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The Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce: The wrong questions, the wrong team, the wrong answers

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The UK government's 2025 Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce, established to cut “red tape” blocking nuclear expansion, is fundamentally misconceived. Historical evidence shows that failed nuclear projects collapsed due to financial risk, not regulatory failure. The Taskforce lacked expertise in radiation science, environment, and economics, its recommendations threaten regulator independence, and its reforms will consume government resources without delivering new capacity before the mid-2040s.

1. Introduction

In February 2025 Prime Minister Starmer announced the setting up of a Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce with a press release¹ headed *“Government rips up rules to fire-up nuclear power”* and sub-headed *“More nuclear power plants will be approved across England and Wales as the Prime Minister slashes red tape to get Britain building.”* This set the tone for future announcements with emotive language and little substance but designed to generate headlines.

The narrative was clear. The planning and regulatory system had failed: *“The industry pioneered in Britain has been suffocated by regulations and this saw investment collapse, leaving only one nuclear power plant – Hinkley Point C – under construction.”* Any opposition to nuclear projects was trivial and should be ignored – *“saying no to the NIMBYs”* and *“saying no to the blockers who have strangled our chances of cheaper energy, growth and jobs for far too long.”*

In April 2025 the leader of the taskforce, John Fingleton, was announced². In May, the other four members were revealed and the terms of reference³ announced (see *Annex 1*). An interim report was published in August 2025⁴ with the Final Report published on 24th November, 2025.⁵ Within two days of its publication, the government had accepted all its recommendations, promising a detailed response in February 2026 and full implementation

within two years.⁶ It is not clear whether government had advance notice of the findings or whether it accepted them without detailed consideration.

The barrage of headline grabbing rhetoric continued throughout, for example, at the publication of the Interim Report, Fingleton described the regulatory system as *“not fit for purpose”*⁷. The Final Report said: *“We are looking to recommend fundamental once-in-a-generation change in the regulatory system to enable the UK’s nuclear sector to thrive and take full advantage of the global resurgence of nuclear technology.”*⁸

2. Terms of reference

The Review’s terms of reference reflected the clear signals that this was not an open investigation to determine whether delivery of the UK’s nuclear ambitions could be accomplished. The conclusions the government required were signposted and reflected in the terms of reference, which are reproduced in full in *Annex 1*. In brief, they directed the Taskforce to: gain quick wins by accelerating existing work on international harmonisation, regulatory justification and ALARP; assess whether current practices remain fit for purpose; identify beneficial legislative amendments; reduce regulatory complexity and address resource constraints; refresh expected regulatory outcomes;



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evaluate regulatory culture and proportionality across the sector; determine how well current arrangements support new and novel nuclear technologies; and explore options for simpler exchange of technologies and companies with advanced nuclear states with aligned priorities.

Most of these are too non-specific to have any analytical value. The one that deserves comment is the first. Its title 'quick wins' is strange as what follows does not appear to lead to quick wins.

The specific mention of the application of the concept of keeping risk As Low as Reasonably Practicable (ALARP) is significant. It came in the same month as President Trump instructed the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission to effectively ignore the assumption every credible national and international regulatory and expert body makes, that there is no safe dose of radiation and that the risk increases in a 'linear' way with increased exposure: the Linear No Threshold (LNT) assumption. Trump said⁹:

"Adopt science-based radiation limits. In particular, the NRC shall reconsider reliance on the linear no-threshold (LNT) model for radiation exposure and the "as low as reasonably achievable" [ALARA] standard, which is predicated on LNT. Those models are flawed, as discussed in section 1 of this order."

This is an extraordinary claim by a US President asserting that the assumption made by every credible regulatory body, LNT, was not science-based. There are detailed differences in emphasis between ALARA and ALARP (ALARP is used more in the UK) but for these purposes they are very similar. Starmer was not as explicit as Trump in questioning LNT but mention of ALARP made it clear that was precisely what he was doing. Making such an instruction calls into question a fundamental principle that should be behind every nuclear safety regulator, that it should be independent of the government.

At first glance, the final reference point, international harmonisation, seems common sense. However, given the record of regulatory bodies not anticipating any of the major accidents or safety challenges – Three Mile Island (1978), Chernobyl (1986), the 9/11 Terror Attack on New York (2001), Fukushima (2011) and now the risk to Zaporizhia from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – the plurality of separate regulatory bodies coming to their own conclusions, albeit with reference to the work of other regulators, would seem to be a strength worth retaining.

In practical terms, the new reactor designs under review by the UK – the Holtec, GE Vernova, and Rolls Royce Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) – were first reviewed in detail by the UK and are not yet under detailed review by France or the USA. The GE Vernova design only started review in Canada less than a year ago, well behind the UK. So, the demand for international harmonisation is a strawman.

