CL:AIRE

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case study bulletin

CL:AIRE case study bulletins provide a source of information on the issues involved with the remediation of specific sites in the UK. This case study bulletin describes how good communications are an intrinsic part of the investigation and remediation of contaminated sites.

Coventry Evening Telegraph, 4th August, 2004

Public affairs and communications on contaminated land projects

A case study of South Car Park, Coventry

Background

South Car Park (SCP) was once part of the former Courtaulds main rayon production works in Coventry. Its remediation and the associated public affairs and communications aspects have been recognised as setting trends.

Historically, the site housed an effluent plant and was used to store coal and the chemical carbon disulphide (CS_2), used in the manufacture of viscose, between about 1904 and 1967. Thereafter, it was gradually converted to use as a car park.

The land came into the Akzo Nobel UK Ltd portfolio following the company's acquisition of Courtaulds plc in 1998, and is currently leased for use as a car park. The site is bounded to the north and west by light industrial units, to the east by the Coventry Canal, and to the south by a residential estate.

Investigations began in 2003 when, during routine site maintenance, Akzo Nobel replaced a collapsed drain to prevent local flooding and found five underground tanks containing small quantities of CS_2. Akzo Nobel commissioned Environmental & Remediation Services Ltd (E&RS - formerly Cortex) to manage the project and implement the public communications programme. The field investigations were led by the consultancy ESI Ltd and the principal contractor on site was EDS Ltd.

There then followed a programme of investigations and remediation. The risk assessment raised the question of the potential for off-site migration of CS_2 although it was uncertain as to whether any significant migration had occurred. To resolve this uncertainty, Akzo Nobel commissioned an investigation to determine the extent of any off-site migration and assess the associated risks to residents in the adjacent estate.

Communications planning

Letters had been intermittently sent to residents and neighbouring companies during the investigation works. The decision to investigate residential gardens took the communications requirements to another level and Akzo Nobel's corporate communications team and E&RS worked together to produce a comprehensive strategy, to enable those involved to respond effectively to the inevitable questions and public concerns these investigations would raise.

Aerial photo showing SCP and the adjacent estate

The communications strategy included the following policy points:

• All members of the site team to be fully briefed on potential communication issues prior to working on site through a dedicated training day with interactive exercises with communication experts. This covered language difficulties, religious sensitivities, handling media enquiries and dealing with conflict resolution

• Garden investigation team to include a female at all times, considered particularly important on an estate where there were many single female households and considerable ethnic diversity

• Investigations to cause minimal disruption and disturbance, with courtesy observed at all times, and expected in return

• All visits to residents to be conducted in pairs, for security of both parties

• All communications to be logged and actions signed off

• Press enquiries to be dealt with by the Akzo Nobel media communications team

• All health queries to be referred to GPs

• All other queries to be referred to the free helpline

• All appointments to be confirmed in writing

• All correspondence to residents to be hand delivered wherever possible

• Confidentiality to be maintained at all times i.e. one property's investigation report was confidential to the owner/tenant and would never be discussed with another property owner/tenant.

Similar past projects had found that people were initially concerned about their family's health, then the health of their pets and finally their house value. With this in mind, the following actions were undertaken:

• A physician, specialising in the field of occupational and environmental medicine, was appointed to devise a concise GP briefing sheet on health effects of CS_2, which was distributed to all GPs in the area by the Primary Care Trust

• A local vet was available for residents on the estate to receive free consultations should they be concerned about their pets

• Property owners were offered up to three free valuations by qualified surveyors, based on the value of their property prior to the investigations, so that they could have a reference point should they need to sell their house during the investigation

• An independent environmental consultant was also appointed to provide technical advice to residents.

These services were all taken up, some to a greater extent than others.

Communications in practice

The residential investigations began with an invitation to all residents on the estate to attend a public meeting, so that findings to date could be provided and an announcement made about the need to investigate gardens. Unfortunately there was poor attendance and those present at the meeting were shocked and upset at the news of the investigations, which meant it did not provide a forum for rational discussion. However, it at least provided an opportunity for the proposals to be made public and for some questions to be raised immediately.

Team meeting

The meeting was attended by local elected representatives, who had been briefed in advance, and by the media. The journalists present reacted well to the comprehensive briefing and sought immediate interviews from the Akzo Nobel communications specialist, who also chaired the meeting.

Inevitably, the following day produced "shock and awe" stories in the local evening newspaper and on radio and TV. The Akzo Nobel media team spent a great deal of time giving and seeking interviews over the ensuing days which went a long way to reducing the impact of the first day headlines. More rational comment followed as it became obvious to the press that the company and its contractors were operating a policy of open communications and transparency.

