



# THE BIGGER ENVIRONMENT

Opponents of a proposed new nuclear power station at Sizewell fear its construction will do irreparable damage to the fragile coast. But operator EDF Energy says there's a bigger environmental story to tell

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Photo: Linda Bohea, citizenside.com

Tom McGarry, head of stakeholder engagement for Sizewell C, says industry and nature have co-existed successfully for a long time



# ENVIRONMENTAL PICTURE

There's been a nuclear power station on the Suffolk coast for more than half a century. Sizewell A was officially opened on April 7, 1967. Alongside it Sizewell B, the UK's only commercial pressurised water reactor (PWR) power station, was built and commissioned between 1987 and 1995.

Most of the time, their presence is unremarkable. They've become familiar, if incongruous, objects in the landscape. Occasionally, the generation of nuclear energy on the fragile Suffolk coast is a source of debate and controversy. Sizewell B was only built after plans were subjected to a detailed safety review and a lengthy public inquiry that took almost three years, and pored over a record 16 million words of evidence.

So it's not surprising that energy company EDF's plans for a third nuclear power station – Sizewell C – should be met with some opposition and trepidation, although an opinion poll conducted by ICM on behalf of EDF indicates that support in East Suffolk for Sizewell C actually outweighs opposition by more than two to one, with high support for nuclear together with renewables, and jobs and training seen as key benefits.

As our environmental knowledge and awareness has increased over the intervening years, this time the argument is more about the impact construction of another power station on a 32-hectare site will have on the local environment. Thousands of people have signed a petition by the Stop Sizewell C campaign, and RSPB is running an awareness campaign about possible harm to its Minsmere reserve, adjacent to Sizewell, and the wider coastal area.

Yet EDF says it wants Sizewell C to be “an exemplar of how industry and environment can coexist peacefully when sensitively developed and managed”, and says operation of Sizewell A and B has proved that wildlife can thrive around the power stations.

## THE ENERGY MIX

“We're on a mission to improve lives,” says Julia Pyke, Sizewell C nuclear development director. Julia has spent most of her career working on different energy projects, including 15 years as a lawyer at Herbert Smith Freehills where she advised EDF on nuclear power, and since 2017 with EDF itself. She chose to pursue a career in power because she's passionate about climate change and wants to be part of the solution.

“This is a project designed to help mitigate climate change – to help people and wildlife. No nuclear power means we have to continue using fossil fuels. We can't address the crisis of climate change without new nuclear – renewables can't do it all. We need a mix – huge expansion in offshore [wind] generation, solar,

hydrogen, with nuclear as the bedrock.”

Neither can it be done with existing facilities. Ageing infrastructure needs to be replaced with newer, more efficient, low carbon technologies, says Julia. Sizewell A – shut down in 2006 – is now in the process of being decommissioned. If Sizewell C goes ahead it will operate alongside Sizewell B, making electricity by the mid-2030s when it is needed.

EDF Energy claims it will provide about seven per cent of the UK's electricity supply – enough to power six million homes – and contribute to the country's 2050 net zero ambition by saving nine million tonnes of carbon emissions each year.

Experience has taught Julia that building new nuclear installations is difficult, not least because it's vital that the public's interests are well considered. The challenge is to balance the wants of local people with the need for clean power and jobs. Along with environmental benefits, new nuclear builds in rural areas, such as Suffolk, can help local economies, she says, by bringing in new skills, new technologies and creating much-needed, long-term jobs.

“We desperately need to provide skilled jobs to local young people,” she says, “and it's not just about construction.” The power industry, she says, is one that offers opportunities in a wide range of fields, at all levels, from apprenticeships all the way to the top.

EDF has already been working with schools and the business community on the education and employment aspects of the



Sizewell A and Sizewell B, on the Suffolk coast



Photo: Andrew Hendry

How Sizewell C, with its twin reactors, could look alongside plants A and B on Suffolk's coast







Photo: Aeyveth/Getty Images/Stockphoto

project, particularly in areas of greatest need, such as Leiston, Lowestoft and Ipswich. “The temporary disruption,” says Julia, “is worth it for a chance to create skilled, well-paid jobs for the long term.”

