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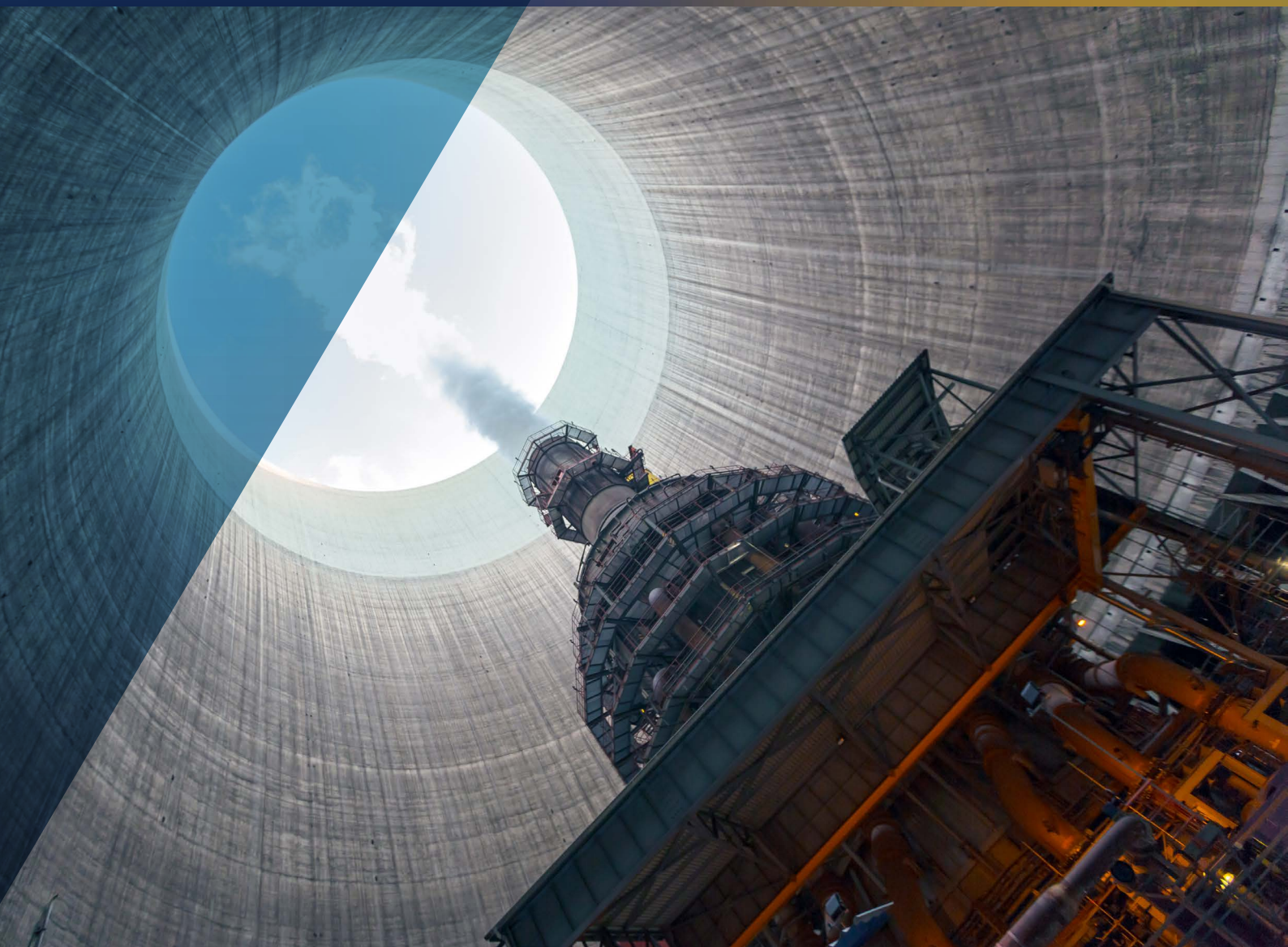
The Nuclear Divide

Public sentiment towards a new era of nuclear energy



INTRODUCTION

The UK government has set out an ambitious vision for a new era of nuclear energy, positioning it as a cornerstone of the country's future energy mix.

