

# Community Relations during Major Pipeline Construction (National Grid and 3G Communications Ltd)

## Project brief

National Grid commissioned 3G Communications to manage the community issues around the construction of a 44km, high-pressure gas pipeline in Gloucestershire.

Engineers cut a swathe the width of a dual carriageway through the scenic, world-renowned Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), affecting historic drystone walls and major footpaths valued by locals and walkers worldwide.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board (CCB), which works to preserve and enhance the AONB, initially opposed the project through a media campaign and it was vital to build a positive relationship to avoid delays. The pipeline was needed to meet rising demand for gas in South West England

3G had to create a community relations strategy which engaged the CCB, the local MP, who had initially objected to the pipeline, and the local community to provide clear communication, understanding and acceptance.

Contractors had to follow a strict code of community conduct, such as safe driving on the county lanes.

## Specific objectives

The main aim was to build trust with communities and stakeholders and cooperate with them closely. The issues had to be effectively managed to enable the construction team to focus on their challenging programme. We also wanted to protect and enhance National Grid's reputation and to ensure that communications issues did not cause costly delays.

## Issues

Initially there was community opposition, negative media coverage and a lack of trust in National Grid due to previous delays to the project.

Communities were disrupted by noise, dust, mud on roads, additional traffic and large vehicles on narrow lanes. The impact on the environment and visual intrusion concerned many residents, who were also aware the new pipeline would not directly benefit local people as it would not deliver gas to their villages.

Other local concerns included closures and diversions of roads, major footpaths and bridleways during the busy summer months and the impact of

construction on the many public, community and charitable events attended by thousands of visitors in this popular holiday destination.

### Strategy and tactics

We adopted a personal approach to communications, identifying key individuals and developing relationships.

Our primary audience was the community and its representatives - MPs, elected councillors and parish councils - also the CCB, schools, local media, walking and horse-riding groups, individual walkers and holiday companies operating in the Cotswolds.

### Outputs

We established a free information telephone line, operated 24/7 when required, staffed by knowledgeable team members who understood local concerns.

We regularly hand-delivered correspondence to more than 1,000 residents to update them on issues such as local road closures, concentrating our relationship development on those living very close to the construction site.

Our project-specific email account enabled a swift two-way exchange of information for those who preferred this communication method. Text messaging was used effectively to alert the project team to issues such as mud on the road and to update local residents.

A section of National Grid's website was dedicated to the project and we worked alongside the CCB to broadcast 'live' information on footpath closures via its Twitter service.

National Grid's community investment programme was successfully promoted to provide a lasting, tangible benefit to the community. This supported 17 projects, including funding for walking events, school initiatives, footpath restoration projects and village hall equipment.

Members of the communications and project teams worked together with local schools and organisations, offering safety talks, arranging tree-planting and providing support to build real trust with the local community. This led to the following comment:

*I am a cub scout leader, your site manager came to talk and the cubs were shown around. You should feel very proud of your work.*

We developed personal relationships with local media, arranging site visits for individual journalists to interview the project team and photograph and film construction.

## Outcomes

The individual approach was extremely successful and the pipeline was delivered on time.

The end-of-project letter to **residents** included a survey asking for comments on the construction impact and the communications undertaken.

To assess the impact on reputation, we asked their opinion of National Grid before, during and after construction. Responses showed that before the project began 39% had a positive view of the company, but following completion this had risen to 87% – a rise of 122%.

The final question was open-ended: *Have you any suggestions as to how we could improve?*

The vast majority of comments were extremely positive, showing strong, successful relationships with the local community.

*I don't think you could improve as, at no time, was there anything done badly - everything was so impressive. We shall miss you!*

*Impossible to improve. Very well done.*

*Superb public relations ....*

*This was a major undertaking along a part of our parish boundary... we attended [pre-application exhibitions] and thereafter were kept very well informed ....*

A **local MP** had written to National Grid's chairman initially objecting to the pipeline. Towards the end of 2010, an email from his assistant said he was:

*... very impressed with what has been done .... His view was that this is a model of how a major construction project should have been conducted through one of the country's very special AONBs.*

Press coverage of a site visit for **district councillors** included the following:

*I have not personally seen any problems. No one has ever met me to complain.*

Communications with the **CCB** transformed the relationship from one that was negative to being mutually beneficial and positive. Representatives participated in events and agreed quotes for our press releases.

**Media** coverage was very positive. *BBC Gloucestershire* carried a live on-site broadcast interview for the lunchtime news, a longer package for the evening news, including an interview with the CCB director, and news bulletins the following morning.

An exclusive granted to the *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard* concluded:

*This would appear to have been a faultless major project, carried out by a huge multinational company. Who would have thought it possible?*

The *Gloucestershire Echo* carried positive coverage.