



# **Chapter ten: Modern impact assessment in a sustainable planning system**



# Priority actions for the UK Government: Impact Assessment



## 1 Reform planning processes...

Create a less adversarial approach to planning and environmental consenting, developing processes which are coherent, flexible, and accessible.



## 2 improve consistency...

Take a joined-up approach to achieving environmental objectives across national development policy, especially for major infrastructure developments.



## 3 ...and deliver modernised EIA.

Work with environmental scientists and planning officers to ensure that the transition to Environmental Outcome Reports (EORs) delivers a modern, digital and data-driven system.

# “Our planning system can deliver for people and the environment, as long as it is modernised.”

**Environmental Impact Assessments** (EIAs) are essential to understanding the impacts of development and delivering robust, evidence-informed approaches to achieving social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

The transition from EIAs and Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) to Environmental Outcomes Reports (EORs) is an ideal opportunity to modernise the planning system.

Working with environmental assessment professionals, the Government should develop a system that is quick, accessible and that genuinely delivers for communities and our natural world.

Once these urgent reforms are completed, developers and communities need certainty.

Consistent, coherent and rational development policies, particularly for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, can support private investment in transport, energy and housing development.

Our planning system can deliver for people and the environment, as long as it is modernised and focused on achieving sustainable development.

Transforming processes with digital technology can help planning and impact assessment to support the transition towards a sustainable society where people and nature thrive.

## Box 9. About the EIA Community

The **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Community** provides a forum for thought-provoking, critical conversations around EIA from a science-based perspective.

The Community aims to connect and support environmental scientists and practitioners working across a range of specialisms involved in the EIA process and to facilitate meaningful discussion between disciplines on the key issues facing the sector.

The Community champions the ethos of utilising EIA as a tool to support decision making which leads to better outcomes from developments and is focused on providing environmental professionals involved in EIAs with the knowledge and skills to support this.

**1. Create a less adversarial approach to planning and environmental consenting, developing processes which are coherent, flexible, and accessible.**

- i. Update the planning system to deliver for the environment, aligning local plans with the Environmental Improvement Plan and rolling out **Air Quality Neutral guidance** across the UK to disincentivise developments with poor public transport links, wood burning stoves, or other high-emitting features.
- ii. Reform planning processes to build a system which brings together developers, planning authorities, environmental experts, and the public early in the process through the shared objective of sustainable development.
- iii. Improve accessibility of evidence for decision makers and the public by centralising monitoring data and information on what works in practice, making consenting decisions more transparent to all parties without over-simplifying them or focusing on ‘ticking boxes’.
- iv. Embed climate, biodiversity, soil health, and sustainable development as explicit environmental outcomes in impact assessment, retaining a proportional approach by offering greater routes for differentiation between nationally-significant and small project scales.

This delivers the **Government's commitment** to “ensure that planning authorities have up-to date Local Plans and reform and strengthen the presumption in favour of sustainable development.”

This will be crucial to delivering the **Government's objective** of “**planning reform to build 1.5 million new homes**” and its ambition for “**exemplary development to be the norm not the exception.**”

This realises the Government's **manifesto commitment** to “**ensure we are building more high-quality, well-designed, and sustainable homes and creating places that increase climate resilience and promote nature recovery.**”

## 2. Take a joined-up approach to achieving environmental objectives throughout national development policy, especially for major infrastructure developments.

- i. Make development deliver for the environment through consistent long-term policies for investment in significant infrastructure and housebuilding projects that align with environmental objectives.
- ii. Promote a ‘needs-based’ approach to development, considering alternative locations and proposals alongside the potential to mitigate impacts. Increase the statutory role of the ‘feasibility’ and ‘options appraisal’ stages of the development process to encourage genuine consideration of alternatives.

These would support the success of the **Government’s proposals** for “a **new National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, bringing together existing bodies, to set strategic infrastructure priorities and oversee the design, scope, and delivery of projects.**”

## 3. Work with environmental scientists and planning officers to ensure that the transition to Environmental Outcome Reports (EORs) delivers a modern, digital and data-driven system.

- i. Speed up the development process by urgently investing in a transition to digital EORs, allowing for a quicker, more accessible and more interactive experience.
- ii. Give local authorities access to environmental expertise, either through the resources to hire experts like ecologists directly or through improved access to pooled expert networks. Support retraining of planning staff to ensure that EORs can be properly assessed.
- iii. Work with businesses to provide a centralised, accessible and open EOR data hub, supporting evidence-informed decisions and reducing duplicate assessments.

This supports the Government’s objective to ‘**get Britain building again**’ and will speed up the delivery of its **manifesto commitment** to “**build a new generation of new towns**” and “**deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable housing in a generation.**”

This would increase the value of the **Government’s pledge** to “**support local authorities by funding additional planning officers**”, reducing the reliance of local authorities on externally funded sources of expertise.