

# Manufacturing matters

## “Give engineers a greater role in Government policy”

**A** year-long inquiry by MPs into the state of UK engineering has said that ministers are failing to listen to expert advice when making and delivering policy.

The House of Commons Innovations, Universities, Science and Skills Committee said that engineering was “one of the UK’s great strengths”, but argued that British engineers are more highly regarded internationally than they are at home. In their report, *Engineering: turning ideas into reality*, the MPs criticised the lack of engineering expertise within the Government and said they were “shocked” to discover that engineering advice had been lacking in the formulation of key policies. They recommend a re-organisation of advisory structures and the creation of a Government Chief Engineer to raise the status of the profession within Whitehall, along with more trained and experienced engineers at all levels of the Civil Service.

Phil Willis (pictured), chairman of the committee, said: “The Government has argued on several occasions that ‘science’ includes engineering, and therefore there is no need for a Chief Engineer. However, it also argues that ‘science’ includes ‘social science’ and ‘statistics’, yet there is a Chief Social Scientist and a National Statistician. The Government’s position is illogical. Engineers are not scientists and scientists are not engineers — you can not look at engineering just simply as a side activity.”

Mr Willis also called for more engineers within the Civil Service and said that more needs to be done to encourage students to study the subject, particularly women. “We can not meet the demands that the Government is making in terms of new nuclear build, nuclear decommissioning and the other major construction projects unless we are prepared to seriously ‘grow’ the graduate engineering pool — and



that means bringing more women in.”

The report’s findings were welcomed in a joint response from 30 engineering bodies. Speaking on their behalf, Lord Browne — President of the Royal Academy of Engineering — said that several key policies “fundamental to the long-term national well-being” had suffered as a result of a failure to engage with engineering advice at the outset. “The system proposed by the committee really does reflect the importance of specialised engineering advice.”

### “Engineering creates opportunities”

Lord Browne added: “Engineering delivers practical results. It creates opportunities, jobs and wealth. In these tough times, it is essential that the Government’s choices are underpinned by sound engineering advice. The report endorses our belief that if you want to change the world, you should be an engineer.”

“As the committee acknowledges, the structure of the engineering profession may be complex, but so are the challenges faced by engin-

eers. Sensitive to concerns about the complexity of the profession, the institutions, the Engineering and Technology Board, the Engineering Council UK and the Royal Academy of Engineering have developed a much more accessible route for policy makers into engineering policy advice and have collaborated on a number of activities in engineering education, such as the recent Young Engineers’ *Big Bang* fair.

“The committee is also right to highlight some of the most exciting new opportunities in engineering, such as plastic electronics. There is a potential for such a high-value industry in the UK, and the lead we currently have in research should not be lost. We could potentially manufacture plastic electronics in the UK, but unless we have the strategic investment of countries like Germany, which work hard to foster the industry, this potential will be lost. A lack of incentives from the Regional Development Agencies to build manufacturing facilities here could also lead to more of our high-value industries moving out of the UK.”

### “Do not let this report become filed and forgotten”

Chris Earnshaw, president of the Institution of Engineering and Technology, said he “would like to see more investment in engineering qualifications at the EngTech level, as this is vitally important in securing the next generation of engineers — and subsequently the country’s future prosperity. We sincerely hope that the findings of this report become a reality, not just fine words that are filed and forgotten.”

Lee Hopley, head of economic policy at the Engineering Employers’ Federation, said: “Britain has strong engineering capability, but this is not sufficiently used when formulating policy — especially in strategic Government procurement.” Ms Hopley said that the need for a solution was “particularly marked” when it came to Britain’s efforts to create a low-carbon economy.

## Motorists may be offered £2,000 to buy electric

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is expected to announce in next week’s Budget that a new fund will be set up to encourage motorists to buy electric cars, as part of a fresh initiative to stimulate the ‘green’ economy. This news follows last week’s pledge by Gordon Brown to make the UK a ‘world leader’ in the production of electric and hybrid cars. Government sources say that motorists buying electric cars will receive a £2,000 subsidy; this would reduce the cost of a small electric car to about £7,000. Drivers could recoup the sale price in savings in little more than two years, as an average electric vehicle saves about £3,000 a year in motoring costs, it is claimed. One unnamed

source said: “We want to encourage people to buy these cars — they are good for the environment, plus Britain is also a major centre of production. Vauxhall, for instance, is soon to introduce the Ampera, the UK version of the Chevy Volt plug-in hybrid.”

This ‘green’ subsidy scheme is said to be favoured by Alistair Darling because he is in two minds about setting up a ‘scrappage’ scheme, whereby motorists receive a £2,000 grant towards the costs of a fuel-efficient car in exchange for ‘turning in’ their old vehicle. A decision is not expected soon on this scheme, as “ministers believe it could end up subsidising overseas car producers,” the Government source said.

Meanwhile, London mayor Boris Johnson last week announced plans to ensure that 100,000 electric cars are used in London, accounting for 5% of the total. This is the same target suggested by Transport Minister Geoff Hoon in a *Guardian* interview back in January.

The goal, said Mr Johnson, is to create 25,000 electric charging spaces in London by 2015, convert at least 1,000 Greater London Authority fleet vehicles to electric by 2015 and ensure charging points are installed in all new buildings in London. “This is an unprecedented package of measures to make London the electric-car capital of Europe,” he said.