3. Did the Taskforce have the required skills?

The Taskforce comprised five members:

- **John Fingleton, Taskforce Lead.** He is an economist with much of his career spent in government competition authorities and with a strong record of advocating for the increase in reliance on competitive mechanisms.
- **Andrew Sherry.** Professor of Materials and Structure at Manchester University with a history of working with UK government-owned bodies such as the National Nuclear Laboratory.

- **Mark Bassett.** A career in national and international regulatory bodies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Office for Nuclear Regulation.
- **Sue Ion.** Nuclear engineer with a career primarily in government owned nuclear bodies such as British Nuclear Fuels and a vocal advocate for nuclear power.
- **Mustafa Latif-Aramaesh.** Planning lawyer with a history of drafting UK laws.

The skills offered by the Taskforce only make some sense if the Terms of Reference are an accurate representation of the issues that have impeded various UK government’s nuclear ambitions. There is no mention of economics or competition in the terms of reference, so it appears the Taskforce Lead did not bring any specific skills to the team. There are references to changes to laws so if it is the legal structure that is holding back nuclear deployment, Latif-Aramaesh’s appointment has some logic. Otherwise, the strong impression is of a team comprising members with no record of bringing a critical perspective to the nuclear industry.

Only one member of the Taskforce appears to have specific experience of regulation, and none has any experience of building or operating nuclear plants. The first of the Terms of Reference, so-called ‘quick wins’, relies on a judgement on the Linear No Threshold assumption, yet there is nobody in the Taskforce with the fundamental scientific credentials to make such judgements. There is also



The Sizewell B Inquiry 1982-84 is cited as the perfect illustration that public inquiries are used by objectors to development to cause long delays. The facts tell a rather different story.

considerable discussion of modifying environmental requirements, yet the Taskforce has no expertise in environmental issues. Only Latif-Aramesh has experience in planning and as a lawyer.

4. What is the evidence and where is the Taskforce's analysis of it?

The government has been pushing a narrative that the UK is uniquely bad at building nuclear power plants, and that inefficiencies in the planning and regulatory system are to blame. We are told that the UK was a world leader in nuclear technology in the 1960s and reforms to planning and regulation would allow us to reclaim that position in a 'globally resurgent nuclear industry' and launch a 'Golden Age' for nuclear. What is the evidence for this diagnosis?

In *Annex 4* we look at the first two decades of nuclear power in the UK, up

to the mid-70s, portrayed as the period when the UK was a world-leader with nuclear power. The analysis shows after the two first Magnox stations, it was a period of decline from, at best, mediocrity. In 1977, Henderson an economist with experience at the UK Treasury stated¹⁰ that the AGR and Concorde programmes were “*two of the three worst civil investment decisions in the history of mankind.*”

4.1. The Thatcher Programme: Sizewell B

The Sizewell B public inquiry from 1982-84 is cited as the ultimate illustration that public inquiries are used by those opposing a project to cause long delays. The evidence does not support this. In 1979 Mrs Thatcher announced a programme of one reactor order per year for ten years, starting with Sizewell B (see *Table 1, Annex 3*).

“There will be no subsidies, direct or indirect. We are not in the business of subsidising nuclear energy. No cheques will be written, there will be no sweetheart deals.”
– Malcolm Wicks, Energy Minister, 2006.

However, it was more than three years after that announcement that the Inquiry started, mostly due to delays in the UK nuclear industry finalising the station design. The Inquiry held hearings for about two years. The Inspector then took nearly two years to draft his report which the Minister responsible sat on for several months before deciding to go ahead with the Sizewell B. So, the public inquiry only accounted for a small proportion (two years) of the delay from policy announcement to investment decision (eight years). The other nine reactors did not go ahead despite one of them, Hinkley Point C, successfully completing a public inquiry process. The reason for the programme not being implemented was not opposition or planning and regulatory delays, it was because the power was too expensive, electricity demand did not justify the reactors’ construction and, most importantly, the privatised electricity company was not willing to take the financial risk of committing to build just three surviving reactors in addition to Sizewell B out of the intended programme of ten reactors. In 2003, the government published an Energy White Paper.¹¹ On nuclear power, it said: *“Although nuclear power produces no carbon dioxide, its current economics make new nuclear build an unattractive option and there are*

important issues of nuclear waste to be resolved. Against this background, we conclude it is right to concentrate our efforts on energy efficiency and renewables. We do not, therefore, propose to support new nuclear build now.”

