

Planning – Infrastructure Division MHCLG
Third Floor SE, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF
InfrastructurePlanning@communities.gov.uk

Enquiries to: Phil Watson Strategic Energy

Projects Manager

Email: phil.watson@suffolk.gov.uk

Date: 27/11/2025

Consultation on streamlining infrastructure planning

Suffolk County Council has a long and strong record of engagement with projects consented under the Planning Act 2008, beginning with one of the earliest consents, the Ipswich Rail Chord, in 2011. Subsequently, the Council has been a statutory consultee for nuclear and offshore wind projects and is currently engaging with multiple solar, and electricity transmission projects, both on and offshore.

The principal issues of concern for Suffolk County Council in responding to this consultation are as follows:

• The examination of a Development Consent Order (DCO) proposal is an opportunity for the Examining Authority, consultees, and the public, to examine the submitted proposals for a scheme. It is not an opportunity for consultees, or the public to engage effectively with the developing proposals for the scheme, or for the applicant to shape the proposals in response to consultees or the public. Evidence presented to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill Committee, and elsewhere, has sought to present examination of the DCO as an effective opportunity for the public to engage with and shape the scheme, in the absence of a statutory duty to consult at the pre-application stage.

The Council considers that this is a false equivalence, indeed, the expectation of the Planning Act 2008 is that only residual matters, those that have not been capable of resolution between the parties prior to submission of the Development Consent Order, should be dealt with at examination.



That any future guidance, even if it is robust and effective, is not adequately
underpinned by Clause 5(7) of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PAIB),
specifically, "Applicants must <u>have regard</u> to any guidance issued by the
Secretary of State to assist them in complying with section 48"

The Council considers that this wording is not robust or appropriate, and that "have regard" should be substituted with "act under". Such wording is appropriate and is precedented, in that the first appearance of "statutory guidance" was in s7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970, which instructed Local Authorities to "act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State."

The Council considers, given that effective, robust, and proportionate, preapplication engagement with consultees and the public is fundamental to the successful operation of the Planning Act 2008, such wording is entirely appropriate, particularly in the absence of a statutory requirement to consult, as proposed by the Government in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

- It will not be possible for the Government to produce effective guidance on pre-application consultation and engagement, without defining the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes of pre-application consultation and engagement, for example:
 - Effective pre-application engagement with statutory consultees facilitates efficient co- design of the project with the relevant professional stakeholders.
 - Effective pre-application engagement with the public, and their elected representatives, at all levels, will both, engender better trust and confidence between the parties, and elicit important information regarding the locality as well as environmental and social issues, which cannot be provided by professional stakeholders.
- The Council considers that the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes of pre-application consultation have not, to date, been robustly defined in guidance; without this it will not be possible to define what is successful engagement in terms of process, and outcomes, therefore, proportionality can also not be defined. (Question 12)
- Acceptance should be a key milestone at which to ensure DCO applications
 are robust, and previous consultations have repeatedly suggested a more
 robust test of acceptance to support this. Indeed, as originally proposed in the



PAIB an application should be "suitable to proceed", with the consequent power for the Inspectorate to request additional information as required. This was a significant improvement on the "Satisfactory Standard" test, which allowed no option for the Inspectorate to request additional information.

However, the Council understands that a government amendment, at the Report Stage in the Lords, removes this provision. This opportunity to ensure better quality DCO applications will, therefore, be lost. (Question 22)

Suffolk County Council maintains its position that the removal of statutory preapplication consultation, as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, is
not robust. However, the Council recognises that it would be inconsistent to
retain such measures for onshore wind developments consented under the
Town and Country Planning Act. To maintain consistency, however, onshore
wind development under the Town and Country Planning Act should be
obliged to operate under the terms of clause 5(7) of the Planning and
Infrastructure Bill in relation to guidance produced by the Secretary of State.
(Question 48)

Detailed responses to the consultation questions are appended to this letter.

Yours faithfully,



Richard Rout

Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform, the Environment and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects



Appendix

Pre-Application

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.

