Public Participation in Decisions Relating to the Environmental Management of Ministry of Defence Sites

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, defence based organisations operate on a hierarchical command structure with decision making carried out at high levels. The decision-making is independent of external stakeholders and takes no account of factors external to purely military considerations. This is, and will remain, the best and most efficient way to manage military operations, particularly those of a sensitive nature or involving conflict.

However, the work of Defence Ministries is not confined to military operations. In many cases, Defence Ministries take on the stewardship of large tracts of land, primarily for training purposes, and the ownership of a large number of buildings, including “heritage sites”. The ownership and stewardship on behalf of the nation as a whole brings with it the necessity for management of the environment, in the widest sense of the word. This management must be carried out in a way that allows military needs to be met but also preserves the environment for future use.

The participation of the public and of special interest groups in decision-making is a theme of the Government of the UK. Policy statements to this effect have been made in public, and the Cabinet Office (the part of the UK governmental structure with responsibilities for issues that affect many Departments of State) issued guidelines effective from the beginning of January 2001 regarding public participation. These are available on the Cabinet Office web site. (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/2000/consult/code/consultationcode.htm) The UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) is bound by these guidelines and is therefore required to undertake public participation where practicable. Public participation would not required, for example, where it would compromise security or operational effectiveness.

With the constraint that public participation should not affect security or operations, it is clear that many functions within the MOD cannot be subject to such public involvement. One area where public participation can take place is in relation to the environmental management of the
MOD estate. This paper outlines the ranges of public participation that could be undertaken and presents some of the UK MOD’s experience with public participation on environmental matters.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

In considering public participation, it is important to understand what is meant. Public participation is now considered to cover a range of approaches to information arrangements that could involve the public. Commonly, public participation is given a series of categories and these are shown below in the order of increasing public involvement.

**Information Giving.** This is the traditional approach of telling the public what you have done after you have done it. There is no public involvement in any of the decisions that have been taken or the information that is supplied. It should be noted that the information given can be extensive - the key factor relates to the decision ability and not the information provided.

**Consultation.** Here, information is supplied to the public regarding what is planned for the future and their opinion is sought. There is an implication that the opinions supplied can change the decisions that will be taken, but there is no obligation to take the opinions received into account.

**Bounded Dialogue.** The organisation with the problem makes the decisions regarding strategy and overall direction of a project but then opens up the implementation to public participation. There is an undertaking that the implementation proposals made through the public participation process will be accepted by the decision maker. An example would be where it is decided that a building will be demolished, but the public would decide when and how this is done in order to minimise the impact on the local community.

**Stakeholder Dialogue.** All interested parties come together to resolve a particular problem or problem area. Progress can only be made when all parties involved in the dialogue agree on a particular point or way forward. This is known as reaching a consensus. The owner of holder of the problem involved has no special control over the direction the discussion takes and has undertaken to implement the consensus solution.

All of these approaches can be considered as public participation and the challenge in the Defence field is to select the correct public participation method for the problem identified. In the recent conflict in Iraq, public participation has been carried out by Information Giving, but this may not be appropriate where the problem involves the environmental management. In these situations, other forms of public participation may be more effective.