If this prescription had been followed, there seems little doubt that electricity bills would be lower, the problem of energy poverty would have been significantly reduced, our dependence on global fossil fuel markets would be less and we would be much closer to meeting our greenhouse gas emissions targets.

4.2. The Blair Programme

However, only three years later Tony Blair abandoned this position stating nuclear power was back on the agenda *“with a vengeance”*.¹² A key promise was that new reactors would be built with no public subsidies. A UK Energy Minister told a Select Committee *“There will be no subsidies, direct or indirect. We are not in the business of subsidising nuclear energy. No cheques will be written, there will be no sweetheart deals.”*¹³ This promise was never credible but it was not until 2015 that it was abandoned.¹⁴

By 2010, this policy had developed into a programme of five projects (11 reactors) all to be online by 2030. This comprised stations at Hinkley Point, Sizewell, Wylfa, Moorside and Oldbury.

To this was added another project, Bradwell B, in 2016. To facilitate this programme, the government introduced a new regulatory procedure, Generic Design Assessment (GDA). Reactor vendors would apply and the regulator would review the design in full detail so that all design issues would be resolved before construction started and the design could be built at any site subject only to dealing with site-specific issues. The four-stage process was expected to take four years. All four designs proposed completed this process largely on time.

4.2.1. Hinkley Point C

It was not until 2013 that the UK government and Electricité de France (EDF), the company leading the bid for Hinkley Point (two EPR reactors), reached an outline agreement on the commercial terms (see *Table 2, Annex 3*). Another three years passed before a final investment decision was taken. It appears this delay was due to the time taken to agree detailed terms and EDF's attempt, largely unsuccessful, to bring in other investors so it would be able to reduce its stake to below 50% – it ended up having to agree to take 66.5%¹⁵. There is no evidence that planning or regulatory delays were the primary factor in a project that EDF announced in 2007 only achieving a final investment decision in 2016.

The project was expected to cost £18bn [2015 money] when the investment decision was taken in 2016 with completion of the second unit by the end of 2025. Even before construction started in 2018 EDF announced a cost increase and by February 2026 another four cost and time increases had been

announced, taking completion to end 2032 at a cost of £35bn [2015 money]. EDF has never acknowledged any blame for these overruns saying they were down to factors other than the technology and its own performance. For example, it has blamed Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) required design changes (a claim vehemently denied by the ONR), the Covid pandemic, the Ukraine invasion, inflation, supply chain issues and shortages of skills.

4.2.2. Sizewell C

In 2012 EDF announced the Sizewell C project as essentially a clone of the Hinkley Point C project and expected to use the same financial model (see *Table 2, Annex 3*). Construction was expected to start two to three years after Hinkley Point C, so that workers could transfer directly from Hinkley Point to Sizewell profiting from the skills and learning built up at Hinkley Point. However, by 2018, EDF had realised it had made a serious mistake in agreeing to a fixed power purchase price for Hinkley Point – indeed, it has subsequently had to write-off more than €16bn of its investment in Hinkley Point C because it had agreed to bear the cost of any cost and time overruns.

EDF refused to go ahead with Sizewell C using the same financial model. It began to promote the Regulated Asset Base (RAB) model to government for Sizewell C in 2018. This would rely on institutional investors for funding, with EDF not taking a significant stake and with the risks being borne by UK electricity consumers not the plant owners. It was not until 2022 that the government had passed the legislation



The delay in the Final Investment Decision for Sizewell C was down to the government and EDF.

necessary for using this model, then a further three years before a final investment decision was taken while investors were found. This decision was possible only because the government took nearly half of the equity, with EDF taking 12.5% and Centrica, a UK energy company, taking a 15% stake. Government was only able to persuade institutional investors to take about a quarter of the equity. So, the delay in achieving a Final Investment Decision for Sizewell was down to the government and EDF. Any planning or regulatory delays were not on the critical path.

The central estimate for the completion date is 2040 at a cost of £39bn [2024 money] about 60% more in real terms than the estimated cost of Hinkley Point C at the same point. Far from benefiting from learning from Hinkley

Point C with lower costs and shorter times, Sizewell C's expected construction time and cost are substantially higher. Again, there is no evidence that planning and regulation are in any way responsible for these increases.

The Taskforce makes no mention of the former CEO of EDF, Henri Proglio, telling the French National Assembly that the EPR was "*too complicated, practically unbuildable*".¹⁶ The other two projects in Europe using this technology,

Olkiluoto 3 in Finland and Flamanville 3 in France, took 18

years and 19 years respectively from construction start to completion. It is therefore implausible that the design is not to blame for a significant part of the delays.

