



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
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**Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local
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21 June 2021

Dear NIPA members,

I am writing to you today ahead of your annual conference starting on 7 July at which I am delighted to be speaking.

The delivery of high-quality national infrastructure across the United Kingdom is a key priority for this Government. As we emerge from the pandemic and prepare to host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November, the role of national infrastructure in tackling the most pressing issues of our time is more important than ever.

The Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) regime was established in 2008 and has now seen 100 important energy, transport, water, wastewater and waste developments determined with a 95% approval rate. It has a strong record for offering high quality consents, robust to legal challenge and with certainty of timescales for investors.

The recovery, and the Government's commitment to building back better and to net zero require it to rise to new challenges over the coming years – playing its part in our ambition to deliver faster, better, and greener. In the National Infrastructure Strategy, the Government set out its commitment to further developing and improving the regime. We want to work directly with industry, local authorities and communities, statutory consultees, and other users of the regime in doing so, and I look forward to launching our operational review at your conference. This letter is an invitation to you and all who are involved in, or affected by NSIPs to help us shape that reform.

Faster Better Greener

The NSIP regime was founded on principles of clear timescales, a national need case embedded in National Policy Statements, early meaningful engagement to avoid any shocks or surprises during examination, and the ability to secure a range of powers in Development Consent Orders to enable consented projects to be delivered.

Practice has evolved quickly and the NSIP process has become recognised for the way in which it is able to deliver timely consents in the national interest, as the growth of Offshore Wind has powerfully demonstrated. However, the context in which the regime was established is changing constantly. New and novel types of projects are using the process, some communities are experiencing clusters of NSIPs, and each NSIP brings with it increasingly significant volume of information to interrogate. The overall recent pattern for NSIPs is one of longer timescales and greater complexity and looking ahead the regime will need to continue to navigate global challenges such as climate change and rapid technological change. It is important that the planning process responds to these challenges and is able to play its full role in driving our economic recovery, and progress towards Net Zero.

This Government believes that it is possible and necessary for the United Kingdom's global competitiveness to deliver infrastructure more quickly and we have set an ambition that by September 2023, some projects will be able to go through the NSIP process in up to half the time than at present. We believe this can be done whilst improving the quality and fairness of the process, and with better and greener outcomes.

Achieving this will require commitment, and change, from all of us. That is why we want your involvement. As experts in the process and infrastructure development more broadly, you know the challenges and opportunities faced in taking infrastructure projects from an idea to a reality.

Stepping up to the challenge

The Government is committed to working across its Departments, Agencies and with regulators and others to identify and tackle barriers to infrastructure delivery. We have set up a cross-Government National Infrastructure Planning Reform Board, chaired by myself and Lord Agnew, Minister of State at the Cabinet Office and Her Majesty's Treasury to drive the reform programme. This Board is already enabling Government to work more closely and effectively on cross-cutting challenges including the review of National Policy Statements, deployment of Offshore Wind, the introduction of Biodiversity Net Gain requirements for NSIPs, and the development of skills and capacity to support the NSIP process.

The NSIP regime must play a fundamental role in realising the step change in delivery of the infrastructure needed to meet the Government's net zero ambitions. This includes navigating the dynamics created by rapidly evolving technologies and changes to the sources of our energy supply. Communities should be at the heart of infrastructure considerations, and for national infrastructure projects that serve all our interests, community voices need to be understood from the outset. The NSIP process has led the way in pioneering good practice in early engagement, however there is further to go, and through digital innovation some exciting opportunities as well.

The next step for us is to work with you, and others interested in the reform programme, to ensure we all understand where the process works well, where there are systemic issues that cause difficulties for infrastructure projects, and what we can do to re-shape how the process works to achieve the aims set out in the National Infrastructure Strategy.

Our programme

The Annex to this letter sets out our roadmap to September 2023 and our three main strands:

- **Operational Review / Project Acceleration.** We are undertaking a full review of the end to end process and all its interactions. We are ambitious here and want to encourage innovation and rapid improvements, so we are looking to test ideas on active NSIPs under the banner of 'Project Acceleration'. We also want to identify and tackle underlying problems using a wide range of Government levers within and beyond the NSIP process itself. We will therefore be undertaking investigative work in collaboration with NSIP users to surface these issues. An inherent part of Project Acceleration will be monitoring and analysing the interventions we test, building our findings into the Operational Review which itself will benefit from ongoing evaluation.
- **National Policy Statements (NPS).** NPSs are a central feature in the NSIP process and the National Infrastructure Strategy sets out our commitment to coordinate relevant departments' reviews of their respective NPS. This is already under way and is a long-term commitment, and you will already be aware of the Energy Secretary's review of the suite of Energy NPSs with the aim of designating updated NPSs by the end of 2021.

