

REGEN



Consultation Response

## Consultation on streamlining infrastructure planning

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Regen provides independent, evidence-led insight and advice in support of our mission to transform the UK's energy system for a net zero future. We focus on analysing the systemic challenges of decarbonising power, heat and transport. We know that a transformation of this scale will require engaging the whole of society in a just transition.

Regen is a membership organisation with over 200 members who share our mission, including clean energy developers, businesses, local authorities, community energy groups and research organisations across the energy sector. We manage the Electricity Storage Network (ESN) – the industry group and voice of the grid-scale electricity storage industry in GB.

### Summary and recommendations

Regen welcomes the streamlining of the NSIP process, particularly where it serves to accelerate the development of critical renewable energy projects in a way that still ensures communities are engaged in the process. As a membership organisation, Regen convenes a regular Planning Working Group. At the quarterly session in October, Regen gathered views on this consultation from the 25 member organisations in attendance, including renewable energy developers. We also circulated our consultation response to members by email to allow them to further comment on our response.

Our response reflects the views of our working group and wider members and aims to guide the Planning Inspectorate in producing guidance that is fit-for-purpose for industry. Our key recommendations are as follows:

- **Recommendation 1:** We welcome the removal of statutory pre-application consultation requirements and the flexibility this provides for NSIP applications. We suggest that guidance is provided in a way that enables this flexibility while still setting out clear principles and examples of good engagement.

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- **Recommendation 2:** Clarity is required regarding what developers should do if consulting between now and the time at which the proposed changes to consultation requirements come into effect. Clear transitional arrangements are critical to ensure timely progression of applications during this period.
- **Recommendation 3:** We support reforming the acceptance test but call for greater clarity on what “ready to proceed to examination” means in practice.
- **Recommendation 4:** We support Critical National Priority projects receiving a fast-track service if the process is significantly amended. To be effective, a fast-track process should be simpler, cheaper, and clearly positioned as a priority pathway for projects of Critical National Priority, ensuring that developers get real benefit from the process without the significant cost or extra administrative burden.
- **Recommendation 5:** We agree that pre-application consultation requirements under the Town and Country Planning Act for onshore wind developments should be removed.
- **Recommendation 6:** In order for the suggested changes to have the desired effect, there needs to be an additional focus on increasing resourcing across the planning system, including both decision makers and statutory consultees.

## Responses to questions

### Chapter 1: Pre-application

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**Question 1:** Please provide views about the potential risks and benefits of government producing more prescriptive or less prescriptive guidance about pre-application consultation and engagement in absence of statutory requirements. In particular, we are interested in views on how guidance on engagement can support an efficient, faster, proportionate and effective NSIP process or whether doing so risks undermining the potential time and cost savings.

Regen welcomes the streamlining of the planning process for NSIPs, particularly where it can accelerate the delivery of projects aligned with renewable energy and net zero targets.

We do not feel that guidance on engagement will undermine the potential time and cost savings of a reformed NSIP process. On the contrary, missing, vague or unclear guidance risks delaying projects by fostering community objections or creating confusion about expectations. If developers were to forgo consultation entirely, they could risk undermining public support for their projects and for renewable energy development more broadly.

Flexibility in NSIP consultation represents a positive opportunity, particularly if embraced in good faith by developers. Our members have welcomed the removal of check-box exercises, which are often time-consuming, costly, and produce limited useful information. Instead, consultation should be bespoke, meeting communities where they are, considering their understanding, engagement levels and preferred methods of communication to maximise comprehension and meaningful participation.

There will also be a need for clarity in communication of these changes, not just to industry but also through LPAs and locally with communities, so there isn't a surprise amongst communities when engagement looks different and this doesn't amplify distrust for major renewable development.

#### **Guidance approach**

While Regen supports the development of guidance that sets out principles and examples of good practice for early and meaningful engagement, we are concerned that overly prescriptive guidance could undermine the intended time and cost savings. Guidance that is too rigid risks creating another check-box exercise, rather than enabling flexible, locally tailored engagement.

