

LESSONS LEARNT

Reviewing the process of the first
National Infrastructure Assessment

Contents

Executive summary	3
1. Background and methodology	5
2. Feedback and lessons for current work	7
3. Lessons for the next Assessment	15

Executive summary

The National Infrastructure Commission published its first National Infrastructure Assessment in July 2018. As this is the first cross-sector assessment of its kind in the UK, the Commission has reviewed the process of producing the Assessment, informed by stakeholder feedback. This report presents lessons learnt for the Commission's current work and the next Assessment, and how the Commission is already responding.

Background and methodology

Following the publication of the Assessment, the Commission carried out a comprehensive engagement process with its staff and external stakeholders to gather feedback. This included workshops, an online stakeholder survey and anonymised interviews.

Feedback and lessons for current work

Eight lessons were drawn from this feedback, and opportunities to respond and improve have been identified:

- **Addressing cross-cutting issues** Internal and external feedback considered the Commission's cross-cutting perspective to be an important part of its role. The cross-cutting topics covered in the Assessment are already being supplemented with new studies on Regulation and Resilience.
- **Managing stakeholder engagement** External respondents felt positively about being able to engage with the issues that the Assessment addressed, but suggested that some changes to the management of the process would allow them to engage even more productively. The Commission is exploring new ways to engage and communicate with external stakeholders.
- **Wide and inclusive stakeholder engagement** Respondents felt the Commission engaged widely and inclusively, and that the Commission could beneficially build on this by broadening the range of stakeholders it engages with. Work to improve diversity, inclusion and public engagement could improve the variety of perspectives that the Commission listens to, as well as the impact of its recommendations.

- **Procuring and managing external work** Analysis from expert external providers was a key part of the Assessment process, with £1.7 million spent overall on procuring high quality modelling and evidence. Feedback focused on making sure that the Commission was getting excellent value and quality from these procurements.
- **Transparency and external challenge** The Assessment's underlying principles include being open and transparent, and feedback showed that the Commission has a reputation for this. Respondents felt that even greater external challenge could further improve the policy recommendations, and that this could be achieved through greater transparency.
- **Strengthening measures for prioritisation and communicating trade-offs** Prioritisation between recommendation options and competing objectives is a key part of the Assessment process, and feedback suggested that a clearer explanation of how and why these trade-offs have been made would be valuable. New measures of infrastructure performance will help to clarify how the Commission's decisions support its objectives.
- **Addressing local and regional issues** The Commission aims to support sustainable economic growth across all regions of the UK and so engages stakeholders across the nation. Feedback highlighted that this engagement was well received and valuable, and that the findings were successfully incorporated into the Assessment, but also suggested further opportunities for addressing local and regional issues.
- **Managing the programme of work** Strong programme management was important for delivering the Assessment on time and within the available budget. The Commission continues to embed best practice, and will consider programme management structures when designing the next Assessment.

Lessons for the next Assessment

From the feedback collected, the Commission has identified issues to consider when designing and delivering the next Assessment. When the process for the next Assessment is launched, the Commission will explain how it has responded to these lessons in its preparation and planning.

1. Background and methodology

The National Infrastructure Commission was established in 2015 to provide independent, impartial advice on the UK's long term infrastructure needs. The Commission is required to carry out an overall assessment of the UK's infrastructure requirements once every five years. The first National Infrastructure Assessment was published in July 2018.

The Assessment is guided by the Commission's objectives to support sustainable economic growth across all regions of the UK, improve competitiveness and improve quality of life. Supporting these objectives are the Assessment's four principles:

- open, transparent, engaging with a wide range of stakeholders
- independent, evidence based, objective and rigorous
- forward looking, challenging established thinking
- comprehensive, taking a whole system approach, understanding and studying interdependencies and feedbacks.

Objectives and outcomes of this review

Given that this kind of cross-sector assessment had not been undertaken at a national level before in the UK, the Commission proposed to undertake a 'lessons learnt' review shortly after the publication of the Assessment, informed by stakeholder views. This report presents the feedback and lessons from this review.

To inform the Commission's approach to future work, the review focuses on the process of producing the Assessment rather than the policy recommendations made in the Assessment. It aims to identify which aspects of the process were successful and should be repeated, and in which areas the Commission could aim to improve by:

- assessing whether the document met its objectives and stakeholder expectations
- assessing which processes went well or less well, and should be adopted or changed for the second Assessment or across the organisation

- understanding what the first Assessment reveals about how the second should be conducted
- communicating to stakeholders how their views will shape the next Assessment.

