

Public consultations

THE Department of Energy has given an assurance that building nuclear reactors on the country's 10 listed sites is not a fait accompli.

"We are taking nothing for granted and public opinion will carry weight," a government spokesman said.

The final decision on which of the sites will be developed is to be decided by the government next spring.

These include Sellafield, Braystones, near Egremont, and Kirksanton, Millom.

A 15-week consultation period for people to air their views both at local and national level is already under way and will close on February 22, followed by "parliamentary scrutiny" paving the way for the final list to be drawn up.

But the government says the consultations present an opportunity not only for the public to comment but to influence.

Local community meetings will play a key part in the areas of the sites which have been declared potentially suitable for new electricity-producing reactors.

Braystones and Sellafield will have exhibition events between January 11-16 and Kirksanton from January 21-23.

Public discussions will also be held on the Saturday morning of each event.

A new Infrastructure Planning Commission has been set up.

It has been given the power to take applications from power company developers and make decisions within a year but Ed Miliband told parliament that any developers will have to show they have consulted locally before any application is made.

But the Secretary of State is introducing planning reform to "remove barriers" such as long public inquiry delays, possibly legal challenges in order to fast track development.

Mr Miliband said: "There will be people who wish to oppose specific planning applications. Their voice must be heard.

"The planning process must ensure we consent the right projects in the right sites.

"While we need a process that can turn down specific applications saying 'no' everywhere would not be in the national interest."

German-based RWE npower is going ahead with its plans to build reactors at Braystones and Kirksanton despite strong local opposition.

A different Spanish-led consortium recently clinched a £70-million deal to build up to three reactors on land outside the present Sellafield site and wish to make a start as early as 2015.