With a target to quadruple nuclear capacity to 24GW by 2050 - enough to meet around a quarter of projected electricity demand - this marks one of the most significant expansions of nuclear infrastructure in British history.

Large-scale projects such as construction of the Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C nuclear power stations are central to this strategy, alongside a new generation of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), which promise faster deployment, lower costs, and greater siting flexibility.

To support this transformation, the government has launched Great British Nuclear, committed billions in funding, and pledged reforms to streamline planning and licensing. The government says this will create thousands of new highly skilled jobs while delivering clean, secure and more affordable energy for working people.

Yet despite this momentum, the success of these plans will depend not only on engineering and investment, but on public support.

Recognising this, SEC Newgate commissioned a nationwide survey in September 2025 to better understand public sentiment towards nuclear energy and its infrastructure.

The findings reveal a deeply divided landscape. While half of the UK public view nuclear positively as a low-carbon energy source, a significant proportion remain sceptical or opposed, particularly when it comes to local development.

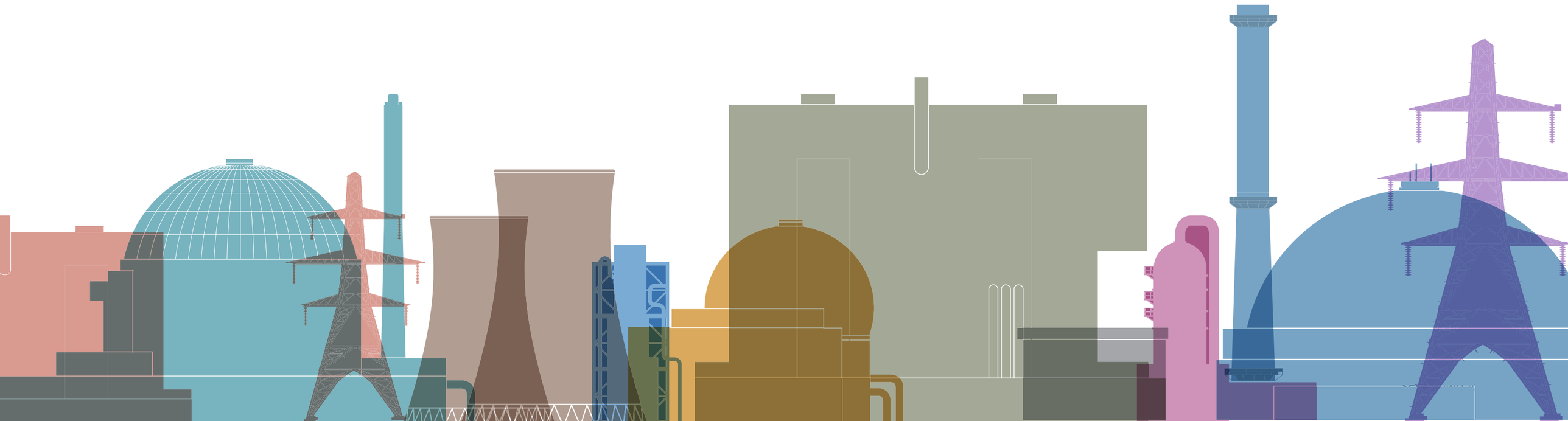
Even with SMRs positioned as safer and more compact alternatives to traditional nuclear power stations, acceptance remains limited.

Concerns about health and safety, environmental impact, and waste disposal persist. For many, the issue is not simply about infrastructure, but about nuclear itself.

Our research highlights the challenge ahead if the UK's ambitions for a new era of nuclear energy are to be realised.

With a wide range of negative views still prevalent, the path to delivering the UK's nuclear ambitions will require not just technical excellence, but strategic and empathetic engagement with communities across the country.

In partnership with those working in the energy sector, the government must now address the beliefs and anxieties that shape public opinion on nuclear energy.