In 2010 EDF and Framatome began work on a revised EPR design, EPR2, that would be cheaper and easier to build. Any subsequent orders for France would be for EPR2s, not the Hinkley/Sizewell design. As of early 2026, the EPR2 design was still not complete but simplification and cost-reduction was to be achieved by leaving off safety features included in EPR, for example, a double wall containment has been replaced by a single-wall. How much this will reduce costs and improve buildability will only be known when the first reactor is completed, which is not expected until 2038.

4.2.3. Wylfa and Oldbury

These two sites, Wylfa on Ynys Mon and Oldbury in Gloucestershire respectively, were bought by Horizon, a consortium of the two largest German utilities (EON and RWE) to build two reactors of unspecified design at each site with Wylfa in the lead (see *Table 3*). The utilities withdrew in 2012 following the Fukushima disaster, selling the sites and the progress made to the Japanese reactor vendor, Hitachi. Hitachi's priority was to sell four of their ABWR-design reactors, and this design completed its GDA on schedule in 2017. Hitachi did not have the financial capability to own the plant and was relying on bringing in investors to take over ownership of the project. But despite desperate attempts by the UK government to keep the Wylfa project afloat, including offering to take a 30% equity stake and to provide all the finance, the project collapsed in 2019 due to lack of investors. There is no evidence that planning or regulatory issues played any part in this collapse.

4.2.4. Moorside

This site, adjacent to Sellafield in Cumbria, was acquired by a consortium of European utilities, NuGen, including Iberdrola (Spain) and ENGIE (France), planning to build three Westinghouse AP1000s, which had started its GDA in 2007 (see *Table 4*). They too withdrew, selling the consortium to Westinghouse (then owned by Toshiba) in 2013, which, like Hitachi, did not have the capacity to own the plant but wanted to sell its reactors. There was a delay in the GDA process because Westinghouse asked

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for it to be paused in 2011. The GDA recommenced in 2014 and was successfully completed in March 2017. The project collapsed in 2017 when Westinghouse filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection because of losses from sales of four AP1000s in the USA. Once again, this collapse was not due to planning or regulation delays.

4.2.5. Bradwell

When the Hinkley Point deal was signed in 2016, one element of the agreement was that the minority investor, China General Nuclear (a state-owned electric utility and reactor vendor), would build two reactors of its own HPR1000 design at the Bradwell site in Essex with a consortium of CGN (66.5%) and EDF (33.5%) also to be complete by 2030 (see *Table 2, Annex 3*). The design completed its GDA successfully and on schedule in 2022. However, by this time, the government had decided that allowing a Chinese company to own and operate a nuclear power plant in the UK posed a national security risk and they effectively vetoed the project. It was not formally abandoned but nothing has been done since 2022 except site remediation. Planning and regulatory procedures played no part in this decision.

4.3. Conclusion

Regulatory and planning issues played no part in the failure of five of the six nuclear projects that came out of the 2006 Blair announcement. The issues that caused the failure were difficulty of finding investors, power purchase agreements that did not give investors sufficient guarantee that income would cover their costs, especially the issue of who bore the risk of cost escalation. The 2025 investment decision for Sizewell C implicitly acknowledged that reactors could be not built in only eight years from Final Investment Decision. The assumption for Sizewell C is this will take at least 15 years.

5. Was the UK ever a world nuclear technology leader and can it regain that position?

The UK was an early adopter of nuclear power, building Calder Hall, the second nuclear power plant in the world (Russia built the first): albeit Calder Hall's primary purpose was to produce plutonium for the UK weapons programme. The UK followed this up with ten more nuclear power plants using the same Magnox technology but getting progressively larger (see *Table 5 in Annex 4*). The only reactors the UK has exported used the Magnox design, one to each of Italy and Japan in 1959. These represent the last major civil nuclear power technology exports made by the UK.

UK technologies deployed domestically since then have a dreadful record. The seven Advanced Gas-Cooled Reactor (AGR) stations took up to 24 years to build and the worst, Dungeness B, has a lifetime reliability of less than 50% (see *Table 6 in Annex 4*). The THORP re-

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processing spent fuel reprocessing plant completed in 1995 was late, overbudget, never worked as designed, and has left an expensive decommissioning legacy because of a plutonium leak not detected for some time. The Mixed Oxide fuel manufacturing plant was designed to produce about 120 tonnes of fuel per year but over its ten-year life to 2011 it produced a total of 15 tonnes of fuel.

So, the UK was never a nuclear technology leader and technologies designed in the UK have generally failed. Given the huge economic risk that building a nuclear power plant represents, customers are going to try to minimise their risk by choosing technologies supplied by companies with a substantial and successful track record. UK companies simply do not have that, and it would take decades for them to build such a track record.

