

# ‘Depoliticising infrastructure’: can a strategic approach enhance public engagement?

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*In a recent [seminar co-hosted](#) by Dialogue by Design and the UCL Transport Institute a simple question was posed: when Government plans to invest £375 billion in infrastructure projects up to 2020, how can this be done with local communities, rather than against them? Here Morgan Wild discusses the prospects for depoliticising infrastructure, the challenges this raises for democratic accountability and the ways in which an independent body could make the public voice in infrastructure decision-making a little louder.*



Many of our participants were concerned about the ways in which politics distorts the strategy and decision-making process for infrastructure in the United Kingdom. [Professor Brian Collins](#)' argument was that decision making about infrastructure in the United Kingdom is fragmented and lacks strategy: generations of deregulation and privatisation have – irrespective of the intended efficiency benefits – led to a patchwork of different companies, regulators, policymakers and politicians, each with partial responsibility for the provision of different infrastructure.

As a result, little strategic planning takes place: the Government's National Infrastructure Plan is simply a list of all the infrastructure projects under development or construction. The question is whether an attempt to centralise strategic responsibility for all major infrastructure projects would be a help or a hindrance.

It is clear that such an approach commands support among at least some politicians and many developers. One proposal, mentioned by some of our participants, would be to place responsibility for strategy in a National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), as proposed in the [Armitt Review](#). This would, every ten years, produce a National Infrastructure Assessment that holistically analyses the UK's infrastructure needs for the following 25-30 years and would make recommendations regarding the type and scale needed – recommendations that the Government would be compelled by statute to put before Parliament.

This is just one example of how infrastructure decision making could be centralised; you can imagine versions of such a Commission that go even further, placing responsibility for initiating and recommending individual schemes in the hands of an independent body, with politicians only involved through signing off decisions at the end. These possibilities raise interesting questions about whether this is desirable; in thinking about the sphere of public engagement, would this enhance or diminish the public voice?

There are, of course, potentially powerful advantages for developers in taking the politics out of infrastructure. Placing infrastructure planning on a 30-year footing might increase confidence about investment decisions. Decoupling the infrastructure cycle from the (at best) five-year political cycle might allow for more ambitious schemes to be considered and for fewer delays caused by politicians procrastinating over whether they should back a project now rather than after an election. Depoliticising infrastructure, therefore, could potentially solve some seemingly intractable problems.

But might there also be costs? There is, surely, a limit on the extent to which politics can be taken out of infrastructure: infrastructure decisions are, by their nature, political. Whether we build a runway at Heathrow or Gatwick or not at all; whether we build HS2 or invest in local railways or both; whether we believe our energy future lies in solar, wind or nuclear – all these are questions not just of technical deliberation, but of contested values. We elect, you might think, our politicians on the basis of whether they share these values; it seems strange to cede these decisions to a technocracy of experts.

There are, therefore, questions of democratic accountability facing an independent infrastructure commission which would need to be addressed. The Armitage Review attempted to do this by making clear that its version of an infrastructure commission would be strategic rather than scheme-specific and that politicians would retain ultimate control over the infrastructure decision-making process. More detail would be needed about how this would work in practice. However, democratic engagement does not take place only at the ballot box. In principle, a body which is responsible for producing a strategic overview and a coherent set of infrastructure schemes might compellingly enhance the public voice, in a range of ways which our participants and speakers identified.

Firstly, our current, fragmented approach to decision making disempowers many, because it is not clear to the public how different projects relate to each other until it is too late. Will Bridges, Consents Officer for [National Grid's North West Coasts Connection](#) project, told us about its plans to connect the electricity generated by a new nuclear power station to the National Grid, and the valuable ways in which local knowledge had influenced their proposals. But, while comments about a particular route option or area might have significant influence, there was no option for no connection to be made at all. National Grid must build some connection between the power station and the Grid, leaving some residents understandably aggrieved that they have not had a proper opportunity to interrogate the strategy for energy production and transmission. A more strategic approach might make the relationships between different infrastructure projects more apparent at an earlier stage.

However, such an approach could go further than consulting citizens on an infrastructure strategy. An independent commission could build them in from the start: public representation could be integrated in high-level governance and as part of devising the strategy, at various stages engaging representative samples of the public in surveys, focus groups, deliberative engagement and dialogues.

Moreover, the current decision-making system assigns too much weight to individual politicians' preferences for schemes over an objective assessment of cost, with the public only involved when the politician places the preferred option before them. Much distrust of infrastructure planning could reflect public scepticism about the rigour lying behind the options presented to it. As [Dr Diane Beddoes](#), Chief Executive at [Dialogue by Design](#) said, the [public's trust of experts \(54%\) far outstrips their trust in politicians \(3%\)](#). Ensuring that projects have the 'stamp of approval' from trusted, independent experts could reduce the deleterious effects that distrust has on public engagement and discourse about infrastructure projects.

There remain challenges in involving the public at a strategic level. The prevailing trend is for further devolution of

decision-making, rather than towards greater centralisation; and some argue that this is appropriate in certain infrastructure planning contexts – for example, participants argued that local politicians tend to remain in their communities for longer than national politicians, and so are more committed to good decision making. Certain participants worried, however, that devolving decision making could sometimes reduce community involvement without “the channels to bring it back up to look at how the pieces of the jigsaw fit together”.

Also, some of our participants were sceptical as to whether there was great appetite among the public for strategic engagement, across modes of transport, for example. Both Dr Diane Beddoes and [Dr Jack Stilgoe](#) put forward a contrasting view, drawing on their experience of projects with [Sciencewise](#), the UK’s national centre for public dialogue in policy making involving science and technology, where they had discovered public appetite and aptitude for the most complex and technical of subject matters when approached and explained skilfully (and – it should be said – when citizens were properly recompensed for their time).

An independent commission for infrastructure planning could, then, improve the public role in infrastructure decision making. It is true that some of these suggestions do not depend on depoliticising infrastructure. Government departments can – and some do – involve the public at a more strategic level than is current common practice. However, for many problems with our current engagement system, taking some of the politics out of infrastructure and creatively embedding the public within a new framework may substantially enhance the public’s voice.

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*This chapter is an extract from the [Infrastructure and the Citizen](#) policy paper, which can be downloaded for free from the [OPM website](#).*

*You may also be interested in two other posts from this series: ‘[The potential for public dialogue and deliberation in the development of national infrastructure policy](#)’ by Ian Thomson and ‘[Only an approach founded on rights and obligations can allow for effective and legitimate public infrastructure provision](#)’ by Elena de Besi*

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