



New Nuclear NPS Team,
Department for Energy Security and Net Zero,
3-8 Whitehall Place
London SW1A 2AW

A National Policy Statement for new nuclear power generation -Consultation on the new approach to siting beyond 2025
Response from West Mersea Town Council

Introduction

We refer to our response to the previous consultative document and the following reaffirms many of the comments made. We are West Mersea Town Council located on an island in North Essex on the estuary of the River Blackwater. The town is some 3 miles by sea from the decommissioned Bradwell nuclear station.

Question 1

***To what extent do you agree with the modification of this approach in light of the consultation feedback?
To retain the <50MW (electric) threshold***

Agree

We consider that 50MW is the right threshold size for projects covered by EN-7.

By the nature of GW stations needing coastal or estuary locations for the cooling water, it means they are rather inflexible. It is being said that SMRs may be safely sited at a variety of locations, coastal or inland, remote or semi-urban and can be associated with industrial complexes and hence may seek a variety of locations inland on rivers, lakes and ports. It would be sensible to have a single EN-7 whereby SMRs are considered alongside GWs with criteria applicable to a variety of locations.

Question 2

To what extent do you believe that the draft NPS is adequately future proofed to accommodate advancements in nuclear technologies?

Disagree

It is not clear in EN-7 that the six sites in EN-6 have been delisted and will be considered in the same way as any other sites identified by developers for potential development. With regards to Bradwell, it is unsuitable and unacceptable as a possible location and the site should be removed from future consideration.

The new approach is unclear and confusing. We advocate a return to a more strategic, less prescriptive, approach that uses a criteria-based process that will provide a framework for siting opportunities.

WMTC therefore considers the process of site identification, selection and assessment should be clarified to indicate the respective roles of GBN, developers and regulators.

Question 3

Are there specific planning or siting consideration that should be addressed to ensure the NPS remains flexible to deployment of nuclear in diverse locations?

Yes

The new approach, whilst giving flexibility, is dependent on a market-based approach rather than a rational, planned approach. There needs to be a coherent framework for planning, which should include timeframes, something that appears to have been thrown out. Timeframes are important in the framework because:

1. Circumstances can change:

- Siting constraints can change over time and it would not make sense to leave open permissions on sites that are no longer suitable for development.
- Changes in energy policy may remove nuclear power as an option.

2. Permissions without timeframes leaves communities in a state of uncertainty. Any prospective development of nuclear is a slow process which raises anxiety among opponents, while supporters also become frustrated. EN-6 sites did not achieve deployment by this year and the uncertainty continues with EN-7 as it stands.

3. Timeframes provide a framework for development. Without timeframes EN-7 is too random, and unstructured. Whilst a lack of strategy and planned development may be intentional it is confusing. WMTC believes the lack of timeframes will cause greater uncertainty about the whole process and purpose of nuclear development. It also leaves communities living in the vicinity of sites in a continuing state of anxiety.

Question 4

To what extent do you agree with the proposal to remove the distinction between previously exclusionary and discretionary criteria?

Agree

We have previously advocated for more criteria to be exclusionary and for some additional criteria to be included. We support the strengthening of criteria and the much greater emphasis on Climate Change, though our concerns remain with respect to timescales, as there are none. We also welcome the attention paid to radioactive waste which was among the issues we considered should be explicitly considered. We note the response to other issues that we raised, including: potable water supply; groundwater protection; and social impacts.

In principle we support dropping the discretionary/exclusionary distinction and strengthening of some criteria and including others. Our remaining concerns are dealt with in response to other questions.

Question 5

The government plans to retain the Semi-Urban Population Density Criterion in EN-7. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the inclusion.

Disagree

WMTC reiterates its view that the criterion relating to risk to safety and security was and still is confusing. Moreover, the notion of 'semi-urban' is misleading. It is claimed that the risks of an accident involving the spread of nuclear materials beyond the site boundary is sufficiently low to allow the application of the semi-urban criterion. It begs the question, what is sufficiently low? If there is a risk, however low, sites should be in remote places. If the risk is regarded as acceptably low, then there seems no reason to rule out an urban location. 'Sufficiently low' is relative and could be interpreted as acceptable in a remote location or in an urban one. Why should the safety of a remote community be of less concern or importance than that of a more densely populated area?

Furthermore, the semi-urban criterion is unduly constraining on flexibility of location for SMRs and AMRs.

Question 6

We are open to revising the Semi-Urban Population Density Criterion in the future. How should this criterion change in the future to better support the deployment of advanced nuclear technologies, and what evidence supports your suggestion? Please reference your sources.

As indicated above we do not consider revision of the semi-urban criterion a useful exercise.