- **EIA/SEA reform.** The *Planning for the Future* White Paper set out the Government's intention to reform environmental assessment to deliver a quicker and simpler framework for assessing environmental impacts and to secure better outcomes for the environment. The NSIP regime has the potential to benefit significantly from this commitment. We want to work with the sector to identify how an improved assessment framework can help deliver the best possible outcomes whilst supporting the development we need.

Finally, our roadmap includes **three key milestones for NSIP users:**

- **Autumn 2021** - we intend to provide a clear progress update on the reform programme and successes so far.
- **Spring 2022** – we intend to formally consult on proposed measures for the NSIP regime for introduction ahead of September 2023.
- **Autumn 2022** - we want users of the regime to be clear about how it is changing, and what is required of them, in good time to meet the ambition that schemes will benefit from improvements from September 2023.

My request to you

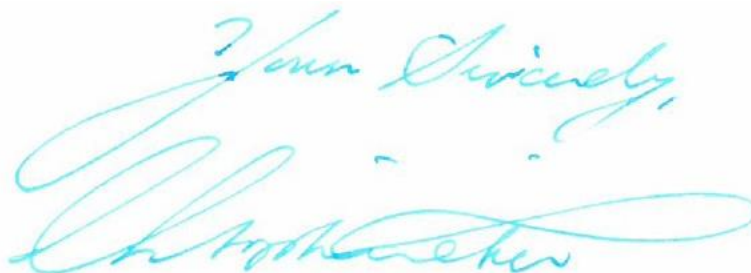
As experts in the regime individually and collectively, we know that your insights and experience – alongside those of other regime users, and the communities which development affects - are essential to making this reform programme a success.

In the Annex to this letter we set out a short analysis of timescales for the 30 most recently consented NSIPs, along with some questions to stimulate your thinking.

I would like to ask you to take the time to talk to each other and to Government about how we can work together to do infrastructure better. We would like you to step outside of your professional and direct interests and look at the system as a whole and think about how we can make it work as effectively as possible from end to end. The conference is one opportunity to do that. As Government, we are looking forward to listening and engaging with you, and all users of the regime. Specifically, we ask that you:

- highlight what it is that has worked for the regime;
- tell us what is missing and what are causing difficulties and blockages, providing as much evidence as you can;
- table ambitious proposed solutions to challenges, test them with other NSIP users and help us all evolve our thinking; and
- use this conference to put forward your experience and ideas and begin your engagement with the NSIP reform programme.

We look forward to hearing your insights and through your engagement we hope you will help unlock the potential of national infrastructure projects and the NSIP process to help achieve our National Infrastructure Strategy ambitions.



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Technical Annex

Purpose

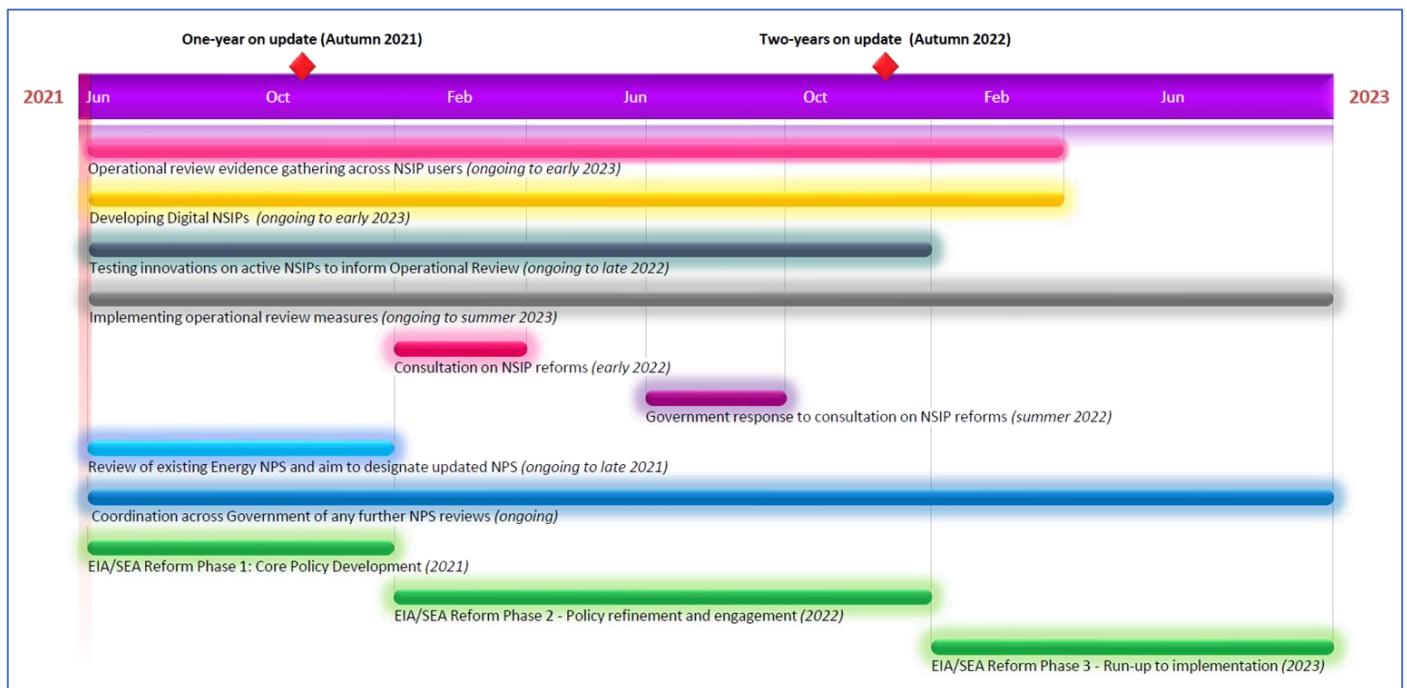
The National Infrastructure Planning Reform Programme will refresh how the NSIP regime operates, making it more effective and bringing government departments together to deliver more certainty in the process and better and faster outcomes.