Future guidance should:

- Be clear about what constitutes high-quality engagement while allowing flexibility for locally specific approaches
- Consider [principles developed by Regen](#) in consultation with developers
- Be concise and usable by all stakeholders, balancing clarity with flexibility.

We note the government's proposal for a voluntary Engagement Summary within application materials. This presents an opportunity for developers to:

- Outline their engagement strategy
- Explain the scope and rationale for the engagement undertaken
- Demonstrate how engagement informed the project design.

This would help examining authorities assess engagement fairly, provide reassurance that developers will not be penalised for omitting unnecessary engagement, and allow some standardisation of information across applications.

#### **Transitional arrangements**

Additional clarity is required on what developers should do if consulting between now and the time at which this change comes into effect. Clear transitional arrangements are critical to ensure timely progression of applications during this period.

**Summary:** We welcome the removal of statutory pre-application consultation requirements and the flexibility this provides for NSIP applications. We suggest that guidance is provided in a way that enables this flexibility, while still setting out clear principles for good engagement. Effective guidance should support early, ongoing, and locally tailored engagement that is meaningful and inclusive, without becoming a prescriptive check-box exercise.

**Question 3: Would it be useful for applicants to consider these factors while preparing their applications and in particular in relation to any non-statutory engagement and consultation (at paragraph 19)? What changes or additions to these draft factors would you welcome? Please provide your views.**

Yes, Regen supports the proposal that applicants should consider the factors set out in the guidance, namely prioritising front-loading, ensuring engagement is proportionate, open and transparent and timely. These principles provide a clear framework to help developers plan effective engagement without overcomplicating the process. However, these factors could be supplemented by sharing some examples of best practice, which highlight other key elements of good engagement.

We do not believe that additional factors are necessary; guidance should remain simple, concise, and usable to avoid creating another prescriptive or check-box exercise.

Question 4: Do you agree guidance should set out at a high level the benefits of non-statutory engagement and consultation? Are there any benefits not listed which we should include?

It would be useful for guidance to set out the benefits of non-statutory engagement at a high level. However, Regen does not consider it necessary to include significant detail on these, as many developers in our working group have a good understanding of the benefits of non-statutory consultation. Guidance should prioritise being practical, concise and usable. Developers need guidance that outlines how to deliver effective, proportionate engagement.

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Question 6: Should guidance include advice to local authorities, statutory bodies and applicants on finding the right balance between engaging early and engaging with sufficient technical information without creating unnecessary delay? We would also welcome comments on whether and how guidance could encourage applicants, local authorities and statutory bodies to work together to most effectively manage resources in their engagement. Please provide your views.

Yes, Regen agrees that guidance should encourage applicants, local authorities (LAs), and statutory bodies (SBs) to work together to manage resources effectively in their engagement.

#### **Balancing early engagement with technical information**

Guidance should emphasise the importance of balancing early engagement with the provision of sufficient technical information. Engaging too early without key technical data may create confusion, while delaying engagement until full technical information is available risks missing opportunities for early issue resolution. Developers, LAs, and SBs should be encouraged to collaborate to determine the right timing and level of detail for engagement.

#### **Tracking and sharing engagement**

It is essential that engagement is well-tracked and information is shared efficiently. This will help examining authorities understand where LAs and SBs have already been involved and allow supplementary information to be referenced appropriately, reducing duplication and unnecessary delays.

#### **Resourcing challenges**

While collaboration should be encouraged, both local authorities and statutory consultees are facing severe capacity constraints. These pre-existing challenges risk limiting the ability of these organisations to provide timely, effective input and to collaborate across the process.

Regen's recent briefing note highlighted key challenges for LAs, including a lack of overall planners and a lack of specialist renewable energy knowledge in local planning teams. This is an issue that needs to be addressed through both increasing the overall number of local authority planners and through the introduction of specialist renewable energy planners working across local authorities.

Statutory consultees are also facing resourcing pressures, largely due to rising caseloads and understaffing. Hold-ups extend planning deadlines and create uncertainty for developers while also placing additional strain on local authority planners who depend on timely input.

