Adversarial to integrated:

How to make environmental consenting a team sport

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About the Institution of Environmental Sciences (IES):

The IES is a professional membership organisation unifying communities of scientists, policymakers, and academics to transform knowledge on environmental science and support the transition to a sustainable society.

Across the full range of environmental disciplines, the IES brings together and champions the voices of science, scientists, and the natural world. As a convening space for interdisciplinary expertise, the IES promotes transformational learning to support our members in their professions and as agents of change.

The IES offers a common home for all those involved in environmental work or action underpinned by science. We are devoted to championing the crucial role of environmental science in ensuring the well-being of humanity now and in the future.

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Executive Summary

Over the past 30 years, environmental science has been confronted with the grave importance of social systems and the influence they can have on the environment. In particular, processes such as Environmental Impact Assessment, marine licensing, and Nationally-Significant Infrastructure Projects can play a substantial role in shaping the human and natural worlds, so environmental consenting remains crucial.

Public opinion over recent years has made clear that people want a healthy environment, but they also need social and economic outcomes including housing, infrastructure, and renewable energy projects. Sustainable development shows that **mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits can be achieved** together, so environmental consenting needs to work in a way that produces multiple benefits at the same time.

In many of these processes, the potential for multiple benefits has been jeopardised by systems which have become **unnecessarily fragmented or adversarial**. Where social outcomes are perceived as working against environmental outcomes, it becomes harder to achieve either. Where developers, Consenting Authorities, and environmental experts do not work in tandem with one another, the best outcomes are rarely realised.

Best practice demonstrates that another option is available. Even without reforming the system itself, the way that participants take part in environmental consenting can make a real difference.

Reimagining **environmental consenting as a team sport** allows everyone to work together for mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits. Rather than a system built on false dichotomies, environmental consenting can support sustainable development where everyone wins together.

Achieving this aspiration in practice follows seven principles:

1. All involved parties **act as one team** working towards sustainable development.
2. The **public are the beneficiaries** of social and environmental outcomes.
3. **Disagreement is viewed as an asset** which can assure high standards.
4. Environmental consenting is **purpose-driven and proportional**.
5. Systems are **rational, coherent, flexible, and accessible**.
6. Decisions are **fair, robust, and informed** by evidence at an early stage.
7. Processes are **aligned with one another** using framework-level governance.

Throughout the report, those principles are supported by practical guidance on how to make those aspirations real through an approach which emphasises **trust, purpose, flexibility, and communication**. Recommendations are also outlined for policy makers seeking to reform consenting processes to embed these aspirations from the outset.

Over the next 30 years, urgent crises require the delivery of public demand for a healthier environment. By working together as a single team with a shared vision, that ambitious action can be realised in a way that maximises social, economic, and environmental benefits for the good of humanity and the natural world.

Introduction

The Institution of Environmental Sciences (IES) is a membership organisation representing over 6000 environmental scientists and standing up for the voice of science, scientists, and the natural world in policy. We promote and raise public awareness of environmental science by supporting professional scientists and academics.

As a professional body, the IES represents the voices of environmental professionals, sharing insights from the front lines of work with the environment. We are particularly well-placed to represent a transdisciplinary approach to those insights, drawing members working in air quality, land condition, water, impact assessment, nature, sustainability, and anywhere else where environmental work is underpinned by science.

As a result, the IES is uniquely positioned to examine interactions between complex natural and social systems from a scientific perspective. We are a leading voice in 'systems thinking' perspectives and transformative approaches to change. Our members work with a broad range of processes and procedures, both in the UK and internationally. That gives the IES a strong understanding of best practice across disciplines and shared challenges across those processes.

Consenting processes are a significant driver for environmental outcomes. Negative outcomes for the environment can be caused by land use change, while positive outcomes can be secured through embedded approaches to environmental improvement. At the same time, these processes are vital for achieving social and economic outcomes in the context of sustainable development and environmental justice.

While best practice has emerged to maximise benefits for society, the economy, and the environment, the processes themselves are not oriented towards achieving environmental and social objectives simultaneously. Over time, many of these processes have grown increasingly adversarial, with participants viewing their role in the process as to promote one set of outcomes at the expense of the other.

Guidance on technical aspects of consenting is increasingly available, but there have been limited efforts to establish principles or steps to mitigate the adversarial nature of the process. In the absence of structural policy changes, the promotion of best practice by those involved in environmental consenting is crucial, so the gap in guidance available to practitioners presents a challenge for informed and effective consenting.