Failure to produce guidance, or failure to produce effective guidance, which sets out clearly the objectives purposes and desired outcomes of pre-application engagement, will inevitably lead to further poor-quality engagement, which in turn will place much greater burdens on the examination process. This will inevitably lead to more matters being unresolved, and unnecessary compromises having to be dealt with by the relevant Secretary of State, prior to any decision being made.

The examination process under the Planning Act 2008 is designed to address residual issues, which the applicant and consultees have not been able to resolve prior to submission of the application. Effective and robust pre-application engagement with both professional consultees and the public can and should resolve most issues.

However, it will not be possible for the Government to produce effective guidance on preapplication consultation an engagement, without defining the purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes of pre-application consultation and engagement.

Effective pre-application engagement with statutory consultees facilitates efficient co-design of the project with the relevant technical and community stakeholders.

Effective pre-application engagement with the public, and their elected representatives, at all levels, will not only engender greater trust and confidence between the parties, but has the potential to elicit important information regarding the locality, as well as environmental and social issues, that cannot be provided by technical stakeholders.

The purpose, objectives, and desired outcomes of pre-application consultation have not, to date, been robustly defined in guidance, so it has not been possible to define what is successful engagement in terms of process, and outcomes, therefore, proportionality can also not be defined.

Pre-application engagement has, in the absence of clear objectives and outcomes, frequently become an exercise in quantity, not quality, and a consequent caution, and



repetition on the part of applicants and their advisors, leading to excessive and poor-quality engagement on many projects.

This problem has then been compounded by the fact that many, although not all, project promoters, are unwilling, or unable, to explain to the public, and politicians, what the purpose of the consultation is. In most cases the consultation is not about, "should this project take place" (Type 1 consultation), rather it is about, "how should this project be implemented" and "what will it look like and deliver for the host community" (type 2 consultation).

Project promoters (and the Secretary of State when preparing guidance) need to be clear and honest about the type of consultation is taking place, failure to do so will inevitably lead to a breakdown of trust between the parties.

Question 2: Should guidance note that collaboration outside of the NSIP process can help to address wider challenges that could otherwise impact development proposals? If so, what should it say?

Assuming this question defines outside the NSIP process as that which takes place prior to statutory consultation under the current regime, or prior to submission of the DCO under the proposed future regime, the guidance should be clear *that effective dialogue and collaboration outside the process is the foundation for the effective operation of the Planning Act 2008*. Formal processes should only focus on the minimum number of important residual matters.

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 16)? What changes or additions to these draft factors would you welcome?

In addition to the factors set out at para 16 of the consultation, the applicant should also set out the basis on which the consultation is being undertaken (see answer to question 1 in relation to "consultation type").

Applicants should, as part of being open and transparent, support the public by a setting out the types of information they are seeking from them, for example in relation to the environment, transport, the impacts of construction, local sensitivity or issues of which they should be aware in shaping design and delivery of the proposals.

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?

Setting out the benefits of effective non-statutory engagement and consultation is useful but secondary, setting out the purposes, objectives, and desired outcomes of effective non-statutory engagement and consultation is essential.



Question 5: Should guidance encourage collaboration between applicants, stakeholders and statutory bodies? If so, what should it say? We particularly welcome views on how collaboration and prevent delays and the role for the sector to work collaboratively with stakeholders and how government can support this.

Guidance should not only encourage collaboration between applicants stakeholders and statutory bodies, but it should also go further and mandate effective engagement between the parties, setting out a framework in this guidance, or elsewhere, to provide appropriate financial support to allow local authorities and statutory bodies to recover their reasonably incurred costs such that these costs do not fall on local or national taxpayers.

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.

This question assumes that early engagement with local authorities and statutory bodies is focused on technical matters only. For Local Authorities, early engagement with project promoters to understand their objectives, constraints, and project timeline is essential, likewise it is critical for project promoters to understand the social and political environment into which their project is being promoted. This is particularly important where an area (such as Suffolk) is subject to multiple concurrent and successive infrastructure projects. In such a situation, the local authority officers will be well placed provide critical guidance to the applicant and facilitate the applicant's engagement with key local stakeholders.