CONTEXT

The UK is at the dawn of a new era of nuclear energy generated by Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), a new generation of nuclear technology offering smaller, and more flexible, alternatives to traditional nuclear power stations. Producing up to 300 megawatts of electricity, SMRs are factory-built and can be assembled on-site, reducing costs and enabling deployment in more varied locations, including industrial zones and former nuclear sites.

The UK government sees SMRs as vital to its net zero and energy security goals and has now confirmed the site of the former Wylfa nuclear power station on the island of Anglesey, North Wales - pictured - as the location for the UK's first SMRs.

Their compact design supports regional development and would help decarbonise sectors like manufacturing, healthcare, and data infrastructure. SMRs will also contribute to diversifying the UK's energy mix and reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

To drive progress, the UK is reforming planning laws, expanding site access, and investing in innovation. Key initiatives include the Great British Nuclear SMR competition and international partnerships to streamline licensing.

SEC Newgate, a consultancy with deep expertise in renewable energy, is closely monitoring these developments. With strong insight into policy and stakeholder engagement, SEC Newgate is well-placed to support organisations navigating the opportunities and challenges of SMRs and the UK's evolving energy landscape.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

SEC Newgate conducted an online survey with n=2,086 respondents in September 2025.

The sample comprised of 18+ United Kingdom and Northern Ireland residents, proportionally representative across age, gender and region.

SENTIMENT TOWARDS NUCLEAR ENERGY REVEALS DIVISION IN THE UK

Public opinion on nuclear energy in the UK is split. Only half of the population feel positively about nuclear as a low carbon energy source, figures that are significantly lower than for solar, wind and tidal. In fact, a quarter of the UK public actively feel negatively towards nuclear energy.

Within the wider nuclear conversation, and with it being positioned as an alternative to renewable energy sources by Reform UK, and increasingly by Conservative and Labour, the research shows that the public remains immensely resistant to this energy source and that it may not be the easy win that public discourse indicates, **especially as Small Modular Reactor (SMR) proposals come forward in the UK.**

There is also a clear demographic profile emerging for those who are more positive about nuclear. These demographic groups include:

- Men
- 65+
- Those who intend to vote Reform UK in the next election

This indicates that nuclear support is not evenly distributed across the UK public and that it is concentrated amongst specific groups. This has a clear implication for engagement: that any communications efforts should be tailored to different audiences.

SENTIMENT TOWARDS RENEWABLE /LOW CARBON ENERGY SOURCES

(% shown is NET positive 6-10)

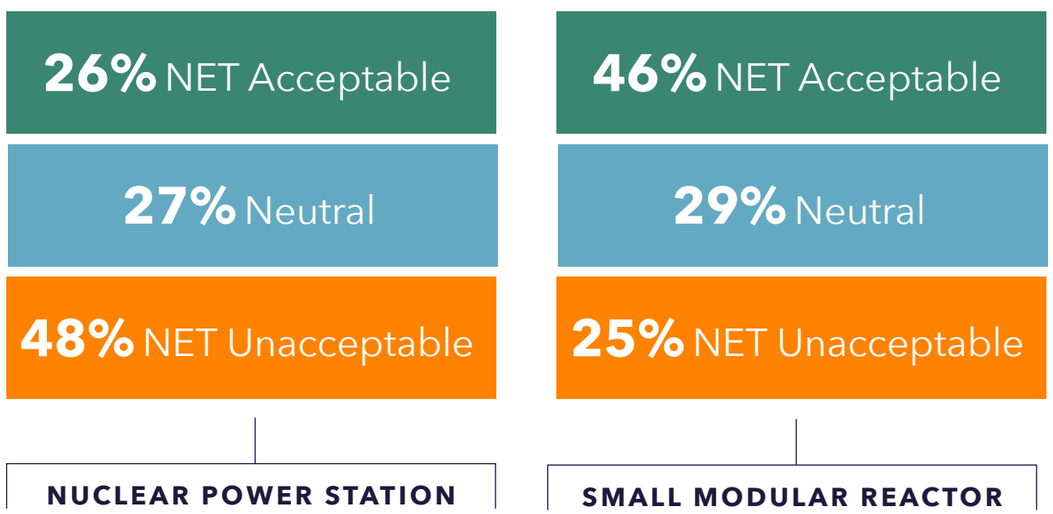
Source: Nuclear Energy Survey, 2025. Q1. How positive or negative do you feel about the following renewable/low carbon energy sources? Base: n=2,086