It is not even clear whether being a world nuclear technology leader is a position worth having. If, as has always happened in the past, the latest world nuclear power renaissance fizzles out, being a technology leader in a technology nobody wants will be of little value. Was the UK's apparent lead, with France, in supersonic air transport with Concorde worth having?

6. Key issues with the Taskforce's recommendations?

The Taskforce report groups its 47 recommendations (see *Annex 2*) into five categories:

1. Government to provide clearer leadership and direction for the nuclear sector. (Recommendation 1).
2. Government and regulators to work together to simplify the regulatory approval process for nuclear projects. (Recommendations 2-4, 15, 35).
3. Nuclear sector and government to focus on reducing risk aversion and ensuring regulatory and sector decisions are proportionate. (Recommendations 5-10, 13, 22-23, 43, 45).
4. Nuclear sector and government to address cultural, capability and financial incentives that block progress/delivery. (Recommendations 16, 21, 36, 38-42, 44).
5. Nuclear sector and government to enable acceleration of delivery and innovation. (Recommendations 11-12, 14, 17-21, 24-37, 46, 47).

While all 47 recommendations and the government's response deserve careful analysis, in this *Policy Brief* we focus on three areas: radiation health issues; siting for new reactors; and environmental issues. As well as being key issues in the plans for new nuclear capacity, as argued above, they comprise areas in which the Taskforce appears to have no specialist expertise. This is not to say that the other recommendations could not also be very damaging, for example, the merging of regulatory capabilities – and they deserve close scrutiny – but

they are outside the scope of this policy brief.

6.1. More Proportionate Application of Allowed Radiation Levels

There appears to be a concerted campaign worldwide by the nuclear industry to discredit the Linear No Threshold (LNT) assumption on the impact on health. As previously stated, President Trump has instructed the US regulator not to use it. It would not be credible for the UK government to question the judgement of every regulatory body worldwide.¹⁷ The UK government states that: “[*The LNT model*] is the international standard, and the best toolkit we have available, nor are we reviewing the legal dose limits that are set out in the *Ionising Radiation Regulations 2017* or the *Tolerability of Risk Framework* itself.”

However, its response to the Taskforce report states “*The nuclear sector's interpretation of the concepts within it, however, has drifted over time, erring towards excessive caution without meaningful safety improvements. The ONR's guidance combines this ambiguity with the Linear Non-Threshold (LNT) model of radiation exposure to define a radiation dose target for the public from nuclear sites as 0.02mSv. This is overly conservative considering the average annual dose for a person in the UK from all sources is 2.6 mSv. This guides regulators to impose safety upgrades where there are no health benefits, at significant cost to the nuclear sector and therefore the public.*” No evidence is offered to support these assertions, and both the Taskforce and DESNZ appear ill-qualified to take a position contrary to current scientific judgement.

While the use of the LNT assumption is clearly an irritant to the nuclear industry, it is not clear that relaxing the allowed radiation doses would have a significant impact on reactor costs and buildability. Probably the two most important and costly additional requirements to nuclear reactors in the past three decades are the need for a core-catcher (or equivalent) to prevent a molten core entering the environment and the need to toughen the reactor vessel sufficiently to withstand impact from a passenger airliner crashing into it. It seems unlikely that changing the allowed dose rate would have any impact on either of these two measures.

6.2. Semi-Urban Siting New Reactors

The one recommendation the government says it is not adopting is number 33: *“Create a new pathway to allow semi-urban power stations”* but it triumphantly states: *“We do not accept the recommendation because we intend to go further.”* No analysis is presented showing siting nuclear power stations closer than 30km to a semi-urban area does not constitute a significant risk, for example, through difficulty of evacuation.

The practical relevance is that despite the brave words about opening up new sites for nuclear construction, the process of identifying and evaluating a new site will be, and ought to be, a slow meticulous process. Ensuring that any site will be secure for the lifetime of up to 200 years that a nuclear facility might have requires careful analysis. A nuclear power plant should not be foisted upon an unwilling community. In its guidance for siting a Geological

Disposal Facility, the government says: *“If the community decides they do not want to host a GDF, then we won’t go ahead.”* Why does the same logic not apply to nuclear power stations?¹⁸

If the government wants to site a new nuclear power plant not already committed (i.e., successors to the Sizewell C EPRs and the Wylfa SMRs), two of the most credible sites in terms of public acceptance are the Hartlepool and Heysham sites, neither of which meet the Semi-Urban Population Density Criterion (SUPDC) which the government proposes to abolish. The Minister’s plans to complete the new pathway to allow semi-urban power stations within 12 months from March 2026 appear precipitate.

