



## DEBATE PACK

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# The Future of Coal in the United Kingdom

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## Summary

This pack has been prepared ahead of the Backbench Business Committee debate on the future of coal in the United Kingdom, to be held on Thursday 3 December 2020 in the House of Commons Chamber. This paper provides a brief overview of the industry and relevant issues, recent parliamentary comment and press articles.

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

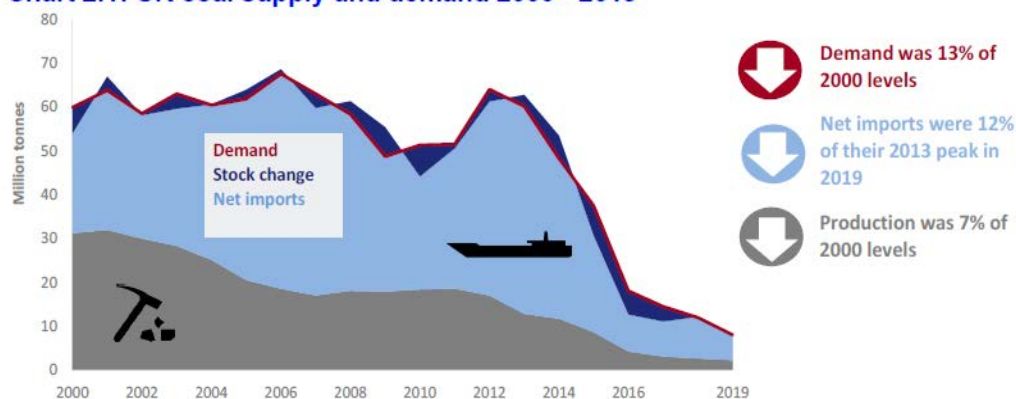
## 1.1 UK coal supply and demand

The Government publishes an annual [Digest of UK energy statistics](#) (DUKES) report which sets out information on the energy used in the UK. The 2020 report, published in July, includes information on the use of coal (in [Chapter 2 on Solid fuels](#)), summarising current demand, production, and imports (bold in original) :

- **In 2019, coal comprised 2.8 per cent of UK primary energy demand. This is down from 4.0 per cent the previous year** and 18 per cent in 2013.
- **Coal demand in the UK is at a record low because of falling demand for electricity generation. Demand fell by 33 per cent** from 11.9 million tonnes in 2018 to 8.0 million tonnes in 2019, with a 56 per cent decrease in the use of coal for electricity generation to a record low. In May 2019 electricity was generated from coal on only 5 days with the longest coal free spell (18 days and 6 hours) since the 1880's. **Just over a third - 36 per cent - of demand for coal was for electricity generation.** Overall demand has fallen by 87 per cent since 2013 as coal generation decreased following government initiatives that resulted in gas being favoured for generation.
- **Coal production fell by 16 per cent compared to last year**, down to an all-time low of 2.2 million tonnes, less than a fifth of the production recorded in 2013. This decrease was mainly due to lower demand for coal-fired electricity and coal mines closing and other collieries producing less coal as they near closure.
- **In 2019, 6.5 million tonnes of coal was imported, down by 36 per cent compared to 2018. Net imports accounted for 73 per cent of the UK's supply. Russia was the UK's largest supplier of coal imports** with a share of 37 per cent. The other main suppliers were the USA with a 27 per cent share and Colombia with a 17 per cent share.

The demand and supply of coal in the UK over time is summarised in Chart 2.1, reproduced below:

