THE UK must overcome a 'generational skills gap' if it is to deliver the new nuclear power stations needed for security of supply and a low carbon economy, energy industry experts warn today. And regulators must not 'move the goalposts' once the framework to build the plants has been agreed, they warn in a report from leading City law firm Berwin Leighton Paisner, backed by the Nuclear Industry Association. The report, Building Britain's Nuclear Future, makes six key points:

- Specialist skills vital to building nuclear power stations have been lost in this country because of the generation gap since the UK's last nuclear programme

- There is a shortage of home grown major programme management skills in the UK, with foreign consortia/firms now delivering the biggest projects

- Regulators must not 'move the goalposts' once the framework to construct the new power stations has been agreed

- Contracts will have to spread and share risks between parties to prevent investors in nuclear new build from being deterred from participation

- The new power stations will be built by consortiums and joint ventures containing a balance of international and UK firms

- The eyes of the world are on the UK's efforts to deliver a nuclear programme – if we do it successfully it will be a great platform for UK plc to export its skills, knowledge and experience around the world

A successful nuclear power programme will also help the government meet its long-term CO_2 objectives and move the UK towards a low-carbon economy. The report from BLP has been put together following interviews with senior figures from the nuclear energy sector including National Grid, Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, UK Atomic Energy Authority, KPMG, the Cogent Sector Skills Council, Westinghouse, Areva, Balfour Beatty and Sir Robert McAlpine among others. There are plans or proposals to construct 10 new nuclear power plants in the UK and up to 300 around the world in the next 20 years, at an estimated cost of $300bn.
There will be more than 80,000 people in the UK employed across the nuclear supply chain, the report shows.

And while the UK's workforce possesses most of the civil engineering skills and expertise to build a nuclear plant there is still a shortfall in some specialist skills – for example the installation of core nuclear reactors.

Nazir Dewji, partner at Berwin Leighton Paisner added: "As many as 300 new nuclear plants are planned around the world in the next 20 or so years. This is a fantastic opportunity to reposition the UK construction industry as a world leader and exporter.

"The UK construction industry is in a strong position to deliver these large-scale, complex infrastructure projects, but we will still rely on specialist nuclear installation technicians and programme management skills from abroad.

"We are going to have to learn fast how we can best fit into an international supply chain if we are going to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the nuclear new build programme.

"The regulatory framework must deliver confidence to the industry to encourage investment and deliver a great future for the UK's nuclear construction sector."

Keith Parker, chief executive of the Nuclear Industry Association said: "The UK stands on the cusp of a golden age of opportunity in the global nuclear power market. Ensuring that the UK is well-equipped with relevant specialist skills is key.

"We have already moved from just four universities to thirteen UK universities offering nuclear-specific course to students and increasing numbers of apprenticeships in this sector. This could be worth billions to the country and will provide thousands of highly skilled jobs at a time when other sectors are shrinking."