6.3. Modify Habitat Regulations

The narrative that environmental protection measures hamper essential developments extends to other infrastructure, such as housing, and the government shows contempt for anyone expressing concern about protecting our environment. As with siting and radiation protection, government asserts that there will be no reduction in protection: *“this government will not lower environmental protections”*, but they must be judged on their actions not their words.

A major element of the Taskforce’s proposals is to modify Habitats Regulations to allow alternative compensatory measures for environmental damage, perhaps many miles from where the damage has been caused. This appears to have been inspired by EDF’s approach at Hinkley Point C. In its Development Consent Order, it committed to install three fish



That countries such as Finland, whose Olkiluoto 3 is pictured above – are having comparable problems building the current reactor designs – suggests that the problem lies with the technology itself and the capability of those supplying and building it. (Source: TVO).

protection measures at the plant, one of which was an Acoustic Fish Deterrent (AFD). In 2019, when the AFD became problematic it tried to substitute the promised AFD with a package of measures which they claimed would compensate for the loss of fish in the estuary, namely saltmarsh, oyster-beds, kelp forest and river work.¹⁹ In 2021, the Planning Inspectorate rejected these proposals in a decision ratified by the Secretary of State for Environment. In 2025, EDF came back with new proposals to install an AFD, which began testing in 2026.²⁰ EDF has consistently given misleading information on the cost of the AFD. talking about the fish protection measures costing £700m implying this

is the cost of the AFD. It is the estimated cost of the total package with the AFD contributing only £50m.²¹ The idea that causing significant environmental harm can be allowed if something compensatory is done elsewhere is ridiculous.

7. Analysis

The bewildering number of recommendations and largely empty verbiage and jingoism disguises serious flaws in the Taskforce's analysis.

7.1. Failure to identify the problem

The government asserts that the problem with building new nuclear in the UK to time and cost is due to failings in the planning and regulatory systems,

an assertion that the Taskforce accepts without question. All the evidence – the fact that other countries are having comparable problems building the current reactor designs – suggests that the problem lies with the technology itself and the capability of those supplying and building it. As a result, a large amount of government time will be spent in the next two years carrying out restructuring and reforms that do not address the actual problem.

7.2. Lack of proportionality

The word ‘proportionality’ appears repeatedly in the terms of reference, the final report and the government’s response. ‘Proportionality’ appears to be a euphemism for absolving the nuclear industry from complying with any democratic, legislative and other requirements that they and their projects might be inconvenienced by.

It is worth highlighting the context in which these proposals are made. If there are no more delays to the Hinkley Point C, Sizewell C and Wylfa projects (a total of 7.9GW), by 2040, nuclear capacity will be 9GW, the level that existed in 2020. Even if there is no growth in electricity demand – the government assumes demand will double by 2050 – nuclear will only supply a little over 15% of electricity by 2040 – long after the electricity generation sector is expected to have been decarbonised.

By contrast, in January 2026, the government awarded contracts for 14.5GW of renewable capacity, virtually all expected to be online by 2030 and producing power at a much lower kWh cost than nuclear energy. Implementing the Fingleton recommendations

will require large amounts of central government time and that of at least 15 government bodies and agencies plus EDF, over the next three years. Even if these measures were to work, there can be no impact on new nuclear capacity not already committed to until the mid-2040s, far too late to be of any value in our main strategic goals of meeting emissions targets and reducing dependency on international fossil fuel markets. At a time of need for urgent government action on meeting our climate change goals, on national security as a result of conflicts in Iran and Ukraine, and a need for action on public health and welfare – especially fuel poverty – this is a gross distortion of government time and resources we cannot afford.

7.3. Normal rules should not be applied to nuclear

A recurring theme of the report is that if the normal processes of democracy and protecting the environment are inconvenient to the nuclear industry, they must be overridden. Those seeking to exercise proper democratic scrutiny are scornfully described as ‘NIMBYs’ and ‘Blockers’ and those seeking to preserve the environment are characterised as prioritising ‘newts and bats’ over public welfare. This special status for nuclear is in addition to the massive public subsidies and concessions given to prevent nuclear projects, like Sizewell C, from collapsing.

7.4. Failure of the government to acknowledge its own shortcomings

One element of the Fingleton report that has received no attention by the

media or by the government is that much of the problem is attributed to government failings. In the summary, Fingleton identifies ‘five primary regulatory problems’²²

- Fragmented oversight;
- Disproportionate decisions;
- Flawed legislation;
- Government indecision;
- Weak industry incentives.

Most of these appear to be failings of government and the relevant Ministries. However, the 47 recommendations do little or nothing to address these perceived failings and the government has said nothing about what steps it is going to take to address them. Instead, the blame for failures of nuclear policy is directed at regulatory and planning agencies.