Drawing upon the outputs from this review, the Commission will prepare the process and methodology for the next iteration of the Assessment, on which it expects to engage with stakeholders before carrying out a public consultation. Alongside this, it will develop its evidence base and identify the key areas for further research and analysis. The second Assessment is expected to be published around 2023.

Review methodology

The Commission engaged a wide range of stakeholders through various channels to gather feedback on the Assessment process. All participants were assured that anonymity would be preserved in the final report to encourage full and honest communication. By using different channels to gather feedback, the review has been able to hear from respondents across all the sectors and types of organisation that the Commission engages with, and from people with many different roles. These channels included:

- **Workshops and roundtables** gathered detailed feedback from external participants in the Assessment process.
- **An online survey** was distributed to stakeholders who had engaged with any stage of the Assessment process, including all those who responded to formal consultations. The quantitative results from this survey are available as an annex to this report.
- **Interviews with 13 key senior stakeholders** were conducted by an external social research specialist.
- **Meetings with groups that promote diversity and inclusion** elicited recommendations for how to improve the Commission's engagement with underrepresented groups.
- **Interviews, workshops and conversations within the Commission** gathered feedback from the eight current Commissioners, members of the Commission's technical and analytical expert advisory panels, and members of the Secretariat.
- **A review of the Assessment's programme management and governance** was undertaken by the Government Internal Audit Agency.

This feedback has been analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach to identify strong and repeated messages. These have been consolidated into eight lessons for the Commission's current work, as well as specific lessons for the next Assessment.

2. Feedback and lessons for current work

This review has drawn out eight lessons for the Commission's current and future work. These are based on suggestions made by respondents to this review, and many align with development work that the Commission is already doing. This section discusses the feedback related to each lesson and describes the relevant work that the Commission is already undertaking.

Addressing cross-cutting issues

Internal and external feedback considered the Commission's cross-cutting perspective to be an important part of its role. The cross-cutting topics covered in the Assessment are already being supplemented with new studies on Regulation and Resilience.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

Feedback recognised the key role and existing strength of the Commission in addressing cross-cutting issues. 75 per cent of online survey respondents who felt able to comment agreed that the Assessment recognised the interconnectedness of different types of infrastructure.

Stakeholders noted the challenges of building consensus and encouraging action on cross-cutting policy recommendations, especially where these sit across multiple government departments, regulators or other bodies. They encouraged the Commission to consider how best to design its recommendations to overcome these barriers and have a strong impact.

Feedback also emphasised the importance of maintaining good communication and knowledge sharing across workstreams within the Commission to identify areas for cross-cutting work.

Work already underway

The Commission is currently producing studies on Regulation and Resilience, which were both identified in the Assessment as cross-cutting topics requiring further investigation. These were commissioned by the government in October 2018 and are expected to report in autumn 2019 and spring 2020. The Commission's modelling strategy is considering whether additional cross-sector modelling and analysis capabilities need to be developed.

Managing stakeholder engagement

External respondents felt positively about being able to engage with the issues that the Assessment addressed, but suggested that some changes to the management of the process would allow them to engage even more productively. The Commission is exploring new ways to engage and communicate with external stakeholders.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

The online survey feedback was positive about the Commission's stakeholder engagement. Of those that felt able to respond, 76 per cent felt engaged throughout the Assessment process and 90 per cent thought the Commission was open and consultative when designing the Assessment's scope, process and methodology.

However, external respondents asked the Commission to communicate the proposed engagement process earlier, more clearly and in greater detail. They noted that this would allow stakeholders to plan their engagement better, increasing its potential value. In addition, they asked the Commission to improve the transparency around how information provided by stakeholders is used, and suggested increasing the communication with stakeholders after they have submitted responses or participated in workshops.

Internal respondents suggested improving the efficiency of the stakeholder response management processes and tools. They referred to several aspects of the process including how responses are received, receipt confirmed, documented, reviewed and disseminated.

Both internal and external respondents suggested that the role, timing and handling of the interim report consultation merited further consideration, to ensure that the full value of the stakeholder responses is extracted and incorporated when compiling the recommendations in the final Assessment report.

