

The Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP  
Minister of State (Housing and Planning)  
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities  
2 Marsham St  
London  
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28 November 2022

Dear Minister

## **DESIGN EXCELLENCE AND NATIONAL POLICY STATEMENTS**

The National Infrastructure Commission (the Commission) provides government with **impartial, expert advice on major long term infrastructure challenges** in the following sectors: energy, transport, water and wastewater, waste, flood risk management, and digital communications. The Commission's objectives are to: support sustainable economic growth across all regions; improve competitiveness; improve quality of life; and support climate resilience and the transition to net zero.

**The Commission established the Design Group in 2019. Its mission is to inspire, promote and champion design excellence in all nationally significant infrastructure projects.** The Design Group published the first ever set of design principles for economic infrastructure – **climate, people, places and value** - and the Commission recommended to government that these be embedded across infrastructure planning and delivery.

In its *National Infrastructure Strategy*, published in 2020, **government committed to embedding good design in all infrastructure projects.** The strategy set out that government would require all infrastructure projects to have a board level design champion in place by the end of 2021, with champions supported by design panels where appropriate. It also committed to embedding the design principles and recommendations on design champions within the support and assurance regime overseen by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority.

Getting major infrastructure projects delivered on time is complex and challenging. National Policy Statements, which set the strategic priorities for the development of key infrastructure, and provide the legal framework for planning decisions, play a vital role in providing policy certainty. However, there have been lengthy delays to publication of updated statements across infrastructure sectors and the Design Group is concerned about the impact this is having on delivery. It was encouraging to see a commitment in the Autumn Statement to publishing updated statements for energy, transport and water resources in 2023 and the Group offers its support to government in helping this to happen.

The updated draft of the overarching policy statement for energy (EN1) includes information about the importance of good design. There are also brief references within

the draft water resources statement from 2019. **These two statements should now be finalised and published without further delay and then relevant design information extended across all National Policy Statements.** Certain sectors have developed their own bespoke design principles, based on those developed by the Design Group, and these could usefully be captured and referenced in the new statements.

**Requiring nationally significant infrastructure projects to consider design properly will support the government’s ambition to speed up delivery and maximise value** for the following reasons:

- 1. Design process:** the use of a structured design process: facilitates effective local consultation (a key part of the ‘front loaded consultation’ Development Consent Order process); provides a framework for early consideration of environmental issues; and drives project team collaboration. This ‘de-risks’ projects significantly.
- 2. Design principles:** the use of design principles provides for the governance of design through the life of a project. This gives confidence to communities, examining authorities, and decision makers. And crucially, it can lead to speedier delivery, as applicants are able to seek approval on the basis that design principles will: provide the framework within which design is developed; and support the subsequent discharge of requirements for Development Consent Order projects.
- 3. Multiple beneficial outcomes:** an effective contextual approach to design will secure opportunities for additional beneficial outcomes. Given the scale of public investment in infrastructure, it is important we go further than simply the provision of operationally efficient developments. A proper focus on design can deliver joined-up, spatial planning outcomes that go wider than the project itself, delivering benefits to local communities. In addition, delivery of a positive ‘outcomes based approach’, rather than merely the mitigation of adverse effects, aligns with emerging government thinking in relation to new environmental impact legislation, following our withdrawal from the European Union.

I’m copying this letter to your colleagues with responsibility for National Policy Statements. The Commission intends to publish the letter on its website.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss these important matters further. My colleague, Dan Shotter, will be in touch to make the necessary arrangements. He can be contacted at: [daniel.shotter@nic.gov.uk](mailto:daniel.shotter@nic.gov.uk).



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**CHAIR, NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGN GROUP**

CC: The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP      Secretary of State for Transport  
Rebecca Pow MP                      Minister for Environmental Quality and Resilience  
Graham Stuart MP                    Minister for Energy and Climate