NEGATIVE SENTIMENT TOWARDS NUCLEAR UNDERPINS LOW LOCAL ACCEPTANCE OF NUCLEAR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

The UK public are very resistant to nuclear power station development in their local area. Only 26% find it acceptable, while 48% are opposed. The prevailing reason behind this lack of acceptance are concerns about health and safety, with residents concerned about the potential of nuclear disaster, drinking water contamination and health impacts. The UK public also express concern about the amount of space that nuclear power stations take up, and thesafe disposal of radioactive waste. Overall, the research reveals strong resistance to nuclear energy's principal infrastructure type.

Even when introducing Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) to the UK public, acceptance only rises to 46%. This is a substantially lower acceptance level than SEC Newgate have seen for solar and wind in previous research projects. There are three key demographic groups where this shift towards greater acceptance (between nuclear power stations and SMRs) is particularly minimal: women, those aged 45–64, and Green Party voters. For these cohorts, attitudes towards nuclear energy appear more entrenched, with limited movement even when SMRs are positioned as smaller, safer and less costly.

HOW ACCEPTABLE WOULD IT BE TO DEVELOP A NUCLEAR POWER STATION VS A SMALL MODULAR REACTOR IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

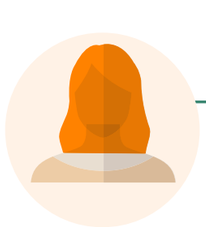


THE KEY DRIVER OF REJECTION IS OF NUCLEAR ITSELF, NOT SIMPLY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT.

Despite SMRs being positioned as safer than nuclear power stations, the top driving concerns behind low acceptance are related to health and safety risks. This indicates that the issue is anchored in concerns about nuclear energy. From previous research with communities about renewable and low carbon infrastructure, safety as the prominent concern is a challenge that so far, appears to be unique to nuclear energy.

Those who reject nuclear energy hold fundamental beliefs that it is unsafe and harmful, and in order to engage communities effectively about nuclear energy development and minimise local opposition, it will be essential to overcome these concerns.

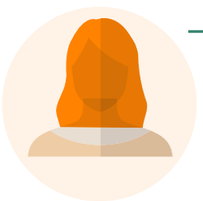
> Anything Nuclear is totally unsafe for local communities. I strongly believe that anything nuclear creates cancer in all living people and animals.
> **65+ years old, Eastern England**



> They are dangerous and can be a health and safety hazard.
> **35 – 44 years old, North East**

> I feel that no matter what type of nuclear-based power system is created, it is not going to be safe or eco friendly.
> **25 – 34 years old, West Midlands**

> I'm thinking of how long nuclear waste takes to degrade and Chernobyl and the nuclear power plant in Japan. Things do go wrong and cause devastation to the land, people and animals for generations. Welsh hill farmers still have to check their sheep for radiation after Chernobyl.
> **55 – 64 years old, Wales**



Source: Nuclear Energy Survey, 2025. Q3. How acceptable or unacceptable do you feel it would be to develop a nuclear power station in your local area? Q5. How acceptable or unacceptable do you feel it would be to develop a small modular reactor (SMR) in your local area? Base: Total n=2,086

THOSE WHO DO NOT ACCEPT SMR DEVELOPMENT HOLD CORE NEGATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT NUCLEAR

Despite the promise of SMRs, a significant proportion of the UK public remains unconvinced. Among those who say it would be unacceptable to build SMRs in their local area, there are three dominant concerns. These beliefs reflect deep rooted anxieties about nuclear energy and that for some, SMRs are not seen as a distinct or safer alternative to traditional nuclear power stations, but rather as part of the same problematic category. Addressing these concerns directly, particularly around waste, disruption, and environmental impact will be critical to building acceptance.