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?

Given that applicants seeking consent under the Planning Act 2008 should be well resourced and have access to the relevant consultancy expertise, it should be reasonably obvious which statutory bodies should be consulted. However, including this in guidance would be appropriate for the avoidance of doubt.

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.



To avoid repetition and confusion any new guidance should point to existing guidance produced by the relevant organisations, rather than repeat guidance which can be found elsewhere.

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?

It is necessary to provide guidance to support local authorities that are not familiar with the NSIP regime, to ensure that they engage effectively with applicants. The guidance could cover a range of matters and examples but programming (and funding) resources, including alignment of technical and political processes, is critical to effective and constructive engagement. Likewise, it is essential that inexperienced applicants understand the value of early, effective, and continuing engagement with local authorities. Particularly as applicants will have an ongoing relationship with these authorities following consent of any scheme, as the local authorities will be responsible for discharging requirements. Therefore, it is in both the applicant's and the local authority's interest to build an effective relationship from the outset.

Question 10: Is guidance needed to encourage applicant engagement with landowners and affected persons in a proportionate, effective and meaningful way? If so, we would welcome views on how guidance should support engagement with landowners and affected persons.

Effective and meaningful engagement with landowners, and affected persons, is essential, and the applicant must be made aware of their duty of care to such individuals, who are often subject to a protracted period of uncertainty and anxiety because of the emergence of the applicant's proposals.

Question 11: Should guidance support applicants to identify Category 3 people to be notified once an application is accepted for examination? If so, what should it say?

It is essential that category three persons are all notified following acceptance of the application for examination.

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.

The guidance must set out the overarching purposes and desired outcomes of consultation with the public and consultee bodies. Broadly, the purpose of consultation is as follows:

1. To ensure technical issues are as far as possible resolved and understandings made on objectives for how detailed matters will come forward in later stages with statutory consultees prior to submission of the DCO.



- 2. To ensure that the public, and their elected representatives, have had an opportunity to meaningfully influence the project and its implementation.
- 3. That the examination is for the resolution of principal residual issues only.
- 4. That there is a mutual obligation on the applicant and consultees to engage effectively to minimise areas of disagreement, notwithstanding any in principle objection to the scheme that consultees, the public, or their political representatives, may have.

The quality and type of engagement that is proposed and implemented by the applicant, should have demonstrable regard for the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s spectrum of public participation.

https://iap2canada.ca/Resources/Documents/0702-Foundations-Spectrum-MWrev2%20(1).pdf

The expectation should be clear that communities in particular, and non-professional interested parties in general, should have reasonable and <u>effective opportunities to</u> genuinely participate and engage in the development and co-design of the project.

Likewise, statutory consultees should be satisfied that they will have adequate opportunity to engage with the project promoter on the required range of technical matters during the pre-application period.

To ensure that such an approach is effective:

The applicant will have an obligation to engage effectively with statutory consultees and local authorities, and parish and town councils and other bodies that may choose to engage with the applicant. The applicant should always seek to minimise any areas of disagreement.

This should be a reciprocal obligation, therefore, statutory consultees and local authorities, parish and town councils, and any other bodies (rather than individuals) that may choose to engage with the applicant, should, during pre-application, be obliged to engage without prejudice to any in principle or other objections that they may have to the scheme, and always seek to minimise the areas of disagreement.

However, if bodies are not receiving a receiving a fee or reimbursement of costs for their participation, they should only be required to use their reasonable endeavours to minimise the areas of disagreement.

<u>Suffolk County Council consider that it is critical to recognise that the Examination process is not a substitute for effective, timely, and proportionate, pre- application engagement.</u>



Question 13: Should guidance continue to encourage applicants to use tools such as Issues and Engagement logs, and Principal Areas of Disagreement Summary Statements? Please comment on the value and scope of these documents for informing likely examination issues in light of the removal of statutory requirements for consultation. We also welcome views on any potential advantages or disadvantages for enabling a more effective examination if regulations required some of these documents to be submitted alongside an application.