This level of information was also conveyed to the local Member of Parliament, Mr Bob Ainsworth who took a great interest throughout the project and contributed by arranging meetings of residents and the project team.

The day after the meeting, the seventeen properties adjacent to the site were given letters requesting access to investigate their rear gardens, with details of what this would involve. In addition, an information pack was hand-delivered to the whole estate, containing Q&A factsheets, and details of the helpline, email and drop-in centre. The drop-in centre was open in the daytime and evening throughout the first week after the public meeting and thereafter in the daytime and evening once a week.

Although a number of people visited the drop-in centre, the majority of communication was conducted by visits to individual properties - over 200 visits in total - and the helpline, which handled almost 850 calls.

Communicating risk is inherently difficult. Where possible, plain language was used, avoiding unnecessary jargon. Visual aids, such as diagrams and an aerial photo of the site, proved valuable. For some residents, English was not their first language and translation services were provided via the local authority.

Over the course of the project, 16 newsletters were distributed to residents, neighbouring companies and interested parties, including local politicians and the media.

As it was impractical to drill into the soil under the houses, and thereby provide reassurance to residents that CS_2 was not under their houses, a year-long comprehensive programme of indoor air monitoring was developed and implemented by the Building Research Establishment, acknowledged experts in this field. The purpose of this was to ensure that CS_2 could not be detected in the air inside the houses. Fortunately, there were no results of any concern in any property.

Most of the gardens investigated had non-detectable or insignificant concentrations of CS_2, which required no further action. Some gardens had concentrations that were low but close to the limit of what may be expected to occur naturally in a garden. Significant concentrations of CS_2 were found in only two back gardens.

Collecting samples

To remediate these gardens meant major excavation work, which was likely to have affected the structural integrity of the houses, so it was concluded that there was no alternative to recommending that these properties be demolished. As the houses were semi-detached, they could not be demolished without affecting the adjoining properties, so five properties were targeted for demolition. Telling people that their home needs to be demolished is distressing for all concerned. Meetings took place at the same time so that residents heard it directly from Akzo Nobel and its representatives. A generous relocation package was offered and residents were given a reasonable period of time to come to a decision. All residents accepted the offer and were helped to find and move to their new homes.

Care was taken to minimise damage to gardens

The five properties were demolished, and the contaminated land dug out from the gardens and replaced with clean material. All other contaminated soil was removed in compliance with the risk assessment. An underground reactive iron barrier was constructed in the car park to treat any residual carbon disulphide in groundwater leaving the site. The groundwater passing through the iron barrier will continue to be monitored for some time.

The investigation and remediation works never posed any hazard to the public. However, there was some occasional noise, vibration and odours that affected the immediate neighbourhood. Best practice was employed on site to keep any such inconvenience to an absolute minimum. In particular, the remediation techniques were designed to minimise odour issues, but some smells were, unfortunately, inevitable. Carbon disulphide can be smelt at concentrations of 1/3,000th of that which would normally be considered potentially harmful to health for long-term exposure. The site had a programme of air monitoring, in close liaison with the council's environmental health department, and never detected concentrations at the site boundary that were significant with respect to human health. When works were unavoidably noisy, people working nights and living next to the site were offered a room in a local hotel during the day.

A planning application is currently being considered to build residential properties in place of the demolished houses. Meanwhile communications with the residents continue via newsletters and the helpline.

Conclusions

Conducting investigations and remediation on residential estates is challenging, but not insurmountable given comprehensive planning and preparation. Technically, the investigations were fairly straightforward and posed few problems. However, communication issues brought another dimension to the project and required dedication of considerable resources, and demanded 'people skills' not traditionally required on contaminated land projects.

Individual visits or calls were by far the most popular means of communication. These helped to establish a level of trust and a better understanding of each other's viewpoint. For example, it was sometimes apparent from body language during visits that residents did not fully understand a certain aspect of the work, so this could be addressed there and then. The helpline particularly suited those who had a quick query and allowed instant feedback to the site team e.g. on odours at the site.

It was correct to assume that priorities would vary both over time and between residents, with financial interests taking precedence once health concerns had been assuaged. Although, in the main, residents were satisfied with the way the project was handled, there is always room for improvement. The drop-in centre was under-used, probably because visits from the team were so readily available. The 24-hour helpline was scaled down towards the end and subsequent projects' helplines have had long but not 24-hour availability, as these are very resource intensive and most calls were during work hours. Countering some of the false rumours circulating was at times extremely difficult, as was managing the envy that arose as a result of solving some of the resident's problems. It is always going to be difficult to please everyone, but some very positive comments were received and useful lessons learnt for future projects.

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South Car Park during Courtaulds' operation

South Car Park post remediation 2005