PLUTONIUM DISPOSITION

Following the Committee of Public Accounts' report 'Nuclear Decommissioning Authority: Risk Reduction at Sellafield' published on 31 October 2018, I am writing to provide the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's response to Recommendation 7 (for the Department to set out its plan for deciding on the long-term use of plutonium). This letter is being sent alongside the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's (NDA) response to the Committee regarding the current arrangements to manage plutonium at Sellafield, also covered by Recommendation 7.

The Government recognises that determining the long-term solution for the UK's inventory of civil separated plutonium is essential to cleaning up the UK's nuclear legacy. A decision on the long-term solution for the UK's inventory of civil separated plutonium can only be made when the Government is confident that an approach can be implemented safely and securely and that it is affordable, deliverable and offers value for money.

In 2011, informed by a public consultation and advice from the NDA, the Government outlined a preliminary policy position to reuse the plutonium as mixed oxide fuel in civil nuclear reactors, with any material unsuitable for reuse immobilised and treated as waste for disposal. Since 2011, the Government has been working closely with the NDA to develop reuse and alternative immobilisation options that could be credibly deployed, and the NDA has undertaken substantial work with commercial developers, technology suppliers and research and development organisations. Current progress on this work is summarised in the NDA's recent publication on the management of plutonium, which I attach to this letter.

BEIS has established a programme of work with the NDA and relevant partners, drawing on HMT Green Book best practice, that will enable the Government to assess credible options for plutonium disposition against a number of critical success factors and taking in to account wider policy interdependencies (including the Government's approach to new nuclear power generation, national security, the UK's Geological Disposal Facility and the Industrial Strategy). As part of this – and given the varying degree of maturity of the technologies being considered – BEIS has commissioned the NDA to carry out further
targeted research and to report its findings to Government in 2020. At this point, the Government will determine the scope and direction of any further work required to enable a decision to be taken at an optimal time.

Due to the size of the plutonium inventory, any long-term disposition solution will take many decades to implement. In the meantime, and while work to assess options for long-term disposition is ongoing, the NDA will continue to store the material in a suite of custom-built facilities that ensure its safety and security in line with regulatory requirements. Further detail on this approach is contained in the NDA’s parallel progress report and response to Recommendation 7.

Your faithfully,

Alex Chisholm