Future Governance Forum

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A MANDATE TO BUILD

A new approach to public engagement in infrastructure planning

By Marley Miller, Gil Richards, Martina Moroney and Chiara Ruggieri-Mitchell

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About the Institution of Civil Engineers

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) is the home of infrastructure.

It is a professional institution with 95,000 members and over 200 years of history.

The Institution qualifies civil and infrastructure engineers, promotes lifelong learning, and provides trusted, impartial, expert advice to decision makers. Its global membership designs, builds, and maintains trustworthy and sustainable infrastructure.

The ICE's vision is a world where infrastructure enables people and planet to thrive.

In a world which is facing unprecedented geopolitical and economic instability, a worsening climate and nature emergency, and rapid technological changes, such as AI, society needs infrastructure that is trustworthy, sustainable, and intelligent.

The ICE empowers its members to deliver safe, sustainable, and inclusive infrastructure to meet these challenges.

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Foreword

Whether the UK can deliver the infrastructure it needs over the coming decade will depend on more than funding, engineering expertise or political commitment. It will require public trust.

Hundreds of billions of pounds are set to be invested in the networks, systems and services that underpin everyday life, from energy and water infrastructure to transport and digital connectivity. These investments are essential to economic growth, the transition to net zero and building resilience to climate change.

At the same time, the way infrastructure is being planned and delivered is changing. Government is reforming the planning system, devolving power to strategic authorities and seeking new approaches to public participation. This creates an opportunity to think differently about how communities are involved in decisions from the outset.

Too often, communities experience infrastructure as something done to them, rather than with them. As a result, consultation can become adversarial, confidence in decision-making can be weakened, and projects can face delay and opposition. We end up with the worst of all worlds: infrastructure projects that take too long to deliver and are over budget, and communities who feel there is no way of making their voice heard.

But there is an alternative. Public engagement done in the right way, at the right time can help deliver infrastructure that is faster to consent and deliver. Meaningful, accessible and transparent engagement also gives communities a voice.

Getting consultation and engagement right means government can continue with reforms to speed up infrastructure delivery, while bringing communities along on the journey. This will allow us to move from the worst of all worlds to the best: faster infrastructure delivery and engaged communities who begin to rebuild their faith in public institutions.

This report lays out how to realise that ambition. It draws on practical examples and proposes reforms that can strengthen both public confidence and project delivery.

It is not a case for slowing down development, but a vision for improving how decisions are made and how communities are involved, so that the UK can deliver the infrastructure it needs more effectively and with greater public confidence.

I would like to thank the team at The Future Governance Forum (FGF) and colleagues at the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE), as well as the many ICE members, practitioners and stakeholders whose insights and expertise informed the development of this report.

Together we can approach public engagement on infrastructure in a way that better serves the UK's communities and its institutions. Thank you for contributing to that future.



Sam Gould
ICE Executive Director of Learning and Insights

Executive Summary

Britain has an infrastructure problem. Slow and expensive delivery hampers our growth and prevents essential infrastructure from being built. Since 2024, the Government has taken steps to speed this up, most notably through reforms in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. The new Burnham administration has expressed a desire to build on this momentum and go further, faster.

Despite our challenges, Britain is not a nation of NIMBYs. 69% of people believe their community would benefit from new infrastructure.[1] But between this belief and an on-the-ground infrastructure project lies a vast mechanism for decision-making and delivery – one which the public find opaque. Despite the broad public support for local infrastructure, more than 60% believe major projects are poorly communicated,[2] and 78% do not feel listened to when infrastructure is planned, funded and delivered.[3]

Burnham's plan to '*Rewire the State*' sends a strong signal that government wants to see greater local control of key aspects of infrastructure such as housing, energy, and transportation. For this to work, we must replace performative consultation with new and modern forms of public participation that aid delivery by building consent at pace.

In polling commissioned for this report, respondents were more interested in shaping how the impacts of an infrastructure project are addressed (60%) and what host communities receive (57%), than in whether it is built at all (44%). There is a pathway to building support among many who are currently sceptical, and the government should seek to win over that middle ground rather than alienate it.

This paper is about understanding how consent and trust can be more effectively built into the infrastructure delivery process, and how that will make the process of delivering infrastructure smoother and lower cost.

It finds that the way the public is involved shapes whether people accept the decisions that follow. People are more willing to support infrastructure when they can see that the process was fair and that their views made a difference. In our polling, more respondents judged a hypothetical consultation fair when told what had changed as a result (72%) than when told nothing had (58%). Good engagement will not win over every opponent, but it can confine opposition to a smaller group and reduce the risk of later challenge, with the cost and delay that brings.

This paper argues that the current system asks for consent at the stage where it is hardest to earn, because public engagement and participation in infrastructure happens almost entirely at the project level. By this time many of the things the public want influence over have already been set in technical processes which few members of the public engage in.

1 Stonehaven, 'How to beat new infrastructure local support challenges', 22 May 2026.

2 Institution of Civil Engineers, 'Paying for Britain's infrastructure system', 25 February 2025.

3 Stonehaven, 'How to beat new infrastructure local support challenges', 22 May 2026.

Limited public influence over upstream decisions, combined with an overreliance on project-level consultation, makes it harder to establish the trust on which consent depends. Recent reforms have created many of the building blocks of a better system, but they have not yet been connected.

We argue for better public engagement at the national level, where questions of '*what*' infrastructure should be built are framed before the process moves to questions of '*where*' and '*how*'. **Each refresh of the 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy should be informed by a streamlined National Infrastructure Assessment, beginning with a deliberative process commissioned by NISTA that draws from a nationally representative panel of citizens, alongside experts and industry bodies.**

We also propose that at each stage - from national strategy to individual projects - the body responsible should publish a short account of what was consulted on, what changed as a result, and what is now settled and what remains open. This would focus engagement on the questions that are genuinely open.

We believe there is an opportunity in the transition to more and more powerful Strategic Authorities in England[4] to establish a strategic regional level in the consultation and infrastructure planning process between assessing what's needed nationally and planning individual projects. This regional level should have a genuine role in feeding local views into national strategy, and should leverage the consultative power of local leaders in the participation process.

As part of this, we propose a new 'regional settlement' for infrastructure planning: Spatial Development Strategies that properly provide for national need should, once examined, guide decisions on where and how nationally significant infrastructure is delivered. The strategic authority should replace local authorities as the statutory consultee, producing a single regional impact report, developed in consultation with local authorities and local residents, and there should be a power to delegate consent decisions on regionally significant infrastructure projects to mayors.

At a project level, clearer framing of the key issues around a project - including what is out of scope for consultation - informed by the tiers above will give a fairer account of what is open to influence by residents. This would avoid a process designed to discuss the 'how' of a project reverting to the 'why' of it. **The Planning Inspectorate should publish an early analysis of key issues, providing clear steers that will make it easier for developers to understand what is required to get a project through examination and supporting them to target their public engagement. Independent community liaison chairs should be appointed for the largest and most contested projects.**

And while the public need a clearer account of the process by which infrastructure is delivered, they also need a clearer account of the benefits of hosting it. At present, the planning system can compensate a community for the harm a project causes, leaving it no worse off. But it cannot make it better off. **A new Strategic Infrastructure Community Fund should be introduced,**

4 The changing picture in England sets the context for the thinking in this report on the regional layer. The role of national governments in Scotland and Wales is not explored here, nor the potential for the model we develop here to be extended.

replacing and surpassing negotiated arrangements for community mitigation in offering pooled funds for regional leaders to spend on regional priorities.

The government has already accepted this principle for strategic data centres through the Local Benefit Plans in its Data Centre Covenant recently announced at Budget 2026. The fund would extend it to all nationally significant infrastructure on a predictable, statutory basis via a levy on projects.

This paper contains a plan for a fairer and more comprehensive system of public participation that offers control for England's places and regions, within the framework of national need. It adds no additional barriers to delivery, but instead proposes structures that enable more genuine buy-in and social consent for the infrastructure we so urgently need, creating a smoother route to infrastructure delivery.

Our recommendations follow the levels of the system set out in Part 2. For each, we set out a headline recommendation and the elements needed to put it into practice.

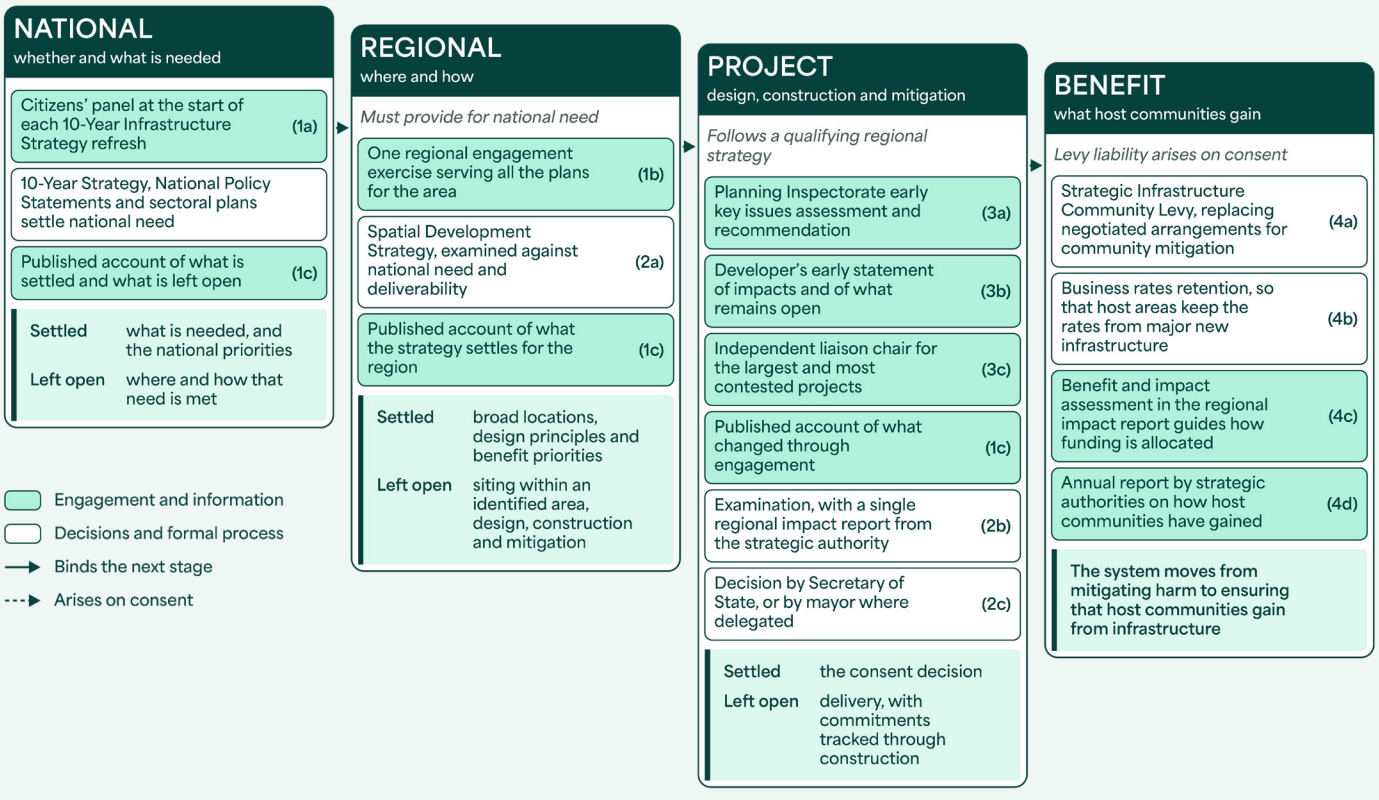
Stage	Headline recommendation	Elements
1. Strategic	Infrastructure strategy engagement should take place at the right level and, where possible, only once, with a clear account at each stage of what is settled and what remains open.	1a. Each refresh of the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy should be informed by a streamlined National Infrastructure Assessment, beginning with a representative deliberative process commissioned by NISTA. 1b. Each strategic authority should run a single regional evidence-gathering exercise serving all the plans for its region. 1c. The body responsible at each stage should publish an account of what was consulted on, what is settled and what remains open.