This report takes a first step towards filling that gap and was developed with reference to the practice of environmental professionals, as well as a range of existing reports, articles, and publications from across the environmental sciences, government, and international organisations. This evidence was considered in discussion with a working group of expert members and through conversations with IES members.
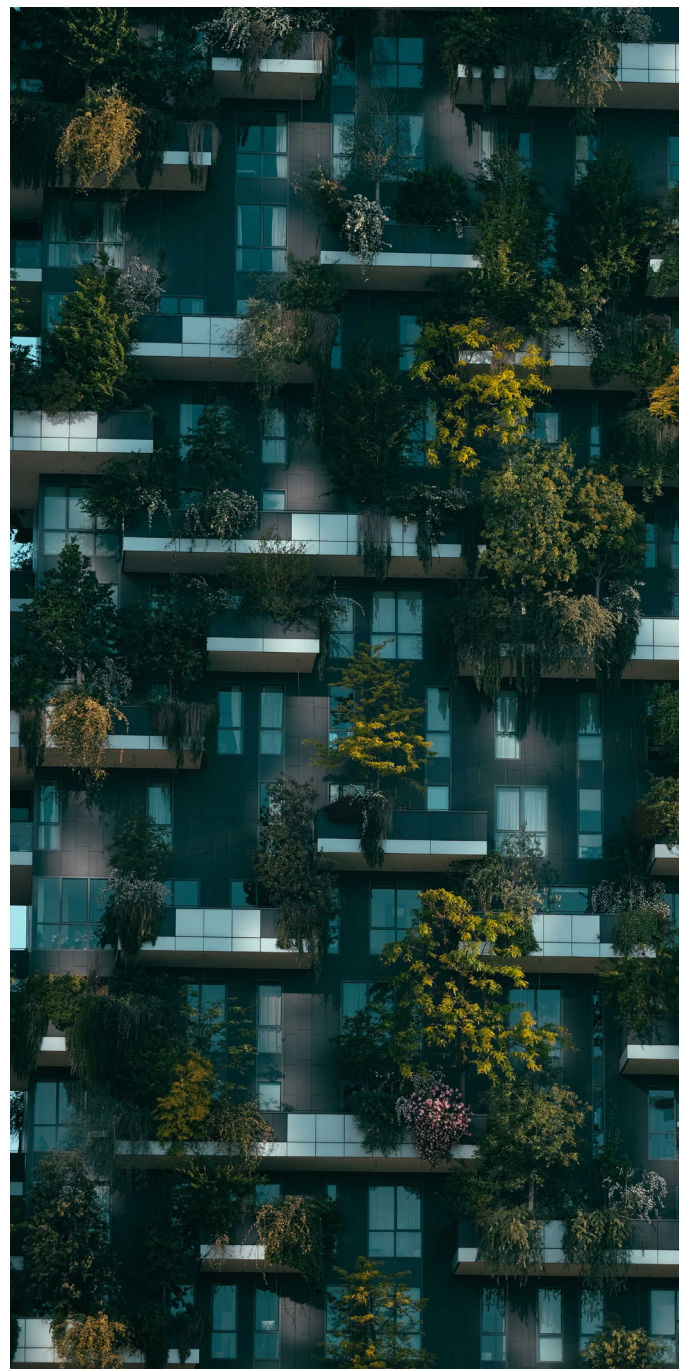
Purpose and scope

Recent reports and policy changes have underlined a series of challenges for consenting processes, particularly in England and across the UK. Experiences from professionals, local authorities and developers regularly highlight that environmental consenting is not working the way that it should, while media commentary makes clear that the public is becoming dissatisfied with the inability of processes to secure either social or environmental outcomes. Systems can be seen as simultaneously lengthy, unnecessarily bureaucratic, and ineffective.

Many of these challenges centre on the gradual reinforcement of a false dichotomy that social, economic, and environmental outcomes are contradictory and must compete with one another in a given project. In reality, the opposite is true: social, economic, and environmental outcomes are maximised when they are approached from an integrated perspective. The result is that consenting processes can drive participants to feel that they need to defend one set of objectives at the expense of others, making the process increasingly adversarial and ultimately becoming self-defeating.

In that context, the purpose of this report is to identify a more mutually-beneficial aspiration for environmental consenting across a broad range of processes, such as Environmental Impact Assessment, Nationally-Significant Infrastructure Projects, marine licensing, and planning. The recommendations apply across the context of a broad range of policies, including national planning frameworks like the National Planning Policy Framework or the Fourth Scottish National Planning Framework; Local Plans, and marine management plans.

Our aspiration is reinforced by a series of 'perspective shifts' to help those engaged in consenting processes to break down the adversarial nature of consenting. Ultimately, individual action will not be sufficient to completely alter these systems, so the guidance in this report cannot solve every challenge for consenting. With a view to longer-term improvements to environmental consenting, this report also sets out recommendations for how processes could be constructed in a more ideal system.

The guidance and recommendations in this report are relevant to everyone involved in environmental consenting, including planning authorities, developers, environmental professionals, and the public. In some instances, it will be most effective for one individual to bring others together to initiate an integrated approach, in which cases Chief Planning Officers may be best-positioned given the convening power of Statutory Authorities and government agencies in the planning system. In other circumstances, a more diffuse approach may be preferable.

This report has been designed to apply as broadly as possible, though it is limited by a predominantly English perspective. The guidance and recommendations have a significant degree of relevance across the UK and (to some extent) internationally, though sections later in the report identify specific notes for adapting the report's messages beyond England.

Context: What is sustainable development?

Box 1. What is sustainable development?

Sustainable development is *'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'*.

Whether or not we realise it, sustainable development is a key objective of environmental consenting as it is a crucial part of ensuring that processes deliver for society, the economy, and the environment.

Sustainable development naturally covers a broad variety of issues. Many interlinking factors decide whether or not a society is sustainable, so processes will often need to account for a range of objectives. Those objectives may be best represented through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and wellbeing
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequality
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
17. Partnership for the goals

Although not every project will directly interact with each goal, the issues underpinning the goals are linked and cannot be separated from one another. As the goals are indivisible in nature, sustainable development requires an understanding of the links and systems between them. They should also be approached in a holistic way that avoids unintended consequences and ensures that they are applied to everyone, leaving no one behind.

Our aspiration for consenting

Environmental consenting does not follow a single process, but many environmental consenting processes face similar challenges. The approach of professionals working within those processes has a substantial effect on what the system looks like in practice, so a better approach can address challenges even in the absence of direct interventions by policy makers.

Facilitating that change relies on a shared aspiration for how the process should work, as well as a mind-set which embeds that aspiration across projects and plans. These seven principles are designed to help those involved in environmental consenting develop that mind-set, working towards a shared aspiration for improving the processes themselves.