NUCLEAR - NEGATIVE BELIEFS

(% Shown Is NET "I Believe This" 6 -10 Out Of 10)

78% Nuclear energy produces harmful waste that can't be disposed of safely

73% Nuclear energy infrastructure causes major disruption for local communities where it's being built

70% Nuclear energy is a major threat to the environment

Those who say it is **UNACCEPTABLE** to build small modular reactors in their local area

EVEN THOSE WHO ARE MORE ACCEPTING OF SMR DEVELOPMENT ARE VULNERABLE TO NEGATIVE MESSAGING

The research shows that acceptance of SMRs does not equate to full confidence in nuclear energy. Among those who say they would accept SMRs being developed in their local area, negative beliefs about nuclear remain widespread. The most prominent concern, held by 2 in 3 of this group, is that the UK relies on foreign companies to build its nuclear infrastructure, revealing a key vulnerability related to the perception of the UK's energy dependency.

Other negative beliefs are also strongly held, with 6 in 10 believing nuclear infrastructure takes too long to build, and that harmful waste cannot be disposed of safely. Over half also believe that nuclear projects cause major disruption to local communities, and that the infrastructure costs too much. These findings show that even among those who are accepting, nuclear energy is viewed through a lens of caution.

NUCLEAR - NEGATIVE BELIEFS

(% Shown Is NET "I Believe This" 6 -10 out of 10)

66% The UK relies on foreign companies to build nuclear energy infrastructure

60% Nuclear energy infrastructure takes too long to build

58% Nuclear energy produces harmful waste that can't be disposed of safely

54% Nuclear energy infrastructure causes major disruption for local communities

52% Nuclear energy infrasctructure costs too much to build

50% Nuclear energy is strongly associated with weapons and conflict

42% Nuclear energy infrasctructure is an eyesore

36% Nuclear energy is a major threat to the environment

29% Nuclear energy is unsafe

21% Nuclear fuel comes from Africa, so it is not homegrown energy

Those who say it is **ACCEPTABLE** to build small modular reactors in their local area

PASSIVES RETAIN STRONG ASSOCIATIONS OF NUCLEAR WITH WEAPONS AND CONFLICT

Among those who are neutral about SMR development (saying it is neither acceptable nor unacceptable), there is also a significant belief that nuclear is strongly associated with weapons and conflict. SEC Newgate's previous research with this cohort, often referred to as 'Passives', demonstrates they are particularly vulnerable to opposing messaging. Typically starting from a lower baseline of knowledge, they tend to latch onto the most salient pieces of information. The strong association of nuclear with weapons and conflict reflects this trend, suggesting that much of their understanding is shaped by high-profile news stories and popular culture, rather than official sources about the potential of nuclear energy.

Source: Nuclear Energy Survey, 2025. Q2a/Q2b. Here are some things that people may believe about nuclear energy. With 0 being 'I don't believe this at all' and 10 being 'I believe this completely', indicate how much you believe each of the following statements. Base: Respondents who say it is unacceptable to build small modular reactors in their local area n=526 Respondents who say it is acceptable to build small modular reactors in their local area n=965

HOWEVER, THERE ARE A RANGE OF POSITIVE SMR MESSAGES THAT STRONGLY RESONATE WITH THE UK PUBLIC

While concerns about nuclear energy are widespread, there is a clear set of positive messages that resonate strongly with the UK public which have the potential to shift sentiment towards this contentious energy source. Regardless of acceptance levels towards SMR development (Unacceptable, Neutral or Acceptable), there are strong positive beliefs about the benefits of nuclear to the UK, including:

Nuclear infrastructure provides jobs for communities for decades

Nuclear increases the UK's energy independence

These messages can be used to build acceptance, even with more sceptical audiences. The opportunity lies in reinforcing these benefits to maintain acceptance and persuade those on the fence. Additionally, those who are accepting of development also hold strong beliefs that nuclear is highly efficient, reliable, and capable of generating a lot of power relative to its size, showing that beliefs about nuclear energy's efficacy already exist and can be leveraged to maintain acceptance.