2. Regional	A regional tier should be established through a new 'regional settlement' for infrastructure planning, under which a qualifying Spatial Development Strategy is binding on how and where national need is delivered.	2a. Spatial Development Strategies that properly provide for national need should, once examined, guide consent decisions. 2b. The strategic authority should replace local authorities as the statutory consultee, producing a single regional impact report. 2c. There should be a power to delegate consent decisions on regionally significant infrastructure projects to mayors.
3. Project	Project-level engagement should be anchored in an early, neutral view of the issues that matter to the decision.	3a. The Planning Inspectorate should publish an early assessment of key issues to guide consultation, with a recommendation the Examining Authority would be expected to follow. 3b. Developers should publish an early statement of impacts and of what remains open, with a standardised statement of impacts at application. 3c. Independent community liaison chairs should be appointed for the largest and most contested projects.

4. Mitigation and community benefit	The system should move from mitigating harm to ensuring that communities which host infrastructure gain from it.	4a. A new Strategic Infrastructure Community Fund should be introduced, replacing negotiated arrangements for community mitigation. 4b. Business rates retention should be expanded so that host areas retain the rates from major new infrastructure projects. 4c. A benefit and impact assessment in the regional impact report should guide how funding is allocated. 4d. Strategic authorities should report annually on how host communities have gained.

Each element either replaces something that already happens or takes place before an application is made, narrowing what is required at the next stage.

This graphic shows how the recommendations would work together as a system, connecting national strategy, regional strategy and individual projects so that each stage settles its own questions and carries its answers into the next.



Part 1 - The problem

Britain's infrastructure problem is a crisis of public trust

Infrastructure projects in the UK routinely take too long and cost too much. As a result, we fail to build enough, which constrains productivity and growth, and undermines the government's ability to deliver on its wider priorities. This is not only an economic problem, but one of public confidence in the state. Infrastructure is a very visible way in which communities see the government's effectiveness. But, on the other hand, it is also a way they see the problems of state inaction, whether that's seeing the costs of HS2 balloon while having limited access to affordable local train links, or feeling the slow rollout of digital infrastructure each day as online meetings or television programmes buffer.

The public knows that better delivery is possible; people have often experienced it in other parts of the country or internationally. As such, the failure to deliver infrastructure reinforces wider perceptions of political and institutional dysfunction.

Public engagement sits at the centre of both problems. The prospect of opposition - and the time it takes to manage it - is one of the reasons projects take so long, as developers go beyond what is required to protect their applications against challenge.

At the same time, whether the public judges a project a success depends in part on whether people understand what it is for and feel they have had a say in it. Yet the point at which most people encounter the planning system - through consultation on a scheme whose main features are already fixed - too often leaves them feeling unheard. Improving how communities are involved in infrastructure decisions offers a way to build faster and restore trust.

The government acknowledges the limits to the current approach. The Cabinet July 2026 Rewiring the State statement notes:

"We agreed to replace the current model of consultation by default with new and modern forms of public participation. This includes considering where performative statutory duties to consult can be revoked and how we can more actively bring the public into the policy-making process instead. This recognises that local leaders are better equipped to link public opinion and civil society to policy making."

This part of the report sets out the scale and consequences of the problem, why public engagement lies at the heart of it, and why the current system is not set up in a way that makes it easy to earn consent or support for infrastructure projects.

1.1 Britain is building too little, too slowly and at too great a cost

It is widely recognised that Britain builds infrastructure too slowly, at too great a cost and in insufficient quantities. A substantial body of literature points to a sector that frequently suffers from poor decision-making and assessment capabilities, a lack of clear political leadership, and lengthy consultation processes of dubious value to both projects and the public. As a result, the UK

has not met the infrastructure needs of a growing economy and population in recent decades, while costs have ballooned. Analysis by the Boston Consulting Group found that delivery timescales increased by 65% between 2012 and 2021 alone.[5] Major rail projects have been calculated to cost 81% more per mile than in Japan and 671% more than in Germany,[6] while a flat road costs double what it does in France.[7] Across rail, nuclear and road projects, the additional cost relative to peer nations has been estimated at around 65% per unit of infrastructure.[8]

This is not lost on the public. In 2025, 66% of people said the UK is bad at delivering major infrastructure projects,[9] and the Institution of Civil Engineers has found that just 13% trust the public sector to deliver infrastructure efficiently and quickly.[10] While this is not a uniquely British problem, the UK compares poorly with its peers: only 19% of the British public believe the UK has a good record of delivering infrastructure, below a 32-country global average of 34%. And 71% agree that the UK is not doing enough to meet its infrastructure needs, 11 percentage points above the G7 average.[11]

1.2 The consequences of this go beyond growth

While there has been considerable recent focus on the significant - and very real - macroeconomic impacts of the UK's infrastructure delivery problem, its consequences go wider than this:

- **Living standards and regional inequality.** Better transport, housing and digital networks allow people to reach a wider range of jobs and improve their earnings, yet provision is uneven. Between 2013/14 and 2022/23, London received 2.43 times as much transport spending per head as the North of England,[12] and the productivity gap between London and the South East and the rest of the UK is now wider than that between East and West Germany, or North and South Italy.[13]

- **Government effectiveness.** Poor infrastructure limits the government's ability to deliver its other priorities. The queue for connections to the energy grid grew by 460% in the six months to June 2025, with some developers facing waits of up to 15 years, holding back clean energy and

5 Boston Consulting Group, 'Reshaping British infrastructure: global lessons to improve project delivery', 7 February 2024.

6 Burn-Murdoch, J. The Nimby tax on Britain and America. Financial Times, 25 August 2023.

7 Boston Consulting Group, 'Reshaping British infrastructure: global lessons to improve project delivery', 7 February 2024.

8 Centre for British Progress, 'Building more for less: a cost-free path to European infrastructure costs', June 18 2026.

9 YouGov, 'Generally speaking, do you think the UK is good or bad at delivering major infrastructure projects?', 19 June 2025.

10 Institution of Civil Engineers, ICE briefing paper: paying for Britain's infrastructure system, 25 February 2025.

11 Ipsos, 'Global Infrastructure Index 2026', with the Global Infrastructure Investor Association, April-May 2026.

12 IPPR North, 'On track to prosperity: Great Northern Rail', June 2025.

13 Anna Stansbury, Dan Turner and Ed Balls, 'Tackling the UK's regional economic inequality: binding constraints and avenues for policy intervention', Harvard Kennedy School, March 2023.

investment in data centres and gigafactories. Meanwhile, inadequate wastewater capacity alone is estimated to have held back around 16,500 new homes.[14]

- **Public trust.** From roads to the networks powering our homes, well-delivered infrastructure can be a concrete demonstration of government's ability to improve people's lives. The reverse is also true. Delayed or over-budget projects can symbolise state dysfunction which, in a context of broader declines in public trust, reinforces perceptions that institutions cannot deliver.[15] Where longstanding deficiencies go unaddressed, they can also become entangled with wider political disillusionment: one study found that constituencies that elected new Reform UK MPs in 2024 were characterised by longstanding concerns about missing transport links.[16] Cases like this may illustrate how failure to deliver visible improvements can spur and entrench declinist narratives. As such, Britain's poor record on infrastructure delivery also risks contributing to a further erosion of trust in government and political institutions.

1.3 Why public engagement matters to delivery

The way the public is engaged lies at the heart of this problem for two reasons.

The first is that engagement, and the opposition it can provoke or defuse, is itself a driver of slow and costly delivery. Faced with the risk of challenge, developers are incentivised to gold-plate their processes, consulting and documenting excessively in order to protect their applications.

Under the previous regime, average pre-application time rose from 14.5 months in 2013 to 27.9 months in 2021, and the consultation element alone from roughly 14 to 21 months.[17] Where opposition occurs, managing it takes time. A Development Consent Order gives a developer legal permission to build, but it does not signify public acceptance. Without this, projects can keep facing opposition, legal challenges, and political intervention. This may force redesigns and delays. Several interviewees stressed that failing to secure acceptance is a practical delivery risk – one that can lead to continual challenge at every stage of a project and, in some cases, to its cancellation.[18,19] As one put it, problems that are closed off legally tend to resurface politically.

Secondly, the public's judgement of whether a project is well-delivered depends partly on understanding what it is for and on the degree of local support. Over 60% of people believe major projects are poorly

14 UK Government, 'Government to tackle speculative demand grid connection requests', GOV.UK, 11 March 2026.

15 Dominic Cook, 'Major projects: the new government's opportunity to build trust in its delivery', Deloitte, 11 July 2024.

16 Stonehaven, 'Moving hearts and minds', 2024.

17 Osborne Clarke, 'UK government lays out plan to streamline the development of critical infrastructure', 28 January 2025.

18 Sabit Otor, Sara Bice and Hayley Henderson, 'Social license to operate and major infrastructure: a social exchange theory approach to modelling drivers of community acceptance', 16 February 2026.

19 Kerry Scott, 'How social licence improves infrastructure outcomes and delivery', Mott MacDonald, 9 January 2025.

communicated,[20] and 78% do not feel listened to when infrastructure is planned, funded and delivered.[21] A project whose purpose is unclear and whose costs fall on a community that feels unheard is unlikely to be received positively, even if it is delivered on time. A project that people understand and have helped shape is more likely to be seen as evidence that the state can act. This matters more given that most other causes of poor delivery, from the historic absence of a long-term strategy, to weaknesses in institutional capability, are largely invisible to the public.[22,23] Engagement on a project near them is the point at which most people encounter the system directly.

While in many cases there is likely to be a core of opposition to infrastructure projects that is hard to win over, the public engagement challenge is not one of widespread hostility to building. 69% of people, and over 80% in Northern Ireland, believe their community would benefit from new infrastructure.[24] What is lacking in most cases is not public enthusiasm for infrastructure, but confidence in how decisions about it are made. Improving how the public is involved in the discussions that shape those decisions upstream therefore has the potential both to establish trust and to accelerate the speed of delivery.

1.4 How consent is built: social licence

Social licence is the continuing acceptance of a project by a local community, distinct from its legal consent. It is usually described in four ways:

1. **Withheld or withdrawn:** the project is actively opposed.
2. **Acceptance:** it is tolerated.
3. **Approval:** it is supported.
4. **Identification:** the community comes to regard it as partly its own.[25]

Moving from opposition to full identification depends on a sequence of conditions: a project must first be seen as legitimate, then those promoting and deciding it must be credible, and only then can trust be established. A project can be entirely legitimate, in the sense of being needed, lawful and properly consented, and still remain at the first level. For infrastructure that serves the country as a whole, acceptance rather than enthusiasm may often be enough - but it still has to be earned.

Securing social licence does not mean eliminating opposition, which for major infrastructure is rarely achievable. It means providing ways to hear and address legitimate concerns, so that opposition is confined to a smaller group - some of whom no quality of engagement will satisfy - and so that concerns are less

20 Institution of Civil Engineers, 'Paying for Britain's infrastructure system', 25 February 2025.

21 Institution of Civil Engineers, 'Built for purpose? Understanding people's experiences of infrastructure assets and services', May 2026.

