication and engagement strategy to be developed than that which preceded the decision whether to move to stage 4 of MRWS. This latter was

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led by interested parties with both political and personal agendas being followed.

Having a Steering Group and Consultative Partnership approach does further muddy the decision making process whereby it becomes less clear whether it is the host community, the Steering Group or the Consultative Partnership who will ultimately recommend to their community whether they should accept the offer.

**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?**

The roles of the various bodies involved in the siting process do need to be clear. Para 2.65 is the key here. Where a community is being asked a question of such magnitude there does need to be absolute understanding and absolute transparency in the roles. Having too many bodies included could easily become confusing and obfuscate where the actual authority to make decisions lies. This is not to suggest that the roles, as indicated, are in any way inappropriate, but to clearly warn that each body will need to work in an entirely different way during their involvement in the siting process. This again reinforces our recommended approach to have a single body, the County Council, as the only decision making body.

**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 do not have anyone sufficiently qualified to make any technical comment on this question.

There is one area however that we feel is unsettling. In para 3.9 the statement that there is no 'best' or 'most suitable' generic type of geology', does indicate that any development of a GDF would be an unwarranted leap of faith. In effect a gamble with people's environment. This again reinforces the need for a medium to long term retrievable storage solution.

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

Enabling this development to be approached as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project diminishes the significance of the County Council as the body that determines the minerals and waste plan for the area. Cumbria has already seen too many local decisions, on matters such as wind farms, overruled by the Secretary of State, to have faith that such a process would be anything other than the Government driving a national agenda in the face of any local views. If the Government wants to have a NSIP process for determining planning matters for the GDF, then do not pretend that there is any voice for local communities.

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- 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?**

Clarity on the inventory is welcomed. The types and volumes of such material is probably still only a 'best guess' but even this would enlighten the host community to what they could expect. Communication of this with the host community is again vital. The technical nature of this discussion with the host community is however seen as fraught with difficulties. Not least of which is to enable sufficient people to understand what is being asked.

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

Some communities have already experienced decades of blight by acting as host for the nuclear industry. The experience to date in West Cumbria does indicate that there is an unequal negotiating stance favouring the government over the host communities. The benefits seen after sixty years or so in Cumbria are not significant when compared to communities in host communities of similar facilities in other countries. There does have to be a significant indication of goodwill shown by Government to the potential host communities early in the process. The focussing stage is too late. Also, a clear plan outlining the physical and economic benefit that will ensue; a plan for at least the next generation to grasp, would demonstrate that this is in effect an iterative process and not simply a one off token gesture for the host community.

- 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 are broadly in favour of the amended approach, especially supportive of bringing forward the early start to work on the environmental and sustainability appraisal. This support is tempered by our position on the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project regime, and by our previous comments on the nature of the intended investment.

- 9. Do you have any other comments?**

**None**