

Ed Miliband unveils plans for mini-nuclear reactors in net-zero drive

The energy secretary will back the building of a fleet of “small modular reactors” around Britain

[Chris Smyth](#), Whitehall Editor | [Adam Vaughan](#), Environment Editor

Friday July 19 2024, 7.05pm, The Times



Since taking office, Ed Miliband has given planning consent to more solar power than has been installed in the past year

KARL BLACK/ALAMY

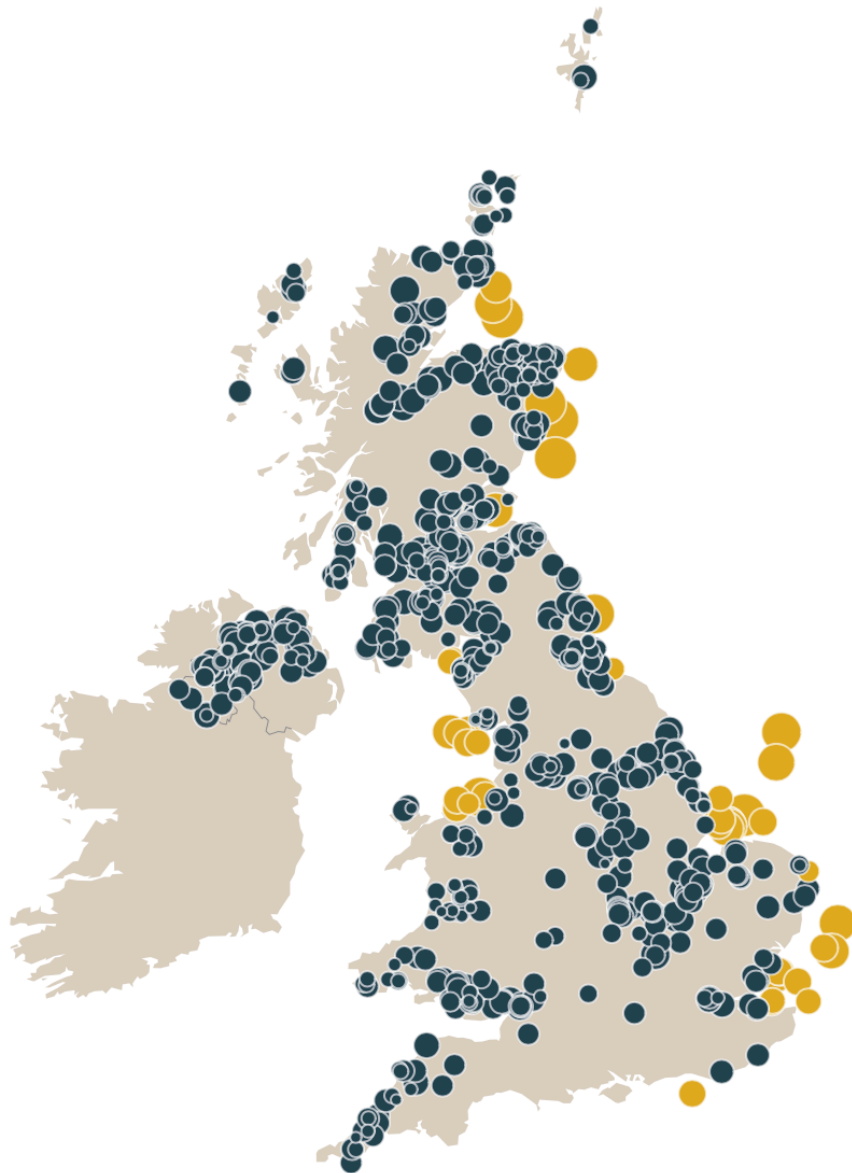
Ed Miliband will press ahead with a new generation of mini nuclear power plants, with plans to unveil reactor designs by September.

The energy secretary has told MPs that he will give his “absolute support” to a plans to build a fleet of “small modular reactors” around Britain as part of his clean energy drive.

Looser planning rules are expected to allow these reactors almost anywhere outside built-up areas, in the next stage of a clean-energy blitz that has resulted in [Miliband](#) lifting a ban on onshore wind farms and approve a host of big solar arrays.

Windy Britain

Onshore and **offshore** operational wind farms in the UK. The size of each circle is proportional to the capacity of the farm in megawatts.



Sites accurate as of April 2024

Map: The Times and The Sunday Times Source: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

Since taking office, Miliband has given planning consent to more solar power than has been installed in the past year, overriding protests from rural MPs to give the green light to projects that will power the equivalent of 400,000 homes.

He is now turning his attention to nuclear power, with a final decision on Sizewell C due, alongside [efforts to finish the Hinkley Point C plant](#). Miliband has also committed to continuing the previous government's drive to make Britain a world leader in small modular reactors.

Advocates of the technology say that factory-made standard designs will be far easier and cheaper to build than conventional plants. Given lower cooling demands, reactors which produce a third to a half as much power as large-scale plants may also be able to be built inland, using rivers and lakes or even cooling towers instead of sea water.

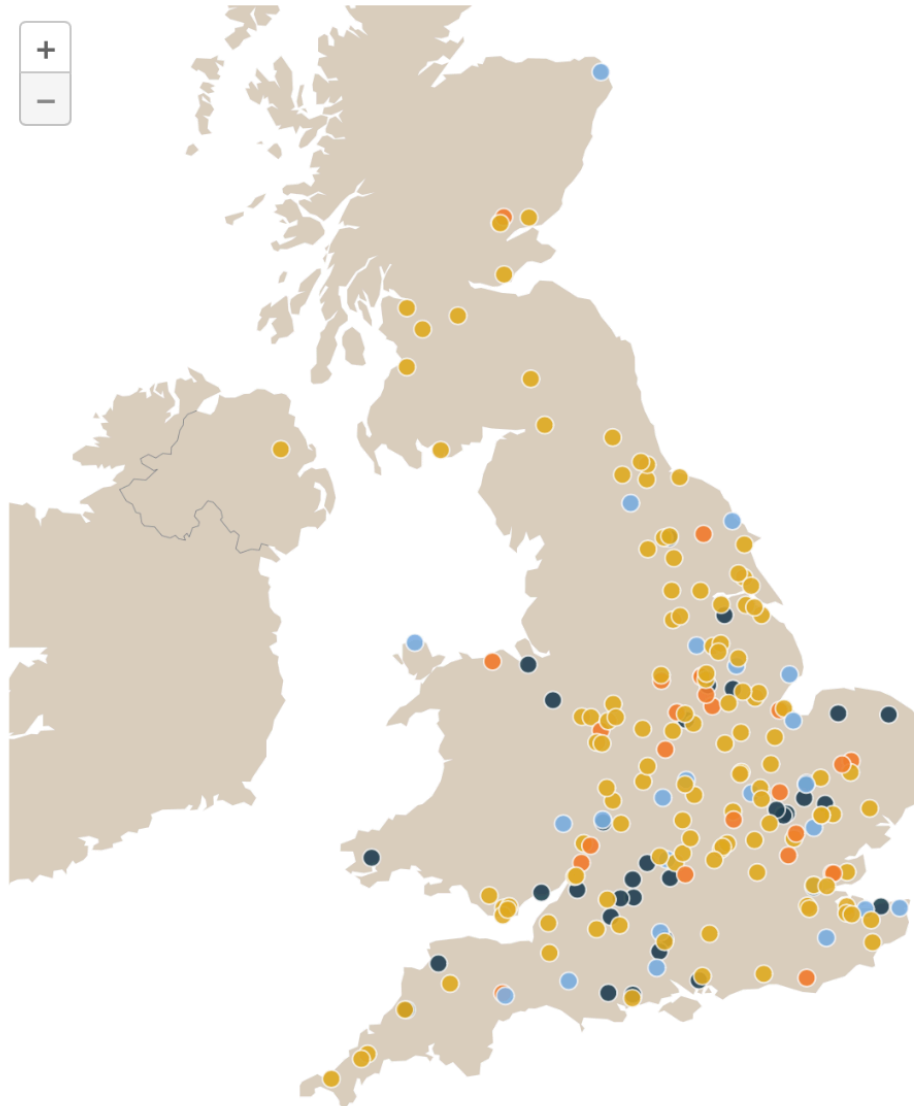
But the smaller prefabricated reactors are yet to be commercially deployed and five companies submitted bids last week to a government competition aiming to get the technology operational by the end of the decade.

Where are the UK's solar farms?

Development status of solar farms across the UK

Development status:

- Planning Application Submitted
- Planning Permission Refused
- Under Construction
- Operational



Sites accurate as of April 2024

Map: The Times and The Sunday Times Source: Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, Barbour ABI

A decision on which designs to take forward is due by the end of the summer. Miliband told MPs this week: “We will strive to keep to the timetable set out.”

Describing nuclear power as “very important for the future”, he said: “This government were very clear in our manifesto about the role that nuclear power — both large-scale nuclear and SMRs — can play.”

A final decision is also due this year on liberalising planning rules for modular reactors. Currently nuclear power plants can be built only on eight named sites but the previous government wanted developers to be able to identify their own location based on a new list of safety and environmental criteria.

Miliband is seen as unlikely to opt for tougher rules, after repeatedly stressing to MPs this week that local concerns over development would not be allowed to veto projects seen as vital to energy security and economic growth.



Miliband has approved a host of big solar arrays

GETTY IMAGES

Under the draft rules, only “population density” and “proximity to military activities” will rule out nuclear plants, meaning they cannot be built in areas with more than 5,000 people per square kilometres, covering most towns and cities. This is designed to “minimise the risk

to the public” in the event of a radioactive spill. All other criteria would be discretionary, including size, flood risk, proximity to civil airports, the natural beauty, ecological importance or cultural heritage of the site.

A de facto ban on onshore wind in place since 2015 was lifted within days of taking office, and Miliband has signalled his intent to make planning decisions on major onshore wind farms a matter for him, not local authorities.

By the end of his first week, Miliband also approved three major solar farms, one of which, Sunnica on the Cambridgeshire-Suffolk border, had been sitting for months on the desk of his predecessor, Claire Coutinho, without a decision.

Together, the three projects have a capacity of about 1.4 gigawatts and Labour wants to triple the existing total of about 18GW of solar in the UK, about 10GW of which is solar farms in fields, and the rest roughly split evenly between rooftops of commercial buildings and homes.

In tandem, Miliband talked of a “rooftop solar revolution” and intimated he would like to see solar panels made mandatory on new build homes where appropriate. However, that power is not in his gift — it is a decision for Angela Rayner, the communities secretary, to make.



Ed Miliband intends to make planning decisions on major onshore wind farms a matter for him, not local authorities

GETTY IMAGES

More major solar farm planning decisions are to come. Botley West at Blenheim Palace, which will become Europe's biggest solar farm if built, is expected to submit a planning application around October. But there will be no presumption in favour of blanket green lighting all new big solar schemes, with Miliband considering each on a case-by-case basis, saying that as a "super nerd" he would give them close attention.

A Department for Energy Security and Net Zero spokesman said: "We are taking immediate action implementing our long-term plan to make Britain a clean energy superpower. In just one week, we have swept away barriers to onshore wind farms, consented more solar power than has been installed in the past year and set out plans for a solar rooftop revolution. We are wasting no time in implementing the bold climate and energy plan needed to deliver our mission for energy independence at rapid pace."