Principal areas of disagreement are an effective way to summarise the key issues emerging from statements of common ground and assist the examining authority in identifying effectively the scope of the examination.

Question 14: Are voluntary evidence plans an effective way of getting input on environmental issues early to inform environmental assessments and identify suitable mitigations? Please provide reasons.

This is a matter for SNCBs.

Question 15: Should guidance set out the circumstances in which use of voluntary evidence plans might be beneficial?

This is a matter for SNCBs.

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.

An engagement summary report would be particularly helpful for the Examining Authority, as it is likely to receive representations regarding the engagement of the applicant on general and specific matters Relating to the application. Therefore, an engagement summary report prepared by the applicant would be beneficial in ensuring clear understanding of any such representations.

Question 17: Do you agree that requiring the following information in notifications to the Planning Inspectorate, host local authorities, and the Marine Management Organisation would be beneficial in enabling them to prepare for examination? What other information or documents could be encouraged through guidance?

(a) Whether a proposed application is expected to be EIA development

Yes

(b) When notifying the Marine Management Organisation, whether a proposed application is expected to require a marine licence for any licensable activities



Yes

(c) Where the most up-to-date information is published and available to view

Yes

(d) Publishing the notification on the applicant's project website

Yes

(e) Other

n/a

Question 18: Should guidance indicate a point at which the applicant should issue the notification? If so, at what should it say?

The notification of projects should be proportionate to the scale and significance of the proposals.

Question 19: Do you agree that a specific format with contents requirements, would be beneficial to standardise this duty for both the applicant and the Planning Inspectorate when ensuring that this Duty has been met (please specify why)? We would also welcome views on what further guidance may support this clarity.

A standardised format would give clarity to inexperienced applicants regarding what is expected of them, it gives clarity for those receiving notification, and consistency of approach between projects, which is especially useful as those being notified as they are dealing with multiple projects.

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.

Whilst a digital first approach is appropriate for much of the application material, it must be recognised that this will need to accommodate the requirements all the Equality Act and that some material, such as visualisations produced to the appropriate standard, can only be used and viewed effectively when printed.(As set out in *Guidance on Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment* 3rd Edition)

A digital first approach will inevitably exclude those who are disadvantaged in terms of digital accessibility, this is likely to further compound the disadvantage of seldom heard groups, particularly in the absence of statutory pre-application consultation.

Question 21: What further guidance would support applicants to undertake effective publicity which enables transparency and public awareness?



To ensure effective public awareness and transparency, an effective and robust test of the adequacy of consultation is essential in order to provide the appropriate incentives for good behaviour on the part of the applicant.

Acceptance

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?

As originally proposed in the PAIB an application should be "suitable to proceed", with the consequent power for the inspectorate to request additional information as required. This was a significant improvement from "Satisfactory Standard" test, with no option for the Inspectorate to request additional information.

However, the Council understands that a government amendment at the Report Stage in the Lords removes this provision. Therefore, it is not clear that robust guidance will now be needed to meet the acceptance test, which would remain unchanged.

Question 23: How can applicants outline how they have had regard to section 51 advice from the Planning Inspectorate when they submit applications, and what should be encouraged through guidance?

As summary of the responses to s51 advice could be set out as part of the engagement summary report (see question 16).

Pre Examination & Examination

Question 24: What further steps should government consider to strengthen the role of the Initial Assessment of Principal Issues (IAPI), so that it supports early clarity for all stakeholders, procedural fairness, and a more focused and effective examination?

No comments.

Question 25: Do you agree that existing guidance provides enough information to aid local authorities in preparing meaningful local impact reports and should therefore be retained? If further information would be beneficial to be included within this guidance, what should it say?



Yes, the existing guidance is sufficient.

Question 26: Is existing guidance clear on the difference between a relevant representation, written representation and local impact report? What further information on the differences between a local impact report and relevant representation would be beneficial to assist local authorities?

Existing guidance may benefit from updating and clarification. Relevant Representations have become much more comprehensive, as required by regulation and are becoming less distinct from Local Impact Reports as a result.

