

Establishing the value of wider public consultation

**A report by
The Future Foundation**

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Executive summary

Original research conducted by the Future Foundation has shown that the public can respond sensibly and intelligently to the complex questions and issues raised about the management of radioactive waste. Furthermore, it has demonstrated genuine interest and demand for information on the part of the public.

There is widespread support among the public for the wider dissemination of information about radioactive waste. The overwhelming majority (90%) of people believe that the general public should be given more information on the subject.

For most people, the issue of radioactive waste is not an everyday concern and, by their own admission, they know little about radioactive waste or nuclear power. However, when the subject is brought to their attention, they recognise the importance of the issue and they are surprised at how little they – and, by extension, the public in general – know about such an important topic.

The public has not consolidated into fixed camps of opinion on the issue of radioactive waste. The focus groups conducted for this report produced an unusually broad spectrum of opinions and responses and the views expressed were often contradictory. This can be explained partly by the fact that people know little about the issue and have never given it much, if any, thought. People's views were fresh, spontaneous and easily changed in the light of other people's comments.

The current low levels of awareness about radioactive waste suggest that any public education strategy needs to start at a fairly rudimentary level. The strategy needs to present the facts and the issues clearly but without oversimplifying them. People are wary of being 'sold' a message and will resist any perceived attempt to anticipate what information they should or should not be given. This is especially the case since the public is currently very suspicious and distrustful of nuclear power and the nuclear industry in general. Any public debate or communications strategy will inevitably operate within an environment of mistrust and suspicion.

People are concerned that information should be accessible to all. At the same time, however, it should not be forced on anyone: *"Information for people if they want to have it."* Television programmes, newspaper articles, and brochures and leaflets are seen as best suited to meet these dual requirements of accessibility and non-intrusiveness.

There is widespread support for greater public involvement in the debate about the future management of radioactive waste. Two thirds of the UK population believe that the general public should be closely involved in the debate (for instance, by attending local meetings or writing to MPs). However, only a quarter of people would wish to be personally involved. There was little agreement with the idea that the public was uninterested or unconcerned – or that the issue of radioactive waste should simply be left to the experts.

The wider dissemination of information was regarded as a prerequisite to increased public participation. Importantly, people regard the current low level of public knowledge as a reason for them to be given more information, not as a reason for the public to be excluded from the debate.

There was a common feeling that, whilst the public should be given information and should be closely involved in the debate, the final decisions about radioactive waste should be made on its behalf by representative bodies. It is unrealistic, however, to expect the public to put their entire trust in any such representative bodies – because it is impossible to trust anyone completely. A more realistic goal is for these organisations to be accountable to the public and open to public scrutiny.

It was suggested that accountability and scrutiny of the management of radioactive waste could be achieved through a number of key measures:

- **The dissemination of information into the public domain**
Even if individual members of the public didn't scrutinise the data, they could be confident that someone else – other members of the public, organisations such as Greenpeace, or the media – would be able to do it on their behalf. In terms of reassuring the public, the fact that information was being put into the public domain was, in many ways, as important as the actual contents of the information.
- **A cross-section of interested parties to have a say in the future management of radioactive waste**
No single organisation should have the whole say in the debate or the decision-making process because no one group or organisation can be totally objective. An adversarial set-up was felt to be the best way of getting to the 'truth', of balancing out the vested interests of the different parties. There was widespread support for the Government, the nuclear industry, academic/university scientists and environmental campaign groups to be involved.
- **A credible, independent watchdog to oversee the management of radioactive waste**
The most popular measure to increase confidence in the nuclear industry was regulation by an independent watchdog. The idea was supported by three-fifths of the population. The watchdog should be funded by the nuclear industry but should not be answerable to it. A crucial argument put forward was that the watchdog would achieve its independence by incorporating the cross-section of interested parties that respondents had already identified as crucial to ensuring integrity and effective scrutiny.

There are low levels of awareness of Nirex among the UK public. Only 2% of people were able to mention it spontaneously. People expressed differing views on the future role of Nirex – but there was widespread agreement that its position and effectiveness is fatally compromised by the fact that it is owned by the industry. It was recognised that any communications strategy launched by Nirex would be greeted by suspicion and distrust – but, nevertheless, it was felt that Nirex should *"keep plugging away"*.

Introduction

Since our inception in 1996, the Future Foundation has been researching public attitudes towards a range of complex issues such as the nature of corporate responsibility and the motivations for charitable giving and ethical consumption. When we first started working with Nirex, we realised that the issues surrounding the management of radioactive waste present degrees of complexity in terms of unravelling public attitudes that were beyond even our previous experience. Because of the enormous time spans and the uncertainty of the science involved, as well as the dire consequences of making the wrong decisions, these were issues that required more than the usual degrees of concentration and thought – both on our part and on the part of the respondents in the original research that we conducted.

We were enthusiastic about the project because the transformation that Nirex is attempting is in tune with our views about how organisations should behave – namely, that all organisations should be open and transparent about every aspect of their aims and activities and that this is the only basis on which trust can be built with citizens and consumers in the modern age. The very act of consulting with wider stakeholder groups – in this case, the public – is central to good business practice now and in the future.

We agreed three key objectives for the project with Nirex:

- To establish that it is possible to consult the UK public about the complex and serious issues involved in the management of radioactive waste;
- To develop a reliable and repeatable research methodology which will allow Nirex to gauge public opinion on a regular basis as it moves forward with its plans for the wider dissemination of information to the public; and
- To explore the level of information, the channels of communication and the regulatory framework that is most likely to engender trust amongst the public and to create a positive environment for decision-making about the management of radioactive waste in the future.

The research findings in this report are specific to the issues of the management of radioactive waste. However, we believe that they are relevant to a far wider constituency – in the context of the perceived necessity of rebuilding public trust in what has been described as the current ‘the culture of fear’, in which concerns and opinions about health and environmental issues can be rapidly fanned by the media and politicians. The response from the members of the public involved in our research suggests that they are the best qualified to speak on their own behalf. We hope that Nirex's brave move in instigating this exercise will set an example to other regulatory bodies who would do well to involve the public in their decision-making processes.

1. Research methodology

1.1 Details of the research

The Future Foundation conducted original research to examine people's attitudes towards radioactive waste and their knowledge of the issues and organisations involved in its management.

There were two stages of original research – a qualitative stage and a quantitative stage. The qualitative stage involved eight focus group discussions with members of the public. The groups were mixed sex, spread across the socio-economic groups and varied by age and by whether or not people had children living at home with them. The groups were conducted in: Putney, Osterley, Oldham, Newcastle and Edinburgh. They were held in April and May 2000.

The quantitative stage involved survey research with a nationally representative sample of the UK population. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 1035 people. The survey questionnaire was devised by the Future Foundation. The fieldwork was then conducted on its behalf by Public Attitude Surveys Ltd in August 2000.

Unless otherwise stated, the data and findings cited in this report come from the original research for this project. Verbatim quotations from the focus group discussions are given in italics.

1.2 The benefits of the methodologies

Qualitative and quantitative research methods offer different benefits and can be used in conjunction to provide a comprehensive understanding of public attitudes and awareness. While focus groups, with their open-ended conversation, are the best means of understanding the breadth and complexity of attitudes and knowledge among the general public, survey research is required to tell us the precise number of people who hold a particular opinion or who know a particular piece of information.

Survey research can be repeated over time to allow us to measure any shifts in public attitudes or awareness – and, therefore, to benchmark the impact of any public communications strategy that might be launched by Nirex or the wider nuclear industry.

At the start of the focus group discussions, respondents were asked for their spontaneous attitudes towards and knowledge of radioactive waste. They were then given prompt material that explained the often complex issues and facts involved in the management of radioactive waste. This allowed a more in-depth discussion of the issues than would otherwise have been possible. (The danger, of course, lies in the possibility of the prompt material being too subjective and thus biasing the responses of the groups.) In four group discussions, the prompt material was a fifteen-minute

video that had been prepared specifically for the occasion by Nirex and The Future Foundation. In the other four discussions, the prompt material was a printed text that had been adapted from the latest draft of Nirex's proposed brochure. Respondents were encouraged to give their views on the information that they had been given: what was new to them, what they did or didn't believe, what they did or didn't understand, and whether or not the information had altered their understanding and attitudes. The focus groups allowed us, therefore, to 'product test' potential channels of communication.