Work already underway

The Commission has already started developing a new website that will improve the clarity of communication with its external stakeholders, alongside continued efforts to share information through social media platforms – most recently including Instagram to engage with the design community in particular.

Wide and inclusive stakeholder engagement

Respondents felt the Commission engaged widely and inclusively, and that the Commission could beneficially build on this by broadening the range of stakeholders it engages with. Work to improve diversity, inclusion and public engagement could improve the variety of perspectives that the Commission listens to, as well as the impact of its recommendations.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

Of the respondents to the online survey who felt able to comment, 85 per cent thought that the Assessment engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, 83 per cent thought that the Commission listened to their views, and the Assessment was also generally considered to be effective in recognising alternative perspectives to the Commission's own view.

Alongside this positive feedback, respondents also made suggestions for further improvements. They recommended that the Commission actively publicise engagement opportunities to groups that are currently underrepresented to increase the range of stakeholders that provide input into the Commission's work. They also felt that the Commission could gather a wider range of perspectives and evidence with more international engagement.

Although respondents commended the Commission's use of social research, they recommended several approaches to engage more inclusively, for example through social media, deliberative approaches such as citizens' assemblies, and short public surveys.

Work already underway

The Commission is already addressing many of the issues covered in this feedback: a corporate workstream is considering how the Commission addresses inclusivity and diversity in its work, including in relation to stakeholder engagement; a new project investigating road congestion is exploring deliberative public engagement methods; and an internal initiative is developing the Commission's approach to international engagement. Recommendations from these workstreams will be disseminated within the Commission.

Procuring and managing external work

Analysis from expert external providers was a key part of the Assessment process, with £1.7 million spent overall on procuring high quality modelling and evidence. Feedback focused on making sure that the Commission was getting excellent value and quality from these procurements.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

In view of the Commission's small size relative to the Assessment's scope and depth, most respondents agreed that using external consultants is necessary and improves the quality of analysis underlying the Commission's recommendations.

The Government Internal Audit Agency highlighted the importance of managing procurements effectively, noting that this would be supported by more detailed procurement plans and tracking.

Feedback also suggested reviewing how invitations to tender are publicised to increase the breadth and quality of consultants that respond to external tenders, and whether Commissioners can use their networks to play a greater role in this.

Work already underway

The Commission is developing its approach to procurement to maximise the value from these projects. Reviewing the characteristics and outcomes of past procurements will indicate whether different types of work are best procured externally or undertaken by the Commission.

Transparency and external challenge

The Assessment's underlying principles include being open and transparent, and feedback showed that the Commission has a reputation for this. Respondents felt that even greater external challenge could further improve the policy recommendations, and that this could be achieved through greater transparency.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

Of the online survey respondents who felt able to comment, 86 per cent agreed that the Assessment was open and transparent; 82 per cent that the Assessment was evidence based and rigorous; and 76 per cent that the Assessment transparently assessed its impact on costs to businesses, consumers, the public sector and other end users of infrastructure.

External respondents reported that they valued the supplementary evidence and data published alongside the main report, and asked for more of the evidence, data, models and assumptions that the Commission uses to be published. In addition, they suggested that it should be easier to find this information on the Commission's website.

Internal respondents emphasised the strong focus on quality and challenge from senior staff. To create further opportunities for challenge, they suggested increasing the consultation with the Commission's existing technical and analytical expert advisory panels, and considering engaging with external stakeholders in smaller groups, earlier or more often. Some respondents felt that the work undertaken by external providers was not transparent enough and that this restricted the ability of internal and external reviewers to critique it. They suggested that this might be addressed by improving how the work is specified by the Commission during procurement.

Work already underway

To increase transparency and the opportunity for external challenge, the Commission is updating the transparency standards in its quality assurance policy. This covers the processes adopted around the evidence gathering process, internal and externally commissioned research, and publications.

Strengthening measures for prioritisation and communicating trade-offs

Prioritisation between recommendation options and competing objectives is a key part of the Assessment process, and feedback suggested that a clearer explanation of how and why these trade-offs have been made would be valuable. New measures of infrastructure performance will help to clarify how the Commission's decisions support its objectives.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

External respondents trusted the decisions made in the Assessment. Of online survey respondents who felt able to comment, 85 per cent agreed that the Assessment was independent and objective, and 95 per cent agreed that it was forward looking.

