

electric and magnetic fields



energy**networks**
association

the facts update - april 2007

SAGE

The Stakeholder Advisory Group on ELF EMFs (SAGE) released its First Interim Assessment of possible precautionary measures for EMFs in April 2007.

SAGE is the group, made up of the whole range of stakeholders in the EMF debate, that has been considering possible precautionary measures in order to provide advice to Government. It is equally funded by Government, the electricity industry, and the charity Children with Leukaemia.

The Assessment considers a number of general issues such as the existing scientific evidence and different factors to weigh up when considering possible actions to take. It considers magnetic fields should be reduced "as low as reasonably achievable", and that cost-benefit analysis is an important way of helping decide what is "reasonable".

Some houses have high magnetic fields, above 0.4 μT , even though they are not near a power line. SAGE identifies that house wiring can be a significant source of EMFs. It recommends a package of measures that could be applied quite cheaply when houses are built or rewired and which should stop high magnetic fields from being produced by the wiring. (The same package could be applied retrospectively to existing homes but at greater cost, and SAGE recommends that applying it to existing homes should be optional.)

SAGE also recommends that manufacturers should consider ways of reducing fields from domestic electrical appliances.

On power lines, SAGE makes two Recommendations. These are that more information should be provided to home owners, and that electricity companies be encouraged to design their power lines in a way ("transposed phasing", which is already in extensive use) that reduces the magnetic fields.

The SAGE Assessment then describes an Option, introducing "corridors" round power lines where building new homes or schools would not be allowed. It is described as an "option" because SAGE participants differed over whether it should be introduced, and SAGE does not recommend it. SAGE conducts a detailed analysis of the pros and cons, and concludes that, on the view of the science adopted by the World Health Organization and by the UK's independent scientific advisors the Health Protection Agency, the costs of introducing this option outweigh the benefits, in terms of reducing any possible risk for childhood leukaemia, so much that it is not in society's interest to introduce corridors. (The costs arise from the loss of use of the strip of land affected around power lines and devaluation of existing homes and are estimated at around several billion pounds.)

To conclude that this option should be introduced, either some other basis has to be used to argue for it despite the costs, or an alternative view of the science (labelled by SAGE as the "California" view) has to be adopted, whereby magnetic fields are considered to cause a range of adverse health effects.

What Happens Next?

SAGE's First Interim Assessment contains advice to Government. It is only Government who can decide which measures to introduce, because the issues affect the whole of society; unless and until Government decide to change policy, UK policy on EMFs remains based round compliance with the international exposure guidelines, and there are no restrictions on building homes close to power lines, as long as basic safety clearances are maintained.

The Electricity Industry View of SAGE

The electricity industry was instrumental in setting up SAGE and we have supported it throughout. We consider a forum like this, where stakeholders with different views and opinions can meet and discuss the issues sensibly is very valuable and is greatly preferable to the alternative of confrontation and argument.

The industry welcomes the clarity the SAGE Assessment brings and the objective appraisal of the various options. Where there are relatively easy and low-cost ways of reducing fields, it makes sense to adopt these on a precautionary basis, and we support these Recommendations that SAGE makes.

It is in the interests of society as whole, however, that any measures are proportionate. Authoritative bodies such as WHO and HPA who have examined the scientific evidence conclude that it is principally in the context of the possibility of a risk for childhood leukaemia that we should be considering precautionary measures. The thorough SAGE analysis shows that, on this basis, introducing "corridors" around power lines would not be a proportionate response; it would cause more damage to society than any benefit it might bring.

Further information

The SAGE web site is at: <http://www.rkpartnership.co.uk/sage/>

More information on the Assessment and the options it considers are on the industry website at: www.emfs.info/sage

The SAGE Assessment is mainly concerned with these issues as they affect society as a whole. If you are individually affected by these issues, you can contact the electricity industry EMF helpline on 0845 7023270.