

Living near nuclear power plants

With new nuclear power back on the agenda, what do the public think?

The picture is complicated, say **Nick Pidgeon**, **Karen Henwood** and **Peter Simmons**

Opposition to nuclear power in Britain reached a peak in the late 1980s, when nuclear energy and radioactive waste were both seen as uniquely 'dreaded' unknown risks, and public distrust of government and the nuclear industry was exceptionally high. Since then, opposition to the replacement of nuclear power stations in Britain has been decreasing, with recent national polling indicating for the first time more support for than opposition to renewal.

However, our own research has shown that a large proportion of existing national support is only conditional (and hence potentially fragile), something which we term 'reluctant acceptance'. Many people see nuclear energy as a 'devil's bargain', a choice of last resort in the face of climate change, and would much prefer renewable energy given the opportunity.

Complex picture

If nuclear power is to have a new dawn, some communities with existing nuclear power stations will be asked to host new stations in their localities. The response of people in such communities does not always mirror that obtained from national samples.

A common assumption is that people in these locations will be overwhelmingly positive about nuclear power, because of long-standing experience with the local station and any local economic benefits the plants might bring. Once again, detailed research suggests a more complex picture, with a wide range of views representing a diverse set of 'publics'.

Geography certainly matters, as when a station contributes economically to nearby communities, but not to others further away who might also perceive themselves to be at risk.

We find that many nearby local residents do have confidence in current site activities. For most of the

time people view their existing local station as both a familiar and unremarkable feature of the locality, although almost everybody we interviewed could recount instances (news of the Chernobyl disaster, terrorist bombings, a friend being diagnosed with cancer) where the 'extraordinary' risks of nuclear power had been brought home to them in a powerful way.

New build

The issue of new build elicits a wide range of opinions amongst local residents which defy simple labels such as 'acceptance' or 'rejection'. Many felt that nuclear power was beneficial and safe, a view coupled with high degrees of trust in the local operators to avoid mishaps. A second group, by contrast, believed that the risks of nuclear power far outweigh any benefits and were highly distrustful of both the nuclear industry and the government.

Congruent with the national findings mentioned above, the most common view was an ambivalent one. Almost 40 per cent of respondents identified with it in a questionnaire administered to residents around the nuclear plants at Oldbury-on-Severn and Hinkley Point in 2008. These individuals saw nuclear power as risky and undesirable, but were prepared to accept it locally because they accepted the argument that it is needed for addressing climate change and energy security.

Wanting to be involved

Whatever their position on nuclear power, the vast majority of people surveyed wanted the industry and government to involve them fully in plans for siting new nuclear power stations locally, and had concerns about radioactive waste. Given industry plans to store irradiated fuel on-site throughout the lifetime of any new stations, the problem of waste would appear to set a particularly acute dilemma for local communities.

A further conclusion from our own work is that, in view of the large proportion of local residents holding ambivalent views, there remains very real potential for polarisation and conflict about nuclear new build, and with this a need for genuine and early dialogue between government, the industry and those affected.

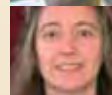
For further details of the research discussed here, see:

Pidgeon, Lorenzoni & Poortinga (2008). Climate change or nuclear power - no thanks! A quantitative study of public perceptions and risk framing in Britain. *Global Environmental Change*, 18, 69-85

Pidgeon, Henwood, Parkhill, Venables & Simmons (2008). *Living with Nuclear Power in Britain: A Mixed Methods Study*. Final Research Report, Cardiff University School of Psychology, available from www.understanding-risk.org



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Nuclear neighbours are positive, asserts **John McNamara**

The recent survey by Nick Pidgeon and colleagues into the attitudes of residents living close to nuclear power stations is a very timely reminder to the nuclear industry that effective community relations are vital, not just for the prospect of new nuclear build, but of course for continued operations at the current generating sites.

Happily, I can report that the nuclear industry realised many years ago that robust and inclusive community relations with those who live closest to stations are paramount – and that the operators continually seek progressive and imaginative ways in which to improve relations with their neighbours.

This surprises many people. Although an expansion of nuclear generating capacity in the UK is now official government policy, the public at large still tend to think of the nuclear industry as secretive and intentionally low-profile.

This may be the view of the majority of people – but of course the vast majority of people in the UK do not live near a nuclear power station. The reverse has for many years been the case with local nuclear communities. While people in London, Leeds and Nottingham may view nuclear power with suspicion, the communities at Bridgwater, Leiston and Lancaster are integrated into a raft of operating information and take a very different, positive view.

Inclusive dialogue

Some of this is a direct result of the socio-economic benefits of having a nuclear power station in your backyard. The town of Leiston has a population of around 5,000. More than 1,000 people work at the Sizewell power stations just three miles away, so it goes without saying that these areas have a vested interest in, and good knowledge of, what goes on at the plant. But much is due to a very professionally-managed, transparent and inclusive local dialogue built up over many years by the operators.

Communication channels include monthly newsletters, quarterly stakeholder meetings (which are open to the public and media, and include operating performance presentations and updates from the regulators including the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency). There are also regular meetings with local councils and open panels with residents' associations.

The local community is fully briefed on plant shutdowns, maintenance work, generating performance, alarm testing, staff injuries and any environmental issues of note.

Local residents are also included in the emergency procedures run by the regulators and health authorities. These are tested regularly.

Support for new nuclear

Of course the industry knows that the trust it has built up with local communities is conditional – our efforts to keep people informed should never diminish or we will soon lose the vital support of our host communities. Nick Pidgeon's study clearly found that residents in these areas support new nuclear – as long as they are kept informed and are part of the decision-making process.

The study also found residents perceived their local nuclear power station to be 'familiar and unremarkable'. He is right to remind us that 'failing to consult in a proper manner, or in a way that does not fully recognise and respond to local people's concerns, would almost certainly undermine the local confidence and trust in local plant operators which has been painstakingly built up.'

Once again we thank Nick Pidgeon for his recognition of our hard work in this area, and for this timely reminder – we have set a high standard and we must continue to do so.

But perhaps our greater challenge is convincing the people of London, Leeds and Nottingham what these nuclear communities already know: that nuclear power is safe, clean and part of the climate-change solution, not the problem.



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