7.5. Compromising the independence of regulators

Two of the key requirements for a credible nuclear regulatory body are that it should not have a duty to promote the technology and it should be independent of its government. The Nuclear Installations Inspectorate (NII) was separated from the government’s nuclear R&D body, the UK Atomic Energy Authority, in 1959 so that its position as regulator was not compromised by a duty to promote nuclear power. It was then part of the government’s Health and Safety Executive. It became the ONR in 2013 when it was made separate from, and independent of, government. Given that the government has a role in appointing the ONR Board members, it is not entirely independent, but government should have no role in its decision-making.

Most of the “five primary regulatory problems” identified by Fingleton appear to be failings of government and the relevant Ministries. However, the 47 recommendations do little or nothing to address these.

However, the Taskforce’s proposals, agreed by government, compromise its independence and its technology neutrality. The Taskforce implementation will prescribe to the ONR how it should interpret ALARP (risk should be As Low As Reasonably Practicable); and its implicit scepticism about the Linear No Threshold radiation damage assumption – an assumption adopted by all credible national and international regulatory bodies – seriously compromises this independence.

It is also a strong signal to the ONR that if the government does not like decisions taken by ONR, it will overrule them. The government claims “*This [Recommendation 43: Develop and fund a joint government and regulator international strategy and action plan] will manage and control risks to ensure there is no dilution in standards or outcomes and no loss of independence.*” However, these are just words – the government’s proposed actions do compromise the ONR’s independence.

The government also says:²³ “*But it [ONR] does not currently have the ability to consider the significant wider social*

benefits of nuclear power in its decision-making. We will legislate to change that, giving the ONR the ability to consider strategic factors – national security, climate, and economic growth – when carrying out its functions.” Asking the ONR to consider these strategic factors not only compromises its technology neutrality, but it is also impractical. ONR is already struggling to fulfil its duties but asking it to factor in national security, climate and economic growth will require additional skills and would seem likely to slow the process down. The Planning Inspectorate does not have independent status and government can and frequently does overrule its recommendations. Most recently the Planning Inspectorate recommended against giving planning permission to the Sizewell and Wylfa projects. For Sizewell, the government overruled the Planning Inspectorate’s decision and it is clear it would have done the same had the Wylfa project gone forward.

7.6. Decisions to be taken by government-appointed committees

A major element of the implementation of the Taskforce report is setting up *ad hoc* panels.

7.6.1. Nuclear Regulatory implementation Panel (NRIP)

The government states:²⁴

“This small, expert council chaired by DESNZ will provide continuity from the Taskforce and embed a strong challenge function throughout implementation. NRIP will be made up of senior figures from across government, regulators and industry alongside independent representation

from the Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce.”

The Panel will “*hold to account*”: regulators, government departments, dutyholders and companies for the delivery of the government’s implementation plan for the Taskforce recommendations. It is clear the government will appoint NRIP’s members and there will be no representation of civil society or independent experts. The possibility that the government’s nuclear ambitions might prove imprudent or unachievable is not contemplated. The policy must be driven through no matter how ill-conceived it proves to be.

7.6.2. Expert Advisory Panel to hear evidence of the tolerability of the risk framework

This Panel will hear evidence on risk tolerability and will produce its recommendations by June 2026.²⁵ By mid-April 2026, no information had been given on who the members of the Panel will be or how they will be chosen suggesting the June 2026 target will either be missed or the Panel’s work hurried. All experience suggests that, like the NRIP, it will not contain representation from civil society or independent experts. The government will appoint only members who are prepared to tell Ministers what they want to hear.

8. Conclusions

The only sensible course of action would be for the government to abandon this misconceived exercise. It should use the valuable time and resources on those options that are able

to meet the UK's strategic goals especially on climate change, energy security and energy affordability. However, the government has backed itself so far into a corner that it is inconceivable that it would find the courage to abandon the implementation process. Anyone who tries to change the outcome will be characterised by the government as the sort of person that has caused all the nuclear industry's problems. The most that can be done is damage limitation.

One simple first step would be rigorous examination by Parliamentary Committees, perhaps more than one. The Energy Security and Net Zero Committee would appear the most appropriate although the Environmental Audit and the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs could review the environmental aspects of the Taskforce Recommendations and the government's commitments to implement them. As of mid-April 2026, none of these have opened an Inquiry into the Taskforce.