Some feedback suggested that the Commission could be clearer about how it prioritises between its different objectives and what evidence it uses to inform trade-offs. Some respondents also requested that the Commission do more to align short term actions with its long term vision.

Work already underway

Since the Assessment, the Commission has published a set of performance measures which cover key sectors and link to the Commission's objectives, including economic and quality of life impacts. These measures add to the information available to the Commissioners when making decisions, and are already being used by the Secretariat to understand infrastructure effectiveness. The Commission intends to fill gaps in its performance measures by developing measures that do not yet exist, and updating them over time as new measures are developed or better data becomes available.

The Commission also continues to review how to apply its remit to assess the fiscal and bills impacts of its recommendations in non-Assessment studies. This ensures a consistent approach to prioritisation across all its recommendations.

Addressing local and regional issues

The Commission aims to support sustainable economic growth across all regions of the UK and so engages stakeholders across the nation. Feedback highlighted that this engagement was well received and valuable, and that the findings were successfully incorporated into the Assessment, but also suggested further opportunities for addressing local and regional issues.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

Alongside positive feedback about the regional engagement events that fed into the Assessment, respondents suggested that the Commission should undertake more. They also requested that the Commission use the regional engagement events to interrogate regional cross-sector issues, to understand interdependencies and the cumulative effect of multiple policy interventions in a single geographic area.

Given the broad scope of the Assessment and the relatively short programme for its delivery, respondents commended its regional and spatial analysis. However, for the next Assessment they suggested that the Commission should aim to do more modelling and analysis of local and regional issues, and also consider how spatial presentation of issues would support decision making.

Work already underway

As part of the post-publication stakeholder engagement, many of the Commissioners and members of the Secretariat have been involved in events discussing the Assessment outside of London. In addition, the Commission is working with five UK cities and city regions to develop strategies to improve local transport connections, and with a further 40 cities to create a knowledge sharing community.

The Commission is currently undertaking a review of its modelling strategy and internal modelling capabilities. Part of this work is considering what capabilities would be needed to make more use of spatial approaches, and whether these should be developed.

Managing the programme of work

Strong programme management was important for delivering the Assessment on time and within the available budget. The Commission continues to embed best practice, and will consider programme management structures when designing the next Assessment.

Respondents' feedback and suggestions

Feedback emphasised the valuable improvements to programme management made throughout the Assessment process. Respondents thought that many of the structures and processes that were introduced should be maintained and augmented, as they had supported the delivery of a complex programme of work within a short time frame.

Programme management was a key topic in the Government Internal Audit Agency's review of the governance and processes of the Assessment. Their feedback highlighted the importance of formal programme management processes and structures.

Work already underway

The Commission's Secretariat is continuing to embed programme management tools and processes as the schedule of work moves on from the Assessment. Standardised and regularly updated trackers are combined with a structure of policy and programme boards to monitor progress, resources and risks. The whole Secretariat continues to meet together weekly to share updates on work across the Commission.

3. Lessons for the next Assessment

From the feedback collected, the Commission has identified issues to consider when designing and delivering the next Assessment.

- **Programme planning and management** Key milestones and publications will be reviewed when planning the next Assessment, alongside how best to manage stakeholder responses and whether there are efficient methods of communicating to stakeholders how their input has been used. The Commission will consider how to design programme management structures early in the process, which may require timely recruitment of a dedicated programme manager.
- **Cross-cutting narratives** Building on the foundation of the first Assessment, the Commission will consider taking a more cross-cutting approach. This will include a review of whether the structure of the Assessment document could draw out cross-cutting narratives more effectively. Specific stakeholder engagement will likely be needed to identify further cross-cutting issues that the Commission should address.
- **Procurement and external challenge** The Commission plans to develop its Secretariat's procurement skills and support for the next Assessment. This will focus on how external work is scoped, including requirements for outputs and transparency; on how consultants' tender returns are scrutinised; and on managing contracts to maximise the quality of the final products. The Commission will also review how to engage most effectively with its expert advisory panels, to increase their opportunities at the next Assessment to challenge work by the Commission and external providers.
- **Objectives and trade-offs** Embedding the newly identified performance measures into decision making processes will help to clarify how the next Assessment's recommendations support Commission objectives, as well as the trade-offs involved. This would be supported by explaining the Commission's objectives more prominently in external communications.

When launching the process for the next Assessment, the Commission will explain how it has responded to these lessons in its preparation and planning.

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