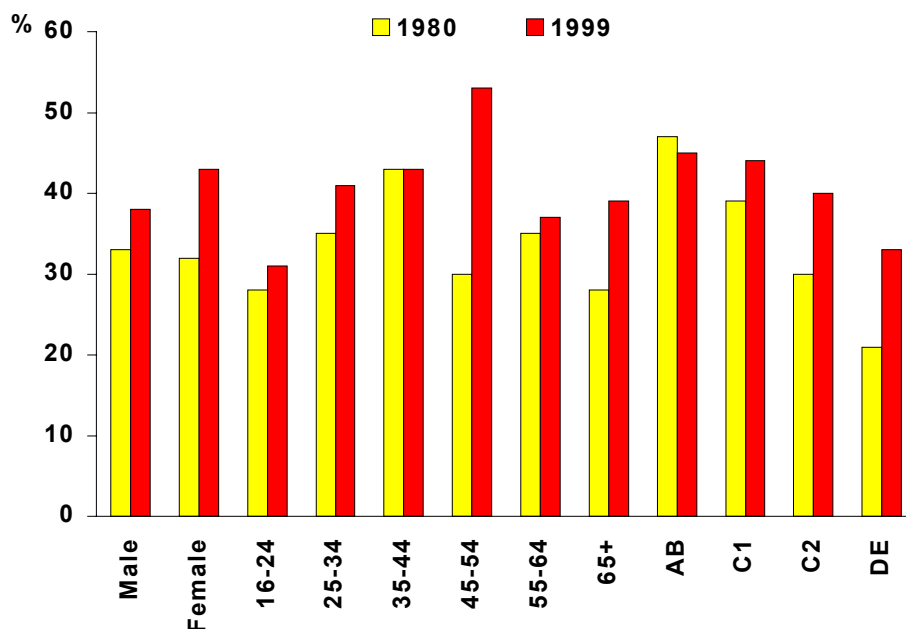
The two stages of research have proven that the public can respond sensibly and intelligently to the very complex questions and issues raised on the subject of radioactive waste. The qualitative research provided valuable insights into the complicated, often contradictory, views and feelings that people have towards the subject. At the same time, we have found that it is possible to use established and recognised quantitative methods to assess public attitudes, albeit at a relatively superficial level compared with the qualitative research. We feel confident that this has established a repeatable benchmark for the examination of public attitudes and awareness.

2. Awareness and information

2.1 Increased public concern about the environment

People regard radioactive waste as an environmental issue – as a potential threat to people’s health and to the natural environment. Previous research by the Future Foundation has shown rising levels of concern about the environment in general over the past two decades, with an increasing share of the UK population claiming to be concerned about what they can do to protect the environment and natural resources (Chart 2.1).

Chart 2.1: % who are concerned about what they can do to protect the environment and natural resources



Source: *'Changing Lives', The Future Foundation/Taylor Nelson/AGB*

Although the strength of support for environmental causes is prone to economic peaks and troughs, there is, nevertheless, a ratchet effect over time and environmental concerns are established firmly in the mainstream of public debate. Realistically, however, concern about the environment is secondary in most people’s minds – and in the minds of most politicians and media commentators – to more immediate and everyday concerns such as healthcare, education and the fear of crime.

2.2 Low spontaneous awareness of radioactive waste

In the focus groups conducted for this report, people were asked to list the most important issues that face society as a whole in the 21st Century. While many respondents included ‘the environment’ in their list of concerns, hardly anyone made

spontaneous mention of radioactive waste. Among the few who did, none gave it a prominent place in their list of concerns. When prompted, most people admitted that they had never given much, if any, thought to the matter.

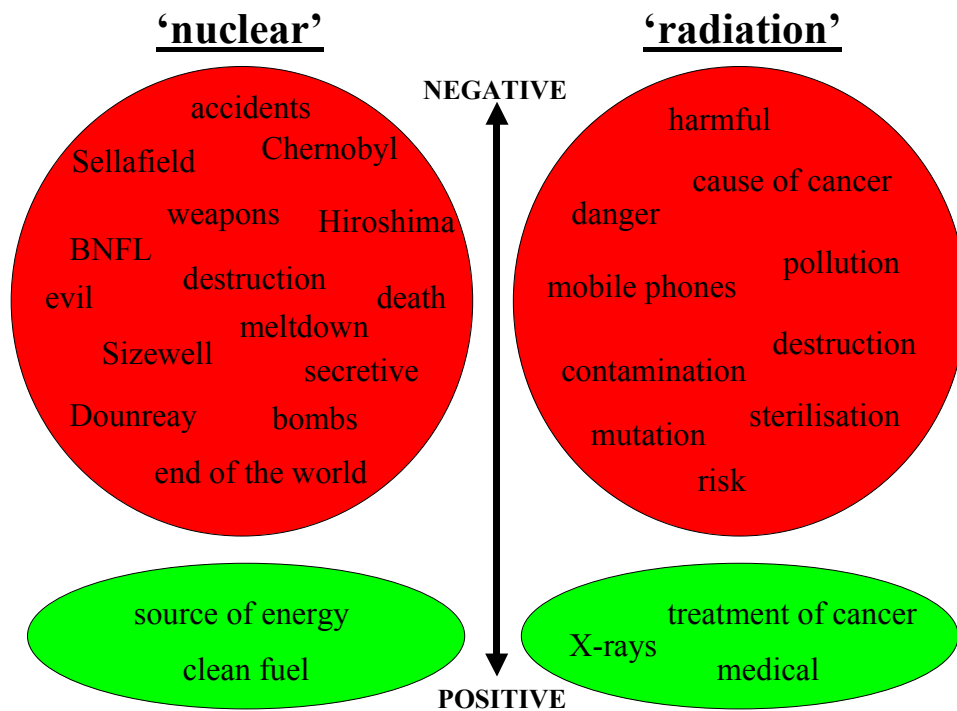
When asked, people freely admitted that they knew little about radioactive waste or nuclear power. Most people did not distinguish in their conversation between ‘radioactive waste’, ‘nuclear waste’, ‘radiation’, ‘nuclear power’ and, even, ‘nuclear weapons’. They blurred the terms and, by their own admission, knew little about any of them.

Without claiming much knowledge on the subject, people expressed a strong but ill-defined mistrust of nuclear power. The words and phrases that they used in association with the terms ‘nuclear’ and ‘radiation’ were mostly negative and they only came up with positive associations when prompted (Chart 2.2).

“I don’t know a lot about it [nuclear power] but I don’t like it, I don’t like the idea of it. There seem to be too many mistakes and too much leaking into the air.”

The major influence on people’s thinking was an awareness of the far-reaching consequences of the Chernobyl disaster. People had a sense that the processes and materials involved in the generation of nuclear power were dangerous but they had only a vague idea of what the actual danger was – which only served to fuel their dread. Nuclear power and radiation were regarded as an ‘invisible menace’.

Chart 2.2 Words and phrases associated with the terms ‘nuclear’ and ‘radiation’



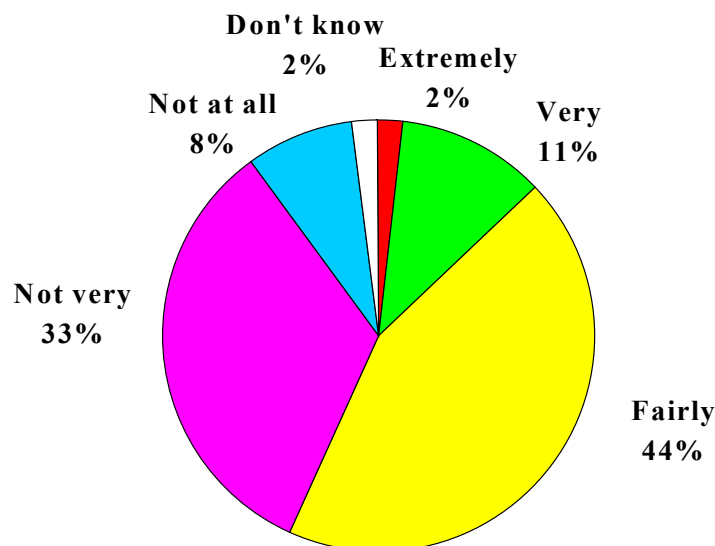
Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

Similarly, people don't know much about the nuclear industry but feel that they know enough to be cynical and suspicious. The industry was seen to be untrustworthy and underhand in its behaviour. There was a widespread belief, for instance, that the industry was dumping radioactive waste in the ground or at sea without the public's consent or knowledge – and this belief was particularly strong among the respondents in Edinburgh. People said that the nuclear industry was only ever brought to their attention by the media or by campaign groups when something went wrong.

“The only time you ever hear about anything, it's bad. An explosion, a crash. It's not surprising that people are so cynical.”

In the survey research, only 13% of the UK population expressed strong confidence in the nuclear industry to operate in the best interests of society. A larger share – roughly two-fifths of the population – claimed to be 'not very' or 'not at all' confident in the industry (Chart 2.3).

Chart 2.3: Confidence in the nuclear industry to operate in the best interests of society



Source: *Nirex, The Future Foundation 2000*

It is worth bearing in mind that the original research for this report was conducted in spring and summer 2000, during a period of intense and adverse publicity about BNFL and safety standards in the nuclear industry. Considering the timing, it is perhaps surprising that respondents were not more negative in their attitudes towards nuclear power and radioactive waste.

2.3 The need for information that is clearly presented

The low levels of awareness about radioactive waste suggest that any public education strategy needs to start at a fairly rudimentary level. These are complex issues and need to be communicated clearly. Without a basic understanding, people will be unable to participate fully in the debate about the future management of radioactive waste.

Once respondents in the focus groups had expressed their spontaneous awareness and attitudes, they were given prompt material – a video in half the groups, a printed text in the other half – that explained the issues with regard to radioactive waste. There was a great deal in the prompt material that was new to people, which is unsurprising given that they had already admitted to knowing little about the subject. Many respondents expressed surprise at how little of the information about radioactive waste had been known to them, especially since, now that it had been brought to their attention, they recognised the issue as being important to society.

“Reading through this [the brochure], I was surprised at how little I knew about the subject.”

No one claimed to have had any trouble following the information presented in the prompt material. The subsequent conversation suggested that people had indeed been able to follow much of what they watched in the video or read in the text. However, there were aspects of the science and the organisational structure of the nuclear industry that remained unclear in people’s minds – but it is difficult to say how much this was due to people’s incomprehension or to the inadequacies of the prompt material. After all, there was only so much information that could be packed into the available space: the video lasted only fifteen minutes and the text was only a dozen pages.

2.4 ‘Incomplete’ information is regarded with suspicion

There was a widespread feeling among respondents in the focus groups that, although the prompt material (both the video and the text) had managed to convey a great deal of information, it hadn’t told ‘the whole story’. They felt that the prompt material didn’t provide enough facts or figures and that it raised issues but didn’t address them in suitable depth.

“It’s an eye-opener. But it only scratches the surface.”

“At the end of the day, you’ve still got no idea of the size of the problem.”

People were quick to latch onto any perceived gaps in the information given and to attribute these gaps to deliberate evasiveness on Nirex’s part. (There was no attempt to disguise the origin of the prompt material. Both the video and the text had been introduced to respondents as being produced by Nirex.) People assumed that they weren’t being given enough information because Nirex didn’t want them to know ‘the truth’. No one was willing to give Nirex the benefit of the doubt. Respondents resisted

any suggestions that Nirex might have kept facts and figures to a minimum so that the video and text would be more digestible to a non-scientific audience or because there was only so much detail that could be packed into the available space.

The sceptical – and sometimes hostile – response to the prompt material suggests that any public communications strategy needs to present data and issues clearly but without oversimplifying them. People want to feel as much as possible that they have been given ‘the whole story’ rather than having been ‘sold’ a particular message. They resent any attempt to anticipate what information they should or should not be given.

For instance, a paragraph that explained radioactivity was regarded as crucial, even though people, by their own admission, might only skim over such a paragraph and might not fully understand the scientific details. It would be good for Nirex – or any other organisation – to be seen to be making the effort to explain the science fully, rather than simply assuming that the public didn’t need to know.

“It would be more reassuring if it was in there, even if I didn’t understand it. At least it would be in there and you could read about it if you wanted to.”

Respondents wanted the prompt material to be ‘more focused’ – to be grounded in facts and figures. And they wanted the facts and figures to be represented in charts and diagrams as well as being part of a text. Such pictorial representation was considered by many to be easier to understand. Also, it showed the facts and figures in their ‘pure’ form, without the selectivity or bias that was possible when facts and figures were dropped into a text.

“I want somebody’s name next to these figures. It’s very easy to say these things but I want to know who came up with the numbers, how they got there.”

People wanted data to be presented in terms that they could understand – and they recognised that different methods of presentation work better for different people. For example, most people find it difficult to conceive the current volumes of radioactive waste in storage when they are expressed in terms of cubic metres. Nevertheless, people would still want these figures to be included (“*for those who want it*”) in any communications. At the same time, the quantities should be presented in more digestible terms – as pie charts or in terms of football pitches or double-decker buses.

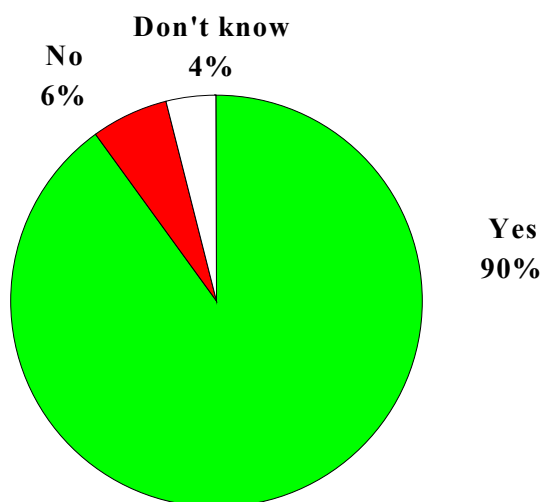
Any key data should be presented in a number of ways to make them accessible to as many people as possible. There is a demand both for a straightforward, ‘dry’ statement of facts (which people might not pay attention to but which offers a reassurance of openness) and for a more accessible – probably pictorial – illustration of the facts.

2.5 Many people want information

The overwhelming majority (90%) of people believe that the general public should be given more information about radioactive waste (Chart 2.4). To a degree, of course, this is probably wishful thinking – it’s all very well to talk in abstract terms about the

need for the general public to be involved but would individuals themselves want to be given information? Evidence of genuine interest on the part of the UK population came at the end of the quantitative survey, when two-thirds of respondents said that they would like to receive any literature that Nirex might produce in the future. This was a strikingly positive response given that people were asked the question towards the end of a face-to-face interview and, for all they knew, a positive response to the question might lead directly to a leaflet or brochure being sent to them.

Chart 2.4: Should the general public be given more information about radioactive waste?



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

When respondents in the focus groups were asked what information they would like to be given about radioactive waste, they tended towards practical details:

- How much is there?
- How long does it last?
- What does it look like?

Above all, the question that they really wanted answered was: how dangerous is the waste? And more specifically, if the waste was dumped in their back yard, would it be harmful?

“I want to know specifics. ‘In a hundred or a hundred thousand years, a little piece would do this much damage.’”

“Does one line of bricks stop the radiation from coming out or does it take four foot of lead?”

If the question of public risk wasn't being answered – or, as many felt, if it wasn't even being addressed by the prompt material – then people assumed the worst. They

assumed that they weren't being told because Nirex didn't want them to know (or, perhaps more worryingly, because Nirex itself didn't know the answer).

The desire for practical information was confirmed by the survey research, where respondents were asked to choose from a list of topics about radioactive waste that would be of interest to them (Chart 2.5).

Chart 2.5: Information respondents would be interested in (prompted)

Where the radioactive waste is kept at the moment	86%
Who is looking after the radioactive waste	83%
How much radioactive waste is being produced	81%
How much radioactive waste there is in existence	80%
The options for managing the radioactive waste	78%
What other countries are doing about their radioactive waste	77%
What radiation is	75%
How energy is created from nuclear power	63%
None of the above	7%

Source: *Nirex, The Future Foundation 2000*

Encouragingly, there was a high level of interest expressed in all the suggested areas of information, with only 7% of respondents saying that they would not be interested in anything.

3. Communicating with the public

3.1 People want communications that are accessible but not intrusive

A variety of views were expressed by respondents in the focus groups on how an organisation such as Nirex should best go about communicating the issues to the public. These views were then quantified in the survey research.

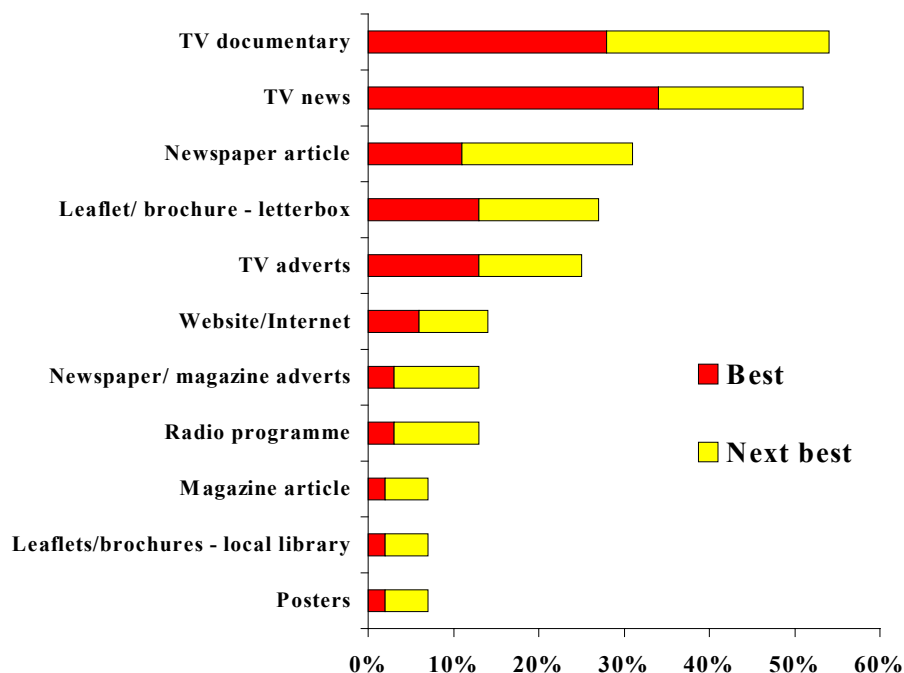
There was a widespread concern that information should be made accessible to all. This meant that information needed to be actively ‘put out’ into the public domain. An annual report that was available on written request would not, for instance, meet the requirement for easy accessibility.

At the same time, people did not want information to be forced on anyone. For some, even a leaflet through the letterbox would be intrusive and unwelcome.

“Information for people if they want to have it. It shouldn’t be forced on people. Accessible to everyone. And at the moment, I don’t think it is.”

For many people, information communicated via the television was best suited to these dual requirements of accessibility and non-intrusiveness: everyone had access to a television and people were free to choose whether or not they watched a particular programme. This support for the television as a means of communication was borne out in the survey research (Chart 3.1).

Chart 3.1: Best methods that Nirex could use to communicate information



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

Some people felt that the Internet was a suitable medium since a web site address could be advertised for the benefit of those who wanted to know more about the subject but would not impinge on those who took no interest. However, other people objected strongly to the use of the Internet on the grounds that it was not universally accessible.

“They would have to bring the information to you, put it through your door or put it on the television. Because if you put it on a website, there’s a lot of people who don’t have access to the Internet.”

Others said that Nirex should consider adverts on television or in newspapers that provide a web site address or a telephone number for people who want to know more.

Most people agreed that a leaflet or brochure explaining the issues would be a good start. For some people, such material should only be available in public libraries – for those who want it. However, as we have already seen, two-thirds of respondents in the quantitative survey said that they would personally like to be sent literature if Nirex produced it.

Many respondents in the focus groups conceded that they would probably not read such a leaflet even if it came through their letterbox. Nevertheless, they argued, the fact that Nirex was making the effort to communicate would be valuable in itself. The fact that information was being put into the public domain would, in many ways, be as important as the actual contents of the information. It would show that the nuclear industry was prepared to open itself to external scrutiny.

It is worth noting that, during the focus groups, the printed text appeared to work better than the video as prompt material for discussion of the issues. It offered a more ‘neutral’ medium for the issues. The pages of text gave respondents a stronger sense of control over the material because they were able to read things at their own speed and to re-read bits that they weren’t sure about. By contrast, viewers of the video felt themselves to be a passive audience, with no control over the delivery of its contents, and they had a greater sense of being manipulated, of being ‘sold’ a message.

3.2 Independent editorial coverage is important

The popularity of television and, to a lesser degree, newspapers as a means of communication stems partly from the perception that the issues would receive an additional level of scrutiny before being presented to the public. If journalists were seen to have had access to the relevant data and to have drawn their own conclusions, it would offer evidence that the industry was genuinely prepared to make itself open and accountable.

During four of the focus groups, respondents were shown a video explaining the issues around radioactive waste. The two presenters in the video were employees of Nirex. Many respondents had an adverse reaction to these presenters, partly because

they were not professional, polished performers and partly because they were seen to be biased and untrustworthy mouthpieces for the nuclear industry. Some respondents felt that the message of the video would have been far more effective if delivered by a professional presenter or known personality. The suggestions made were people such as Carol Vorderman, Jon Snow and Richard Branson. The benefit of such people, it was argued, would be that they are able to communicate and would be entertaining to watch – but also that they are perceived to be trustworthy people who would only get involved in something that was above board. They would bring an additional level of scrutiny – and, crucially, external scrutiny – to the subject matter.

“It would be better as a Horizon documentary.”

A paradox was apparent in people’s attitudes to the media. On the one hand, people are deeply cynical about what they read in the newspapers and, to a lesser degree, about what they hear and see on the television and radio. The media are seen to be unduly influenced by commercial demands and by the vested interests of owners and stakeholders and are not independent, objective voices. At the same time, however, respondents, by their own admission, would believe whatever they were told by certain personalities such as Carol Vorderman. They happily admitted that they would watch a presentation by Ms Vorderman and believe what they were told without questioning who had written the script and made the film. So, there was a strange blend of cynicism and self-confessed gullibility in people’s attitudes.

As a further illustration of the importance of independent editorial coverage, respondents in the focus groups said that they would be keener to receive a brochure or leaflet that had been jointly produced by Nirex and Greenpeace rather than one that had been produced by Nirex alone. The involvement of two interested parties would ensure that neither could make untrue claims without the other being able to object.

3.3 Communications don’t need to target specific groups

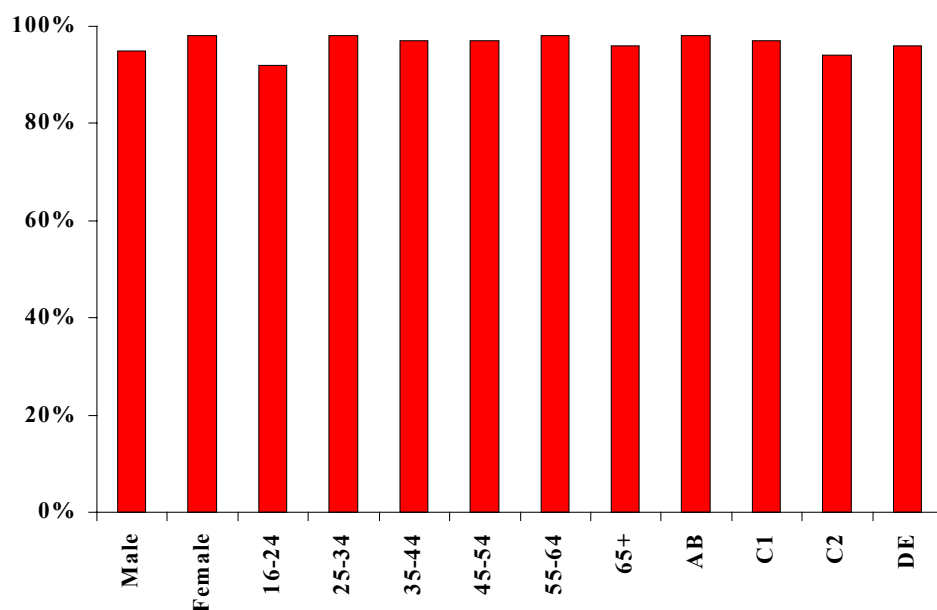
The quantitative survey research showed few major differences between the various demographic groups – between the different sexes, age groups, socio-economic groups or regions of the UK – in terms of knowledge about or attitudes towards radioactive waste. Charts 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate the general lack of differences.

There were some minor differences. For instance, it was found that:

- a slightly higher proportion of women than men claimed to be concerned about radioactive waste and to be interested in all types of information on the matter;
- the 16-24 and the over-65 age groups were generally less keen to be personally involved and less keen to receive information than the rest of the adult population;
- a greater number of those in higher socio-economic groups were interested in receiving information.

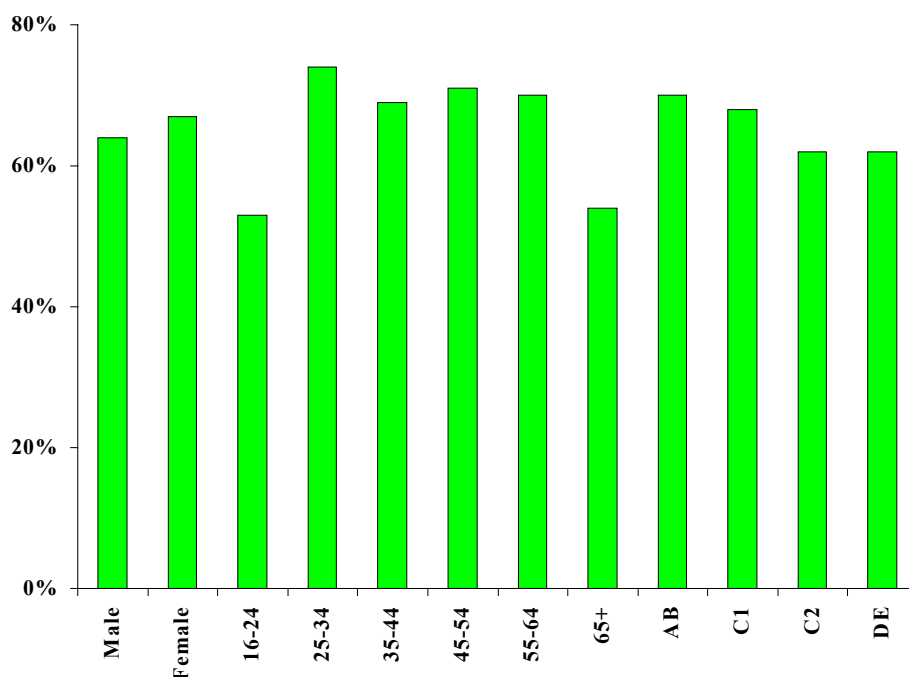
However, the differences should not be overstated.

Chart 3.2 Importance of the management of radioactive waste to society as a whole - % agree very /quite important



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

Chart 3.3 If Nirex produced literature about radioactive waste, would you like it to be sent to you?



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

Similarly, the focus group discussions produced an unusually broad spectrum of opinions and responses – unusual, that is, by the standards of focus groups on other subjects. However, as in the quantitative stage, there was no clear division of attitudes

along demographic lines. The unusual diversity of attitudes can be explained partly by the fact that respondents, by their own admission, knew little about the subject matter. The views that they were expressing were fresh, spontaneous, ill-thought out and easily changed in the light of other people's comments. People hadn't given much, if any, thought to the issues beforehand. They did not, therefore, have strong, fixed views. This would seem to suggest that the public has not consolidated into fixed camps of opinion on the issue of radioactive waste – partly through lack of knowledge about the issues involved and partly through simply not having given any thought to the issues. And certainly no fixed camps of opinion have formed along demographic lines.

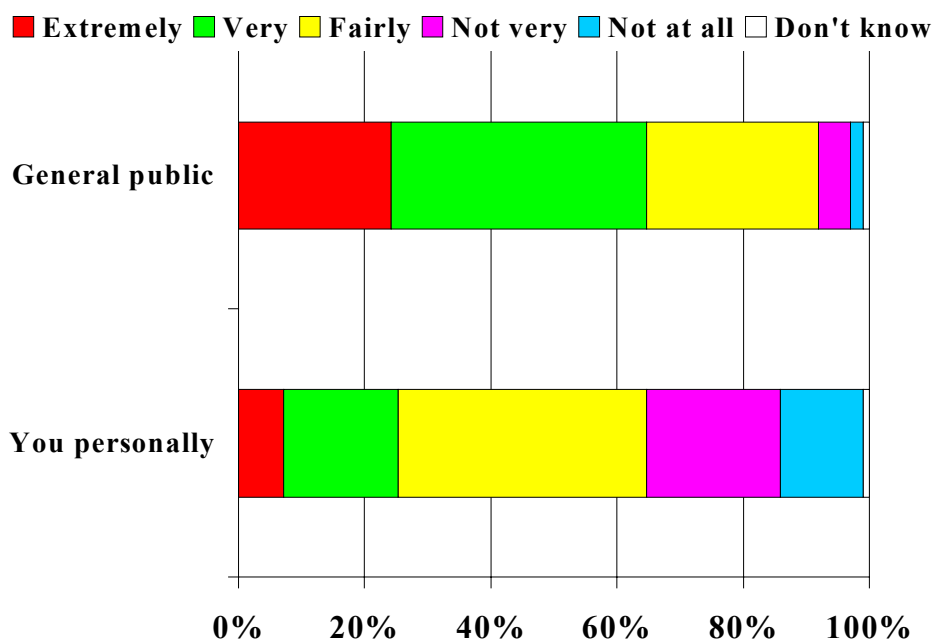
The lack of clear demographic differences suggests that a communications strategy – at this rudimentary level of public education – would not need to target specific groups but could address the population as a single audience.

4. Public participation in the debate about radioactive waste

4.1 Widespread support for the idea of public voice in the debate

Two thirds of the UK population believe that the general public should be closely involved in the debate about the management of radioactive waste – by, for instance, attending local meetings or writing to MPs. However, only a quarter of people would themselves wish to be closely involved (Chart 4.1).

Chart 4.1: How much do you think that the general public should be involved in the debate about the management of radioactive waste (e.g. attend local meetings, write to MP)? And how much would you personally like to be involved?



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

Most respondents in the focus groups said that, having viewed and discussed the prompt material, they now considered the issue to be much more important than they had previously. They were confident that public awareness of the issues could be raised over time and the public would get more involved in the debate about radioactive waste.

People themselves regard the lack of public understanding as the major obstacle to full participation in the debate about the management of radioactive waste. In the quantitative survey, people were given a list of reasons for the public not to be involved in the debate (Chart 4.2). There was highest agreement with the idea that members of the public should be excluded because they didn't know enough. There

was little agreement, on the other hand, with the idea that the public was simply uninterested or unconcerned – or that the issue of radioactive waste should simply be left to the experts.

Chart 4.2: Best reasons why the general public should not be involved in the debate about the management of radioactive waste - % agree with reasons given

	Best	2nd best	Two best
The public doesn't know enough about the issues	42%	23%	65%
The public doesn't understand the science	23%	28%	51%
It should be left to the experts	11%	11%	22%
The public just aren't interested enough	7%	8%	14%
It's too big an issue for the public to think about	5%	9%	14%
It's only an issue for the people who live near to where the waste is being stored	2%	5%	7%
The public have other things to worry about in their daily lives	3%	3%	6%

Source: *Nirex, The Future Foundation 2000*

The wider dissemination of information is seen, therefore, as a prerequisite to public debate. The fact that people don't currently know very much about the issues is not a reason for them to be excluded from the debate. Rather, it is a reason for them to be given more information.

4.2 Recognition that there are limits to public participation – but local residents will get involved

There were differing views in the group discussions on the ability of the public to grasp the issues and the degree to which the public should be involved. This in itself is an important finding – the public is willing and able to discuss sensibly its own role in the debate.

“Don't ask my opinion on something I know nothing about.”

“We should all be involved in deciding what happens to it.”

Most people agreed that there were limits to how involved the general public could ever be in the decision-making process and the management of radioactive waste. The public could never know enough about the issues – and certainly never as much as

the experts – and such important decisions should be taken by representative bodies rather than being subject to public whim.

“It has to be decided by the experts rather than a poll in The Sun.”

Furthermore, people were realistic enough to recognise that radioactive waste would never be an everyday concern for most people. For many, it would only truly assume importance when it became a tangible, local issue. A general conclusion reached in the group discussions was that the public would always ultimately have a say in the issue of radioactive waste because it would always come down to a local planning issue, subject to a public enquiry. (Following on from this, respondents recognised that the industry faced an intractable problem because no one would ever want the radioactive waste to end up in their back yard. This in turn made people cynical about the idea of public consultation – what was the point of consulting the public when, realistically, no one in their right mind would ever want the waste to be stored or ‘dumped’ in their local area?)

There was a common feeling, however, that members of the public should certainly be kept informed even if they did not have the final say in the matter. The decision-making process should, therefore, be open and transparent and the issues and arguments should be easily accessible to anyone who was interested. The representative bodies should be accountable to the public for the decisions that they take on its behalf.

5. Building trust in the future

5.1 Accountability and scrutiny, rather than trust, are realistic goals

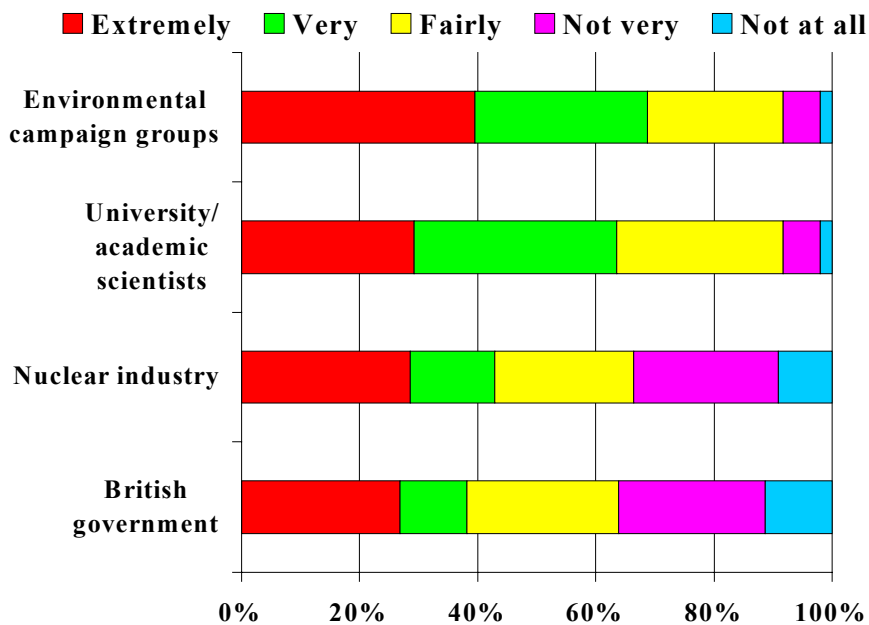
To a degree, therefore, the public recognises the need to entrust the decision-making process to representative bodies. At the same time, however, there is a widespread feeling that it is impossible to trust anyone completely.

“You’re in a situation where you’d probably only trust Mother Teresa.”

“At the end of the day, you have to trust them, don’t you? What other choice have you got?”

The survey research showed that the public has some faith in the reliability and honesty in the people or organisations that might be involved in the decision-making process but that this faith is far from complete (Chart 5.1).

Chart 5.1: Reliability and honesty of these organisations as a source of information about radioactive waste



Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

It is certainly not enough for the representative bodies simply to say “Trust us”. In fact, nothing was more likely to breed distrust, especially since the nuclear industry and the government were seen to have a track record of dishonesty. Trust in the people who dealt with radioactive waste was not, therefore, regarded as a realistic goal.

Instead, the goal should be accountability and scrutiny. At some point the public needed to stand back and entrust the decision-making to the experts but these experts should be accountable to the public and open to public scrutiny.

It was suggested that accountability and scrutiny could be achieved through a number of measures:

- **putting more information in the public domain**
- **involving a cross-section of interested parties**
- **establishing a credible, independent watchdog**

We will go on to look at each of these measures in turn – whilst recognising that they are closely linked with one another.

5.2 Putting more information in the public domain

As we have already seen, the wider dissemination of information is regarded as a crucial prerequisite to public accountability. The information should be presented in digestible form, to make it suitable for public consumption, but without oversimplifying the facts and the issues. If an organisation such as Nirex provided facts and figures, then the public had something to hold on to. The figures could be scrutinised and if they were found to be false, then those responsible could be held accountable.

“Facts. Something where you can say, ‘That’s true’ or ‘That’s not true.’”

In the focus groups, individual respondents admitted that they themselves might not scrutinise the data but they were confident that someone else – either other members of the public, organisations such as Greenpeace or the media – would do it on their behalf.

People wanted facts and figures that were attributable to someone – to individual scientists or, at least, to particular organisations. Without individuals or organisations being named, there was felt to be insufficient accountability. One respondent in the focus groups suggested that he should be able to phone directly the scientist who has produced the computer simulations and have his questions answered.

“I want somebody’s name next to these figures. It’s very easy to say these things but I want to know who came up with the numbers, how they got there.”

Some respondents said that they would like to know more about those people and organisations in positions of trust. They would like to know, for instance, who sat on the boards of the organisations involved and what part they played in the decision-making process. The phrasing used in the prompt material to explain Nirex’s status – ‘owned by the nuclear industry and controlled by the government’ – was felt by many

to be unclear and evasive. What, they wanted to know, was meant by ownership and control? What exactly were the lines of command and accountability between Nirex and its masters? Did Nirex enjoy any independence from the industry and government? With this question in mind, some respondents said that they would like to know who was on the board of Nirex and what other positions, if any, these individuals held in the industry or the government.