Question 7

Are there any specific areas of the draft EN-7 where further clarity or guidance is needed to help ensure successful implementation by developers, planners and regulators?

Yes

WMTC has the following observations and recommendations on a variety of themes raised by the draft NPS and Consultation documents:

1. Bias and unjustified generalisation.

At various points there is extraordinary bias on the merits of nuclear power being a necessary part of the energy mix to reach net zero. The benefits of nuclear power are shown in a positive light without balancing it with any negative implications. Employment and investment are represented as gross gains, ignoring opportunity costs. The high upfront and escalating costs and long timescales to deployment (as with Hinkley Point C) are ignored and the problems of managing highly active wastes in the far future are barely given attention. The Government's assertion 'that there is an urgent need for new nuclear, which is a safe and low carbon source of energy' (Cons. 2.2.2) seems to assert that 'the benefits of these projects are in general considered to outweigh any remaining negative impacts that can't be fully mitigated' (1.1.4). We cannot see that the negative impacts have been identified or considered properly within a more balanced cost/benefit risk assessment. We consider the most obvious impacts/risks are: risk of cyberattack, terrorism, radioactive waste, social and political change and institutional breakdown. These are all massive risks which cannot be entirely mitigated or fully prevented.

While we appreciate the attention given to the Climate Change mitigation offered by nuclear power, the problems of mitigating its impacts on nuclear generation and radioactive waste management are understated. Overall, EN-7 sometimes reads as biased rather than a measured and balanced document.

WMTC would urge the Government to provide a more measured and balanced, account of the virtues and failings of nuclear energy in the final version of EN-7.

2. Radioactive waste management (rwm).

We appreciate and commend the greater attention being given to radioactive waste management with the emphasis on safe and secure interim storage arrangements. However, we feel it is important to ensure that developers demonstrate that appropriate measures will be made from the start. These measures should include adaptation or mitigation, timescales and responsibilities considering resilience against climate change impacts, societal change and institutional control.

The impacts of Climate Change in terms of sea-level rise, coastal processes, storm surges and flooding are pretty much unpredictable beyond 2100. New nuclear power projects are likely to extend beyond the end of this century and rwm way beyond that, with no certainty that arrangements for disposal will be either available or implementable. The question needs to be asked: should we take an incalculable risk into the far future?

Radioactive waste management is a critical issue and a major reason for not proceeding with new nuclear power. Or indeed a reason that projects fail.

With rwm being a major issue WMTC believes it requires greater scrutiny of the credibility and acceptability of proposals for safe management in the unknowable conditions of the far future.

3. Socio-economic issues and health and wellbeing.

Socio-economic is treated as an impact rather than a criterion in EN-7. A number of impacts, such as employment and housing, transport and construction may act as constraints and, therefore, should be recognised as a criterion. But, the centrality of societal issues needs much more recognition. Nuclear power and radioactive waste are as much social as scientific issues. Nuclear projects if they are to proceed must be scientifically credible and socially acceptable.

Social acceptability applies both to nuclear energy as a whole, and to the deployment of specific projects at particular locations. At present there appears to be, at least among Government, decision makers and the nuclear industry, a firm commitment to nuclear power. There is an assumption that there is a general public acceptance, though that is open to doubt. A predominantly pro-nuclear view has been flowing since the early 2000s and has intensified in recent years with the assertions that nuclear is essential to meet net zero and to provide energy security. Both assertions are debatable. This pro-nuclear situation is less evident at site level where the anxiety and intrusiveness of major nuclear power projects is often opposed by a majority of citizens. Certainly, this would be true of the Blackwater communities around the Bradwell site.

WMTC considers that social acceptability should be demonstrated before any project proceeds and not just be asserted, claimed or assumed. A pro-nuclear discourse may fade or be abruptly disrupted if a major nuclear catastrophe occurs. Nuclear power projects pose risks to health and wellbeing far into the future. Societal stability and institutional continuity cannot be guaranteed.

Therefore, the social context and resilience are matters that should at least be recognised, if not considered, as an integral aspect of nuclear decision making.

We would like to reaffirm that Social Acceptability should be an overarching and exclusionary criterion. The benefits of nuclear power to the present and near future generations must be weighed against the detriments of managing decommissioning and radioactive waste imposed on far future generations.

The contribution of nuclear energy to achieving net zero from specific projects must be weighed against the risks from radioactivity to environments, public health and wellbeing from impacts of climate change. The fundamental ethical question posed by intergenerational equity is whether or not to proceed.

4. Need for framework for siting new nuclear projects

We have previously stated the need for a framework for decision making under the alternative approach to siting. Our concerns remain that the alternative approach goes against the previous better placed strategic siting approach which was based on government-driven assessment principles and criteria that produced specific sites. The strategic approach was based on rational analysis and provided detailed guidance to potential developers. The site selection was somewhat flawed and we still contest the inclusion of the Bradwell site.

