

Unite response to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA): Draft Business Plan 2024 to 2027 for consultation.



Introduction

- 1.1. This submission is made by Unite, the UK's largest trade union with over one million members across all sectors of the economy, including, manufacturing, financial services, transport, food and agriculture, construction, energy and utilities, information technology, service industries, health, local government and the not-for-profit sector. Unite also organises in the community, enabling those who are not in employment to be part of our union.
- 1.2. Of particular relevance, to this submission, Unite represents almost 31,000 engineers and technicians in the Energy and Utilities sector carrying out every task from the most menial to the most highly skilled engineers and scientists in the country within the nuclear energy industry.

2. Observations

- 2.1. Unite recognizes that according to the projected budgets funds are declining or remaining static in many areas, causing a real terms reduction due to the price of just about everything declining as a result of inflation. Unite does not believe that the budget as allocated is realistic as there are too much need and not enough to go around.
- 2.2. The industry is in dire need of investment and in the absence of government funding, every avenue should be explored to achieve this goal. Unite believes that the industries workforce comprises of some of the brightest minds in the country and the NDA would be wise to provide them with a voice to provide options. The programme is one that lasts over 100 years and therefore needs an appropriate time between reviews of the NDA budget that provide security and stability which reduce costs.
- 2.3. The demands on the NDA are growing as more of the facilities reaches a stage where it can no longer provide power safely. Extending the life of plants will only work for so long before inevitably the site is handed over for decommissioning. When this happens, the NDA has to ensure that there is sufficient transfer funding for it to complete its work and not settle for a pittance. Failure to do so will only cause more financial strain to be applied to the Nuclear Restoration Services (NRS) fleet decommissioning processes to reduce costs further. Equally, as things stand without life span enhancement, especially of the AGR's there will be a bottleneck of work at Springfield in particular, to clear the demands of the staff and equipment, from other sites in order to reach their deadlines.
- 2.4. There are any number of activities that need to be undertaken in order for UK plc to reach its goal of net zero by 2050. This goal has created shortages in things like carbon capture utilisation and storage, green hydrogen generation to meet the demands of the energy, transport and other mobile energy supply requirements¹. Key to all of these endeavors is the need for heat, and one thing that the nuclear industry has in excess - heat. Are their solutions that have been examined to find ways to safely extract this heat for a useful purpose and at the same time create revenue? Have such ideas been given the proper airing? Many staff do not think the NDA think outside of their limited box to find solutions that could aid them in balancing their books, focusing instead on the core task of the safe removal of radioactive waste, returning sites to the way they were or better. As stated earlier in 2.2 the industry is in dire need of investment and in the absence of government

¹ This would include the replacement for fossil fuels to power anything from a portable generator, chainsaw, or compressor to a straddle carrier at a port or combine harvester. [There is an open call for evidence on this area](#)

funding, every avenue should be explored, especially ones that enhance the achievement of the UN Sustainability goals that feature in the consultation. Unite feels that there are opportunities to explore and new funding avenues that will help the NDA finances and help it to become more sustainable.

