Are we in the age of nuclear?

With nuclear energy recently classified as “environmentally sustainable” and the launch of Great British Nuclear, which could see nuclear energy account for up to 25% of our electricity by 2050, are we in the age of nuclear?

To find out, we asked the public* to share their views on how they see nuclear serving the UK’s energy needs.

Should we reduce carbon emissions?

94% of people think Britain should reduce its carbon emissions. But that still leaves 6% of people who don’t. While a small percentage, that equates to four million people – nearly half the population of London.

Do we want nuclear energy?

More than half (51%) the population support the use of nuclear energy, with only 14% against and 35% undecided.

However, when placed within the larger context of renewable energy sources, such as wind and solar, nuclear struggled to garner support from respondents, with less than a third in support (30%).

This opens the door for the industry to build on current understanding of nuclear energy in the wider energy mix and highlight its true potential.

To what extent do you support nuclear energy for generating electricity in the UK?

Support nuclear energy: 51%

Against nuclear energy: 35%

Undecided: 14%

Do people want more nuclear?

47% support the development of a nuclear energy facility in their county, while 36% are on the fence and only 15% oppose. This rises to 53% of 16-24 year olds who support.

Would you like to see more nuclear developments around the UK?

Support development of nuclear energy facility in county: 47%

Oppose: 15%

Undecided: 36%

How important is nuclear energy in the drive to net zero?

29% of people believe that nuclear energy has a major role to play in a low carbon energy system. However, 33% believe it only has a minor role to play, 20% don’t know and 11% believe it shouldn’t play a role at all.

When comparing to other renewables, however, nuclear again scored poorly. 34% believe solar energy will contribute the most to net zero. 32% said offshore wind and 24% said onshore wind. Nuclear energy scored just 15% of the vote.

Overall, this highlights the need to demonstrate nuclear energy’s role and ensure there is broader understanding and acceptance of the technology. Doing so will enable future nuclear investment and development.

What is the most important renewable energy source in our drive to net zero?

Solar energy: 34%

Offshore wind: 32%

Onshore wind: 24%

Nuclear energy: 15%
Nuclear energy is emerging as a crucial asset in our quest to achieve net zero emissions. It’s encouraging to note that a significant number of people are in favour of developing nuclear sites, recognising the potential for job creation, regional upskilling and supporting the UK in its 2050 targets. However, it still lacks widespread awareness and support when placed within the context of other renewable sources. Moving forward, it’s vital that we draw greater attention to nuclear energy as renewable energy and highlight the vital role it plays in our pursuit of a greener and more sustainable future.

Conclusions:

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Moving forward, it’s vital that we draw greater attention to nuclear energy as renewable energy and highlight the vital role it plays in our pursuit of a greener and more sustainable future.

What matters most?

Cost is considered the most important factor when considering future energy generation, at 43%. But, at less than half of respondents, that is fewer than expected, particularly given the cost of living crisis and the immense focus on energy prices in today’s media and political discourse.

Nearly 1 in 3 people consider tackling climate change to be the most important factor when considering energy generation. This is a positive sign for how people consider the climate in their energy choices.

Reliability and energy security both gained around 25% of the vote. The sharp rise in conversation around energy security following the invasion of Ukraine has put these two terms, which were relatively unknown a short time ago, into dinner table conversation.

Just 14% of people consider job opportunities to be an important factor. This raises the need for the industry to highlight the vast array of exciting and diverse careers the nuclear world can offer.

Is it safe?

Safety has long been the perceived enemy of the nuclear industry with historical disasters still referred to in popular culture. That remains somewhat as nuclear energy scored only 44% as a safe energy source and 17% feel it is unsafe. However, the remaining 39% remain unsure and are primed to be convinced of the greatly enhanced safety of new nuclear technologies.

Regions that support nuclear development

Exploring UK geography, we found that the regions that supported nuclear energy the most were spread across the UK, giving a sense of the broad support for the technology.

- West Midlands (58%)
- London (56%)
- Wales (57%)
- Scotland (48%)

* The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,000 nationally representative respondents UK between 27.3.23 to 29.4.23. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.
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