1. All involved parties should be **viewed as one team** working towards sustainable development, backed by a process and enforcement mechanisms which exist to prevent negative social and environmental outcomes.

2. The public should **be viewed as the beneficiaries** of the social and environmental outcomes of the project and a part of the team responsible for ensuring that people get the things they care about.

3. Disagreement should **be viewed as an asset** which can assure high standards, facilitate good design based on iterative feedback, or adapt a project to local context. Productive disagreements are based in evidence, drawing on well-made planning policies (such as Local Plans, Marine Plans, etc.) or principles of sustainable development and design.

4. Processes should **be purpose-driven,** taking a proportional approach to achieving multiple benefits for communities and the environment, where no consideration is seen as a 'tick box'.

5. Processes should be **rational, coherent, flexible, and accessible**, reflecting the limited resources and capacity of the parties involved. To serve the beneficiaries of the processes, the public should be able to understand them, without compromising on the quality of evidence underpinning them.

6. Processes should be **fair, robust, and informed** by design, assured by parties who work to share and consolidate data and who embrace competent expertise to give legitimacy to decisions.

7. Processes should be **aligned with one another** across spatial and temporal scales using framework-level governance, avoiding duplication and unnecessary complexity. By design, processes should have the potential to scale outcomes and objectives from local communities to the whole country.
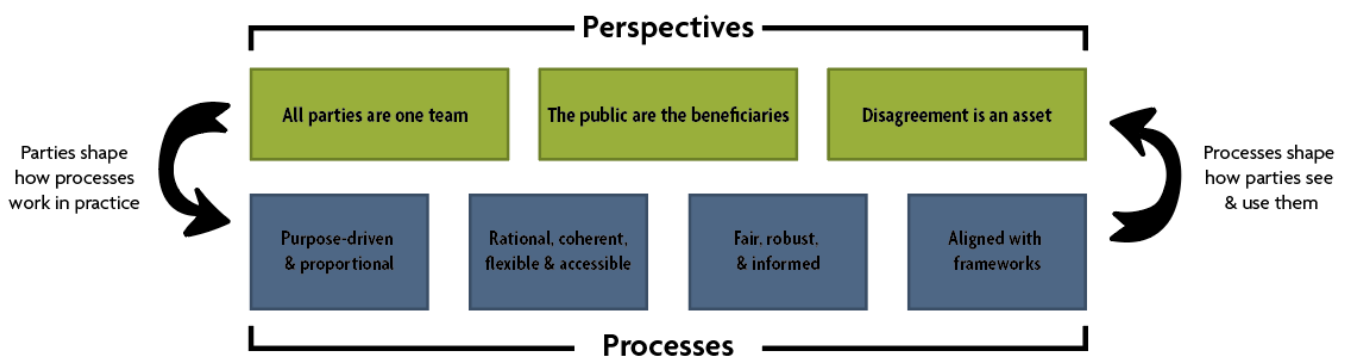
What are the challenges now for consenting?

Environmental consenting is complex by design, arising at the intersection of technical democratic procedures and technical environmental systems. Naturally, it gives rise to a large number of complicated challenges, some of which are unavoidable and some of which could be mitigated.

No approach is likely to create perfect outcomes and many steps towards improvement would require some degree of intervention through policy. However, there are still some significant steps which can be taken to improve the system in the absence of external intervention, so a realistic reflection on the extent of the challenges currently facing environmental consenting is an important step towards meaningful improvement.

Overall, environmental consenting faces challenges linked to (a) the overly adversarial system, (b) the emphasis of process at the expense of purpose, (c) limited public accountability and accessibility, and (d) a lack of coherence between processes.

Environmental consenting is structured around a false dichotomy between social and environmental outcomes, creating **inherently adversarial processes.** These are ultimately self-defeating, as the potential for social, economic, and environmental goals is not fully realised.

> Project design is highly-motivated by **fear of judicial review or challenge,** increasing conflict between parties and reducing the scope for innovative design. Presumptions in favour of 'doing things how they have always been done' stymie opportunities for mutual social and economic benefits that have arisen from new evidence or increased expertise.

> Environmental consenting is **seen as detached from people's values,** appearing irrelevant to their lives or unnecessarily bureaucratic for limited gain. Without fully appreciating the value of a healthy environment, some people are led to believe that they have no stakes in environmental consenting.

Environmental consenting can become dominated by **process at the expense of purpose**, leading to overly-bureaucratic approaches which take a long time without rational justification, often making it harder to achieve social or environmental outcomes.

Competent **expertise is not fully utilised**, becoming a tool to aggravate adversarial divides, at the expense of the ability to inform all parties, or it can be too heavily focused on meeting a single metric, target, or objective, at the expense of informing holistic design.

