

Briefing Note

The Partnership's opinion survey



Introduction

The Government says a repository will only be put somewhere where the geology is suitable and there is a community that has volunteered to have it.

The West Cumbria Managing Radioactive Waste Safely Partnership was set up to help Allerdale Borough Council, Copeland Borough Council and Cumbria County Council decide whether or not to take part in the search for a site for a repository, without any commitment to have it.

After examining the issues and talking to local people we have produced a consultation document setting out our initial opinions on a range of issues. We have organised a consultation, which will run until 23rd March 2012, to get people's views before we send our final report to the Councils.

We have developed three 'indicators' so that, after this consultation, we can judge whether our initial opinions are credible given public and stakeholder views. These involve:

- taking into account the range of views received as part of this consultation from across West Cumbria and beyond;
- ensuring we have understood and responded to concerns from the public and stakeholder organisations; and
- a statistically representative opinion survey to find out how many people in the areas covered by Allerdale and Copeland Borough Councils are in favour of entering the siting process compared to how many are against.

What is an opinion survey?

An opinion survey is a poll of public opinion from a sample or sub-set of a particular group or population. Opinion surveys are used to gauge public opinion without having to ask every member of a group or population (in this case everyone in West Cumbria).

How will the survey be conducted?

The details of the survey will be developed once we have appointed a polling company to carry it out early in 2012. We will use a reputable polling company to carry out this work and have hired two expert reviewers to give their views on the survey.

We will use a random telephone survey method, a well established approach which has been proven to give a fairly accurate guide to public opinion. One thousand people will be sampled in each of the areas covered by Allerdale and Copeland Borough Councils. A list of telephone numbers across West Cumbria will be randomly generated so all households have an equal chance of being selected.

The people carrying out the interviews will call each number up to 5 times at different times of the day and over a period of a few weeks to try to ensure a response is received from every number on the list. The number is not called back if someone answers and refuses to participate. As the original list of numbers is random the resulting sample should reflect the wider population.

Statistical theory tells us that with a sample size of 1,000 people (in each borough) there is a 95% chance that the results will be accurate to within approximately +/- 3%. In other words if we ran the survey 100 times, in 95 cases the response to a

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particular question would be within 3 percentage points of the result we would get if everyone in the area was asked that question. This level of accuracy is the industry standard for this type of poll.

The people who are contacted by the interviewers will be asked about their awareness of the MRWS process, whether they support or oppose taking part in the search for somewhere to put a repository and why they hold that view.

Why not do face-to-face interviews?

We considered whether to use a face-to-face survey method (conducting interviews in people's homes). With any polling method there is a risk that the results may not accurately reflect the views of the whole population. For a number of reasons this risk is arguably lower with a face-to-face survey, although it is difficult to say by how much.

However, a face-to-face survey would cost considerably more than a telephone survey (possibly up to three times as much), so we decided a telephone survey is adequate and proportionate given that we are not making a final yes or no decision about having a repository at this stage.

Whichever method was used, if the results of the opinion survey are very close, Partnership members and the Councils that are the Decision Making Bodies, would need to consider the accuracy of the survey method and make a judgement about how confident they were that the results properly reflect public opinion. If the results are very close indeed it may be that it is not possible to confidently state that more people are in favour of one option than the other.

What about people who only have mobile phones?

The proportion of mobile-only households is around 10%. We are aware that the survey methodology will not include these views. However, we believe that there is no inherent reason to suspect that people in mobile-only households will necessarily hold a different view on radioactive waste than people with a landline, so we are content with the approach. We will work with the survey company to enable weighting of the data in ways that ensure the views of young

people are properly represented (as it is often young people that fall into the mobile-only category).

Why are you using net support as an indicator?

Net support basically means the 'yeses' are more than the 'nos' – those who remain neutral or say 'I don't know' are not counted. We chose net support because we think this is an appropriate indicator to use given that at this stage we are discussing whether to enter the siting process. We are not saying a final 'yes' or 'no' to having a repository in West Cumbria.

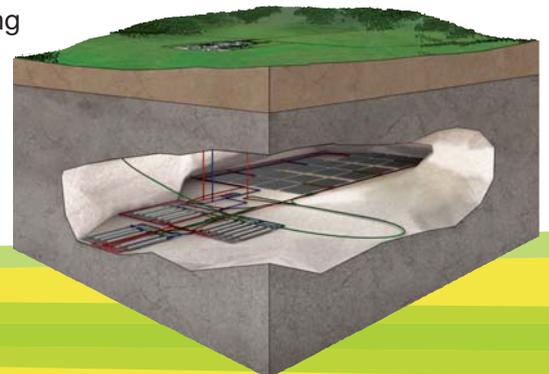
In surveys we have conducted so far, the proportion of people saying they 'don't know' has also been very low (between 2-5%).

Why not hold a referendum

We have discussed this issue at length and concluded that, at this stage in the process, an opinion survey should be used because:

- It avoids the claimed negative features of referendums such as low or unrepresentative turnout, manipulation of views by organised interests, over-simplification of the issues, and the risk of other issues influencing people's responses.
- Although some people have suggested using a referendum, many of them say it should only be carried out when more detail is available, e.g. on impacts, benefits and geology.
- In the limited number of countries where referendums have been used in a volunteer process (Hungary and South Korea), this has only been done at the stage when potential sites have been identified, which is later in the process than we currently are at.

The potential use of referendums and other methods in later stages of the siting process can be kept open for review if a decision to enter the siting process is taken.



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