Acceptance levels towards SMR development in my local area

UNACCEPTABLE	NEUTRAL	ACCEPTABLE
Nuclear energy infrastructure provides jobs to communities for decades **(54%)**	Nuclear energy infrastructure provides jobs to communities for decades **(54%)**	Nuclear energy infrastructure provides jobs to communities for decades **(86%)**
Nuclear energy increases the UK's energy independence **(52%)**	Nuclear energy increases the UK's energy independence **(51%)**	Nuclear energy infrastructure is highly efficient **(82%)**
		Nuclear energy is our most reliable energy source **(81%)**
		Nuclear energy generates a lot of power relative to the amount of space required **(81%)**
		Nuclear energy increases the UK's energy independence **(81%)**

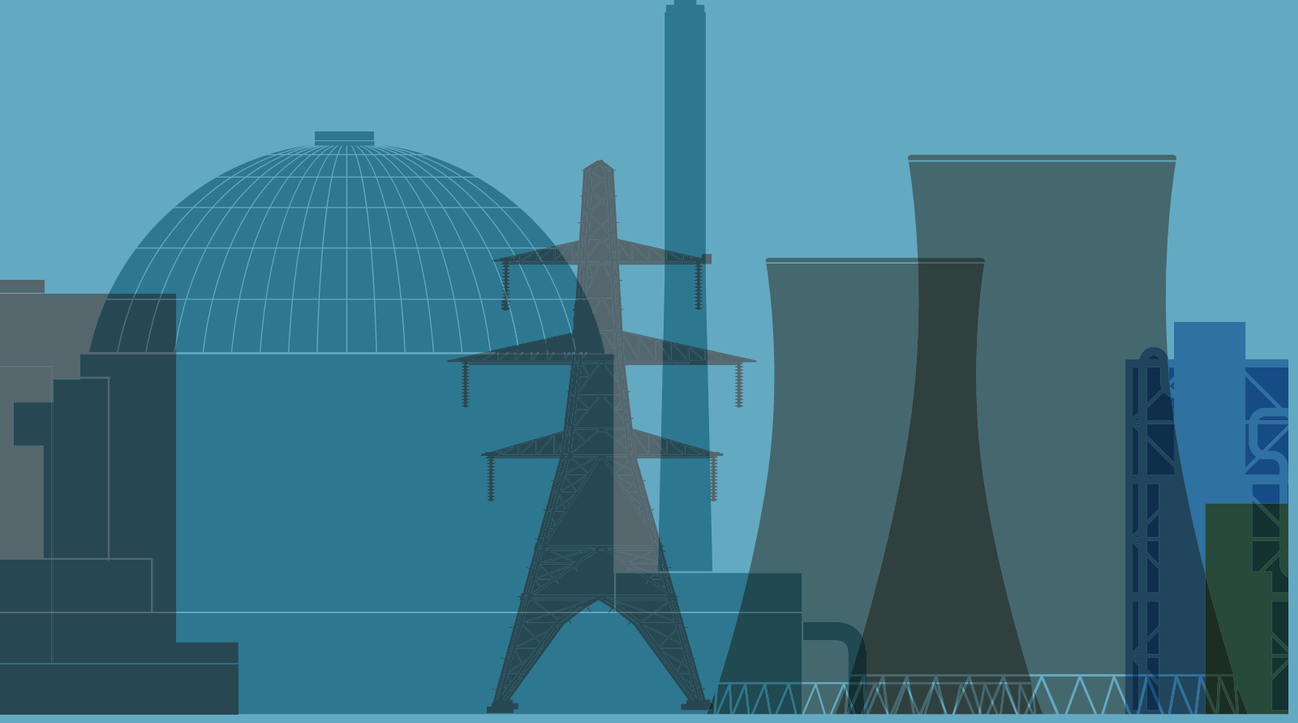
TOP POSITIVE MESSAGES TO LEVERAGE

AN OPPORTUNITY TO DRIVE SMR ACCEPTANCE AMONGST THE NEXT GENERATION

Among 18–24 year olds, there's a clear opportunity to drive acceptance for SMRs by leaning into the right messages. This cohort respond positively to a range of benefits, especially those tied to economic impact and energy reliability. They hold a range of positive beliefs about nuclear, significantly more so than other age cohorts, including that nuclear infrastructure provides jobs, is highly efficient and reliable, generates a lot of power and boosts the UK's energy independence.

This cohort's beliefs about nuclear indicate that the path forward is about education and connection, and that highlighting nuclear's role in job creation, sustainability and national resilience can help bring them on board as more SMR proposals come forward in the UK.

Source: Nuclear Energy Survey, 2025. Q2a/Q2b. Here are some things that people may believe about nuclear energy. With 0 being 'I don't believe this at all' and 10 being 'I believe this completely', indicate how much you believe each of the following statements. Base: Respondents who say it is unacceptable to build small modular reactors in their local area n=526 Respondents who say it is neither acceptable nor unacceptable to build small modular reactors in their local area n=595 Respondents who say it is acceptable to build small modular reactors in their local area n=965.



Summary of Findings

People will need persuading about a new era of nuclear energy: Public sentiment is at odds with the UK government's enthusiasm for a new era of nuclear energy. Left unaddressed, this could form a starting point to opposition for specific nuclear energy projects and mean decision-makers face strong pressure from the start, posing a challenge to timely delivery.

Public opinion on nuclear energy is split: Only about half of the UK public views nuclear positively, with much lower support compared to wind and solar. Local opposition is strong, mainly due to health, safety, and environmental concerns.