The alternative approach pretty much leaves it up to developers to make their own choices and decisions around the identification and assessment of suitability of sites. Developers are unlikely to undertake all this without a framework and support. Such a framework and support needs to be clarified and made explicit. Independent advice and support from regulators will be essential if developers are to proceed with confidence. We do not consider GBN an appropriate body to engage in any preliminary siting process. GBN's role is to promote nuclear power and therefore would be acting on market-based principles.

WMTC considers that Government must provide a clear framework for the alternative siting process based on scoping of locations that can be assessed against strategic siting criteria. This is necessary to provide the clarity and confidence required in the process, otherwise there is a danger for it to proceed with little or no control and in a somewhat disorganised manner.

Question 8

Would additional support or information from the Government be beneficial and assist developers intending to apply for Development Consent in implementing EN-7?

Not enough information

WMTC has already mentioned that a developer-led approach is very flawed. We would like to reiterate that we consider a more strategic approach is preferable with Government applying criteria to indicate potentially suitable sites.

We consider that EN-7 should be far more explicit in supporting the independent role of regulators and PINS and in recognising the significant part that councils, NGOs, environmental groups and other stakeholders play in ensuring environmental sustainability and community wellbeing. We set out our concerns and recommendations below:

1. Independent role of Regulators

WMTC is concerned that the proposed new approach to siting will compromise the principle of independent regulation. The regulators, especially ONR, are firmly committed to their mission of ensuring strong and independent regulatory practice to protect the health and safety of people and the environment. A developer-led approach requires the developer to assess suitability of a site. We are not convinced that developers will undertake a thorough assessment due to constraints on time, expertise, resources or motivation. In practice developers will be guided to those sites already identified in EN-6 or possible new sites fostered by GBN.

It is clear that ONR and PINS will act in an advisory capacity as facilitators in the site selection process. This draws them more into a proactive role of sponsorship as opposed to their standard role of reactive regulation. Whilst we acknowledge that this is not the intention, as relationships develop, roles may evolve and be corrupted in the process. Certainly, a conflict of interests between competing roles is a possibility. A statement on the role and independence of regulation should be provided within the text of EN-7.

WMTC strongly advises that Government has a strict Code of Practice that differentiates between facilitation and regulation, to ensure that the independence of regulators is firmly acknowledged. Regulatory advice as to potential site suitability must not be confined to individual developers but published and open to Government, stakeholders and the wider public. Regulators and PINS must act as independent facilitators on potential suitability of sites.

2. Role of local authorities, non-governmental organisations, campaign groups and others

The contribution of these groups to the issues in EN-7 is recognised in the consultation document and further input is welcomed. Clearly these groups also have a significant part to play in the implementation and site selection process. While some changes to speed up decision making are suggested, it is welcomed that there is no suggestion in EN-7 that the present regulatory and planning regimes, including consultation and engagement, will be weakened or reduced. That said, the participative approach to decision making has come under attack from the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for DESNZ with their use of the term 'blockers' to question the work and contribution that groups make. We consider the various groups who provide advice and sometimes objections to specific proposals have an essential role to play in seeking to ensure the environmental protection and health and wellbeing of places they represent.

WMTC urges the Government to make clear in EN-7 that it welcomes and respects the creative and supportive part that local authorities, NGOs, community groups, etc. play. A statement would be welcomed recognising the positive contribution these groups make in helping to support and deliver environmental sustainability and wellbeing.

We wish to put forward the following regarding Climate Change. We reaffirm that the criterion must be exclusionary. Related criteria such as flooding and coastal processes should remain separate but contributory assessments.

In the 2022 Chief Nuclear Inspector's Annual Report, CNI Mark Foy stated that 'Recognising the growing challenges presented, potential external hazards to nuclear sites, and the significant public interest in climate change, my next CNI themed inspection will focus on this area. The purpose will be to provide assurance on the continued adequacy of industry's arrangements to maintain safety in the face of climate change impacts, taking account of the latest scientific advice'.

It has been reported to us that the NGOs attended a series of workshops with senior staff from the Office of Nuclear Regulation to discuss resilience in the nuclear industry, and it is clear from these that nuclear facilities will in future face increasing threats from climate change, with coastal erosion, storm surges and the possibility of flooding being identified through modelling as particularly marked risks to sites along the East Coast of England. These sites include those at Hartlepool, Sizewell, Bradwell and Dungeness. It is highly likely that operations at such sites will be untenable in the longer term.

Questions 9 and 10

Contact details and representation

West Mersea Town Council

Email: town.clerk@westmerseatowncouncil.gov.uk

Parish/Town Council