In some cases, processes may produce **unrealistic or contrived proposals**, encouraging the 'consideration' of alternatives which are not appropriate in context solely to justify the intended design option. As a result, better design options are overlooked in favour of well-established but inappropriate alternatives.
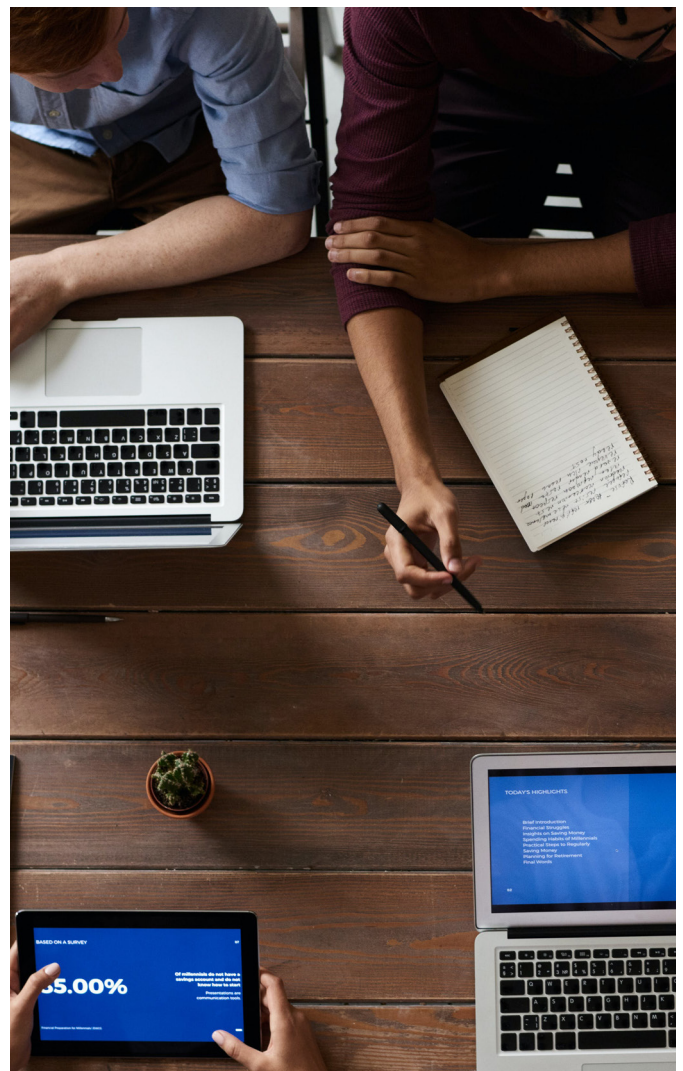
Box 2. Case study: How can technical language alienate the public?

In planning, factors which planning authorities can take into account are defined as 'material considerations'. In the UK, these considerations have not been universally defined by the legal system, leaving the definition broad and based on generalised approaches which may apply differently in context.

Two challenges emerge from this ambiguity. Firstly, the term itself has a 'common language' meaning as well as a technical one, which implies that anything outside defined material considerations does not matter, leading members of the public to feel disempowered or alienated from planning decisions. For example, a purely private concern is unlikely to be a material consideration, but telling a member of the public that a factor affecting their private property is "not a material consideration" could lead them to feel that planning does not serve their interests.

Secondly, the ambiguity of the term leads to ambiguity for the process. Leaving courts the capacity to determine that something is not a material consideration increases the threat of legal challenge, amplifying risk aversion and making the system more adversarial. Meanwhile, the weight of material considerations is left to authorities, so the technical language can also make it harder to predict outcomes, reducing transparency for the public.

Processes are often **inaccessible or lacking transparency,** leading to challenges for public consent and legitimacy. These challenges are exacerbated when the public lacks trust in the process or disagrees with the objectives it seeks to achieve.

> Processes and **decisions are poorly understood**, often because of their complexity or the technical language associated with them. The details of processes have been poorly communicated to the public and often have a degree of unnecessary complexity arising from their construction.

> Processes **lack public trust and support** where engagement has historically failed. This has been exacerbated by highly-publicised failures or shifts in policy direction which have de-legitimised the process and undermined trust in professionals and the planning system.

> Decisions can **lack effective accountability** where planning officers are not empowered to enforce decisions, lack access to technical expertise, or where the decision to reject a project ultimately only delays it due to the complexity of procedures.

Processes **lack coherence and alignment,** making it difficult to achieve social or environmental outcomes across multiple processes. Processes are difficult to scale up or down, particularly where technical expertise is limited, and environmental plans can fail where they are reliant on fragmented and uncoordinated approaches. This can also lead to unnecessary duplication or repetition.

> Environmental consenting produces a large amount of **data that is not properly utilised** for future projects due to a lack of consolidation. Concerns around commerciality inhibit data sharing, preventing post-implementation

reviews and the overall improvement of best practice, particularly on the effectiveness of alternative designs.

Many consenting authorities **lack the resources, capacity, and access to expertise** needed to coordinate processes effectively. Differing approaches to how expertise is integrated can lead to ambiguity and unnecessary duplication. Developers also have constrained resources, limiting design flexibility and innovation.

How can we begin to address these challenges?

Addressing the many complex and interconnected challenges for environmental consenting will not be simple. The purpose of this report is not to propose perfect solutions to every challenge. Instead, it proposes some first steps towards addressing the root causes of some of the most pressing challenges, helping to facilitate the aspiration for environmental consenting set out earlier in the report.

Promoting a less adversarial approach

The most important step towards better environmental consenting is to create a less adversarial approach, which can be achieved by reimagining the process as a team sport. At a fundamental level, social, economic, and environmental outcomes are linked: if people's basic social needs are not met, they may struggle to make environmentally-positive choices; if the environment is degraded, it will be harder for people to access the social benefits of nature.

For example, if housing developments are not sufficiently permitted to give people access to homes, the prices of accommodation will increase, limiting the money consumers have to make more sustainable choices. Likewise, if housing developments forego environmental considerations, benefits like natural flood risk management might be lost, increasing the risk and damage of flooding and causing negative social and economic outcomes for the people who live in those homes.

The truth is that all the parties involved in environmental consenting want the same thing: to pursue sustainable development that provides mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits. Put more simply, we want to give people what they need to thrive, without giving up the other things they care about.