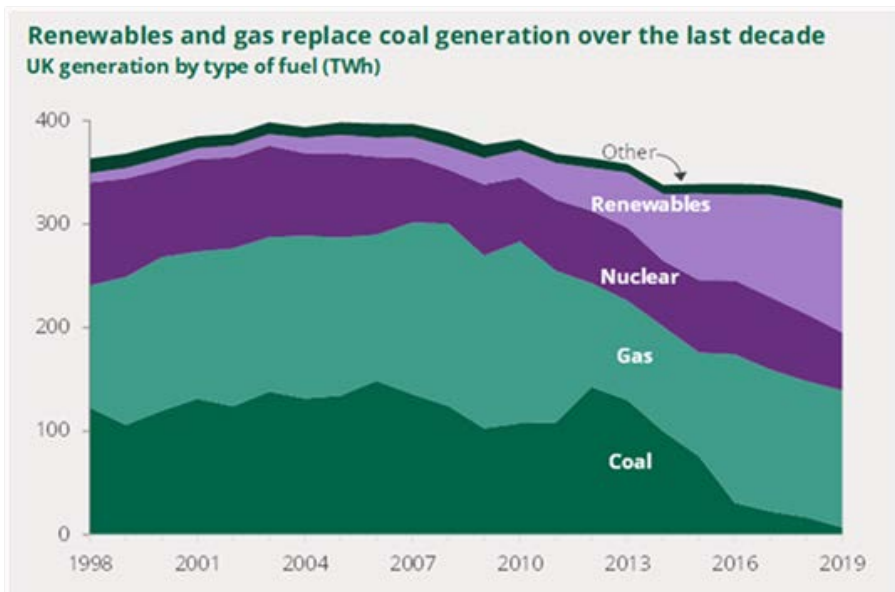
**Chart 2.1: UK coal supply and demand 2000 - 2019**



## 1.2 Coal in electricity generation

Since the Industrial Revolution when demand for energy soared, the UK's energy sector has changed significantly. From an early reliance on coal, the discovery of oil and gas in the North Sea led to a shift in the sector and the growth of associated industries such as refining. Today a further shift is occurring with the focus on low-carbon sources of energy.<sup>1</sup>

The graph below shows the electricity mix for electricity generation in the UK over time.<sup>2</sup> Coal, which historically provided a large proportion of the electricity mix has declined to a very small proportion, while renewables have grown.



Source: BEIS, [Energy Trends](#), table 5.1, June 2020

One of the main motivations for using less coal is decarbonisation. The UK has a statutory target of [net zero](#) emissions by 2050 (relative to 1990 levels). The greenhouse gas emissions (largely carbon) released when coal is combusted means it is one of the key fuels contributing to UK emissions. In January 2018, the UK Government committed to phasing out coal for electricity generation by 2025 at the latest. In February 2020, the Government announced plans to consult on moving this date forward by a year to October 2024. In response to the announcement, the then Business Secretary Andrea Leadsom said:

Coal-generated energy will soon be a distant memory as we plan to decarbonise every sector of our economy, enabling a greener future for all our children.<sup>3</sup>

More information on energy is available from the Library briefing paper on [Energy policy: an overview](#) (August 2020).

<sup>1</sup> National Grid, [The history of energy](#), [accessed 10 August 2020]

<sup>2</sup> Full details of energy consumption in the UK (including the fuels used to supply heat and transport demand) can be found in the Government's [Energy Consumption in the UK](#) report, or the [Digest of UK energy statistics](#) report, both published annually.

<sup>3</sup> Gov.uk, [End of coal power to be brought forward in drive towards net zero](#), 4 February 2020

## 1.3 Coal in industry

In addition to the production of electricity, coal is also used in industry both as a fuel for energy, and in some cases such as the steel industry, as a raw material for industrial processes.

Coal is used as a fuel in several energy intensive industries, such as cement, glass and brick manufacturing. To help meet decarbonisation targets, some industries have been exploring switching from coal to alternative energy sources such as biomass, hydrogen, and electricity. The Government has supported fuel switching through the [Industrial Fuel Switching Competition](#), which - over several phases of funding beginning in 2018 - has supported studies, feasibility and demonstration projects for using alternative fuels. The Climate Change Committee (who advise the Government on decarbonisation) said in their [2020 Progress Report to Parliament](#) that the Government should “fill policy gaps on fuel switching” in industry as deployment of alternative fuels “is needed urgently”.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, coal can be used as a raw material for industrial processes; the example of coking coal in the steel industry is set out below.

### **Coal use in steel manufacturing**

In short, steel is an alloy of iron, meaning it is made by mixing iron with other elements, such as carbon. Iron is found naturally in the earth's crust as iron ore (iron oxides with impurities) and must be extracted from the ore to produce steel.

There are two main methods for producing steel – the blast furnace basic oxygen route and the electric arc furnace route. During steel manufacturing using the blast furnace method, coke is needed as a reducing agent to extract iron from iron oxide ores. The coke itself is produced from a type of coal called ‘coking coal’.<sup>5</sup>

The electric arc furnace route uses scrap steel as the raw material and electricity to produce heat. As there is no iron ore processing, the need for coke is avoided. The electric arc route therefore has much lower carbon emissions than the blast furnace route. However there is debate about the extent to which recycled steel can meet global demand for steel production.<sup>6</sup>

The blast furnace route forms the majority of UK and global steel production. In 2018, 78% of UK steel (5.7 million tonnes) was produced using the basic oxygen route at Tata Steel's Port Talbot site and British Steel's Scunthorpe site.<sup>7</sup>

As with electricity, one of the main motivations for using less coal in steel production is decarbonisation. In addition to the possibility of using more recycled material in electric arc furnaces, there are a number of

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<sup>4</sup> CCC, [Reducing UK emissions Progress Report to Parliament](#), June 2020, page 181

<sup>5</sup> A summary of how coal is used in steel making is available from the World Coal Association webpage on [‘How is Steel Produced?’](#) [accesses November 2020]

<sup>6</sup> See for example Climate Action Tracker, [Blog: Decarbonising the global steel and cement sectors requires more than zero carbon fuels: analysis](#), 18 October 2017

<sup>7</sup> Steel UK, [Key Statistics Guide 2019](#)

alternative methods being developed to reduce the emissions from the steel making process. Some of the options under development globally are summarised in the World Steel Association's webpage on [Environment and Climate Change](#), including:

- **Hydrogen as a reducing agent** - Avoids carbon and uses hydrogen to reduce iron ore, thereby averting the creation of CO<sub>2</sub>, and producing H<sub>2</sub>O (water) instead.
- **Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS)** - Generates a clean and concentrated CO<sub>2</sub> stream that can be captured and stored. The process involves retrofitting steel plants with capture technology and requires the development of transportation networks and access to storage sites.
- **Carbon Capture and Utilisation (CCU)** - Uses the components of the co-product gases from existing processes to produce fuels or input material for the chemical industry.
- **Biomass as a reducing agent** - Can partially substitute coal for biomass such as charcoal.
- **Electrolysis** – Reduces iron ore using electricity.

In 2019, the Government launched a call for evidence on a [Clean Steel Fund](#). The proposed £250 million fund was intended to help transition to lower carbon steel production, and “maximise the longevity and resilience in the UK steel sector”. The Government is analysing the feedback.

## 1.4 Coal mines – planning

### Mineral and coal extraction

In England and Wales, proposals for the extraction of minerals – including coal - are subject to the requirements of the [Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#) administered by the Minerals Planning Authority (MPA) for the area in which the development is located.

In England, the MPA will take the decision in accordance with the policies set out in the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) and the minerals chapter of the online [Planning Practice Guidance](#). Planning authorities should also have a section on mineral extraction in their local plan which would have gone through (or will go through if not yet in place) a period of public consultation.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was first published in 2012. Following a consultation, it was revised and updated in July 2018, with some further, minor amendment in February 2019.

NPPF 2012 had a [chapter on facilitating the sustainable use of minerals](#). This observed (amongst other things) that minerals are essential for sustainable economic growth and set out some principles for preparing local plans and determining planning applications.<sup>8</sup> NPPF 2012 went on to say that mineral planning authorities should indicate any areas where coal extraction “may be acceptable”, but permission

<sup>8</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), February 2012: chapter 13

for the extraction of coal should not be given unless the proposal was “environmentally acceptable (or can be made so) or provided national, local or community benefits to “clearly outweigh” the likely impacts.<sup>9</sup>

NPPF 2019 also has a [chapter on facilitating the sustainable use of minerals](#). In determining planning applications (the NPPF now says) great weight should be given to the benefits of mineral extraction,<sup>10</sup> except in relation to coal, where planning permission should not be granted unless the proposal is (or can be made) environmentally acceptable or provides national, local or community benefits to clearly outweigh its likely impacts, taking all relevant matters into account, including any residual environmental impacts.<sup>11</sup>

The [Planning Practice Guidance \(PPG\) on minerals](#) covers planning for coal extraction.<sup>12</sup>

### Calling-in a planning application

The Secretary of State has the power to take the decision-making power on a planning application out of the hands of the local planning authority (LPA) by calling it in for his own determination. This can be done at any time during the planning application process, up to the point at which the LPA makes the decision.

The power to call-in planning applications is very general and the Secretary of State can call-in an application for any reason. In practice, very few applications are called-in every year. They normally relate to planning applications raising issues of national significance.

The [Commons Library briefing on calling-in a planning application](#) provides more information.<sup>13</sup>

### Highthorn colliery planning application

The [website of the Banks Group](#) summarises Highthorn colliery’s planning history.

An application for planning permission was submitted in October 2015 and called-in by the Secretary of State, who refused planning permission, even though the LPA had been minded to approve it. That refusal was quashed by the High Court, which sent the matter back to the Secretary of State in November 2018, for redetermination. The planning application was refused by the Secretary of State in September 2020.

The [Secretary of State’s decision letter](#) records that the planning inspector had recommended that the application be approved, and planning permission granted, subject to conditions but the Secretary of State disagreed with the Inspector’s recommendation and so decided to refuse planning permission. The decision letter sets out at length the various matters considered by the Secretary of State. On the demand for coal, it says that there is “limited objective evidence” for the continuing

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<sup>9</sup> As above: paragraph 149

<sup>10</sup> As above: paragraphs 205-6

<sup>11</sup> As above, paragraph 211

<sup>12</sup> MHCLG, [Guidance: Minerals](#), 17 October 2014

<sup>13</sup> SN 00930, 31 January 2019

use of coal for industrial proposes beyond the very short term.<sup>14</sup> In reaching his decision, the Secretary of State considered that the national policy context, as set out in the NPPF, was now more restrictive than it was when the application was first considered<sup>15</sup> and the conditions of paragraph 211 of the NPPF were not met.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> MHCLG, [\*Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – Section 77 application made by HJ Banks & Company Ltd land at Highthorn, Widdrington, Northumberland NE61 5EE\*](#) Application Ref: 15/03410/Ccmeia, 8 September 2020: paragraph 59

<sup>15</sup> As above: paragraph 82

<sup>16</sup> As above: paragraph 87

## 2. Press articles

*Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.*

Telegraph, 1 December 2020

[Coal mines could power the UK once again under plans to turn them into geothermal plants](#)

Guardian, 26 November 2020

[British coal plants fired up to meet temporary electricity shortfall](#)

Independent, 14 October 2020

[Labour is opposing the UK's first new deep coal mine in 30 years. Now Robert Jenrick must do the same](#)

FT, 1 October 2020

[UK's first new deep coal mine for 30 years likely to be approved](#)

Independent, 18 August 2020

[Climate crisis: County Durham's last coal mine closes, following successful campaign by locals and environmental activists](#)

Independent, 19 June 2020

[Global energy provided by clean sources matches coal for first time, analysis reveals](#)

BBC news, 10 June 2020

[Britain goes coal free as renewables edge out fossil fuels](#)

Independent, 9 June 2020

[Climate crisis: How coal mining could still help warm our homes with clean, green power](#)

Telegraph, 31 May 2020

[Why Britain still needs coal-fired power stations](#)



FT, 1 October 2019

[How Britain ended its coal addiction. The shift in the UK is an important victory for environmentalists in their fight against fossil fuels](#)

Guardian, 30 Aug 2019

[Share of coal in UK's electricity system falls to record lows](#)

## 3. Parliamentary Questions

### [Coal: Carbon Emissions](#)

**Asked by:** Onwurah, Chi | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, with reference to his recent decision to refuse planning permission for the coal mine at Druridge Bay, what assessment he has made of whether a coal mine can be carbon neutral; and what the evidential basis is for that assessment.