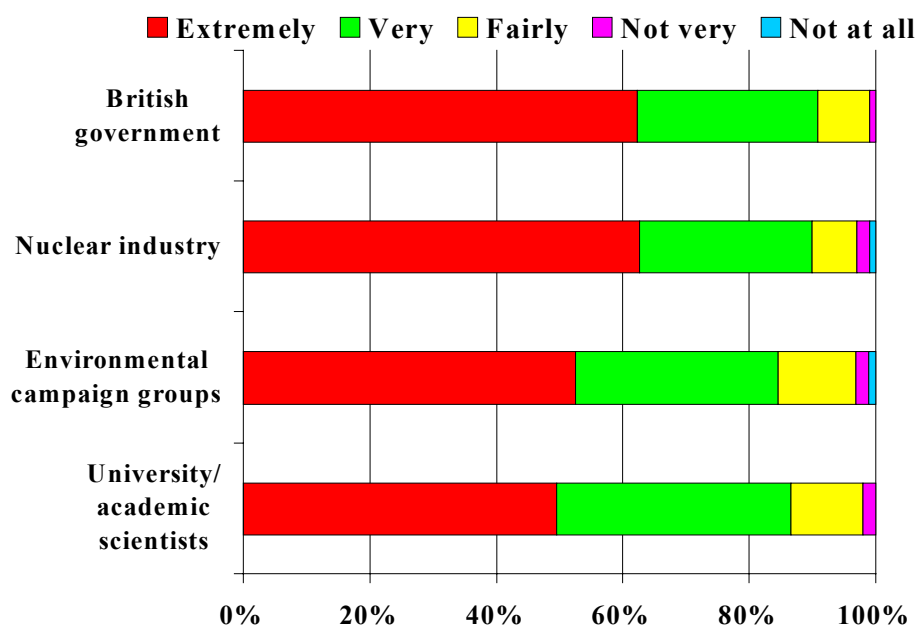
Many people said that they would like to know what research was currently being carried out by the nuclear industry. In particular, what were the scientists at Nirex working on? As part of the general desire for facts and figures, respondents wanted to hear the specific details of their research and the expenditure involved. One respondent suggested a timeline showing what Nirex aimed to have done by a certain date. Other respondents agreed enthusiastically with this. At least people would then be able to see if the proposed timetable hadn't been kept to. Such a measure was seen as one of the ways of pinning the industry down.

5.3 Involving a cross-section of interested parties

A common theme to emerge from the group discussions was the need for a cross-section of interested parties to be closely involved in the debate about radioactive waste. This would bring integrity and effective scrutiny to the decision-making process. An adversarial set-up was felt to be the best way of getting to the 'truth', of balancing out the vested interests of the different parties. No single organisation should have the whole say in the decision-making because no one group or organisation can be totally objective. The more organisations that were involved in discussing the issues, the less easy it was for any one organisation to hide or distort the 'truth'. (In support of the idea of a cross-section of interests, some respondents cited the example of Parliamentary cross-party committees, which were felt to be the most effective and trustworthy element in the current government structure, able, to a degree, to circumnavigate the short-term, narrow interests of political parties and to work towards a 'greater good'. They were seen as the best means of uncovering truths that the governing executive might prefer to keep hidden.)

The idea of a cross-section of interests was borne out by the quantitative research, where respondents were asked which organisations should be involved in the debate about the management of radioactive waste. There was widespread support for each of the organisations suggested to be involved, with no single organisation put forward to the exclusion of the others (Chart 5.2).

Chart 5.2: Extent to which these organisations should be involved in the debate about the management of radioactive waste



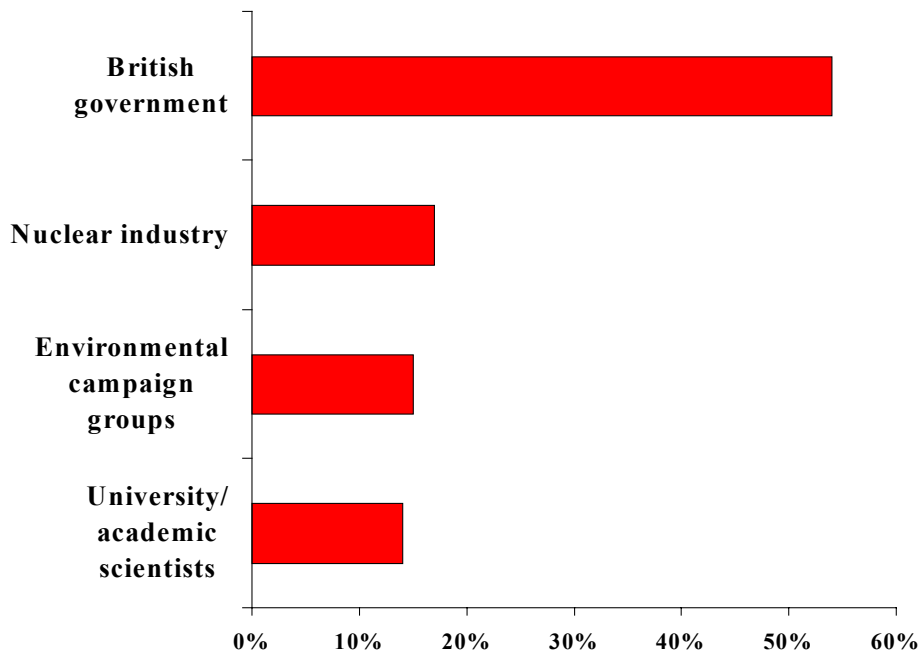
Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

The different organisations were each seen to possess good qualities that necessitated their inclusion in the debate. At the same time, they also possessed bad qualities that needed to be balanced out by the involvement of the other organisations.

(i) The Government

In most people's minds, the Government has an undoubted role to play. If only one organisation was allowed the final say on the issue of radioactive waste, the majority of the UK population would want it to be the Government (Chart 5.3).

This finding is in line with previous research by the Future Foundation, which has found that, for all its perceived flaws and the declining trust in its authority, people still look to government as the organisation best placed and most appropriate to tackle the major issues that face society. Government, after all, is the body that has been elected to represent the public interest – and its elected status makes it, to a degree, accountable and open to scrutiny.

Chart 5.3: Who should have the final say about the management of radioactive waste?

Source: Nirex, *The Future Foundation 2000*

At the same time, politicians are regarded with extreme cynicism and distrust by the electorate. They are felt to be incapable of operating with anything other than self-interest and short-term gain in mind. As a result, they are not best placed to give appropriate consideration to a long-term issue such as radioactive waste. Their short-sightedness needs to be balanced by organisations that are seen to operate with a longer term perspective and in the best interests of the public.

(ii) The nuclear industry

Most people agreed that the nuclear industry has an important role to play in deciding what happens to radioactive waste. Since it deals with radioactive waste on an everyday basis, it brings a unique wealth of scientific expertise to the debate. On a less positive note, the industry should also be involved because it is, after all, responsible for much of the waste in existence.

“They created the stuff in the first place.”

The industry cannot be trusted, however, to operate in the best interests of society. Its contribution to the debate would always be tainted by self-interest and the profit motive.

“The nuclear industry have been caught lying. They’ve been caught out time and time again. And that’s the biggest problem. I can’t believe a word they’re saying.”

The industry's contribution needed to be balanced, therefore, by the arguments and the scrutiny of other organisations. This was the only way of making the industry accountable to the public. (In the focus groups, a detail from the prompt material that caught many respondents' eye was the fact that high-level waste is managed by BNFL. Everyone agreed that this was unsatisfactory since a private company could not be trusted to put safety considerations before commercial interests.)

(iii) Academic/university scientists

There was considerable faith in the expertise and integrity of academic scientists. For many respondents, they could be trusted to come up with the best solutions because they wouldn't risk their reputations by allowing themselves to be influenced by non-scientific considerations. They were seen as the best chance to achieve objective and impartial scrutiny and, therefore, to get at the 'truth'.

Some respondents, however, pointed out that academic scientists were just as prone as anyone else to be influenced by the interests of their paymasters. There was also a recognition that scientists did not always agree on 'the truth' – that individuals could come up with conflicting evidence and draw contradictory conclusions. Furthermore, there was unease about the degree to which scientists could be trusted to act in the public interest. All too often, it was felt, scientific progress lacked a moral or ethical dimension. With this in mind, some people argued that scientists should come up with a range of technical solutions for the management of radioactive waste but should not themselves be involved in the final decision.

(iv) Environmental campaign groups

People felt that environmental groups, and Greenpeace in particular, make an important contribution to the debate because they have the best interests of the public at heart. They play an invaluable and popular role as a thorn in the side of industry and government by throwing light on issues.

"The only time you ever hear anything is when there's been a spill or when Greenpeace kick up a fuss."