### COAST AND INDUSTRY

Tom McGarry, head of stakeholder engagement, has more than a decade of experience working in Suffolk, meeting and talking with local communities. He believes that while people have a huge love of the coast they understand that industry is part of it, citing Felixstowe as an example.

A key tourist destination, it is also home to the UK’s busiest container port, an important provider of employment right next to Trimley Marshes Nature Reserve.

“Industry and nature have co-existed successfully for a long time,” he says. “The concerns at Sizewell are mainly about the environmental impact on wildlife, flora and fauna during the construction phase. The lengths we’re going to to lessen that impact are far more than during the construction of Sizewell A and B.”

EDF is currently going through the application process for a Development Consent Order, which will give planning permission to build Sizewell C. It was ready in March 2020, but the company decided to delay because the Covid-19 pandemic made public meetings practically impossible and very few people were using the various online platforms to enable meetings. During formal public consultation between 2012 and 2019, EDF engaged with more than 10,000 local people and community groups, input which Julia says has enabled them to come up with a better environmental and community strategy.

EDF has pledged to minimise disruption to local communities during the construction of Sizewell C, to invest in local employment, education and skills – including creating 1,000 apprenticeships – and to support the growth of the local economy, including supporting local firms in gaining work on the project.

Tom McGarry says much has been made of the impact transport to the site will have, so the company has decided to bring 60 per cent of construction materials by rail and sea, reducing HGVs on local roads.

The company has learned a lot from its experience at Hinkley Point C in Somerset, where it began work in 2018 on a nuclear power station identical to that proposed for Sizewell C.

Listening to communities there has taught them, among other things, about the practicalities of living with a large-scale construction workforce. HGVs will stick to approved routes, fly-parking penalties will be imposed and all workers will be required to sign a Worker Code of Conduct, which will be enforced.

Respecting the Suffolk heritage

coast, minimising the impact on RSPB Minsmere, National Trust Dunwich Heath and Leiston Abbey are high priorities, as is returning the temporary construction area to a standard befitting the AONB. A tourism fund will support the Suffolk coast tourism sector and a community fund will enhance the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of local communities.

Much of the public concern comes from the sheer scale of the project on such a fragile coastline but Julia answers this by pointing out that nuclear power generation is actually very densely concentrated.

“If you want to make low carbon electricity any other way you actually need vastly more space,” she says. Sizewell A, B and C would occupy 69 hectares, less than 0.2 per cent of the total 156 sq miles of Suffolk Coasts and Heaths Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, where the site is located. “After Sizewell B everything was regenerated and Minsmere thrives next to it.”

### LEGACY MATTERS

Indeed, Tom McGarry says the legacy of Sizewell C will be a good one for Suffolk. The company’s on-site geologists and environmental specialists will work with wildlife and nature partners to oversee the rewilding of large areas of the Sizewell estate, which will increase by 25 per cent. The result will be a 19 per cent net gain in biodiversity, he says, all of which should be reasons people will want to visit, contributing to eco-tourism.

Environmental measures include creating 47.8ha of enhanced habitats for marsh harriers, already underway, including a new wetland to provide habitat for marsh harriers if they stop using the Sizewell Marshes for feeding during the construction of Sizewell C. In the longer term, says EDF, the site will include extra grassland areas and wetlands, which will be better for marsh harriers than the present conditions.

For bats, dark corridors will be created, new bat boxes will add to over 40 already installed and a new ‘bat barn’ will be provided. EDF has also sought guidance from the Environment Agency, and input from Natural England, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the RSPB, to ensure that construction doesn’t affect the water levels and natural flooding that make up the habitat of ground nesting birds, such as avocets and bitterns.

Should Sizewell C go ahead, EDF intends to establish an independent environmental trust to manage the ongoing re-wilding and biodiversity of the Sizewell estate, which it will contribute to every year during the operation of Sizewell C, and to expanding and identifying other areas for re-wilding and habitat creation. ♦



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Photo: EDF ENERGY