Because those outcomes are linked, we either all win in the long term or we all lose. Whether or not we realise it, environmental consenting is a team sport.

Reimagining environmental consenting as a team sport

On a team, everyone has a role to play, so reimagining environmental consenting as a team sport can help to promote a less adversarial approach where other participants are viewed for the value they add to the team as a whole, rather than as adversaries who get in the way of one another's goals.

- **Developers are the shooters and scorers**: they get the job done, pushing forward and delivering projects by financing and developing them. Without the developers, there is no development, so everyone loses out on the potential benefits.

- **Environmental experts are the defenders**: they prevent bad outcomes which the rest of the team lacks the knowledge to watch out for and they minimise risks so that the team can focus on winning the game. Without the environmental experts, there is no way to safeguard against environmental and regulatory risks, so everyone loses out on social, economic, and environmental benefits if the project falls through or leads to unintended consequences.

- **Consenting Authorities are the coach**: they manage the process to ensure that everyone is playing their part in the right way, and because they aren't 'on the field' they can play the strategic role of balancing the 'offence' of development with the 'defence' of sustainability. Without the Consenting Authorities, the system can become unbalanced, undermining both the ability to develop and the ability to protect the environment.

- **The public are the team's supporters**: they are the reason the game is played and are the beneficiaries of playing it well. They may not be on the playing field but good teams involve the fans anyway because they shape what the team should be trying to achieve and they define the spirit of what 'good' looks like. Without the public, there is no way to decide what outcomes are beneficial, so development loses its purpose.

No part of the team can win on their own. Everyone should work together to plan for success because excluding part of the team forfeits their knowledge and increases the risk that the plan will not work in practice. Integrating environmental expertise at an earlier stage such as the design stage allows developments to drive ahead without the risk of unforeseen consequences or designs which are 'doomed to fail'. It also allows for plans to be updated and iterated in response to feedback and new information.

Following the metaphor, consenting processes are 'the rules of the game'. They keep everyone on track and prevent negative social, economic, or environmental outcomes by defining the roles of participants and guiding projects in line with the goals and desires of communities. Working with Consenting Authorities early in the process ensures that developments are in line with plans and policies such as Local Plans and national frameworks, making it more likely that everyone wins in the end.

Prioritising purpose and public benefit

Getting the desired outcomes from environmental consenting requires a clear agreement on what outcomes the process should be producing: we cannot win if we do not know what winning looks like.

The purpose of consenting comes from many sources: planning policies at the local and national level set objectives which have been socially agreed, either through public engagement or democratic representation. Either way, environmental consenting is part of ensuring consent for sustainable development, so taking a purpose-driven approach cannot be separated from the question of public benefit.

On the question of public benefit, the Nolan Principles are a helpful guide. They remind us that core values such as openness and accountability are vital for allowing the public to understand and influence decisions, so accessibility and transparency are crucial steps towards keeping consenting relevant to its purpose.

At the same time, the Nolan Principles champion objectivity, integrity, and leadership, so those involved in consenting for the public benefit should not be solely beholden to shifting public opinions. There remains a crucial role for objective evidence and best practice on how social and environmental outcomes can be secured for the public benefit.

Balancing the dual and inseparable purposes of public consent and public benefit is only possible with an integrated approach which is genuinely informed by those purposes. Without integrating objective evidence, the public may not actually get what they want if projects fail or have unintended consequences. Without integrating accessibility, the public has no reason to trust that projects are serving their interests.

In practice: Promoting an integrated approach

Embedding this aspiration in practice may be challenging, particularly given how deeply the current adversarial mind-set is embedded in the structure of environmental consenting processes. In practice, the following guidance can simplify the development of that mind-set:

- **Trust is critical:** even if the process remains adversarial by nature, building trust between everyone involved provides opportunities to make the process work the way it should and allows a more adaptive approach. If developers trust that criticism exists to improve the project, rather than to threaten it, those critiques are more likely to create better outcomes. If Consenting Authorities and environmental experts trust that developers are seeking good design in accordance with the public's vision, they can work to improve design through more cooperative channels of communication.

  o Be clear about your objectives
  o Open communication early in the process
  o Build relationships to foster trust

- **Purpose provides clarity:** when parties disagree about which objectives matter more or how to balance different outcomes or risks, returning to the purpose of the process provides clarity. Planning policies, Local Plans, and other insights into the public's aspiration can settle disputes. If society has agreed to certain environmental protections through democratically-created regulations, meeting those protections should take priority. If society has agreed to certain goals through democratically-created plans, meeting those goals should take priority.

  o Ask whether your actions are contributing to the purpose of the process
  o Use planning policies to settle disputes
  o Discuss how your part in the process can contribute to shared objectives

- **There is no 'black and white':** best practice goes a long way towards supporting a better understanding of what works and how to achieve mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits, but context matters and consideration should be given to local communities and ecosystems. Similarly, policies and Local Plans set baseline values and desirable outcomes but should also be understood in the context of emerging evidence and changing circumstances, so a flexible approach is needed.

  o Take a reflexive approach that allows for innovation and adaptation
  o Design, question, and communicate with a purpose, rather than defaulting to a single inflexible approach
  o Accept challenges as a chance to improve overall outcomes and ensure your challenges are purpose-driven

- **Communication matters:** for an integrated approach to succeed, everyone involved needs to understand each other. Building relationships is a crucial step to developing trust, and without effective communication, neither expert evidence nor public perspectives can be fully reflected in how decisions are made.

  o Be honest about your objectives and communicate for a purpose
  o Use accessible language, break down technical concepts, and use graphics or visualisations to explain what you mean

o Balance the need for technical specificity with accessibility by tailoring your communications for different audiences

- **Establish credibility through your actions:** building trust and relationships often requires more than communication – how stakeholders are viewed depends on the actions they take. Engaging others in ways of working, using 'co-production' approaches to make them part of the process, can establish credibility. It can also embed knowledge with the parties responsible for decision making, as long as they can see that the evidence has been developed in credible, relevant, and legitimate ways.

    o Use appropriate indicators, avoiding misleading or conflicting ways of measuring success

    o Include others in the process of producing knowledge and making decisions

    o Promote equity, diversity and inclusion by enabling wider participation and addressing inherent inequalities in the process

Box 3. Case study: How can an integrated approach avoid late stage project refusals?

Challenge: Many projects can face risks associated with consents being rejected at a late stage in the process, effectively wasting time and money and compromising strategic land use objectives.

Context: For projects which require the resolution of an application at the pre-construction phase, considerable investment may take place before it is clear whether a scheme is deliverable in practice (such as for Habitats Regulations Assessments in a case with imperative reasons of overriding public interest (IROPI) or for confirmation of a Flood Order for a flood protection scheme in Scotland).

This can arise where a statutory authority allows the process to proceed through consultation of planning stages while awaiting confirmation of the full details of potential compensation measures (and the preconstruction baseline for qualifying species). This can create a substantial element of risk, such as in a case where an ornithologist assesses that compensation proposals for over-wintering birds in a Special Protected Area for marine licensing are unlikely to effectively offset adverse effects on site integrity. Ultimately this introduces a sizeable degree of risk, dissuading projects and creating uncertainty.

Solutions: While these challenges can be inherent to the processes they affect, some mitigatory action can be taken. For example, the strategic identification of effective compensatory measures by relevant statutory authorities can create more certainty about which measures are likely to be suitable and effective, reducing the risk of late stage refusals.

Sharing case studies and evidence through publicly-available databases or reporting would be one tool for increasing clarity, particularly where project data and post-implementation reviews allow developers or consenting authorities to evaluate potential measures before applying them to a project.

These challenges can also be addressed by a more integrated approach to communication at an early stage, which allows for broader identification of the contextual factors which are likely to arise in applications and assessments later in the process. In doing so, early communication can save developers time and money, avoiding substantial risks for development.

Long term recommendations for environmental consenting

In the medium to long term, the promotion of an adversarial approach could be supplemented and reinforced by policy changes to improve environmental consenting processes. In particular, the next UK general election (expected in 2024) is likely to have ramifications for the planning system in England and the next elections to the Scottish Parliament (expected by mid-2026) are likely to have implications for Scottish planning.

More broadly than in those specific examples, policy making presents the opportunity to improve environmental consenting processes and formally embed a less adversarial approach. Though short term actions can make a significant difference even without policy change, long term improvements are possible where policy facilitates a better approach.

Recommendations for re-evaluating and reforming environmental consenting processes:

1. **Reforms to environmental consenting should be purpose-driven and well-reasoned**. Sustainable development is bound up in complex systems, so any change can create a period of uncertainty, undermining social, economic, and environmental goals. Many objectives have urgent timeframes for delivery, such as housebuilding and the development of renewable energy systems, so even as the system is transformed, it should be resilient enough to continue functioning.

2. **Environmental consenting should be properly resourced to function correctly.** Restricting budgets for Consenting Authorities to the point that they cannot effectively play their part costs more in the long-term, constraining the potential to achieve socially and economically valuable outcomes. This is equally true if Authorities lack access to necessary expertise, so Authorities should either by given the resources to hire experts like ecologists directly, or have improved access to pooled expert networks. The process should have sufficient capacity that it can be run effectively and inclusively.

3. **Environmental consenting should be rational, coherent, flexible, and accessible**. Consenting processes should be aligned through framework-level governance to minimise duplication, link national objectives to local delivery, and maintain the necessary flexibility for projects to be handled by the right system. Processes should make sense to everyone involved, informed by the purpose for which they exist without becoming over-simplified and focused on 'ticking boxes'.

4. **Environmental consenting should be an evidence-led process.** To effectively serve the public interest, decisions should be informed by robust evidence. This requires evidence to be available both to decision makers and the public, so data collection and monitoring must be supported with the purposes of environmental consenting in mind. Evidence should be centralised, accessible, and realistic about what works in practice.

5. **Environmental consenting should be proportionate, with the flexibility to scale up or down as needed.** Consenting processes are already complicated and expensive enough, so proportionality is essential to ensuring that social, economic, and environmental benefits from consenting match up with the time and expense involved in securing them. Greater routes for differentiation between nationally-significant and small project scales allows for more flexibility without a significant degree of risk. Examples of scaling could include using Environmental Statements as a surrogate for full Impact Assessments on smaller projects or allowing projects aligned with Local Plans to be scoped out of the need for further assessments (where impacts have already been addressed, such as through Strategic Environmental Assessment).

6. **Participants should be given the skills and guidance needed to participate effectively.** For the process to succeed, everyone involved needs to play their part, so access to robust training and guidance should be built into the system. National frameworks (such as the National Planning Policy Framework) could be an effective platform for spreading guidance in a coherent manner to give participants a clear sense of their role and how to carry it out. Participants and the public need to understand the process and their responsibilities within it, which can be facilitated by promoting 'process literacy' and wider understandings of environmental consenting.

Adapting to the context of devolved nations

While this report has addressed the challenges with consenting processes from a generalised perspective, many of the case studies and examples are specific to the context of England. The devolved nations of the UK have responsibility for environment and planning, as well as several related issues such as local government, housing, economic development, water and flood defence, and transport.

Even where English examples are used, most of the guidance and recommendations included can be applied more generally. As the challenges causing environmental consenting to become adversarial are experienced across the United Kingdom, the recommendations to overcome those challenges are equally universal. Many of the consenting processes which differ across devolved administrations also have common roots, often being underpinned by consenting principles developed while the UK was a member of the European Union.

There are specific exceptions where additional context applies.

References to Local Plans in England should be considered to apply with equal relevance to Local Development Plans in Scotland, Local Development Plans in Wales, and Development Plans in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, where Local Place Plans exist, they are likely to inform these plans and will often be a more direct means for public engagement in the community.

When considering Scotland, references to the National Planning Policy Framework as a national strategic framework in England should be considered in the context of Scotland's 4th National Planning Framework. When considering Wales, such references should be considered in the context of Planning Policy Wales and associated Technical Advice Notes. In Northern Ireland, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement can be considered to be an equivalent national strategic framework for the purposes of this report.

Additionally in Wales, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act imposes specific duties on local authorities and other public bodies to carry out sustainable development and achieve goals for social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing. As a result, Wales has already made some progress towards best practice, with the potential for further developments in this area through the Infrastructure (Wales) Bill.

Adapting to the international context

Beyond the UK, the guidance and recommendations in this report still have some relevance. Though the challenges associated with adversarial consenting are not internationally universal, there are many countries and contexts where those challenges are experienced, so the aspiration and guidance set out in this report may still be useful.

Applying the aspiration set out in the report to an international context requires a reflective approach to account for the differing processes and social, economic, or environmental objectives involved.

The core messages of the report can be adapted for international contexts by applying three principles:

1. **Sustainable development** should be at the core of consenting processes: social and economic development are inseparable from environmental protection and regeneration, so sustainability frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals can support a cross-context approach to environmental consenting which also promotes environmental justice.

2. Take a **tailored approach** led by the local context: adapt technical knowledge to suit local processes, but also adapt how principles and mind-sets are used to account for cultural and political differences.

3. Be **purpose-driven and integrated** rather than bureaucratic and adversarial: the most crucial element of securing multiple benefits for society, the economy, and the environment is to keep those mutual objectives at the heart of the process, acknowledging that they are only achievable when everyone involved works towards a shared set of goals. That truth is applicable across borders.
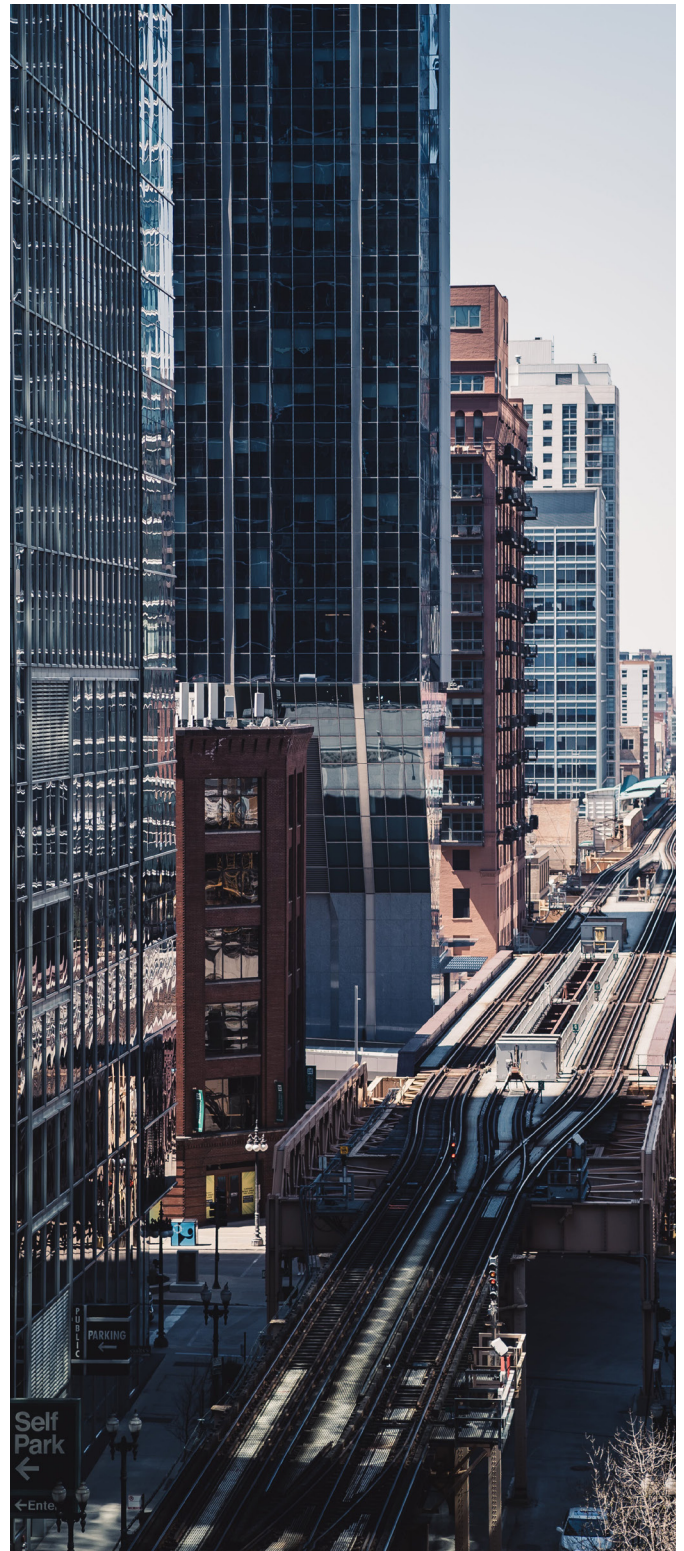
What steps can be taken to support this aspiration?