This annex is intended to outline the key activities and milestones which will help drive these reforms, provide an overview of the current NSIP regime's performance, and stimulate critical thought about the current system ahead of the NIPA conference.

Whilst the NIPA conference presents an important opportunity to gather insights from industry and practitioners, it forms one part of a much wider operational review phase, through which we will seek to engage with all users of the NSIP regime, including local authorities, statutory consultees, and communities affected by development.

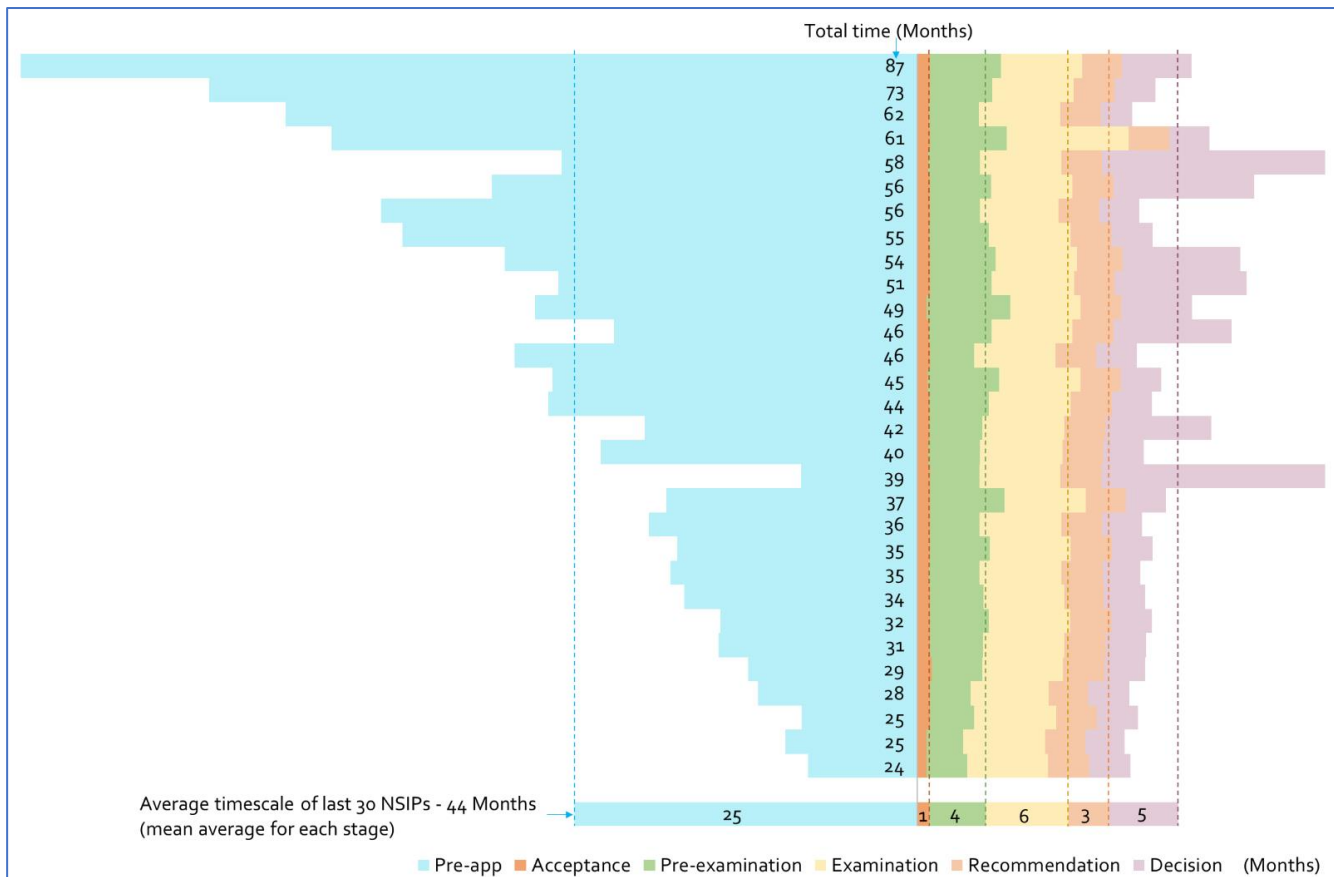
Road Map to reform

The key milestones and activities to realise the ambition of these reforms over the coming years are provided in the figure below.



Performance of NSIPs

The reforms to the NSIP regime must be formulated against a robust understanding of how the regime currently functions, and what existing issues the reforms might need to address. It is therefore important to develop a clear picture of the recent performance of the NSIP regime.



Source: Based on best available data sourced from the Planning Inspectorate website
 N.B: For the purposes of the above graphic, the starting point for the pre-application stage is taken as the point at which Planning Inspectorate first becomes aware of the intention of a promoter to submit an application for development consent.

Accordingly, the Government is building an in-depth understanding of the factors that affect NSIP timescales and quality, especially any systemic issues influencing NSIPs. To help illuminate some potential areas of focus for the reform programme, we have undertaken some analysis of the time taken for the last 30 NSIP applications to pass through the pre-application, examination, and decision stages, as shown on the above graphic.

There is substantial variation in the time taken for the 30 most recently determined NSIPs to pass through the regime, including wide variation in the time projects spend in the pre-application phase. The timescales for handling applications from submission through to examination is relatively consistent but in some instances decision timescales have been extended by the relevant Secretary of State.

Gathering insights

The analysis above, and topics below are intended to stimulate critical thought about the current system ahead of the NIPA conference and help delegates come ready to share their insights. NIPA is conducting a more in-depth survey of NSIP regime users ahead of the conference, and reflection on the below issues may help inform survey responses. Insights against the below topics and the responses to the NIPA survey will make a substantial contribution to the evidence that will shape the reforms.

The Government is keen to hear from all those who engage with the NSIP regime on what they see as the main issues affecting each principal stage of the process, and what potential solutions might be deployed to remedy these. To stimulate such critical thinking, we would ask you to consider the following three topics and bring your ideas to the Conference:

