

The future of nuclear energy in the UK

General overview

Confronted by major issues such as climate change and security of supply, Britain urgently needs to reshape its energy portfolio by making difficult choices that will have implications for many generations.

Instead, increasingly, there is a sense of drift. The question of nuclear power – and energy policy in general – remains beset by a lack of clarity, a history of entrenched views and a paucity of informed public debate.

The University of Birmingham's Policy Commission on the future of nuclear energy in the UK aims to help begin the process of moving on from this apparent impasse.

It offers a state-of-play assessment of nuclear energy's current circumstances and likely prospects, and a critical examination of what might be done to deliver policies that are effective in both the short and longer term.

Its findings are especially pertinent at a time when concerns about carbon targets, fuel poverty and proposed new nuclear power stations are high on the national agenda and the need to demonstrate a sense of direction is growing ever more pressing.

Equally, its conclusions come at a time when the importance of instilling public confidence cannot be overstated. Indeed, it is fair to say that contributors to the Commission, irrespective of their opinions on other matters, agreed that the role of the public – its involvement, its understanding and its endorsement – is fundamental to the whole issue of future energy strategy.

The Commission has made a concerted effort to move away from the kind of black-and-white, for-or-against approach that has characterised so many of the arguments surrounding nuclear energy for so long. We believe it is time to start conducting this discussion in a way that is genuinely informative and inclusive, otherwise the public will never be meaningfully engaged in decisions that will affect everyone's life for decades to come.

To that end, we present here our key recommendations in the most simple and succinct terms and invite those readers who require further detail and analysis to read the report in full.

Key recommendations

- Nuclear energy should be part of the UK's overall programme of developing more sustainable energy sources and maximising energy efficiency
- Government and industry need to work together to produce a shared 'roadmap' detailing a coherent long term strategy that can be championed by a statutory Nuclear Policy Council
- The public and private sectors must share the financial risks associated with new nuclear power stations if the latter is to remain successfully engaged in the process
- The UK has to develop a world-class research capacity to support the introduction of the next generation of nuclear reactors

- Government-led training and education programmes are essential to ensuring a suitably skilled workforce is in place when the building of new nuclear facilities begins
- The process of identifying potential sites for the safe geological disposal of nuclear waste requires better communication, more dialogue and appropriate incentives
- The wider understanding of nuclear energy – and of the energy sector in its entirety – must be enhanced through informed and reasoned debate if the UK's future energy strategies are to gain public acceptance

To summarise, the Commission's belief is that the UK needs to be rebuilt as a nuclear nation if it is to meet key challenges such as limiting greenhouse gas emissions, ensuring security of supply and industrial competitiveness. But it is first crucial to acknowledge that Britain has fallen significantly behind its international competitors in many areas vital to successfully embracing the nuclear option as part of a broader energy policy.

Consequently, only a farsighted, wide-ranging and fully integrated strategy is likely to overcome the numerous significant hurdles that must be negotiated. In short, it is not too late to act, but we have to do so decisively and effectively – and the process has to start now.

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