- 2.5. In this response Unite wishes to stress the need to invest in the workforce, to ensure there is some resilience to these pressures, to combat the number that are, or who plan to leave, as demand for their skills develops elsewhere in the nuclear industry. While the workforce has agreed a 3-year deal at Sellafield it should be recognized that the current financial climate is piling pressure on staff to provide family financial security to balance their own budgets. This does not mean that it can be assumed that the rest of the workforce will follow suit. The situation where the pay increases are capped by the public sector limits, yet the workforce do not benefit from being in the public sector pension schemes, makes staff feel resentful as the NDA appear to be picking the options that best suit them rather than their workforce.
- 2.6. Unite would stress that we are seeing a number of apprentices depart only part way through their training, leaving gaps in replacement bodies as existing staff near retirement. A straw poll has revealed that a high percentage will be heading into retirement in the next ten years and it would appear that there are not enough apprentices to make up the numbers. Trainers are also becoming a rare commodity especially given that their salary is less than the level that can be expected by the people they are training when they finish the course. Unite is calling for workers in their last year of service before retirement to enter the training school to pass on their knowledge and skills to the new intake so the skills are not lost.
- 2.7. The problem of a lack of skilled staff is highlighted best with reference to Cyber first that needs to attract those with the skills to combat those from hostile nations or those of questionable moral fibre. Despite the need to recruit more of these skilled individuals, Unite has witnessed a slow decline in their numbers as the NDA fails to recruit and importantly retain these security professionals. Unite would like to see a reversal of this trend for the security of all. Therefore, NDA budgets need to ensure that skilled workers from across the NDA are recognised as such and paid a salary that is market leading to attract and retain the brightest and best rather than lose them to alternative employment.
- 2.8. The problem of a lack of or declining numbers of skilled staff is concerning. Unite has witnessed a slow decline in their numbers and the NDA fails to recruit and more importantly retain their craft resource skills. Unite feels that there is a desperate need for critical skills funding due to this lack of core skill resilience. The combination of an aging workforce, capped salaries and the lack of progression opportunities, do not encourage employee loyalty when doors start opening elsewhere. These movements will result in skills gaps that mean deadlines will be missed. As buildings and equipment age, finding the replacement parts becomes a task that is increasingly more expensive and the same applies to staff, if there isn't the investment into people.
- 2.9. Staff were informed that the announcement that the Dounreay's MD was joining Magnox in early 2023 but were surprised to learn, latterly that the intension was to merge everything at Dounreay under the Magnox banner without any consultation. Staff were especially concerned to learn that they would be included in the pay and conditions caps imposed under Magnox HR. This raises further trepidations about EDF and other operated sites joining the NRS fleet as staff at active power stations are paid increases based on commercial decisions, which are not bound by public sector pay barriers. If the government believe that staff will stay, when faced with a cap on earnings, while there are new alternatives opening up at new power-stations operated in the private sector, they may have a rude awakening, as these skills are in high demand and therefore command a premium. Unite therefore firmly believe that this needs to be urgently addressed.
- 2.10. As stressed earlier, at all sites, buildings/equipment and infrastructure are degrading and are in dire need of attention. If this matter is not recognised and actioned/funded appropriately, then the decommissioning program itself will be put at risk. Therefore, Unite believe asset care management needs to be fully understood and improved as a matter of urgency.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1. Unite believes that the most important point in any budget is the provision to ensure the retention of its most important asset, its staff. Failure to invest in the workforce and you see a rapid decline in its worth as numbers depreciate due to an insufficient influx of skilled replacements.
- 3.2. As highlighted previously, with investment into new nuclear fleets is the need to attract employees, resulting in an increase in the offers on the table. Failure to engage and the staff begin to feel isolated without the ability to highlight solutions to problems that expand until they interfere with timelines.
- 3.3. The primary function of the NDA should be to provide long term, appropriate and stable funding to the Site Licence Companies. Short term funding does not and never will, allow the Site's to be managed appropriately. This leads to poor decision making, especially with resource/recruitment strategies. If this is not addressed imminently, then the long-term costs will spiral, and the burden transferred to future generations/taxpayers.
- 3.4. What has become increasingly clear, is that there is not enough money in the NDA coffers, requiring the use of out of the box thinking and possible diversification to raise additional funding utilizing the opportunities to do more than just return the land to the way it was found and the long-term management of radioactive materials. Solutions that may not be obvious to management but more obvious to those on the front line. These may include the diversification into areas to more closely align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, while assisting UK plc reach its Net Zero by 2050 targets. Using waste heat more productively or other such ideas, that could be turned into a profitable enterprise, can only improve the state of the NDA's budget.
- 3.5. Unite believe that the NDA management need to work more closely with the workforce or at the very least their reps to identify issues, clarify the reasoning for less obvious decisions and potentially the realization of solutions and a change to the status quo. Why should the NDA scrape by and expect highly skilled staff to do the same when doors are opening for them, The NDA has 17,000 minds it can call on for ideas of ways to solve this predicament, what is lost by engagement, if both sides enter the room willing to listen.

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