Written Representations are now used more infrequently by Suffolk County Council. However, they are still very important for parties other than Local Authorities.

Question 27: How can guidance seek to reduce existing barriers that public authorities face in engaging with the process?

An effective framework for securing appropriate robust Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) which allow for full cost recovery such that the costs incurred by local authorities in relation to national infrastructure projects do not fall on local taxpayers is essential.

Likewise, PPAs are essential support the significant costs associated with the discharge of requirements, Local authorities may be discharging authority, or a consultee to the discharging authority, as in either case cost will be incurred.

Question 28: What should guidance say to ensure public authorities engage appropriately with examinations? We would welcome views on how guidance can outline the circumstances in which public authorities are relevant to the application.

Provision of effective robust Planning Performance Agreements would place contractual obligations on local authorities to engage effectively with pre-application discussions and the examination.

Question 29: Do you consider that regulations for compulsory acquisition as part of DCOs should, where possible, limit the duplication of procedures where land acquisition changes are required and to provide the Examining Authority with greater discretion to set reasonable timeframes to reflect the specific circumstances of each DCO and its associated land acquisition issue?

No comment.

Question 30: Are there any further changes that could be made to the infrastructure planning CA Regulations and supporting guidance to contribute to the streamlining of the DCO examination process by reducing repetition or timescales where changes to land acquisition are required post submission?

No comment.



Question 31: In addition to the changes highlighted in Chapter 3 of this consultation, what further changes to pre-examination and examination guidance would support efficient and effective examination of applications for development consent?

No comment.

Question 32: Are there further changes to secondary legislation – for example, the Infrastructure Planning (Examination Procedure Rules) 2010 – which you believe government should consider to support effective and efficient examinations?

No comment.

Reforming NSIP services

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.

No comment.

Question 34: What alternative models could government consider for pre-application support in order to enable better collective oversight and co-ordination of input across statutory bodies?

No comment.

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

No comment.

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?

No comment.

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?



No comment.

Question 38: Are there any changes that could be made to pre-application service offerings by public bodies?

No comment.

Question 39: Should the ability to cost recover be extended to additional or all statutory bodies that are prescribed in the Planning Act 2008 and Schedule 1 to the 2009 Regulations (as amended?)

Yes – however, as this would place an obligation on them to provide the level of service specified in a planning performance agreement or other contract, and it would oblige them to engage without prejudice, some of the bodies set out in schedule one, such as Town and Parish Councils might reasonably, therefore, choose not to do this in some instances.

Question 40: How should government develop key performance indicators for public bodies providing cost recoverable services for NSIP applications, and if so, what should those key performance indicators contain?

KPIs should specify the timely provision of advice and the effective engagement of funded organisations with the examination process. However, applicants would also need to meet reciprocal defined standards for effective engagement and project management, such as the timely provision of information, outcomes and reporting on actions.

Question 41: In what ways can government support local authorities as they implement cost recoverable services?

Provide a clear framework for the implementation of Planning performance Agreements that acknowledges the substantial cost incurred, the importance of Local Authority Advice and, therefore, shapes the understanding and expectations of the applicant in relation to the costs.

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?

Continue to engage effectively with Local Authorities who are dealing with major infrastructure projects and demonstrably recognise the value of the work they are doing in delivering new infrastructure.

Any emerging public narrative that effective and proportionate pre-application engagement with local authorities, or their involvement process of Discharge of Requirements, is a block on development should be avoided.

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.

This authority has no substantive experience of the fast-track scheme.

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 comment.

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.

No comment.

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 preapplication, 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:

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

No comment.

(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.

No comment.

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

No comment.

(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.

No comment.



Question 47: Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding the fast-track process or related policies?

No comment.

TCPA Mandatory Pre-application

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

Suffolk County Council maintains its position that the removal of statutory pre-application as set out in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is not robust. However, the Council recognises that it would be inconsistent to retain such measures for onshore wind developments consented under the Town and Country Planning Act.

To maintain consistency, however, onshore wind development under the Town and Country Planning Act should be obliged to operate under the terms of clause 5(7) of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill.