

Women's energy network alliance inaugural conference

As a Women in Nuclear and Atkins representative, I recently attended the inaugural Women's Energy Network Alliance (WENA) conference. This conference addressed some big questions! How do we transform the energy industry to deliver reliable, affordable, sustainable power to reach net zero targets? How do we source diverse and specialised skills in a narrowing market? How do we support employees in an inclusive workspace?

WENA is formed of [Women in Nuclear UK](#), [Lean In Equity and Sustainability](#), [District Heating Divas](#), [Ally](#), Full Circle 21, [Powerful Women](#) and [ReWIRE](#). These seven organisations represent over 350,000 women working in energy-related industries in the UK, from nuclear to renewable energy. WENA's member organisations work across various initiatives, including STEM outreach, mentorship programmes and championing measures to promote women at the board level.

The inaugural conference, sponsored by Atkins, was timed to continue the gender diversity conversation after International Women's Day and addressed "Striving to Thrive in a Transitioning Sector".

The conference was kicked off by Amanda Sollaway (MP, Minister for Energy Consumers and Affordability, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero). As the only female minister for this new department and proud grandmother to a curious science-minded girl, Amanda highlighted that we need to include the richness of female talent in a STEM workforce that is less than a quarter female.

Laura Sandys (Co-Founder, POWERful Women and CEO, Challenging Ideas) then spoke about the energy sector's unique challenges as it shifts to meet net-zero targets. Laura outlined how we need to move away from traditional business models – energy is no longer a consumer good sold by energy giants but a service that must meet rapidly changing customer demands. By 2035 we may require 20-30 GW of flexibility within our grid, and EV cars could offer as much energy storage as three nuclear power stations! Therefore, the energy industry needs to present varied value-added business models, e.g. heat as a service or comprehensive EV subscription services. As new assets and customers emerge, the energy industry must embrace new skills such as data management, logistics and ethics.

Laura challenged the conference attendees to redefine themselves for this new energy sector – if you are stereotyped, surprise people! If you are siloed, break out! If you feel too good to move, build a succession plan and mentor people to open opportunities for them and yourselves.

It was excellent to hear about women's experiences across the energy sector and to work together to propose solutions. The conference then split into breakout groups, discussing key topics such as "how to leverage data to improve diversity" and "how can you be what you cannot see". WENA will present the feedback from these groups in a paper, condensing discussions into three targeted goals.

The final part of the conference was a panel featuring Sarah Long (Net Zero Energy Business Market Director, Atkins) discussing the value of succession planning, for example, challenging leaders to include at least one woman in the pipeline for future roles. Lisa McBride (Chair of Women in Nuclear Canada and Head of Business Development, GE Hitachi) encouraged companies to link diversity statistics to the bottom line to prove how diversity improves companies' performance. The panel also challenged attendees to bring a male colleague to the next conference, highlighting the importance of allyship and the burden that can be placed upon women to address the gender disparity alongside their day jobs. Lamé Verre (Co-Founder Lean in Equity and Sustainability and Head of Strategy, Innovation & Sustainability, SSE) proposed that ED&I work should be highly valued within companies, for example, associating promotions with contributions towards diversity targets. Zoe Morrissey (Legal Counsel and Director, Electricity Systems Operator) described how her company performed a secondary ED&I interview for all candidates to promote diversity of thought.

The most striking part of the conference was when we were challenged to imagine working in an industry where everyone feels represented and valued for our differences, where mentoring is widespread, and we are encouraged to develop continuously. This is the inclusive energy sector that WENA is aiming for! It felt wonderful to feel my work in Women in Nuclear was part of a wider energy community filled with inspiring women with the same drive for gender parity! So please get involved with a WENA member organisation and promote diversity within your organisation.