Pursuing the aspiration for environmental consenting set out in this report will require those involved in processes to initiate dialogues and work together. Naturally, those relationships may take time to develop in practice. Meanwhile, there are interim steps which can be taken to support this aspiration from individual perspectives.

For Statutory Authorities who support integrated environmental consenting:

- **Bring the team together**: use the convening power of the authority to bring together developers, environmental professionals, and the public to build a shared mind-set and goals, moving from an adversarial process to an integrated one.

- **Make the process more transparent**: increase public engagement with the specific goal of demystifying the technical elements of environmental consenting. Use accessible language and (where appropriate) share guidance on how decisions are made, giving the public more information and supporting their role in shaping the community's approach to sustainable development.

For developers who support integrated environmental consenting:

- **Engage early:** bring in environmental expertise as early as possible (either at the design stage or from the outset of a project) to begin a productive dialogue, identify options to improve projects through iterative adaptations, and avoid costly design changes at the mitigation stage.

- **Embrace the value of an integrated approach**: developments which provide mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits are better for the communities where those projects happen, so developers should be unapologetic about the quality of any project which takes a truly integrated approach, which increases the value of developments and sets developers apart from competitors.

For environmental professionals who support integrated environmental consenting:

- **Demystify the technical:** support a broader understanding of environmental consenting for all parties, demystifying technical aspects of the process for the public and sharing environmental expertise with all parties to make them part of the process of producing evidence. Engage in active communication with others involved in a project, sharing the rationale behind decisions and asking questions to increase exposure to alternative perspectives.

- **Be facilitative, not prescriptive:** use your expertise to facilitate mutual social, economic, and environmental benefits and ensure your advice is purpose-driven, not unnecessarily criticising reasonable decisions. Avoid prescriptive recommendations which are not relevant in context where there are alternative ways to improve social and environmental outcomes.

For individuals and communities who support integrated environmental consenting:

- **Seek the evidence**: regardless of attempts to improve the accessibility and transparency of consenting decisions, there will always be communication failures. Reach out to find the evidence underpinning decisions and be prepared to embrace the full range of benefits a decision can provide, beyond those which matter most to a single perspective.

- **Help build a shared vision**: making environmental consenting a 'team sport' relies on having a shared objective, so the most important role for the public is to help shape that vision by feeding into Local Plans and other local democratic processes. With a clear and shared set of objectives driving consenting processes, it becomes easier to trust that each individual decision is working towards that goal.

What next?

Environmental consenting has always played an important role in sustainable development. The importance of that role is only likely to increase in the face of megatrends currently facing society: the increasing urgency of environmental challenges and the pressing triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution; the context of increasing social and economic needs; and a trend towards the politicisation of scientific evidence and planning decisions.

Despite those challenges, there are also significant opportunities to create a future where social, economic, and environmental goods are mutually achievable. Securing those benefits through consenting processes requires a shift in attitude, so this report takes an important first step towards reimagining environmental consenting.

Over the coming year, the Institution of Environmental Sciences will continue to work with partner organisations and stakeholders to support best practice across the sector. In particular, our communities such as the Environmental Policy Implementation Community (EPIC) and the IES Environmental Impact Assessment Community will play important roles in spreading guidance to local authorities and environmental experts respectively.

In the UK specifically, the next few years pose the potential for significant change, so the IES will seize the opportunity for positive engagement with stakeholders across the political and social spectrums, working together to transform environmental consenting.

Evidence-informed decision making relies on collective trust and close working relationships, so our processes must become integrated and cannot fall into the trap of being adversarial by nature. A better future for environmental consenting can be achieved as we overcome those barriers, leading to mutual and lasting benefits for humanity and the planet.

Further reading & bibliography

More on our aspirations for environmental consenting and sustainable development

- Reframing EIA: A tool for better design for people and planet

- Transforming the planet: Our vision for the future of environmental science

- Consultation response on Environmental Outcomes Reports

- Consultation response on reforms to planning policy

- Designing sustainable building: interdisciplinary discussion

- Transformative action & local knowledge

Evidence on the importance and role of environmental consenting

- The impact of environmental regulations on development (House of Lords Built Environment Committee)

- A review of the implementation of environmental assessments regimes in England (Office for Environmental Protection)

- National Land Data Programme: Pilots and projects overview (DSIT and Geospatial Commission)

- Delivering net zero, climate resilience, and growth (National Infrastructure Commission)

Research and case studies for alternative approaches to environmental consenting

- Marine Data Exchange — as a case study of improved data and evidence sharing

- Trygg & Wenander (2022) 'Strategic spatial planning for sustainable development — Swedish planners' institutional capacity' — research on the role of spatial planning in improving institutional capacity in planning

- Infrastructure (Wales) Bill — as a case study of legislation which allows Ministers to determine categories of optional infrastructure consents, facilitating a flexible and proportional approach in some circumstances

- Mersey Gateway (see page 5) — as a case study of design and environmental teams being integrated earlier in a process, allowing for mutual social, economic, and environmental outcomes

Further reading

- Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations)

- Our Common Future (World Commission on Environment and Development)

- The diverse values and valuation of nature (IPBES)