**Summary:** Guidance should encourage applicants, local authorities, and statutory bodies to collaborate effectively to manage engagement resources while balancing early engagement with sufficient technical information. It should be practical, usable, and recognise existing resourcing constraints across local authorities and statutory consultees. There is also an urgent need to address resourcing challenges facing both planning authorities and statutory consultees.

**Question 7:** Is guidance needed to support applicants to identify which statutory bodies should be consulted based on the potential impacts of the proposed application? If so, what should that guidance include?

Yes, we support the introduction of clear but non-prescriptive guidance for this purpose.

**Question 8:** Would additional government guidance on engagement with statutory bodies regarding environmental requirements be of value, in addition to the advice and guidance provided directly by those organisations? How can guidance support constructive engagement by statutory bodies? Please provide details on what would be most useful in government guidance relative to what is provided to other relevant organisations.

Regen considers that additional government guidance on engagement with statutory bodies could be valuable. Guidance could support constructive engagement by reassuring developers

that they don't need to produce an overly technical, lengthy preliminary environmental information report and providing examples of what a more iterative, flexible approach could look like, including examples of when it might be appropriate not to engage with a certain body or about a certain issue. Guidance should emphasise the benefits of a different approach, including saving time in the process.

It will also be important that feedback from statutory bodies is useful and actionable for developers. Guidance should promote early engagement and emphasise the benefits of changing project design to reflect advice for improving the chances of a successful application.

Simplifying reporting requirements could free up statutory body resources, enabling them to provide more timely advice and support examination processes within the required timeframes. However, adopting a more iterative approach may increase the importance of continuity of engagement with specific staff members, which could present additional challenges for both developers and statutory bodies.

### **Question 9: Is guidance needed to support proportionate, effective and constructive engagement from both the applicant and local authorities? If yes, what should such guidance cover?**

Yes, guidance could be useful, but it should remain high-level, practical, and not overly detailed or prescriptive. Guidance should:

- Outline where engagement from local authorities can add value without prescribing the exact nature or level of their involvement.
- Recognise that LAs can act as convenors between developers and communities, but engagement should remain light-touch and focused on areas where both parties benefit, given capacity constraints.
- As stated in the consultation document, any guidance should clarify that advice from LAs should not be interpreted as project endorsement. This encourages councils to provide constructive advice even where they have concerns, for example, about cumulative impacts.

### **Question 12: Is guidance needed to encourage applicant engagement with communities in a proportionate, effective and meaningful way? If so, what should it say? We would also welcome thoughts on how guidance can provide clarity and support engagement by communities.**

Yes, additional guidance would be valuable to encourage applicants to engage with communities in a way that is proportionate, effective, and meaningful. Guidance should build on the principles set out in [Regen's Best Practice Guide for Community Engagement](#) (co-developed with industry), particularly around:

- Engaging early: early engagement allows developers to understand the local context. This can inform project design, help identify potential risks, and anticipate community concerns ahead of examination.
- Engaging openly: transparency throughout the engagement process fosters trust and ensures communities understand the purpose and scope of consultation.
- Being inclusive: engaging widely, including harder-to-reach groups and underrepresented stakeholders, ensures diverse perspectives are captured and helps address wider community inequalities.

Guidance should be concise and practical, ensuring that it is of use to developers.

To support engagement with communities, guidance could:

- Provide practical examples of best practice, emphasising interactive events and forums rather than sharing lengthy draft documents.
- Offer advice on identifying the wider community, including harder-to-reach groups,
- Provide simple, actionable principles rather than prescriptive requirements, allowing flexibility for locally tailored engagement strategies.

Summary: Guidance should promote early, inclusive, and locally tailored engagement that captures diverse community perspectives, including harder-to-reach groups. It should provide practical, flexible principles and examples of best practice, enabling applicants to design projects that are responsive, well-informed and supported by the community, while ensuring the consultation process remains efficient, proportionate, and meaningful.

**Question 16:** If guidance were to highlight the option to publish an engagement summary report, what might the potential advantages and disadvantages of this be? We would also welcome views on submitting this report alongside an application, especially what advantages and disadvantages there may be for a more effective examination if guidance encouraged or regulations required its submission.

Guidance that highlights the option to voluntarily publish an Engagement Summary Report could provide a practical and efficient way to capture and assess applicants' engagement

strategies. However, if overly detailed or lengthy, the report could become a bureaucratic exercise, adding time and effort without proportionate benefit.

Therefore, we suggest that the report should be concise and focused on strategy and outcomes rather than exhaustive detail. It should include how engagement shaped the development and whether a broad, diverse range of stakeholders was consulted. Voluntary publication is preferable, encouraging transparency and usability while maintaining flexibility in engagement approaches.

**Question 20: Do you agree with the proposal to move to a ‘digital first’ approach by only requiring information to be made available for inspection online? Please explain why. The government would welcome information and data about any potential impacts, including equalities impacts, of this change.**

Regen supports the move to a digital-first approach, recognising that it can make information more accessible, efficient to share, and easier to navigate for most stakeholders. Digital access can improve transparency, reduce administrative burden, and allow materials to be updated and distributed quickly.

However, it is essential that this approach does not disadvantage those without reliable internet access or digital literacy. Many rural or lower-income communities, where infrastructure projects are often located, continue to face digital exclusion.

Therefore, while the default should be digital, guidance should also require that key information is available through alternative formats or channels where needed. This could include:

- Providing printed copies or summaries in local libraries, council offices, or community centres.
- Ensuring public notices clearly explain how non-digital access can be requested.
- Using existing community networks or local authorities to help share information with digitally excluded groups.

## Chapter 2: Acceptance

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**Question 22: What further advice is needed through guidance to ensure sufficient clarity about the test that will be applied by the Planning Inspectorate at the acceptance stage, and how**

applications can be prepared that will meet the acceptance test? What guidance if any should be provided to provide clarity about matters that are not tested at acceptance, in order to clearly establish the difference between past and future requirements?

Regen notes the proposed change to the acceptance test from assessing whether an application is “of a satisfactory standard” to whether it is “ready to proceed to examination.” However, the meaning and practical implications of this change are currently unclear.

Our members have expressed concern that, without clear guidance, this shift could create uncertainty for developers and risk inconsistent interpretation. Clear and transparent guidance is therefore essential to ensure applicants understand the expectations for acceptance. The guidance should:

- Define what “ready to proceed to examination” means in practice, including the standard of evidence, documentation, and engagement expected.
- Provide examples of what constitutes a complete and compliant application under the new test.
- Clarify what matters are not tested at acceptance, to prevent unnecessary effort on materials or issues that will instead be considered during the examination stage.
- Clearly distinguish between past and future requirements to ensure applicants preparing applications during the transition period are not disadvantaged.

**Summary:** Regen supports reforming the acceptance test but calls for clarity and practical guidance on what “ready to proceed to examination” means.

## Chapter 4: Reforming NSIP services

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Question 33: Is government correct in seeking to reframe the pre-application services provided by the Planning Inspectorate in this way? Are these the right objectives? Are there any additional changes to these services in light of the removal of statutory pre-application consultation that guidance should seek to clarify? We would particularly welcome reflections from developers on what factors they take into account in determining which service is most appropriate for their project.

Yes. Regen agrees that there is merit in reframing the pre-application services provided by the Planning Inspectorate, as current models are underutilised. The consultation notes that these services are intended to help developers understand guidance and seek advice on the quality of

their applications. However, in practice, uptake has been limited, suggesting that the existing offer does not provide sufficient value for developers.

Regen's view (informed by consultation with developers in our Planning Working Group) is that guidance should be sufficiently clear, consistent, and industry-relevant so that developers do not feel the need for bespoke or tailored Inspectorate services in order to navigate the process confidently. Guidance should be comprehensive and practical enough to give developers the certainty they need without reliance on additional advisory services.

This view reflects the feedback from Regen's Planning Working Group. Members reported very limited interest in using the existing pre-application services, including the enhanced and fast-track planning routes, as these did not appear to deliver a clear time or quality benefit relative to the additional administrative effort and cost required. Some members also reported confusion about whether using one service would automatically place them into another, such as the fast-track route, which they were not seeking to pursue.

### Question 35: What steps could government take to make the enhanced service more attractive to applicants of complex and high priority projects?

Developers consulted during our Planning Working Group indicate that they would prefer improvements to the overall clarity, consistency, and timeliness of the standard process rather than the introduction of additional service tiers.

Rather than focusing on a separate enhanced service, government efforts would be better directed toward addressing systemic challenges, particularly resourcing and capacity within the planning system and within statutory consultees. Ensuring adequate staffing, expertise, and process efficiency would deliver more meaningful benefits for all applicants and provide a more predictable and effective system overall.

### Question 36: Should guidance be more directive in setting out that, where applicants are advised that a project has been assessed by the Planning Inspectorate as being in need of a higher level of service (for reasons including project complexity and local circumstances), applicants are expected to adopt that level of service?

Regen's response has been informed by views gathered during our Planning Working Group, including project developers. Developers do not want to be required to adopt a more costly, higher level of service, particularly when the added value is unclear. The consultation suggests

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that enhanced services are designed to make projects eligible for the fast-track process; however, developers are reluctant to be forced onto the fast-track route in its current form, as they do not perceive it to offer additional benefits compared to the standard process. We thus recommend that there needs to be an overall reform of the fast-track service.

**Question 37: Should guidance also specify that recommendations made by the Planning Inspectorate on the allocation of their pre-application services ought to be informed by considerations about whether the project or project type has been identified by government as a priority? If so, would this have any unintended consequences? Would it be important for government to be clear and transparent on what its priority projects are?**

It is important for the government to be transparent about which projects are designated as priority projects; it would seem logical for this to align with the Critical National Priority designations. However, Regen members emphasise that unless the fast-track services is reformed, developers should retain the choice of whether to follow any particular pathway or service.

**Question 42: How else can government support local authorities in their role engaging with NSIP applications, as they adapt their role to take account of reforms through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill?**

Regen believes that the most effective way the government can support local authorities in adapting to the new NSIP framework is through targeted resourcing and capacity-building for planning teams. Many local planning authorities are already facing significant staffing shortages and skills gaps, particularly in specialist areas such as energy. Without addressing these structural capacity challenges, reforms to the NSIP process risk being undermined by delays and inconsistent local engagement.

Regen's [2025 briefing note](#) on local planning capacity, informed by insights from our Net Zero Living programme, identified several key steps that could strengthen local authority capability, including creating regional pools of specialist renewable energy planners to provide expertise and consistency across multiple authorities and ensuring that any new specialist staff or resources are additional, not drawn from already overstretched local planning teams.

The government could also play a role in facilitating better information sharing and coordination between local authorities, statutory consultees and developers. Early and structured

engagement between these parties can help identify and mitigate issues before submission, leading to smoother and faster examinations.

**Question 43: Do you agree that there remains merit for applicants in a fast-track process, based on shortened examinations delivered through primary legislation and with the process set out in guidance, that is designed to deliver a faster process for certain projects? If yes, give reasons why it is not being used currently; if not, please give reasons.**

We agree that there remains merit in a form of fast-track process for renewable energy developments, which are a Critical National Priority. Such a process, delivered through primary legislation and set out in clear guidance, could help accelerate the deployment of projects that are essential for achieving net-zero targets and enhancing energy security.

However, under the current system, the fast-track process is not being widely used. This is primarily because the existing framework is not considered to be fit for purpose: it is costly and administratively burdensome, meaning that the benefits of fast-tracking are often outweighed by the effort required to navigate the process. Developers are not sufficiently incentivised to pursue it. Our response is informed by views gathered during our Planning Working Group, which includes renewable energy developers and other stakeholders.

To be effective, a fast-track process should be simpler, cheaper, and clearly positioned as a priority pathway for projects of Critical National Priority, ensuring that developers get real benefit from the process without the significant cost.

**Question 44: The current fast-track guidance is designed to deliver upfront certainty for making decisions within 12 months of applications being accepted. Do you consider it fit for purpose? If not, please give reasons.**

No, we do not consider the current fast-track guidance and process fit for purpose. Members of our planning working group have observed that it is often more effective to address issues on a case-by-case basis and resolve them before the examination stage. This approach can prevent unnecessary delays and reduce the additional costs and complexities associated with the fast-track process.

**Question 45:** How do you think the existing fast-track process could be amended to support delivery of government's priorities, and be more widely applied to applicants? We are also interested in views on how government should determine and communicate which projects it considers to be a priority for taking through the pre-application, examination and decision process.

Developers have emphasised during our Planning Working Group that they are unlikely to use the existing fast-track route unless it is reformed, as the current process involves additional documentation and costs that are often not justified. To support the delivery of government priorities, we suggest a reformed fast-track process that genuinely prioritises projects of a Critical National Priority without imposing the additional administrative burden and costs that currently deter applicants.

The government should clearly determine and communicate which projects qualify as priorities, ensuring that the fast-track process is applied consistently and transparently. This would help incentivise developers to use the route, streamline pre-application, examination, and decision stages, and ensure that projects essential to the country's net-zero objectives are delivered efficiently.

**Question 46:** In what ways can government and its agencies best support applicants and relevant stakeholders to achieve robust, and faster decision timeframes during the pre-application, examination and decision process? Please indicate your views on the following potential changes, covered in this section. Please suggest practical measures, tools, or desired policy changes, and give reasons to support these:

As stated in the consultation, the inspectorate has already seen a lowering of timescales in light of emphasising front-loading of information gathering and consultation. This has happened without uptake of the fast-track process.

**(a) Adapting the existing process so that it supports those projects which are considered by government to be a priority for fast-tracking.**

As suggested in our response to question 45, we would support a reformed fast-track process that prioritises projects categorised as Critical National Priority, without imposing significant additional costs on developers. These projects should be given priority by the inspectorate,

reflecting their national importance in contributing to meeting our net zero targets, to ensure timely delivery.

**(b) Developing an approach based on a more proactive role for government and its agencies facilitating fast-track projects through the pre-application, examination and decision process.**

We support stronger coordination by the government and its agencies, as outlined in the consultation, bringing key bodies together to collectively determine appropriate timelines for fast-track projects and providing the necessary resources to support this process. However, statutory bodies face significant capacity challenges. Without addressing chronic under-resourcing, faster delivery of fast-track projects is unlikely to be achieved and may simply shift delays to other applications. Adequate resourcing of statutory bodies is essential for this approach to be effective.

**(c) Support priority projects to be fast-tracked, by reducing / removing applicant choice from the decision about whether to apply a fast-track process.**

Regen's members expressed concern during our Planning Working Group about removing applicant choice under the current system. Developers do not wish to be forced onto the existing fast-track process because it currently carries additional costs, is perceived to add little value, and is relatively untested. Any reforms to make fast-track mandatory should only follow substantive improvements to make the process simpler, cheaper, and genuinely beneficial.

**(d) Introduce greater flexibility by adapting the current guidance to make it clear that the priority level of the project will form part of an overall assessment about the eligibility of the project for the fast-track process.**

We support greater priority being given to projects of a Critical National Priority if this were delivered under a reformed fast-track system. If this change were to happen, then updated guidance to ensure clarity would be valuable.

## Chapter 5: Mandatory pre-application requirements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

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Question 48: Do you agree that pre-application consultation requirements under the Town and Country Planning Act for onshore wind developments should be removed? Please give reasons.

Yes. Regen supports the decision to remove pre-application consultation requirements for onshore wind developments with more than 2 turbines or where the hub height exceeds 15 metres. This requirement is outdated since the end of the de facto ban on onshore wind and should be brought in line with requirements for other energy infrastructure in England. This would ensure that onshore wind projects being decided at the local level do not face more prescriptive requirements than large projects of National Significance, making the pre-application assessment more proportional.