This *Policy Brief* identifies three particular areas of concern in the Nuclear Regulatory Taskforce's Final Report: siting of nuclear power plants, environmental protection, and radiation protection; any precipitate weakening of these elements must be resisted. The change in siting criterion to allow nuclear power plants to be sited near population centres is especially urgent with proposals that will have implications for the next two centuries potentially being rushed through in a year without any evidence that this change is based on clear unequivocal findings. The

The change in siting criterion is especially urgent with proposals that will have implications for the next two centuries.

weakening of environmental protection is a slippery slope, opening the way for developers of any facility, not just nuclear power plants, to argue that the environmental damage caused must not stand in the way of a facility with benefits claimed for it by the developers. The proposed changes in worker protection, the application of the LNT assumption, are also not based on rigorous analysis; the LNT assumption is just inconvenient for the nuclear industry.

This is not just a UK issue. The UK appears to be following President Trump's lead in weakening regulatory independence along with other countries such as France and Hungary. Given the inordinate influence of the US and the UK in nuclear policy and regulation, there is a risk that nuclear industries in other countries will use these precedents to argue for weakening their own regulatory and planning processes. And all of this is based on a failure to learn the lessons of the UK's nuclear build problems. These are not due to unnecessary regulatory burdens, but to the failure to find a business model for a technology that has proved impossible to deliver anywhere near on time or on budget, even when estimates for these have been increased, and which cannot compete with other renewables on cost per MWh.

Endnotes

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7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/taskforce-to-tackle-regulatory-barriers-holding-back-nuclear>
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nuclear-regulatory-taskforce/nuclear-regulatory-taskforce-interim-report>
9. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/05/ordering-the-reform-of-the-nuclear-regulatory-commission/>
10. P. D. Henderson, 'Two British Errors: their probable size and some possible lessons', Oxford Economic Papers, 29 (1977), 185. He estimated that they lost £4.4 billion in 1975 prices, which was between 12 and 13 times the total research and development spend of all British universities at that time.
11. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-energy-future-creating-a-low-carbon-economy>
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/may/16/energy.business>
13. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2006/oct/11/politics.nuclearindustry>
14. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/damian-carrington-blog/2015/oct/22/hinkley-point-uk-energy-policy-is-now-hunkering-in-a-nuclear-bunker>
15. Its minority partner, China General Nuclear, was only contractually obliged to fund 33.5% of the project up to the forecast construction cost. It has not been willing to invest beyond that point and all investment has been coming from EDF since 2024. EDF's stake at the end of 2025 was 76.7%. <https://www.edf.fr/sites/groupe/files/2026-04/2026-04-02-urd-edf-2025-en.pdf> p 76
16. <https://x.com/laernoess/status/1603111408173973504>
17. For example, it is the assumption adopted by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) and the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR)
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Annex 1: Terms of Reference

The Taskforce shall focus on the areas of:

1. **Quick wins** – accelerating and delivering existing work on international harmonisation, Regulatory Justification, application of ALARP in practice and proportionality of emergency planning rules.
2. **Suitability** – the Taskforce shall assess current practices to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and the most effective way to fulfil the regulatory requirement.
3. **Legislation** – taking into account recent changes, and those that are currently in progress (e.g. in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill), the Taskforce shall identify whether further amendments to legislation would achieve significant benefits, ranking by predicted impact.
4. **Regulator scope and resource capacity** – the Taskforce shall explore opportunities to reduce the complexity of the regulatory interfaces in defence and civil nuclear sectors, and the degree to which the system's resource capacity constraints represent critical blockers to delivering nuclear ambitions.
5. **Regulatory outcomes** – the Taskforce shall refresh the outcomes that HMG, informed by the sector, expects from regulators and the regulated, considering where these (for example, timelines) should be set in statute.
6. **Nuclear sector culture and processes** – the Taskforce shall assess the proportionate application and response to regulation in the nuclear sector including both by regulators and the nuclear industry itself; the clarity and utility of guidance; behaviours and norms including in the relationships between regulators and the regulated.
7. **Innovation and new nuclear** – the Taskforce shall determine the degree to which current and proposed arrangements enable exploitation of new nuclear technologies and novel applications of nuclear technology.
8. **International harmonisation** – the Taskforce will explore options to enable simpler, quicker exchange of nuclear technologies and companies between the UK and advanced nuclear states with closely-aligned priorities (for example, France, Canada and the US), including mutual recognition.

The other annexes and their tables can be found online at policybrief.org.

Annex 2: 47 Recommendations of the Taskforce

Annex 3: The Thatcher and Blair Nuclear Programmes

Annex 4: What is the record of the UK nuclear power?

Find these annexes in the online version of this article:

<https://policybrief.org/briefs/the-nuclear-regulatory-taskforce-the-wrong-questions-the-wrong-team-the-wrong-answers/>

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