

Public engagement and nuclear power

Summary

This short briefing provides an outline of the Sustainable Development Commission's advice to Government on the need for a comprehensive engagement programme as a central part of any policy on nuclear new-build. We believe that the judicial review decision on 15th February 2007 provides the Government with a unique opportunity to announce an innovative and transparent public engagement programme. This would help the Government to understand the public's views over nuclear power, and their thoughts on energy policy more generally, thereby helping the Government to develop policy that has a better chance of gaining broad acceptance.

SDC position on nuclear power

The SDC published a position paper on nuclear power in March 2006 as our primary input to the DTI's Energy Review.¹ Our work, which was based on a comprehensive evidence base, identified three major advantages of nuclear power², along with five significant disadvantages.³ The majority opinion of the SDC's Commissioners was that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages, and that new-build nuclear power should not be pursued at this time.

The SDC was keen to present these five disadvantages as a set of challenges to Government. We were very pleased therefore to note the significant progress made in the Energy Review on issues such as energy efficiency, distributed generation and renewables – in particular, the proposals for an Energy Performance Commitment, and a cap on energy suppliers post-2012. We also welcome the commitment not to subsidise new nuclear power, which was one of our five concerns.

The need for public engagement

The SDC recognises that our work on nuclear power may not reflect the views and opinions of the general public. There are large variations in peoples' understanding of all the issues surrounding nuclear power, including climate change, energy security, and the technology itself. Furthermore, there is a wide spectrum of views and concerns over nuclear power in particular.

The SDC believes that understanding these views and concerns is essential for the development of a truly sustainable energy policy. This can only be achieved through a comprehensive and deliberative engagement process. This was one of the key conclusions of one of the evidence-based reports commissioned by the SDC as part of our work in this area:

*"...recent experience – in the GM case for instance – points to the danger of treating public attitudes and the factors shaping them as of secondary significance. Truly sustainable energy policies seem likely to benefit from going with the grain of wider public concerns, rather than from rubbing up against them."*⁴

¹ SDC (2006). *The role of nuclear power in a low carbon economy*. Available at: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/060306.html>

² These were: climate change benefits, improved energy security, and a good UK safety record

³ These were: uncertain economics (and the concern that new nuclear would be subsidised), intergenerational issues, detracting from efforts to reduce energy demand, technological lock-in and inflexibility, and international safety & security

⁴ SDC (2006). *Nuclear paper 7 – Public perceptions and community issues*. Available at: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=342>

More generally, policy-makers will increasingly be presented with complex issues of strategic importance, such as road pricing and aviation. These need to be dealt with in the round rather than as single issues and public engagement is a key part of this process.

The benefits of public engagement

From the Government's perspective, public engagement on this issue offers the following direct benefits:

- a) **Inform** the public and key stakeholders, not only through direct/indirect provision of information but also by stimulating public **conversations** on the key issues surrounding climate change, energy policy, and the role of nuclear within that
- b) Address the **consultation process** concerns highlighted by the decision, by providing a consultation process which generates a full and usable understanding of the public's concerns and aspirations around energy policy and climate change, with nuclear power being just one part of that (in the round)
- c) Use the information gained through the above to increase the **robustness** of the resulting energy policy, ensuring that the policy addresses key issues and meets key challenges, including how the Nuclear Policy Framework might go some way to addressing these

In addition, an engagement programme would deliver the following strategic benefits in line with the Government's priorities on sustainable development and democratic renewal:

- d) Generate **ownership** and responsibility across the society for addressing the 'energy gap', raising the likelihood of successful implementation of an energy policy that meets climate change targets by securing long-term action across society, rather than leaving Government in a 'blame ghetto' searching for 'quick-fix' measures
- e) Understand how to **engage the nation** in critical, long-term strategic decisions and change that involve significant complexity and uncertainty. Policy-makers will increasingly be presented with complex issues of strategic importance which need to be dealt with in the round rather than as single issues. Along with congestion charging and aviation, decisions around energy policy will need to make use of full 'public engagement' programmes which enable significant shifts in policy and action.

Delivering a public engagement programme

An integrated public engagement programme on energy policy and nuclear power would involve a mix of deliberative processes, consultation and communication. The SDC believes that the judicial review decision provides the Government with a unique opportunity to announce an innovative and transparent public engagement programme as part of the forthcoming Energy White Paper.

Within the constraints of what is legally possible, we believe that it is possible for the Government to begin this process from its current position of support towards a new generation of nuclear power plants.

However, it is essential for the integrity of the Nuclear Policy Framework and the engagement exercise that no other decisions are taken until the public engagement is complete and the conclusions analysed. This does not exclude the possibility that separate consultation exercises on technical issues (such as reactor design or health and safety issues) could take place simultaneously.

The SDC recommends that any public engagement programme should be initiated by the Government in consultation with independent experts. Possible engagement tools might include:

- Citizen summits as held by DWP on the pensions debate and by DoH on your health your say
- Deliberative workshops with key stakeholders and representatives of the general public
- Involvement of media organisations (e.g. BBC) to build public interest and understanding
- Local and regional events (as for GM and as used by the UK SD strategy consultation)
- Scenario work, as being developed as part of the Sciencehorizons programme
- Online consultation exercises that enable deliberative input (such as held by Dialogue by Design)
- Self-administered deliberative exercises, such as those used by CoRWM in its nuclear waste engagement, or the aMap tool being developed by Delib
- Strong and considered communications programmes, building on best practice and existing planned campaigns (such as climate change, EST campaigns etc)
- Ongoing engagement mechanisms such as Open Strategy which allow continued engagement post consultation.

Principles for effective engagement

- **Clarity:** (1) ensure that the engagement starts with consideration of the problem to be addressed – any buy into solutions can only follow buy into the problem; (2) Have absolute clarity over the aims and the parameters of the engagement – what exactly are you trying to achieve, what level of support (and from whom) are you looking for, what can and can't be changed.
- **Integration:** (1) that the whole programme of relevant consultations, policies, and communication campaigns on nuclear power and wider energy policy are joined up in such a way that Government can present a compelling story that makes sense to the public; (2) there is also an opportunity for the Government to integrate its engagement work in this area with the wider climate change debate.
- **Independence:** (1) the engagement is overseen by a balanced and independent 'oversight group', which reviews both the process and content of the consultation; (2) the engagement is designed and delivered by professional independent process experts including conflict resolution, opinion polling, communication and deliberative consultation; (3) there is a full independent evaluation of the process, established from the beginning.
- **Layered approach:** The process should fit the needs of the audience. It is possible to layer different engagement activities, addressing different audiences and subjects. For example, technical discussions (such as reactor design or health and safety issues) can be conducted separately and in parallel to other public engagement processes.
- **Feedback:** there should be a strong follow through to the engagement/consultation, enabling the nation to find out how the results were used and to take the opportunity to be part of the solution (e.g. making changes themselves).

The role of the SDC

The SDC would be happy to offer advice on both the design and development of the process of a public engagement programme, and on the content of the engagement (for example, building on the 'five tests' set out in our March 2006 position paper on nuclear power).