However, whilst groups such as Greenpeace are regarded as well-intentioned, they are also seen to lack sufficient knowledge about many of the issues that they choose to raise. They are seen to be too extreme in their views and too over-the-top in their claims. Some people saw them as too keen to promote values and solutions that were impractical and unrealistic. It was also argued that, because they have limited resources, they are driven to chase sensationalist issues to grab attention for themselves.

"They have an agenda and they bias things to prove their case."

Because of this, they cannot be entirely trusted. They should certainly be involved in the debate but their extreme views and lack of realism need to be balanced by other voices – just as much as, say, the claims of the nuclear industry need to be balanced.

5.4 Establishing a credible, independent watchdog

In the survey research, respondents were presented with a list of possible measures to increase their confidence in the nuclear industry (Chart 5.4). The most popular measure, supported by three-fifths of the population, was regulation by an independent watchdog.

Chart 5.4: Measures that would increase confidence in nuclear industry (prompted)

If the nuclear industry...

Was regulated by an independent watchdog	59%
Launched a policy of transparency and openness	45%
Was seen to consult environmental campaign groups on a regular basis	44%
Was seen to consult the general public on a regular basis	42%
Was seen to consult academic/university scientists on a regular basis	30%
Was seen to consult other countries with nuclear power on a regular basis	28%
Sponsored research at universities and schools	17%
Was owned by the Government	11%

Source: *Nirex, The Future Foundation 2000*

In the focus groups, people were able to discuss in some depth and complexity the possible relationship between any regulatory body and the nuclear industry. Most people were able to cite industry watchdogs such as Oftel, Ofwat and Ofsted and they were keen for the nuclear industry to be overseen by a similar organisation. They were keen to emphasise that the organisation should have genuine clout.

“It should be real, serious powers to shut places down or people to be sent to jail if they knowingly dump stuff. It should have serious teeth.”

A crucial argument put forward was that the watchdog would achieve its independence from the nuclear industry by incorporating the cross-section of interested parties that respondents had already identified as crucial to ensuring integrity and effective scrutiny. There was widespread agreement on this point – even though respondents differed as to how exactly the various interests should be brought together.

Equally, there was a variety of views on the issue of how the regulatory body should be funded. It was widely agreed, however, that the nuclear industry itself should meet the costs of managing radioactive waste since it was responsible for producing the waste and reaped the profits from electricity production. The general view that emerged from the discussion was that the industry should pay for the regulator – probably through a levy on its profits – but should not have any influence over it. The regulator, in other words, should be funded by the industry but not answerable to it.

People were clear that the role of regulator should be kept separate from any commercial interests. They could not accept, therefore, that a regulatory body should be advising the nuclear industry on a commercial basis on how it should be packaging its waste – as Nirex does currently.

It should be noted, however, that the precise nature and remit of any such regulatory body was not the intended focus of the discussion. This should be the task of another research programme.

6. Attitudes towards Nirex

6.1 Awareness of Nirex

There is low level of awareness of Nirex. When asked to name companies and organisations that are involved in the nuclear industry and that deal with radioactive waste, only a small minority – 2% – of the UK population demonstrated spontaneous awareness of Nirex. A further 32% claimed to recognise the name when it was shown to them.

Respondents in the focus groups also displayed low awareness, even when respondents were asked directly whether they'd ever heard of Nirex. The only recognition came among a couple of people who had vague memories of the planning refusal for the proposed Rock Characterisation Facility (RCF) at Sellafield in 1997, and a further three or four people in an Edinburgh group who described Nirex in strongly hostile terms as an organisation that had lied and cheated in its bid to dump waste in the far north of the Highlands.

6.2 Nirex is compromised by industry ownership

The role and history of Nirex was explained briefly in the prompt material produced for the focus groups. In all of the group discussions, the single piece of information from the prompt material that provoked conversation was the fact that Nirex is 'owned by the nuclear industry and controlled by the government'. There was strong disapproval of Nirex being owned by the industry – and this was the single fact that the discussion about Nirex's role kept coming back to. In the present set-up, Nirex was regarded as the public face or spokesman – even the 'PR agency' – of the industry. It was seen to be accountable to its shareholders rather than to the public. Respondents felt strongly that Nirex needed to be non-profit-making and independent from the commercial interests of the nuclear industry. Its compromised status and the perceived absence of an independent regulator were regarded as the major barriers to public confidence and to ensuring the best solution to the problem of radioactive waste.

Some respondents were equally concerned to hear that the government was involved in the running of Nirex. Against this, other people felt that it was good that the Secretary of State had a 'golden share' in Nirex. They felt that this meant he would always have the final say in any decision. In this way, the industry would always be held to account. Others argued that government and industry were so deeply 'in cahoots' with one another that the Secretary of State would not be able to make a proper assessment of the public good from the information that was supplied to him by the industry. Others felt that it was good that both the industry and the government were involved in Nirex because they balanced out each other's vested interests and ensured a fairer, more accountable system. This relates to the public demand for a cross-section of interested parties to be involved in the management of radioactive waste (discussed in Section 5.3).

Many respondents in the focus groups came away from the prompt material with little idea of Nirex's exact role and purpose. Instead, they came away with an idea of what they would like Nirex to be – a watchdog and a leader in providing solutions to the problems posed by nuclear power and radioactive waste. With this in mind, they were frustrated by the limitations of Nirex's perceived activities. Why, for instance, weren't its scientists looking at alternative sources of energy rather than focusing on nuclear power? And what was Nirex doing about the waste that had been dumped in the sea in previous decades? Or about the waste in other countries?

“It's a pussy cat. It's got no teeth whatsoever. I'm most disappointed.”

Some respondents felt strongly that there was a need for an organisation that could lay out the issues and facts with regard to radioactive waste but that Nirex was not suited to the role – because it was not independent from the nuclear industry and because it had not been open and honest in the past. The only way to get the public involved in the debate and to ensure public confidence was to ‘start all over again’ by abolishing Nirex and establishing a new organisation.

Nevertheless, many respondents felt that it would be a good first step for Nirex to put information into the public domain. In particular – and in line with the idea of a cross-section of interested parties – people wanted Nirex to share its data with campaign groups such as Greenpeace so that these groups could assess the data on behalf of the public. The idea of a conference held jointly by Nirex and Friends of the Earth was well-received because it suggested that Nirex was prepared to stand up and make itself vulnerable to external scrutiny.

“It's reasonable to trust [Nirex] as much as anyone else. But we need to hear the other side of the story.”

“I think it's a good idea that they're getting other people involved because sometimes in a company you get so narrow-minded, thinking about pounds, shillings and pence, and you forget about the people across the street and they're the people you want to get involved in it.”

Public enthusiasm for such a measure was demonstrated in the survey research, where a policy of transparency and openness and regular consultation with environmental campaign groups were the second most popular measures chosen by respondents to increase confidence in the nuclear industry. (See Chart 5.4)

That said, people wanted to know why Nirex had chosen the present time to step into the limelight, through its staging of the focus groups and the proposed production of a brochure. With no clear idea of Nirex's motives, people suspected the worst – that Nirex was pursuing some underhand strategy. Many respondents suspected that the idea of public consultation was a PR exercise, a question of *“soothing their [Nirex's] conscience”* or *“pacifying the public”* – or somehow testing the water to see how concerned people would become when confronted with the issues and, by implication, how much Nirex would be able to get away with.

“It’s a comfort thing, so that the nuclear industry can say that they’ve consulted the public.”

“They’re trying to appear user-friendly.”

There was suspicion and cynicism among some respondents that the hidden agenda behind the strategy of openness and public consultation was to rally public opinion to Nirex’s point of view. In particular, the hidden agenda might be to mobilise the public to lobby the government to reverse the RCF planning refusal in 1997.

People didn’t feel that Nirex had yet earned the right to talk about trust. Its immediate aim should be to get on with the job and to disseminate its information. If it did this, it might eventually gain the trust of the wider public. It would do this, however, by making itself accountable and open to scrutiny rather than by presenting itself as trustworthy. Public confidence was not something that could be generated overnight and was unlikely ever to happen while Nirex remained in the hands of the nuclear industry.