**Answering member:** Christopher Pincher | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

The Secretary of State's conclusions on this case are fully set out in the decision letter of 8 September, which is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/called-in-decision-land-at-highthorn-widdrington-northumberland-ref-3158266-8-september-2020>.

27 Oct 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 105369

### [Coal: Carbon Emissions](#)

**Asked by:** McKinnell, Catherine | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what assessment he has made of the effect of increases in the domestic supply of coal on global carbon emissions.

**Answering member:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Domestic production of coal, alongside the amounts of coal imported in the UK, have been steadily declining in the last five years. This is evidenced by the figures published by the Department here: [DUKES table 2.4](#).

In order to tackle climate change and deliver a net zero economy by 2050, we need to further reduce our use of coal. We are among the first countries in the world to commit to closing all unabated coal power plants. We intend to do this by 2024.

15 Oct 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 101008

[Coal: Mining](#)

**Asked by:** McKinnell, Catherine | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, what assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the letter he received from Professor Paul Ekins and colleagues on the climate impact of approving new coal mines.

**Answering member:** Christopher Pincher | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

The Department has noted the letter from Professor Ekins relating to coal and climate change.

The National Planning Policy Framework approach to coal extraction proposals is that planning permission should not be granted unless it is environmentally acceptable, or its likely effects are clearly outweighed by national, local or community benefits (taking all relevant matters into account, including any residual environmental effects).

We are currently consulting on a reform of the planning system which recognises that the planning system has a role to play in the efforts to combat climate change. There is an opportunity for Professor Ekins to engage in that consultation process and I would welcome his views on how our proposed planning system should address the concerns he raises.

15 Oct 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 101006

[Coal: Mining](#)

**Asked by:** Holden, Mr Richard | **Party:** Conservative Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, how much and what proportion of coal in thousands of tonnes used in British industry in each of the last five years was mined in (a) the UK, (b) Russia and (c) Columbia.

**Answering member:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

BEIS does not hold data linking the source of coal to its final use. Overall volumes are published in the Digest of UK Energy Statistics and Energy Trends.

The table below shows the volumes of coal imported from Russia, Columbia and produced by the UK and the total supply and demand for 2015 to 2019.

**Thousand tonnes**

	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>
<b>Supply</b>	<b>37,600</b>	<b>18,022</b>	<b>14,422</b>	<b>11,922</b>	<b>7,971</b>
Of which UK production	8,598	4,178	3,041	2,580	2,166
Of which net stock draw	+6,869	+5,374	+3,378	-169	+16
Of which net imports	22,133	8,470	8,003	9,510	5,789
<i>Of which imports from Russia</i>	<i>8,380</i>	<i>2,433</i>	<i>3,883</i>	<i>4,695</i>	<i>2,421</i>
<i>Of which imports from Columbia</i>	<i>6,553</i>	<i>2,896</i>	<i>731</i>	<i>635</i>	<i>1,078</i>
<b>Demand</b>	<b>37,451</b>	<b>18,035</b>	<b>14,439</b>	<b>11,929</b>	<b>7,963</b>
Of which final consumption by industry	2,073	1,963	1,732	1,581	1,426

Source: Digest of UK Energy Statistics 2020, table 2.4:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/solid-fuels-and-derived-gases-chapter-2-digest-of-united-kingdom-energy-statistics-dukes>

Energy Trends table 2.4:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/solid-fuels-and-derived-gases-section-2-energy-trends>

25 Sep 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 93711

[Coal: Imports and Exports](#)

**Asked by:** Holden, Mr Richard | **Party:** Conservative Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, how much coal in (a) tonnes and (b) cash terms the UK has (i) imported and (ii) exported in each of the last 10 years.

**Answering member:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party |

**Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Information on UK coal trade is published in the Digest of UK Energy Statistics (DUKES) [table G.2](#).