- 1. What Government, its Arms-Length Bodies and other statutory bodies could do to accelerate the speed at which NSIP applications can be prepared and more generally to enhance the quality of submissions.**
- 2. Following submission, whether there are any aspects of the examination and decision process which might be enhanced, and how might these be improved.**
- 3. Where a development consent order has been made, what impediments there are to physically implementing a project which could be removed.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to use of digital tools across society, including in the planning system. Ensuring a fully digital and data enabled wider planning system is also at the heart of the *Planning for the Future* white paper and equally presents substantial potential to improve the NSIP regime. Work is underway to explore digital EIA measures for NSIPs and we are investing in a new digital process for the Planning Inspectorate, but digital tools may present wider reaching opportunities for improvement. We would therefore invite you to consider:

- 4. How digitalisation might support the wider improvements to the regime, for example are there any specific aspects that you feel could benefit from digital enhancements.**

The operation of the NSIP regime brings together a wider range of Government departments and agencies. There may be potential to make improvements to the system through enhanced co-ordination across Government. Accordingly, we would invite you to consider:

- 5. What issues are affecting current NSIPs that you are working on that would benefit from enhanced cross-government co-ordination including Government Departments and Arms-Length Bodies.**
- 6. Whether the NSIP regime successfully interacts with other consenting and regulatory processes and the wider context within which infrastructure projects operate.**

The successful operation of the NSIP regime also depends in part on ensuring Government and its agencies, local planning authorities, industry and other NSIP users have sufficient capacity and capability to properly engage in the process. We would therefore invite you to consider:

- 7. Areas where limits in the capacity or capability of NSIP applicants, interested parties and other participants are resulting in either delays or adversely affecting outcomes.**

We would invite delegates to consider the above questions and come to NIPA's annual conference ready to share their views on the seven topics above, and any others they would like to raise.

If you would be interested in being kept up to date with reforms to the NSIP regime, please sign up to our mailing list InfrastructurePlanning@communities.gov.uk.

Further details of NIPA's annual conference can be found on their [website](#).