Support is uneven across demographics: Men, older adults (65+), and Reform UK voters are more supportive, while women, those aged 44–64, and Green Party voters are more resistant—even to newer technologies like Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

Core concerns are deep-rooted: Fears about nuclear disasters, waste disposal, and environmental impact are widespread. Even those open to Small Modular Reactors remain cautious and susceptible to negative messaging.

Positive messages resonate: Benefits such as job creation, energy independence, efficiency, and reliability are well-received, especially among younger people (18–24).

Recommended Actions

The UK's bold ambitions for nuclear energy can only be realised by building trust and addressing anxieties and misinformation. **We recommend:**

Making the case for UK nuclear energy: Countering concerns and misconceptions about nuclear energy at a national level can reduce the risk of negative sentiment and resistance towards individual projects.

Showcasing innovation and safety: Clearly explaining the safety and efficiency of new technologies including Small Modular Reactors, using tangible examples and demonstrations.

Emphasising positive impacts: Highlighting nuclear's role in job creation, energy independence, and reliable power, particularly for younger and undecided audiences.

Engaging early and often: Start local engagement well before planning applications, maintain open dialogue, and involve trusted community figures.

Tailor communications: Segment audiences and adapt messages to address the specific concerns of different groups, especially those most resistant.

Address fears directly: Communicate transparently about health, safety, and environmental safeguards, using credible evidence and real-world examples.

Counter negative narratives: Monitor public discourse and respond quickly to misinformation, equipping supporters with accurate information.

Educate the undecided: Provide accessible, clear information to those who are neutral or lack knowledge, focusing on separating facts from myths.

Maintain transparency: Be consistent, honest, and open in all communications, acknowledging uncertainties and explaining risk management.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a reservoir of strong negative sentiment rooted in concerns about nuclear itself. Left unaddressed, these will form a starting point to opposition for specific projects and mean decision-makers face strong pressure from the start, posing a challenge to timely delivery. Government and industry must now work together to address these issues, providing education and tackling misinformation to ensure that the UK can achieve its ambitions for a new era of nuclear energy.

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