22 National Infrastructure Commission, 'Cost drivers of major infrastructure projects in the UK', October 2024.

23 Institute for Government, 'The wrong infrastructure decision-making', January 2023.

24 Stonehaven, 'How to beat new infrastructure local support challenges', 22 May 2026

25 Ian Thomson and Robert Boutilier, 'Social licence to operate', in P. Darling (ed.), *SME Mining Engineering Handbook*, 2011.

likely to be pressed at every subsequent stage.[26,27,28] Our polling supports this. Good communication consolidated and broadened support among those already open to a project, but did much less for committed opponents.[29]

The evidence on how social licence is built converges on a small number of conditions. Empirical work on community acceptance finds that the quality of contact and the perceived fairness of the process are the principal determinants of trust, and that trust is the strongest predictor of acceptance.[30,31] This is consistent with the wider literature on what makes processes fair, which finds that people's willingness to accept a decision depends in substantial part on whether they regard the process as fair, partly independently of whether the outcome favoured them.[32] A fair process in this sense offers a voice that can genuinely influence the outcome, a decision-maker seen as neutral, respectful treatment, and candour about what can and cannot change. Acceptance also depends on the perceived balance of costs and gains, so that benefit needs to be visible alongside mitigation.

Polling commissioned for this report tested the role of candour and responsiveness directly. Respondents were shown a proposal for a new electrical substation and overhead line near their home, followed by one of two accounts of how the consultation concluded. In both, the location of the substation was unchanged. Where respondents were told that construction hours and haulage routes had been adjusted in response to local views, and that the community fund would follow priorities raised in the consultation, two thirds (72%) judged the process fair, compared with 58% where they were told nothing had changed. Being told at the outset that the site itself was not open to change made no difference to perceptions of fairness or to support for the project.[33] What appears to matter most is not how much is put to consultation, but whether people can see that the questions which were open were genuinely answered.

26 Sabit Otor, Sara Bice and Hayley Henderson, 'Social license to operate and major infrastructure: a social exchange theory approach to modelling drivers of community acceptance', 16 February 2026.

27 Kerry Scott, 'How social licence improves infrastructure outcomes and delivery', Mott MacDonald, 9 January 2025.

28 Alice Stuart et al., 'Conceptualising social license to operate', 15 August 2023.

29 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11–12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

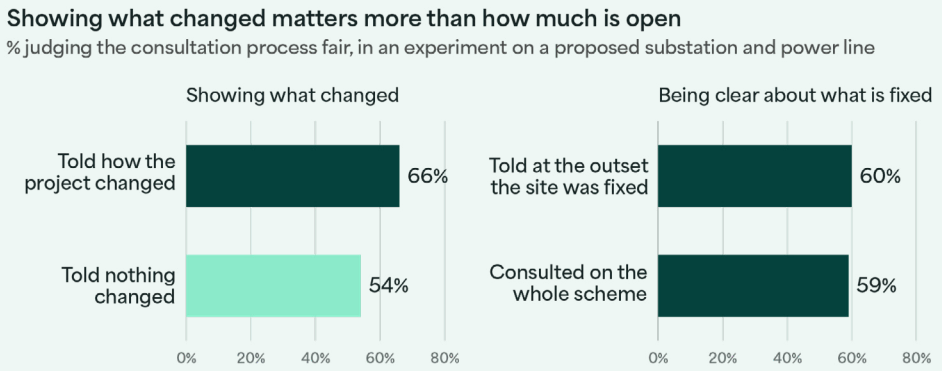
30 Kieren Moffat and Airong Zhang, 'The paths to social licence to operate: an integrative model explaining community acceptance of mining', *Resources Policy*, 39, 2014.

31 Alice Stuart et al., 'Conceptualising social license to operate', 15 August 2023.

32 Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*, Princeton University Press, 2006; Steven L. Blader and Tom R. Tyler, 'A four-component model of procedural justice', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(6), 2003.

33 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11–12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

Figure 1.1: Perceived fairness of the consultation process, by what respondents were told



Source : Convergent polling for FGF/ICE, 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that whether a host community comes to accept a project depends on much more than the quality of engagement on the project itself. It depends on whether the case for the infrastructure has been made in a way the public recognises, on whether decisions about where it goes and how it is delivered have been taken by someone accountable to the area, on whether engagement has been candid about what can still change, and on whether those who bear the costs can see what they will gain.

While social licence is built locally, the nature of our planning process means it is difficult to build at the project stage alone. Where the upstream stages have not reflected public views, the main constraints have already been set, and the developer and the community will most likely begin from very different positions on what should be up for debate. Credibility, on which trust in turn depends, is very difficult to establish from that position – even with high-quality engagement. As such, while local engagement is generally a necessary condition for securing social licence, much of whether it succeeds will depend on what happens upstream.

1.5 The current system asks for trust at the stage where it is hardest to earn

The Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) regime, introduced by the Planning Act 2008, was itself an attempt to address the problem of consent.[34] It replaced a system in which the need for infrastructure was frequently re-argued project by project; the planning inquiry into Heathrow Terminal 5 in the late 1990s lasted almost four years.

The regime worked at two levels:

- At the strategic level, National Policy Statements (NPSs) were introduced to explain the need for different classes of infrastructure and the national priorities against which individual applications should be judged. These were introduced to make clear at the national level the principles guiding consent decisions – requiring consultation and parliamentary approval before designation – and designed to ensure that examinations on projects

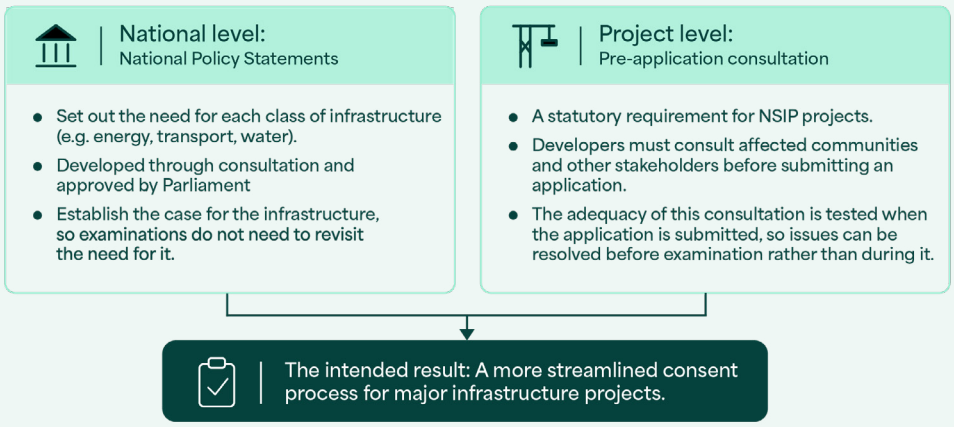
34 Planning Act 2008.

do not have to revisit the case for specific infrastructure again from first principles, as was previously often the case.

- And at the project level, pre-application consultation was made a statutory requirement, with its adequacy tested when an application was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for acceptance. The purpose was to surface and resolve issues before examination rather than during it in order to deliver against an accelerated timetable for a decision: six months to examine, three to report, three to decide.[35]

The NSIP regime before the 2025 Planning and Infrastructure Act

Introduced by the Planning Act 2008, the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) regime streamlined consent for major infrastructure by working at two levels:



The principle of moving engagement earlier was sound, but in practice the regime added time and cost without giving communities more influence. Consultation on National Policy Statements takes place, but it is technical. Its respondents are mainly developers, statutory bodies and national organisations, and its conclusions do not reach communities in any form they would recognise.

There was, and still is, no regional or local tier connecting national need to host communities. As such, most engagement fell on the pre-application stage. This grew because any material change risked triggering a further round, creating incentives to consult on everything as a precaution.[36] One interviewee argued that this led to a *"longer and longer timescale where everything is consulted on rather than what is most helpful"*. Similarly, because a project's application would only be accepted by the Planning Inspectorate (pass the 'acceptance test') if the developer was judged to have undergone appropriate consultation, applicants focused on robust processes rather than the quality of engagement itself. As another put it, *"it doesn't make people happier that they are consulted a million times"*.

The result is often a mismatch between the influence communities expect to have and the influence they actually exercise. A community might discover that

35 Planning Inspectorate, 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects and the people and organisations involved in the process', 8 August 2024.

36 Hugh Scanlon, Jennie Baker and Dominic Bowers, 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project procedures: changes on the horizon', Lichfields, 19 December 2025.

a power station is proposed in its area and arrive at the consultation wanting to discuss whether or where it should be built, only to find that those questions were settled at an earlier stage in which they played little part.

Of course, purpose and site are only two aspects of infrastructure delivery. Engagement on the remaining questions can make a real difference. But where people have not been told clearly about what has already been decided, and why, consultation can become a forum for contesting the need for, rather than shaping the delivery of, a project.

The same pattern runs through how communities are compensated. Funding is secured through obligations that are necessary to make projects acceptable. Harms can be mitigated, but communities cannot be enriched through the planning system. Lorries will pass a house, so window glazing is funded; tourism income is harmed, so a tourism fund is established. Anything beyond compensation is voluntary and negotiated project by project. Funding is often divided into separate pots which, as several interviewees observed, can favour those best able to write applications over what a community most needs.

There is no established point at which questions of where and how are settled with the public before a developer is involved. As a result, almost all the weight falls on project-level engagement, which is asked to secure trust on questions it can no longer answer, while the settlement it offers host communities compensates rather than benefits. The opposition that follows can then contribute to the delay and uncertainty the regime was designed to prevent.

1.6 A system being rebuilt

Since 2024, the government has begun to reform almost every part of the system described above. It has changed the fiscal rules to allow greater public investment and published a 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy, overseen by a new National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA). Through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, it has removed the requirement for mandatory pre-application consultation - accepting that the duty had become a tick-box exercise - and placed a duty on strategic authorities to prepare Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs). Through the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, it has created a tier of strategic authorities, most led by directly elected mayors, with new powers over planning and development. And the current administration's commitment to *Rewire the State* and devolve fiscal power will drive two important transformations: replacing consultation by default with more modern forms of public participation, and moving power - and the money to use it - closer to the places affected.

Taken together, these changes amount to a significant reshaping of how infrastructure is planned. The government has removed much of what did not work, introduced tools for setting national strategy more clearly, and established a new tier of strategic authorities with new regional planning powers. However, they have not yet set out a clear account of how these reforms and tiers will work together. Nor how, or at what level, the public should be engaged. Part 2 sets out the opportunity this creates.

Part 2 - The opportunity

From consultation to participation: an opportunity to rethink how Britain builds

To accelerate infrastructure delivery, the Starmer government pursued a combination of greater public investment, more coherent national infrastructure planning, changes to the consenting regime, and increased devolution. The Burnham government is building on this, shifting power from Whitehall to the regions and making regions themselves more outcome focused and accountable to local people.

These efforts represent a major opportunity to combine a more strategic approach to infrastructure delivery with greater local accountability and improved public participation. Yet, despite real opportunities to use these tools to improve public involvement upstream, important questions remain about how they will work together, and how engagement will work in practice. In this section, we examine progress to date, the opportunities presented by the government's reforms, and how considering public engagement across the new system as a whole could improve public support for infrastructure without slowing down delivery.

2.1 Removing ineffective consultation is only half the answer

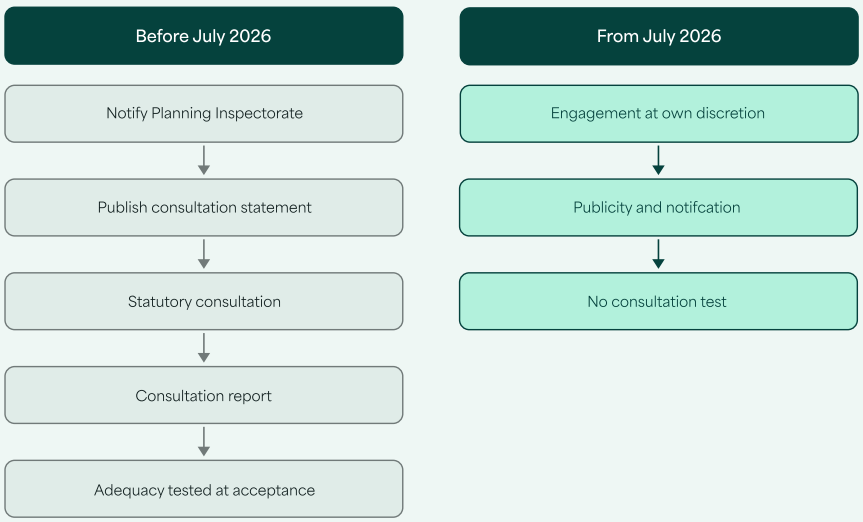
In an effort to drive growth, the government removed the statutory duty to consult before an application in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, and in 2026 set out *guidance* to replace it.[37] The scope, nature, timing and extent of pre-application work is now at each applicants' discretion. Pre-application consultation now forms no part of the acceptance test.[38] Only two obligations remain: to publicise the project (including information on how to find out more), and to notify the Secretary of State and relevant local authorities. Beyond that, guidance sets expectations rather than requirements: that engagement should identify key issues early, improve design, inform the application, reduce delay and uncertainty, and narrow the issues requiring consideration at examination.[39]

37 Matthew Pennycook, 'Further reforms to the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime', UK Parliament, 23 April 2025.

38 Matthew Addy, 'Beyond the tick box: community engagement after planning reform', Counter Context, 11 February 2026; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Planning Act 2008: guidance on preparing an application, Part 1: pre-application steps', 3 July 2026.

39 Ibid

Figure 2.1: Pre-application requirements before and after July 2026



This was the right decision. The government expects it to reduce pre-application times by around a year and to save more than £1 billion across the projects expected by July 2029.[40] The evidence so far indicates that most applicants have continued to engage before submission, on the view that doing so makes consenting easier and that reputational exposure does not disappear when a statutory duty does. Several interviewees welcomed the flexibility to tailor engagement to the needs and concerns of each community.

Removing ineffective consultation is, however, only half the answer. The reforms leave two questions for the government to address:

- **How to avoid a postcode lottery of engagement quality.** The scope, nature and timing of project-level engagement are now almost entirely a matter for the applicant, with no direct assurance. Many developers will use this flexibility well; others may do very little, or stick to previous practice. There is a role for government in providing good practice tools and case studies on which developers can draw.

- **How to ensure public views are sought at the right level and at the right time.** Pre-application consultation is one stage of the process, and it sits downstream of the decisions that shape applications and that the public often care most about. The reforms to planning and to devolution have largely evolved separately, and there is an opportunity to bring them together, both to streamline the system and to ensure that public views are understood and reflected upstream.

Reducing requirements around project-level consultation makes it more important to establish meaningful opportunities for public involvement elsewhere in the system. The government has indicated that it is thinking about this as well as how to reshape the approach to public engagement more broadly.

40 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Consultation on streamlining infrastructure planning', 24 September 2025.

In its *Rewiring the State* statement, the Cabinet agreed to *"replace the current model of consultation by default with new and modern forms of public participation"*, to consider *"where performative statutory duties to consult can be revoked"*, and recognised *"that local leaders are better equipped to link public opinion and civil society to policy making"*.[41] In September 2026, the Cabinet Office directed departments to end unnecessary consultations – observing that written surveys rarely capture the true views of communities – and committed to set out a vision for public participation and new guidance on engagement.[42] This forms part of a wider push for power, and accountability for the use of that power, to sit as locally as possible – a push that covers consultation, fiscal devolution, the roll-out of mayors around the country, and more.

More recently, the chancellor linked the fiscal devolution roadmap, published alongside the Budget, to local leaders financing local infrastructure in his budget speech.[43] More detail on action the government will take is expected in the *Rewiring the State* delivery plan, due before the end of the year.

2.2 The building blocks of a better system are now in place

Since 2024, the government has put in place many of the elements necessary for a more effective approach to public participation. Introduced through separate reforms to national strategy, planning and devolution, they have not yet been brought together, but they provide the building blocks of a system in which the public is involved in each decision at the level at which it is made.

At the national level, the 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy, published in 2025, sets the policy framework and long-term direction for investment across economic and social infrastructure, overseen by NISTA.

10-Year Infrastructure Strategy

The 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy, published in June 2025, sets out the government's long-term plans for investing in, planning and delivering infrastructure.

It brings together **economic infrastructure**, such as transport, energy and water, with **social infrastructure**, including hospitals, schools and housing.

Backed by at least **£725 billion** of public funding over ten years, it aims to support economic growth, improve public services, attract private investment and provide greater certainty about future infrastructure development.

The strategy also seeks to improve coordination between infrastructure sectors and across different parts of the country, including through a more joined-up approach to spatial planning. Its implementation will be overseen by the **National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA)**, with progress reviewed every two years.

41 Cabinet Office, 'Rewiring the State: Cabinet statement', July 2026.

42 Cabinet Office, 'Box-ticking" consultations scrapped to speed up delivery', 10 September 2026.

43 HM Treasury, 'Fiscal Devolution Roadmap', 28 October 2026.

Beneath it, National Policy Statements continue to set out the need for each class of nationally significant infrastructure[44] and the policies against which applications are decided. They are consulted on and approved by Parliament, and are now to be reviewed more frequently. In some sectors, national need is also being given a broad geography through sectoral spatial plans. In energy, the National Energy System Operator is preparing a Strategic Spatial Energy Plan, setting out broadly where new generation and storage should be located, and a Centralised Strategic Network Plan for the transmission network, with Regional Energy Strategic Plans to follow by the end of 2028.[45] These plans begin to answer the question of where national need should be met, but they are prepared sector by sector and are not yet connected to plans for particular places.

At the regional level, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 has established a tier of strategic authorities, most led by a directly elected mayor, and the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 requires them to prepare SDSs. These are the first statutory plans to look across different types of infrastructure and land use within a region.

Spatial Development Strategies

- SDSs are high-level statutory plans that set out how infrastructure should be coordinated across regions.
- Introduced across England under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, they identify broad locations for the infrastructure needed to support national ambitions.
- SDSs will be prepared by strategic authorities, working together where necessary.
- SDSs cannot allocate specific sites for development, but can identify broad locations, growth corridors or strategic areas.

Mayors are also gaining powers to call in applications of potential strategic importance and to make Mayoral Development Orders (modelled on existing Local Development Orders[46]) which will give them the ability to streamline granting planning permission across a whole site or group of sites.[47] Following this autumn's Budget, they will receive a growing share of business rates and income tax, giving them both a democratic mandate and, increasingly, the means to shape what is built in their regions.

At the project level, the removal of mandatory pre-application consultation has given developers greater discretion over how they engage, while examination and the final decision remain with the Planning Inspectorate and the Secretary of State.

44 Planning Inspectorate, 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects and the people and organisations involved in the process', 28 September 2026.

45 National Energy System Operator, 'NESO outlines new timelines for Strategic Energy Plans', NESO, 5 December 2025.

46 Local Government Association, 'Local Development Orders', Planning Advisory Service.

47 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2026), 'Planning powers for mayors in England', GOV.UK, 24 August 2026.

2.3 How the pieces should fit together

In theory, the public can now shape a project at four points: when national need and policy are set, through the regional and spatial plans for an area, during pre-application engagement, and at examination (Figure 2.2). But these stages are not yet clearly connected. Most people do not engage when national policy is set, regional strategies have no defined weight in decisions on individual projects, and therefore as of now, almost all the consultation still happens at the project stage. A community often meets a scheme for the first time when its fundamentals are fixed, and is invited to comment without knowing which decisions remain open and how they could have affected it (if they even could). That creates a mismatch of expectations, and too often sets up a contest over a project rather than a conversation about it.

These levels should be connected, with each involving the public on a distinct question, so that the scope of what remains open narrows from one stage to the next:

- **At the national level:** the question is whether and what infrastructure the country needs, and how competing objectives should be balanced. This is where the case for need can be made with the public rather than to it.
- **At the regional level:** the question is how and where that need is met across a functioning economic geography. This is where an accountable decision on where and how can be taken before any developer is involved.
- **At the project level:** the questions are about choosing a site within an identified area, design, construction and mitigation. This is where clarity about what remains open matters most.
- **Across all three:** the question is what host communities will gain (not just how loss will be mitigated) and how that is decided.

Figure 2.2: The four points at which a project can be shaped by public views

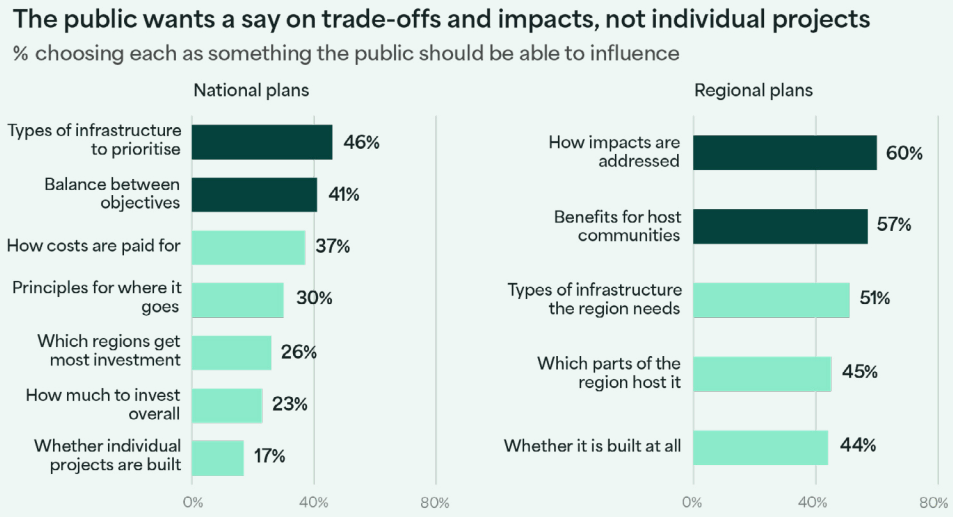
Level	Examples	What it determines
National need and policy	National Policy Statements / UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy	Whether a class of infrastructure is needed; the policy that guides each decision; locations identified as suitable
Regional and spatial	Spatial Development Strategies	Broad locations for development and the infrastructure needed to support them. Cannot be site-specific or allocate sites
Pre-application	Application-specific consultations	Siting within a corridor, design, mitigation, community benefit
Examination and decision	Application-specific consultations	Mitigation, requirements attached to the Order, planning obligations

The problem with the current system is not that the scope narrows, but that the narrowing is largely invisible, so that communities are often unaware of what

was fixed at an earlier stage and arrive with mismatched expectations of what is possible.

The public's own priorities fit this pattern. Asked what they should be able to influence in the government's long-term infrastructure plans, respondents to our polling first and foremost chose the types of infrastructure which should be prioritised (46%) and the balance between objectives such as growth, energy security, environmental protection and cost (41%). Whether individual nationally significant projects should be built at all came last, at 17%. In a regional plan, they most wanted a say on how impacts on communities are addressed (60%) and what benefits host communities receive (57%), ahead of whether infrastructure is built at all (44%).[48] A plurality (49%) also accept that, once the country has decided it needs a kind of infrastructure, local people should influence where and how it is built, rather than whether it is built, compared with 39% who would let local areas refuse it.

Figure 2.3: What the public wants to influence in national and regional infrastructure plans



Source : Convergent polling for FGF/ICE, 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults.

While the literature on social licence emphasises the importance of early and continuous engagement, this is not achieved by asking the same people the same questions at every stage; our interviewees consistently described this as eroding rather than building trust. It comes from asking each question once, at the level where it is genuinely open, and carrying the answer forward visibly into the next stage. The rest of this Part takes each level in turn, and Part 3 sets out how our recommendations would connect them.

2.4 The strategic level: engaging the public on national and regional strategy

Whether the country needs a particular class of infrastructure is, and should remain, a national question. This is already consulted on. Strategic authorities are now beginning work on SDSs, which will also be consulted on. The difficulty is that consultation at these levels is often long and technical; its respondents

48 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

are mainly developers, statutory bodies and national organisations, and its conclusions do not reach communities meaningfully. As the strategic tier expands, the risk of duplication also grows: without coordination, the same communities could within a few years be asked about a national sectoral plan, its regional counterpart (their SDS), and then individual projects, each touching on overlapping questions.

Our polling (above) suggests national engagement should help people consider the trade-offs underpinning infrastructure, not replicate consultation on individual schemes. That suggests harnessing conventional and deliberative methods. In a deliberative process, such as a citizens' assembly, a representative sample of the public is randomly selected, hears evidence, considers the trade-offs over several sessions, and reaches considered recommendations to which the decision-maker publicly responds. Such processes offer four things conventional consultation does not, each of which bears on how consent is built:

- **They reach people conventional consultation misses.** Those who did not vote at the last general election – around two in five adults – were the group least well served by consultation in our polling: their support for the project they were shown fell over the course of the consultation, while support among others rose, and they were much less likely to judge the process fair.[49]

- **They allow informed judgement on trade-offs.** Asked what would help them contribute to a national plan, respondents most often chose clear and accessible information about the choices (44%) and information about costs and trade-offs (33%).

- **They lend legitimacy to national need.** A national needs statement shaped by a representative group of citizens, with a published account of how their views were reflected, has a stronger claim on the communities that later host infrastructure than one shaped only by the sector.

- **They tell government which arguments carry weight.** Evidence that can inform how the case for infrastructure is made at every later stage.

There are precedents in the UK. Climate Assembly UK, commissioned by six House of Commons select committees, brought a representative sample of the public together to consider how the UK should meet its net zero target.[50] Internationally, Canada has run successive rounds of national engagement on its long-term infrastructure planning, treating sub-national governments and the public as participants.[51] In Brazil, regional dialogues identified distinct priorities in different parts of the country, from waterways and highways in the Amazon, to restoring existing infrastructure in the Atlantic Forest. This then fed into a single long-term national strategy, showing how regional engagement can inform a joined-up national plan.[52]

49 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

50 Climate Assembly UK, 'About'.

51 Canadian Infrastructure Council, 'What we heard: planning for Canada's first National Infrastructure Assessment', 22 September 2025.

52 Aleiya Cummins, 'The people of Brazil have spoken – and it's leading to better internet coverage', ICE, 29 October 2025.

The same applies to regional strategy. Much thinking has already been done on how participation could be moved to that level, including engaging the public on SDSs, when the principles and patterns of development are decided, using deliberative *and* conventional methods, and asking strategic authorities to evidence their engagement.[53] A single regional exercise of this kind could also avoid the duplication described above by serving all the plans that bear on the same area.

2.5 The regional level: filling the missing middle

There is currently a gap at the stage communities arguably care most about: between the point at which need is agreed nationally and the point at which a specific application is made, when many key details are fixed. This is the regional level where decisions could be taken on how and where national need is delivered.

National planning policy expects (regional) SDSs to make 'provision' for infrastructure committed to in the (national) 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy and (national) sectoral spatial plans.[54] But their role in implementing national strategy is not yet clearly defined, nor is how they should be taken into account in the consenting process.

A SDS can be considered at examination of a Development Consent Order where the decision-maker regards it as important and relevant, but it has no defined weight. Strategic authorities have no formal role in consenting beyond that of any local authority, and a linear scheme crossing several councils can generate several overlapping Local Impact Reports with no single account of its effects. As such, even if local communities do engage in these consultations, they may have little impact in shaping the major projects being planned for their regions.

The present moment offers several ways in which this 'missing middle' could be filled. Sectoral spatial plans have the potential to translate national need into place-based terms, identifying broadly where infrastructure will need to be delivered. Connecting that sector-specific view with the place-based perspective of SDSs could provide a far more meaningful point of public engagement, at which communities could influence how national needs are accommodated while decisions over location, priorities and trade-offs are still open, and could broaden the focus beyond individual NSIPs, which are only part of each region's infrastructure needs.

The government has already decided that mayors, and the strategic authorities they lead, should act as the democratic voice of their regions, and has legislated on that basis across spatial strategy, development management and, now, fiscal devolution. Infrastructure planning is the notable area to which this has not yet fully been applied.

There are two reasons to see them as the right vehicle for connecting national policy to local delivery:

53 Demos, 'The MIMBY majority', May 2025.

54 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'National Planning Policy Framework', August 2026, policy PM1(2)(f); Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, s.12G(2)(c).

- **Accountability.** National government can establish the need for infrastructure, but may struggle to translate its mandate to the local level. Developers have evident commercial interest in the outcome. Directly elected mayors, independent of promoters and leading a strategy that must be consulted on and examined, can explain what national requirements mean for their region and be held to account for how they are met. A greater role in delivering infrastructure would also give the issue greater salience in local elections, offering voters another way to shape these decisions before any application is made.

- **Coordination.** Strategic authorities weigh trade-offs across their councils, and can give an account of how to accommodate infrastructure within it.

Comparable systems already function on this basis. In Australia, consent for major infrastructure sits with states, while an independent national body maintains a priority list of nationally significant projects. In Germany, the Länder authorities are the competent authorities for development consent, while the federal level establishes need and assigns funding. In the Netherlands, infrastructure of regional interest sits with the provinces and nationally significant projects are reserved to the centre.[55]

This regional role needs careful design. There would be little value in a system that allowed locally elected leaders to reject needs already established nationally, for example by opposing grid upgrades on which the national clean energy transition depends. Whether infrastructure is needed should remain a national question; the regional level should determine how and where.

2.6 The project level: engagement becomes narrower and better focused

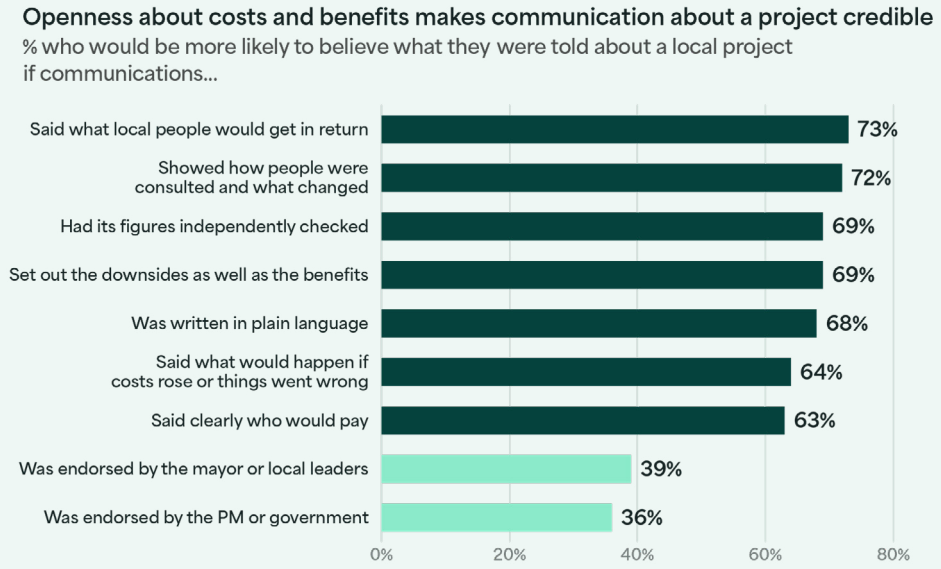
Connecting the upstream stages does not diminish the role of project-level engagement, but it changes what it is for. A lot remains to be determined after schemes come forward: sitting within identified areas, design, mitigation and wider benefits. On linear schemes the scope is often greater, as there might be genuine alternatives along a route; on site-specific schemes it is narrower, because the site is generally chosen before engagement begins. Stronger upstream engagement and a greater role for mayors would change the terms of that engagement in two ways. More of what arrives at application would already reflect positions the region has consulted on, so that project-level engagement implements a strategy the area has helped to shape rather than responding to a proposal that appears without antecedent. It would also allow greater clarity at the project stage about what remains open and what has been settled.

As Part 1 showed, that clarity matters. Being told at the outset that the site of a project was fixed did not harm perceptions of fairness in our polling. Being told what changed due to consultation raised them considerably. Being open about costs and risks also makes communication more credible: 69% said they would be more likely to believe information about a project if it set out downsides as well as benefits, 64% if it explained what would happen if costs rose or things went wrong, and 63% if it said clearly who would pay. Independent planning

55 Jörg Knieling, 'Governance of energy infrastructures: comparing planning cultures in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany', February 2026.

inspectors were the source respondents would most likely trust to tell them what a project would mean for their area (34%) - well ahead of the company building it (14%).[56]

Figure 2.4: What makes communication about a project credible



Source : Convergent polling for FGF/ICE, 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults.

A stronger regional role would not by itself ensure that project-level engagement is done well. A high-trust environment will also depend on encouraging developers to be open about the scope for discussion, the actual costs and risks, and their proposals to mitigate them. A key obstacle is that the Planning Inspectorate does not provide any pre-application view of the issues likely to bear on consent, and the Examining Authority's assessment of the principal issues takes place only after an application has been accepted.[57] As a result, developers often over-engineer against risks that will never materialise, communities invest effort in objections that cannot succeed while overlooking those that could, and no one holds an early, neutral view of what actually matters.

2.7 From compensating communities to ensuring they gain

The final element is what host communities receive. The legal tests governing planning obligations and requirements mean that identified harms can be mitigated, so that a community is left no worse off, but it cannot through the planning system be made better off. Anything more is voluntary and negotiated project by project, and funding is divided into separate pots tied to particular harms.

This is a missed opportunity. The focus should be less on mitigation than on maximising the benefit to communities that host vital infrastructure. The sums involved can be considerable: Sizewell C's package of community funding and mitigations is worth over £250m and will generate substantial ongoing business

56 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

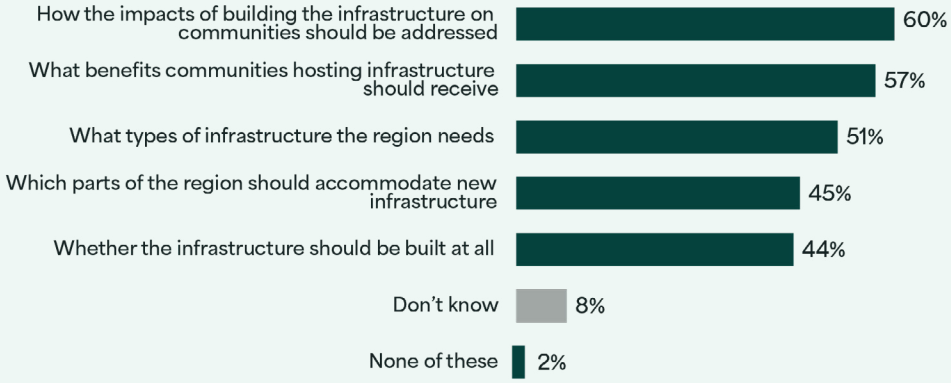
57 A planning inspector or multiple inspectors, appointed by the Planning Inspectorate (on behalf of the Secretary of State).

rates receipts (the existing Sizewell B station was billed around £24 million in business rates in 2019). Providing such funding more flexibly to strategic authorities, with a mandate to ensure that host communities gain and the ability to combine it with wider funding, could deliver far greater benefit than fragmented, negotiated packages.

The public's priorities point the same way. How impacts are addressed (60%) and what host communities receive (57%) are what people most want to influence in a regional plan, and an explanation of what local people would get in return was the single factor most likely to make them believe what they were told about a project (73%).[58]

Figure 2.5: What should people be able to influence in regional infrastructure plans

Which of the following decisions, if any, do you think people should have an opportunity to influence when a regional infrastructure plan is being developed? Please select all that apply.



Source : Convergent polling for FGF/ICE, 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults.

During the development of this paper, the government sent a strong signal it agrees with this, introducing the 'Data Centre Covenant' in the autumn Budget 2026. Among environmental, cyber security, and employment components it requires:

"Communities that host nationally important infrastructure should share directly in the rewards. Strategic data centres should agree a Local Benefit Plan that commits to substantial investment, developed with the local community and linked to the development's size. This can be spent on local priorities, like transport, parks and town centres."[59]

The economic significance of datacentres, and their potential for controversy, has likely led to this targeted action. But as our polling shows there is a strong case for extending the principle to other classes of infrastructure.

58 Convergent, polling commissioned for this report, fieldwork 11-12 October 2026, 1,077 UK adults, online.

59 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2025), 'The Data Centre Covenant', GOV.UK, 28 October 2026.

Part 3 - Recommendations

3.1 Designing engagement across the system as a whole

The reforms of the last two years have changed the planning system substantially and devolved material powers and funding to the regional level. What has not yet been done is to consider how the different elements of the resulting system can be coordinated and harnessed together to plan major infrastructure and effectively engage the public at the right stage.

Here we set out our proposed approach for bringing these reforms together. We have sought to answer two questions: how the public can be brought in at the right level, while the strategic questions that matter most to them remain open; and how that involvement can be made easy to understand and contribute to, without slowing the planning process, and ideally while supporting further streamlining.

Our answers, organised level by level, are guided by five principles:

- **Build on the government's direction of travel.** The recommendations work through the institutions, plans and processes the government has put in place and do not seek to reopen questions answered recently. For example, they intentionally avoid anything that would create a legitimate expectation of consultation at the pre-application stage. While avoiding re-opening old questions, they take seriously the challenge presented by *Rewiring the State* and try to solidify what 'non-performative', locally led and delivery-oriented reforms would look like.

- **No additional layers to slow down applications.** Every step proposed either replaces something that already happens or takes place at a level above the application stage, and seeks to provide clarity that will accelerate applications once they are submitted.

- **Simplify and align using a place-based lens.** Where several plans and consultations cover the same questions in the same place, they should be combined or made to share evidence, so that plan-makers do not duplicate one another's work and those being consulted can understand more easily when, where, and what decisions they are able to influence.

- **Ensure questions of national need are addressed nationally.** The question of whether the country needs a class of infrastructure is settled nationally and is not reopened at the regional or project level. The regional role concerns how and where that need is met and must be tested to ensure it aligns with national policy.

- **Communities that host infrastructure should gain.** The system should be built so that hosting nationally significant infrastructure leaves a place better off, with the benefits directed towards what the community itself values, rather than only offsetting the harms a project causes.

3.2 Stage 1 - The strategic level: engaging the public on national and regional strategy

It is at the national level that the case for infrastructure is set out and the priorities that guide everything downstream are set: which kinds of infrastructure the country will invest in, at what scale, and increasingly, where. The strategic tier is being strengthened: the 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy now sets the overall framework, National Policy Statements are to be reviewed more regularly, and sectoral spatial plans are being developed to give national need a spatial form. At the same time, strategic authorities are beginning work on SDSs. Each of these is, or will be, subject to consultation, so the question is not whether the public should be engaged at this level, but how this can best be done.

As Part 2 set out, consultations at this level have tended to be long and technical, with responses coming principally from developers, statutory bodies and national organisations. Most members of the public engage with infrastructure only when a project is proposed near them, by which time the strategic choices that produced it have been settled. As the strategic tier expands, there is also a growing risk of duplication: within two or three years, the same communities could be asked about a range of different plans, each touching on overlapping questions (see 2.4 for an enumeration).

Our polling also suggests that the public's interest at this level lies in the trade-offs, such as which types of infrastructure to prioritise and how to balance competing objectives, rather than in individual projects.

Our recommendation therefore focuses on three things: making engagement on national strategy more representative of the public as a whole; ensuring engagement takes place at the right level and where possible only once, through a single regional evidence-gathering exercise; and making clear, at every stage what has been settled and what remains open. Each can be achieved through existing institutions and timetables.

Recommendation 1: Engagement on infrastructure strategy should take place at the right level and, where possible, only once - through a representative process to inform national strategy and a single regional evidence-gathering exercise that serves all the plans for a region - with a clear account at each stage of what has been decided and what remains open for the next.

1a. Each refresh of the 10-Year Infrastructure Strategy should be informed by a streamlined National Infrastructure Assessment, beginning with a representative deliberative process commissioned by NISTA.

The 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy now sets the framework within which at least £725 billion of public investment over the coming decade is planned, and NISTA maintains a pipeline of around 780 planned public and private projects.[60]

60 National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, 'NISTA annual report 2024-25', 11 August 2025.

Its choices bear directly on the infrastructure communities will host.

Before becoming NISTA, the National Infrastructure Commission produced five-yearly National Infrastructure Assessments, which took a 30-year view of the UK's infrastructure needs and informed the development of the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy. The most recent was published in 2023. NISTA has not continued this work. As it refreshes the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy next year, NISTA should undertake a streamlined version of the assessment. The 2023 assessment's Young Professionals Panel and Design Panel were innovations, but an assessment reflecting society-wide priorities should draw on a broader cross-section of the public, alongside traditional economic forecasting.

We propose that each refresh of the strategy should begin with a representative deliberative process - a citizens' panel or assembly - designed as follows:

- **Timing.** The process should occur at the start of each refresh, before options narrow, so that its conclusions can shape the strategy rather than respond to a finished draft.
- **Participants.** Members should be representative of the public, selected through stratified random selection, with sessions held across the nations and regions.
- **Questions.** The process should be framed around the trade-offs the strategy must make: the balance between new investment and maintaining existing assets; between national networks and regional connectivity; between the pace of delivery and the level of local disruption that is acceptable; how costs should be shared between bill payers and taxpayers; and how communities that host infrastructure should benefit.
- **Evidence.** Participants should hear expert evidence and have access to the analysis informing the strategy, so that they weigh the same information as decision makers.
- **Response.** The panel's recommendations should be published, alongside NISTA's response explaining which have been taken forward and why.

This would allow NISTA to engage the public on both the benefits of infrastructure investment and the trade-offs involved in prioritising different strategic challenges, sectors and funding choices, strengthening the legitimacy of long-term infrastructure planning and building understanding of, and support for, difficult decisions. The cost of running this process would depend on the scale and way it was delivered. An analogous process was run by the Climate Assembly and cost £560,000.[61]

1b. Each strategic authority should run a single regional evidence-gathering exercise that serves its Spatial Development Strategy and the national and regional plans for its area, so that consultation takes place at the right level and is not duplicated.

61 UK Parliament, 'Trust, public engagement and UK Parliament', 21 May 2025.

Rather than separate public exercises for the SDS and the various regional and sectoral plans that touch the same area, the strategic authority would convene one structured conversation with the public about the region's infrastructure priorities and the trade-offs between them. Its design would be agreed in advance with the bodies preparing the relevant plans – such as NESO for energy, the regional water resources groups and transport bodies – so that it covers the questions each of them needs answered, at a time that allows the answers to inform their drafts.

It should take place at the point at which the strategy's principles and broad patterns of development are being decided, and should use representative deliberative methods, such as citizens' assemblies or panels, alongside conventional consultation and dialogue with the region's local authorities, so that it hears from a broad cross-section of the region rather than from those with the strongest existing views. The evidence gathered – on priorities, constraints, acceptable trade-offs and the benefits communities most value – would be published and shared with other plan-makers who would draw on it rather than repeat it.

The strategic authority would then carry that evidence into national planning by responding to consultations on each National Policy Statement draft, sectoral plan and refresh of the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy affecting its area, so that regional views reach national plans without separate regional exercises for each. Strategic authorities should be named consultees in each case: for National Policy Statements, by adding them to the prescribed consultees; and for sectoral plans and the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy, through the terms on which each plan is commissioned and prepared and through guidance from NISTA.

Strategic authorities will start from different positions, with varying resources and expertise. The government should therefore consider what support each will need to build the capacity and capability to play a full and effective role in infrastructure planning and delivery so that communities in every region can rely on the same high standard of engagement.

1c. At every stage, the body responsible should publish a clear account of what was consulted on, how the responses have been reflected, what is now settled and what remains open for the stage that follows.

As we set out above, communities often meet a project without understanding where, and on what basis, the decisions that produced it were taken. Time and resources devoted to engagement can then be spent on questions that have already been settled to the benefit of no one and the frustration of all.

A short account, written for a public audience and published at each stage, would set expectations about what can still be influenced, focus engagement on the issues that are genuinely open, and give developers greater certainty about which questions remain to be resolved at the project stage:

- **National.** On each refresh of the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy, each National Policy Statement and each sectoral plan, the responsible body would set out what it heard, what changed as a result and why, what is now settled – principally need and national priorities – and what is left for regional and project-level decisions.

- **Regional.** On adopting its SDS, the strategic authority would set out how its regional engagement was reflected, how the strategy provides for national need, and what it settles for the region, such as broad locations, design principles and benefit priorities.

- **Project.** The Planning Inspectorate's key issues analysis and the developer's early statement (as per recommendations 3a and 3b) would outline what is settled or remains open, followed at application by an account of what changed through engagement.

Each account would be published alongside a document that is already being produced, so this adds no new stage.



3.3 Stage 2 - The regional level: filling the missing link in infrastructure planning

As set out in Part 2, there is currently a gap between the point at which national need is established and the point at which an application for a specific project comes forward. The regional level is the right level to address this. It is the level at which economic trade-offs can be made across a functioning economic geography, and at which proposals are developed enough for communities to understand them and want to engage. The government is already focusing on making mayors, and the strategic authorities they lead, the voice of their regions, and has placed a duty on them to prepare SDSs, which are expected to be in place by around 2029.

What has not yet happened is the connection of this regional tier to the way nationally significant infrastructure is consented. Under the Planning Act 2008, decisions on nationally significant projects must be taken in accordance with the relevant National Policy Statement, and a SDS can be taken into account only where the decision-maker regards it as important and relevant, with no defined weight. Strategic authorities, meanwhile, have no formal role in the consenting process beyond that of any local authority. There is also not yet clarity on how SDSs should work alongside sectoral plans (including those with a regional focus, such as the Regional Energy Strategic Plans), or how the relevant communities should be consulted on issues that affect both. Our proposed approach seeks to set out how these could be tied together.

Recommendation 2: A regional tier should be established in infrastructure planning through a new "regional settlement": Spatial Development Strategies that make proper provision for nationally identified infrastructure needs, tested at examination. In return, a strategy that does so should be binding on decisions about how and where nationally significant infrastructure is delivered in its area, unless there are strong reasons to depart from it, and the strategic authority should gain a defined role in the consenting process - including, for infrastructure of regional significance, the ability for the government to delegate the consent decision itself.

Our central proposal is a new "regional settlement" for infrastructure planning. A SDS must make proper provision for the infrastructure its area is nationally required to host, and this is tested at the strategy's independent examination. In return, a strategy that does so earns weight in consent decisions. Where the Planning Inspectorate finds at examination that a strategy makes proper provision for national need and is a credible and deliverable plan, decisions on nationally significant infrastructure in that area should be taken in accordance with the strategy's policies on how and where that infrastructure is delivered, unless there are strong reasons to depart from them. This would mirror the way in which the Planning Act 2008 already requires decisions to follow National Policy Statements. This would not be a route to revisit whether national need has been correctly identified - which remains a matter for national policy - but a means of settling, in advance and with the involvement of the region, how that need can best be met.

This would also improve public engagement. The political intention is that each English region will be led by a directly elected mayor, able to represent the views of their communities in the infrastructure planning process and accountable to them for the choices made. Residents would be able to influence how national need is met in their region, both through the election of their mayor and through engagement on the SDS, at a stage when the questions are still open, and would know that the resulting strategy will carry real weight when individual projects are decided.

This new regional settlement would be put into effect through three elements, all of which could be taken forward in this Parliament: the strengthened status of the SDSs in guiding consent decisions; the strategic authority's role as the statutory consultee, through a single regional impact report; and, for infrastructure of regional significance, the delegation of the consent decision itself. Each replaces something that already happens or takes place upstream of individual applications, so that nothing is added to the critical path of a project, and each applies only where its preconditions are met, with the current arrangements continuing elsewhere.



2a. Spatial Development Strategies should set out how nationally identified need can best be met in the region and, once found sound at examination, decisions on nationally significant infrastructure should follow them.

Sectoral plans and SDSs do different jobs. Sectoral plans look across a single system for the country as a whole, determining what is needed and, broadly, where; SDSs look across different types of infrastructure and land use in one place, and are best placed to determine how that need can be accommodated in a region. Guidance should make clear how the two work together, with SDSs giving positive steers on how national need could be delivered in the region, including:

- Corridors and zones in which nationally needed infrastructure could most effectively be delivered, framed as areas rather than precise routes.
- Approaches to managing cumulative impact where several projects and their construction converge on one area, such as the sequencing of construction and shared arrangements for construction traffic and workforce accommodation – matters that no individual project can address.
- Design and construction approaches that would support delivery, helping projects to fit their surroundings and secure local support.
- A standing statement of benefit priorities, setting out what the region would want the proposed Strategic Infrastructure Community Fund to support, as set out in recommendation 4a.

At examination, the Planning Inspectorate should test two things: that the strategy provides for the infrastructure needs identified in national policy for its area, taking evidence from the relevant government departments and system operators; and that its infrastructure policies are deliverable. The bar for deliverability would be that the strategy's policies are consistent with national policy and would not add costs to the point of making projects unviable, nor pass significant additional costs to bill payers or taxpayers – for example, a general expectation that electricity lines be placed underground where national policy does not require it – in the same way that local plan policies are already tested for viability. Because strategies are already examined for consistency with national policy, these tests could be introduced through national planning policy and guidance.

Applicants would explain in their application how they have addressed the strategy, and justify any departure from it. A project conforming to a qualifying strategy would therefore have the broad questions of where and how it is built largely settled before it is submitted, so that examination can focus on the issues that remain, and engagement on the regional strategy would carry real weight in the decisions that follow. Giving a qualifying strategy this weight in consent decisions does require primary legislation, which could be brought forward in this Parliament. In the meantime, guidance and each National Policy Statement, as it is reviewed, could confirm that the policies of a qualifying strategy should be given substantial weight.

2b. The strategic authority should replace the individual local authorities as the statutory consultee for nationally significant infrastructure in its area, and submit a single regional impact report that weighs the views of its constituent authorities.

Currently, each relevant local authority is consulted separately and may submit its own Local Impact Report. As such, single linear or clustered projects can attract overlapping reports, with no single account of its effects across the whole area and no one charged with weighing the trade-offs between them. We propose that the strategic authority should become the statutory consultee in place of the individual local authorities, reducing the number of consultees, and should submit a single regional impact report in place of individual Local Impact Reports. In preparing the report, the strategic authority would consult its constituent local authorities and draw on the local knowledge – of highways, ecology, heritage and flood risk – that they hold. It would then be for the strategic authority to weigh up the trade-offs between their views and to submit a single view, setting out how the project sits against the SDS and the region's proposals for maximising benefit to the host community, as explained in further detail in recommendation 4c.

This would give the examination one clear regional position rather than several competing ones. Constituent councils would retain the right to make representations as interested parties.

The regional report would be submitted within the examination timetable that currently applies to Local Impact Reports, so the change would add no time to the process. Where there is currently no strategic authority, the current arrangements would continue to apply until one has been established. This can begin through guidance, with legislation following to formalise the strategic authority's status as statutory consultee.

2c. The government should be able to delegate consent decisions on "regionally significant infrastructure projects" to the mayors of established strategic authorities.

For a defined class of projects whose impacts are largely contained within a single strategic authority area - for example, medium-scale generation and storage, local and regional transport schemes, and some water resources projects, within thresholds set nationally - the relevant Secretary of State should have the power to delegate the consent decision to the mayor of an established strategic authority. This would enable Mayors to take personal ownership in driving through projects that are important to their region quickly and taking responsibility for balancing the trade-offs. Delegation would not be automatic. A mayor - or potentially a developer - would request it for a particular project setting out the grounds, and the Secretary of State would decide whether to delegate, taking into account whether the project is primarily regional in its impact, and whether delegation would support a timely and well-founded decision. The Secretary of State would retain the power to decline a request or to recover a decision where that was in the national interest.

Where a decision is delegated, the process would otherwise be unchanged. The Planning Inspectorate would continue to examine the application and make a recommendation, and the decision would be taken against the same National Policy Statements, within the same statutory timescales and in the light of the SDS's policies. Because the examination continues to be carried out by the Planning Inspectorate, delegation does not depend on strategic authorities building new technical capacity. It requires primary legislation, which could be brought forward in this Parliament.

3.4 Stage 3 - The project level: clearer and better-focused engagement

The government has rightly sought to ensure that the new pre-application guidance does not create a legitimate expectation of consultation. With more of the strategic questions settled upstream, through national strategy and the SDS, engagement at the project level can focus on what remains open: sitting within an identified area, design, construction and mitigation. What is currently missing is an early, authoritative, neutral view of which issues are actually capable of affecting the decision. Our recommendation places an early, neutral analysis of the key issues at the centre of project-level engagement, and builds the developer's engagement around it.

The recommendations at this stage are designed to give developers and communities better information and to support good practice, rather than to impose new requirements on engagement before an application is made.

Recommendation 3: Project-level engagement should be anchored in an early, neutral and published view of the issues that matter to the decision, so that developers and communities can focus their efforts on what can still be influenced.

3a. The Planning Inspectorate should provide an early, published assessment of the key issues likely to bear on consent for each nationally significant project.

We propose to model this on the role of the planning officer under the town and country planning system, who engages with an applicant before an application is made, forms a professional view of the issues that matter and presents a reasoned recommendation to the decision-maker.

Once a project has been scoped, a named case officer in the Planning Inspectorate would meet the developer, the strategic authority, the relevant local authorities and the statutory consultees, and would prepare and publish a short key issues report setting out their recommendation on:

- The issues most likely to bear on the decision, and the information the examination is likely to need on each.
- The matters already settled by the relevant National Policy Statement and, where one is in place, the SDS, which should not be reopened.
- The issues are unlikely to require detailed consideration at examination.

The case officer would be functionally separate from those who would later examine the application. The report would not bind the Examining Authority, whose independence and statutory duties must be preserved, but it would carry real weight. The Examining Authority would treat it as the starting point for its initial assessment of the principal issues, would not reopen the matters it identifies as settled or unlikely to need detailed consideration unless new evidence or a material change to the project warranted it, and would explain any departure from it. The report would be updated if the project changed materially, and the updated report would carry the same weight.

This would bring forward, rather than add to, work the Planning Inspectorate already does, since the Examining Authority could largely adopt the earlier assessment rather than repeat it. It would be offered as a standard part of the Planning Inspectorate's existing chargeable pre-application service, with guidance setting the expectation that applicants for nationally significant projects request it. The weight attached to the report would give developers a clear reason to do so, and it would require neither a new body nor a new mandatory stage.

An assessment of this kind would allow design effort and engagement to be focused on what actually matters, give developers a dependable early indication of how the issues will be treated, help communities to direct their efforts towards the issues that can affect the outcome, and make it easier for developers to be open about the issues they have been told are not first-order for the success of their application. New South Wales provides a well-established example of an early, authoritative statement of this kind (Box 3.3).

Box 3.1: New South Wales - an early, authoritative statement of what must be assessed

How it works. In New South Wales, every State Significant Infrastructure project begins with a request for the Planning Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs). The proponent lodges a scoping report describing the project and its strategic context, summarising early community engagement, setting out the engagement planned while the environmental impact statement is prepared, and identifying the matters that need further assessment. The planning department publishes the scoping report, seeks advice from key government agencies and the relevant councils, and publishes the SEARs within 28 days. They set out what the environmental impact statement must address, and expire if it is not submitted within two years.[62] The state has since introduced industry-specific requirements for common types of project, and is reviewing the process so that scoping focuses on the key environmental risks rather than on matters that add little value.[63]

What it shows. Developers, agencies, councils and communities receive an authoritative, published statement early in the process of which issues will be assessed and what engagement is expected, before the main assessment work is done. This focuses effort on the matters most likely to affect the decision.

3b. Developers should use that assessment to set out, early and plainly, what a project will mean for the community and what remains open to influence, with a short, standardised statement of impacts forming part of the application.

Guidance should set out best practice, with templates and worked examples, for a short statement published at the start of a developer's engagement. Building on the key issues assessment, it would set out the project's expected adverse impacts and disruption - what they are, where they fall and how long they last - and what is genuinely open to influence and what is already settled, with reasons, drawing on the accounts published at earlier stages (as per recommendation 1c) and the region's position in its SDSs (as per recommendation 2a). As engagement proceeds, developers should explain what changed as a result and what did not. As outlined in Part 2, this is supported by our polling that found being candid about what is fixed did not reduce perceptions of fairness and that what mattered more than anything was explaining what changed as a result of the public engagement.

Guidance should also encourage developers to make the case for a project - the national and the local reasons for it - as clearly as they describe what is being built, and to return to completed projects to account for the value delivered. The strategic authority, with its knowledge of the local examples that make such a case tangible, is well placed to support this.

62 NSW Planning Portal, 'Request SEARs - State significant infrastructure', 3 June 2024.

63 NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure, 'Streamlining major project assessment', updated 2 April 2026.

At the application stage, a valid application should include a concise, standardised statement of the project's expected adverse impacts and disruption, in plain English, in a prescribed format, and within a prescribed maximum length, together with a short account of any engagement they have decided to do and what changed through it. The Planning Inspectorate would check at acceptance only that the statement is present and conforms to the prescribed format, as it does for other application documents; it would not assess the quality of the applicant's engagement and therefore couldn't use this to prevent applications passing through the pre-application stage. Its content would be drawn from assessments the applicant must already carry out, principally the Environmental Statement, so no new assessment would be required.

3c. For the largest and most contested projects, an independent community liaison chair should be appointed as a matter of best practice.

The chair's role would be to give communities confidence in the integrity of the process, rather than to run the consultation or take any part in the decision:

- **Appointment and independence.** Chairs could be appointed from a published register of accredited practitioners, maintained by a body independent of developers, and funded by developers.
- **Function.** The chair would convene a community liaison group from the pre-application stage through construction, publish an independent account of engagement, and track whether commitments made during engagement are delivered.
- **Status.** The chair's account could be submitted to the examination.



3.5 Stage 4 - Mitigation and community benefit: ensuring that communities which host infrastructure gain

As we set out above, the current system is designed to mitigate the identified harms of a project rather than to ensure that the community hosting the infrastructure benefits from it. Funding is divided into separate pots tied to specific harms, negotiated project by project, and often directed by who is best able to apply for it rather than by what the community most needs.

Our proposed approach aligns with the logic of integrated financial settlements for strategic authorities, which give them the flexibility to direct funding where it will make the most difference, drawing on their understanding of their communities' priorities and on the benefit priorities set out in their SDSs (as per recommendation 2a). It is designed to make the cost to developers more predictable rather than higher, and to allow communities to see what a project will mean for them while it is still being examined, without adding to the consent timetable.

Recommendation 4: The system should move from mitigating the harms of infrastructure to ensuring that the communities which host it gain from it.

4a. A Strategic Infrastructure Community Fund should replace the fragmented, negotiated arrangements for community and socio-economic mitigation.

This would be created from a non-negotiable levy on major projects, calculated according to an agreed formula and modelled on the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). This would consolidate separate community benefit funds into a single, predictable payment. Two features distinguish it.

First, the amount would be set by a published schedule rather than negotiated project by project, so that it is known from the outset and is the same for any comparable project.

Second, the payment would not be a factor in deciding whether to grant consent: projects would neither gain nor lose from it, and liability would arise once consent is granted. As such, what is decided locally is not how much is paid, but how it is spent.

The legal change. Currently, community-facing funds - tourism and local economy funds, skills contributions, etc. - are development consent obligations, usually brought through a Deed of Obligation negotiated between developers and host authorities, and finalised during examination. Each must satisfy the three tests in regulation 122 of the CIL Regulations: it is needed to make the project acceptable, directly related to it, and fairly and reasonably related to it in scale and kind. Development Consent Order requirements are subject to similar common law tests. This means each contribution must be tied to specific harms. As such, funding is often divided into separate pots: a tourism fund can only address tourism harms and cannot be redirected to other priorities. Because our proposed Levy would not bear on the consent decision, it would not need to meet those tests, which apply to planning obligations rather than to a charge set by schedule (as is already the case). This allows the

money to be spent on local priorities rather than only on offsetting a specific harm. Legislation would be needed to replace the regulation 122 route and common law tests (for the community and socio-economic category) with the fund.

Precedents. There are two. The first is the Nature Restoration Fund, created by the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, which disapplies case-by-case environmental mitigation for defined impacts and allows developers to pay a formula-based levy, with funds deployed strategically and the environmental outcome still secured. The levy would apply the same mechanism to community and socio-economic impacts. The second is the community benefit framework for electricity transmission. Here, government has already accepted a formulaic national approach in one sector: its guidance sets indicative community fund contributions of £200,000 per kilometre of new overhead line and £530,000 per substation, and households within 500 metres of new or upgraded transmission infrastructure receive discounts of up to £250 a year for ten years.[64] The levy would extend this principle, on a statutory basis, across classes of infrastructure.

Scope. The levy would replace the regulation 122 route only for community and socio-economic mitigation. Physical harm mitigations – noise insulation, for example – would still be secured as requirements and obligations, as would environmental mitigation and safety and statutory requirements. Direct compensation for acute individual harm would remain outside the pooled fund. Developers would therefore continue to fund the costs identified through the planning system for physical harm. The levy departs from that principle only for community and socio-economic spend (within clear limits) and replaces negotiation with predictability.

A legal vehicle. One option is to build on the Mayoral CIL, which already allows the Mayor of London to fund strategic transport infrastructure. The government has proposed extending this to other mayors following an SDS, with a remit covering strategically important infrastructure.[65] It is currently charged on the floorspace of new buildings, and structures like pylons and wind turbines are not liable, so it would raise little from most nationally significant infrastructure, and its proceeds are not directed towards host communities.[66] This option would mean extending its charging basis to the scale of projects and extending its uses to benefits for host communities.

How to set the levy. One option is a national schedule, set by the Secretary of State with the sponsoring departments, by class of infrastructure and expressed per unit of physical scale – for example, per kilometre of linear infrastructure or per unit of generating capacity. This would offer developers a single basis for costing projects. As the charge is based on the scale of a project's impact (not land values), it may avoid some of the difficulties faced by the previous government's proposed Infrastructure Levy (which attempted to set a schedule that worked everywhere).

64 Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 'Households near new pylons to save hundreds on energy bills', press release, 10 March 2025.

65 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Planning powers for mayors in England', consultation, 24 August 2026.

66 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Community Infrastructure Levy' guidance, 12 June 2014.

Another option is for strategic authorities to set schedules within a national framework, which would define infrastructure classes, calculation methods and the amount rates could vary, with each schedule viability-tested and examined (like current CIL charging schedules). Both options would calibrate rates to the current average level of community and socio-economic spend for each class, so that the levy is cost-neutral on average, and would be reviewed periodically. Payment would be phased over the construction period, beginning at commencement.

How the fund would be allocated. Receipts would be paid to the strategic authority, which increasingly holds the spending levers – on transport, skills and employment support – with which the fund could be aligned. Rather than prescribing a fixed share for the host area, the arrangements would give the strategic authority flexibility over how funds are used, combined with a duty to have regard to the impacts on host communities and clear accountability for ensuring that they gain. The Spatial Development Strategy could identify key priorities for spending in the region, developed in consultation with local authorities and residents, which the Fund could be spent on. Where there is no strategic authority, receipts would be paid to the relevant upper-tier or unitary authorities, apportioned according to the project's footprint.

The safeguards that replace the three tests. In place of the regulation 122 tests, the amount is set by schedule and is not weighed in the consent decision, so it cannot buy permission and is not negotiated; the schedule would need to be designed to ensure it would not impact viability of projects by leaving them prohibitively expensive; and the strategic authority has a duty to have regard to the identified impacts when allocating funds so that flexibility is bounded by evidenced need. Because the fund consolidates spend that developers already make, calibrated to current levels, it converts an uncertain, negotiated cost into a predictable one rather than adding to it. Sizewell C illustrates how community funding is secured under the current arrangements, and what would change under this approach (Box 3.2).

Box 3.2: Sizewell C - a missed opportunity to harness the largest ever community funding package

As noted above, Sizewell C's £250 million community funding and mitigation package is one of the largest associated with a UK infrastructure project. One interviewee argued that the way it was negotiated and structured limited its ability to deliver positive change to residents' lives. Negotiations have focused on identifying and compensating for specific harms associated with Sizewell, not on addressing the area's long-term needs. The funding, divided into separate, ring-fenced pots, was intended to address particular impacts. Similarly, much of the money was only accessible as grants through competitive applications.

This has encouraged spending on fairly small-scale initiatives, rather than on larger interventions targeting local services. The application process has also been criticised for favouring organisations with the capacity to navigate applications. This is a missed opportunity in itself, and means that despite the sums involved, communities may struggle to identify lasting improvements attributable to Sizewell C.

One example comes from Sizewell's transport requirements. Sizewell required new rail infrastructure to transport materials to the site. Because of the current approach, the infrastructure was designed around the project's immediate operational requirements *without* considering the area's wider connectivity needs. Exploring the possibility of a passenger station (or even integrating the new infrastructure with local bus services) could have provided a lasting local benefit beyond the construction period.

4b. Host areas should retain the business rates from major new infrastructure.

This would follow models that already exist in the renewable energy business rates retention arrangements and the Hinkley Point C precedent. The commitment in the 2026 Budget to full local retention of business rates by the end of the decade makes this more achievable; the recommendation is that the rates from major new infrastructure should be retained for the benefit of the host area, rather than redistributed through resets or pooling.

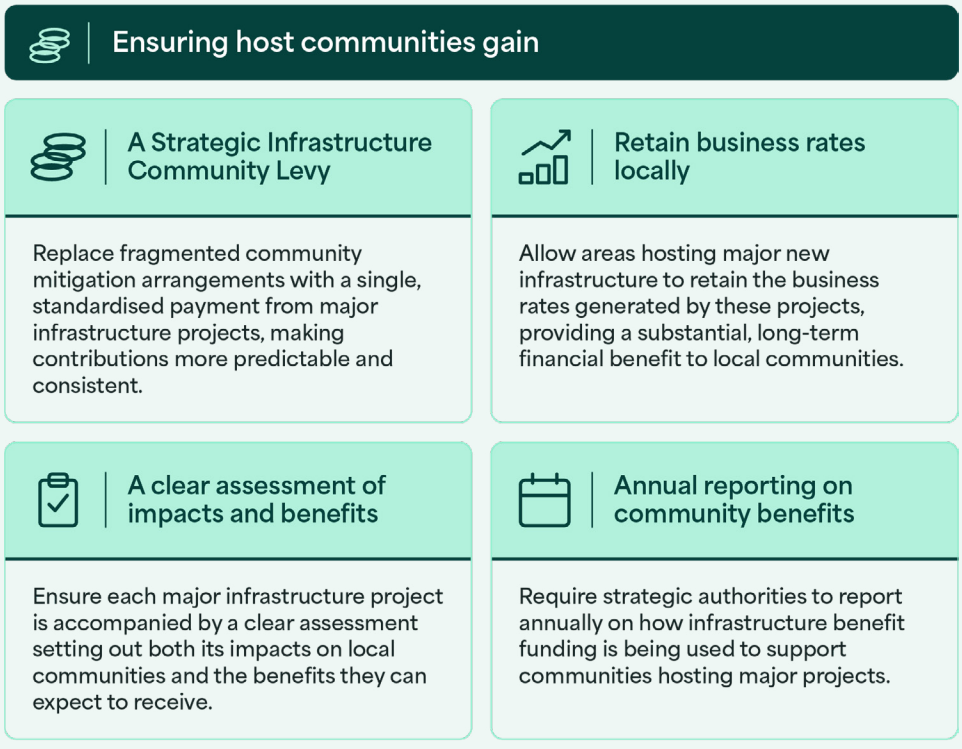
4c. Each project should be accompanied by a benefit and impact assessment, set out in the single regional impact report.

The assessment would combine, while the project is being examined, a plain account of the project's disruption and a proposal for how the host community will benefit. The developer would provide the first, through the statement of impacts in its application (as per recommendation 3b), since it holds the project detail. The strategic authority would provide the second in its regional impact report (as per recommendation 2b): an estimate of the levy and business rates

receipts the project is expected to generate, and how it proposes to use them, alongside its other funding, in line with the benefit priorities in its SDS – or, where it proposes to prioritise uses that do not address the identified impacts directly, why it expects them to deliver greater benefit for the host community. Communities would therefore be able to see the costs and the benefits of a project side by side, and to comment on both before a decision is taken. The benefit proposal would be published and open to comment, but like the levy itself, it would not be weighed by the Examining Authority in the consent decision. Scrutiny would instead come through the strategic authority's own arrangements and its annual reporting (as set out in recommendation 4d).

4d. In return for receiving and directing infrastructure benefit funding, strategic authorities should report annually on how they are ensuring that host communities gain.

They should also consider how their wider funding could be aligned with levy receipts where this would produce greater benefit for those communities. Together with the duty to have regard to the impacts on host communities, this ensures that levy receipts remain tied to the communities that bear the costs of infrastructure, rather than becoming part of general regional spending.



Conclusion

The government's reforms to infrastructure planning are needed and welcome. But speeding up planning alone will not fully resolve the problems of infrastructure delivery. Legal consent does not automatically translate into public acceptance. Similarly, removing an opportunity for consultation will not be enough to address the concerns that lead communities to oppose projects. The challenge is to design a system in which faster delivery and meaningful engagement reinforce one another.

This means rethinking when, where, and how to involve the public. Communities should have opportunities to influence the choices that shape infrastructure earlier. National engagement should establish what infrastructure is needed. Regional engagement should help determine where and how to meet those needs. Project-level engagement should focus on the decisions that remain open, including design, construction and mitigation. At each stage, the public needs a clearer account of what is settled, what remains open to influence, and how the public has shaped the outcome.

Strategic authorities' growing role offers an opportunity to test this approach. They can close the gap between national priorities and the communities that will host them. Giving regional leaders more influence over infrastructure planning while ensuring regional strategies carry weight in later decisions means national needs could be met in ways that cohere with local circumstances. Clearer project-level engagement and a more consistent approach to community benefits would also give communities a more meaningful stake in infrastructure.

This does not mean adding more requirements or extending planning processes. Our proposals reduce duplication, and by offering better engagement, should reduce the need to revisit decisions.

We are aware that better engagement will not eliminate all opposition. Disagreements and hard choices will always remain. But a system with transparent decisions in which communities can see their views making a difference is more likely to secure acceptance and support faster delivery.

A new system is already emerging through reforms to spatial planning and devolution. It must contain a coherent approach to engagement, backed by clear responsibilities and real opportunities for influence. Our recommendations offer a practical route to doing so.

Building the infrastructure we need and rebuilding public trust are not in competition. A nation that involves people meaningfully in decisions, delivers projects more effectively, and helps communities share in their benefits can do both. The expansion of English devolution and the new *Rewiring the State* agenda present an opportunity: an opportunity to create a system in which communities are not just affected by infrastructure, but actively involved in shaping it. That would be a better settlement for the public and nation alike.