Year	Coal import volume, thousand tonnes	Coal export volume, thousand tonnes	Coal import value (c.i.f.), £m	Coal export value (f.o.b.), £m
2009	36,504	646	2,635	77
2010	23,579	715	1,850	86
2011	31,966	986	2,987	159
2012	42,235	726	3,133	110
2013	45,523	843	2,988	129
2014	39,386	617	2,323	84
2015	22,517	486	1,255	60
2016	8,679	638	621	67
2017	8,205	488	924	60
2018	10,128	701	1,153	119

Source: H.M. Revenue and Customs

In this table coal includes steam coal, coking coal, coke and anthracite. Data for 2019 will be published on 30 July 2020.

22 Jun 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 59906

### [Coal Fired Power Stations](#)

**Asked by:** Lamont, John | **Party:** Conservative Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what plans he has to bring forward phasing out coal from the energy sector to 2024.

**Answering member:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

We have confirmed our commitment to put an end to unabated coal power generation from 2025, and on 4 February 2020 my Rt. Hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced the Government's intention to consult on bringing forward the coal closure date to 1 October 2024. A closure in 2024 would mean that in 10 years we have reduced our reliance on unabated coal generation from around a third of our electricity supply to zero. We will consult on this in due course.

As a result of our existing policies, including carbon pricing and our support for renewables, we have already made great headway in reducing our reliance on coal, which fell from 39% in 2012 to less than 3% in 2019.

19 May 2020 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 45381

[UK Export Finance: Coal](#)

**Asked by:** Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) | **Party:** Conservative Party

The move to generate electricity from sources other than coal is very welcome, but some manufacturing processes will still require a supply of coal. Does the Minister agree that it is better for that coal to be supplied from domestic sources rather than being shipped halfway around the world?

**Answered by:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party |

**Department:** Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

My hon. Friend is right. Obviously, from a coal and carbon emissions reduction point of view, it makes sense to have a locally based coal source rather than shipping it in a very costly way halfway around the world. That is a fair point. On the point about coal, the 2024 target is absolutely achievable. It is something we are absolutely committed to doing. In the long run, coal will be taken completely off the power generation grid, and that is something to be celebrated across the whole House.

03 Mar 2020 | Oral questions - Supplementary | Answered | House of Commons | House of Commons chamber | 672 c745

[Industry: Coal](#)

**Asked by:** Farrelly, Paul | **Party:** Labour Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what steps her Department is taking to support research into cost-effective alternatives to coal for heavy industry.

**Answering member:** Kwasi Kwarteng | **Party:** Conservative Party |

**Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

The Department understands the need for industry to decarbonise as the UK moves towards net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. To support this priority, the Department is currently running, or intending to run, the following R&D programmes that focus on industrial decarbonisation, which may consider bids for cost-effective alternatives to coal:

- The Industrial Fuel Switching Competition is a £20m competition, funded by the BEIS £505m Energy Innovation Portfolio (2016-2021), which aims to identify and test the processes and technologies required for industries in the UK to switch to low carbon fuels;
- The Industrial Energy Transformation Fund was announced at Budget 2018 as a new fund worth up to £315 million to support businesses with high energy use to transition to a low carbon future and to cut their bills through increased energy efficiency;
- The Clean Steel Fund, is a £250m programme, currently under consultation, will support the UK steel sector to transition to lower

carbon iron and steel production through new technologies and processes;

- The Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund has two relevant challenges, including the industrial decarbonisation challenge which is focused on heavy industry, and the Transforming Foundation Industries challenge, which is focused on energy and resource efficiency.

07 Oct 2019 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 292851

### [Coal](#)

**Asked by:** Goldsmith, Zac | **Party:** Conservative Party

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what assessment he has made of the adequacy of existing coal stocks to meet expected needs for electricity generation before coal is phased out.

**Answering member:** Chris Skidmore | **Party:** Conservative Party | **Department:** Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

The latest statistics are publicly available ([Energy Trends table 2.1.](#))

The government is committed to ending unabated coal power by 2025. As a result of our existing policies, including carbon pricing and our support for renewables, we have already made great headway in reducing our reliance on coal, which fell from 39% of electricity in 2012 to 5% in 2018. There are now regular coal free periods, and in May the UK went without running coal power generation for over two weeks – the longest coal-free period in the country since the 1880s.

13 Jun 2019 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 259966

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