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# Green social democracy: Building a public mandate for infrastructure

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# Summary

The renewal of transport and energy infrastructure lies at the heart of the UK's economic development plans. It offers a route to private sector investment, more geographically balanced growth and a more efficient economy. As a consequence it is an area of growing public spending, and an unusual degree of consensus between the political parties. More fundamentally, infrastructure is an enabler. It can and should improve people's quality of life and lead to outcomes that society values.

Unfortunately, UK infrastructure delivery has a fraught history, in which the biggest schemes such as HS2 and the Heathrow third runway, have been delayed or halted by public protest. Some politicians and businesses despair at the difficulty of creating a sense of common purpose on planning for infrastructure. Others will recognise that the public mandate to oppose infrastructure is often stronger and clearer than that to support it.

The Labour Party has prioritised infrastructure in its economic plan, and commissioned Sir John Armitt to explore how to improve its planning. His recommendation, accepted by the party, is to create an independent National Infrastructure Commission to undertake 25-30 year national infrastructure assessments, approved by parliament and delivered through sectoral plans. The proposed commission is a good framework for longer term decision making. But, if it does not strengthen the democratic mandate for infrastructure at the same time, it risks being another top down attempt to impose unpopular schemes, and it will not last.

Social democrats understand that democracy is more than the actions of political representatives voted in every five years. The quality of democracy is determined by the distribution of power and the level of agency which individuals and communities have over the decisions which affect them.

In the context of infrastructure, the quality of democracy can be judged by the way that decision making identifies shared goals locally and nationally, and how it manages the tensions between competing public interests. The democratic mandate for infrastructure will come from the actions of elected representatives, as well as the quality of the public dialogue about infrastructure options and the ends that it is designed to meet.

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This pamphlet sets out how Armit’s approach could be modified to achieve this, building in a commitment to public dialogue and recognising that infrastructure planning is more than a technocratic challenge. This is not merely a ‘nice to have’. Public opposition to infrastructure has real potential to delay and thwart its delivery. Incorporating dialogue into infrastructure planning will improve the quality of decision making and the plan that results, and provide it with a much stronger mandate than parliament alone can offer. The social democratic tradition is well placed to show leadership on this, using its ambitions to decentralise power and decision making to strengthen infrastructure planning.

The national infrastructure commission needs a public dialogue function as part of its core remit. This should be reflected in commissioners’ expertise, commission staffing and budget, and in the following central ways:

- **a stakeholder council:** providing broad civil society input into the national infrastructure assessment and subsequent reviews, as well as overseeing the localised public dialogues;
- **city and county infrastructure dialogues:** providing geographically based, cross-sectoral input to infrastructure planning via deliberative dialogues that include local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, civil society and communities.

The scale of infrastructure required to strengthen and decarbonise the UK economy is huge and a bold commitment to investing time and resource in building a public mandate for it is central to future success. The national infrastructure commission will have a unique opportunity to develop an infrastructure vision for the UK, and to include civil society in the process of considering the social, economic and environmental outcomes it will enable. It also has the opportunity to inform more detailed delivery plans with insight from cities and counties, strengthening them with an understanding of the context in which nationally significant projects will be pursued. The alternative is a plan that works on paper, but which stalls on the ground, as project after project gets mired in controversy, confrontation and opposition. This is an outcome the UK cannot afford.

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# The infrastructure challenge



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The UK’s infrastructure is ageing, with an estimated five per cent of growth sacrificed per year since 2000 due to under investment.<sup>1</sup> A fifth of the UK’s electricity generating capacity will come offline in the next ten years and decision making for roads and rail is fragmented.<sup>2</sup> A number of transport projects are fraught with controversy, and the water industry’s five year review process has not considered large new projects. Just over half of the businesses surveyed by the CBI see the UK’s infrastructure as inferior to that in the US or Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Any infrastructure built now has to be future-proof, ie resilient to the impacts of climate change, able to improve quality of life and to facilitate the transition to a low carbon economy. This is well understood by decision makers. The Treasury’s infrastructure pipeline covers 646 projects. Between 2012 and 2020, energy projects account for 44 per cent of the total, including 47 offshore wind projects and 57 onshore ones.

Overall, 63 per cent of expected infrastructure spending is low carbon.<sup>4</sup> As Ed Balls, shadow chancellor, has stated “without a low carbon infrastructure plan and economic strategy, in the modern economy you simply don’t have an economic plan.”<sup>5</sup>

Thinking creatively about climate change mitigation and infrastructure will also mean that demand side approaches to changing behaviour rather than building new infrastructure can be considered.

But planning infrastructure in the abstract is very different to breaking ground on a project and seeing it through to completion. Public support plays a crucial role, as debate about projects gets played out on a national stage: in parliament, in boardrooms, in the press, through protests and in communities around the country. Public opposition has seen projects scrapped, and projects like HS2 or renewables continue to experience intense opposition. The CBI’s research found that 46 per cent of the public are satisfied with the UK’s national infrastructure, with focus groups revealing that aversion to disruption outweighs enthusiasm for the benefits that new infrastructure will deliver.<sup>6</sup> A public mandate for building new infrastructure is by no means a given and securing it will be a significant challenge.

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## Heathrow: engagement the wrong way round?

A third runway for Heathrow was announced in a 2003 government white paper. To those affected, the decision seemed to have been made, with no scope for discussing the kinds of questions that should have informed the debate. Questions such as: what was the economic or social need driving a third runway proposal? How robust were its assumptions? Was a third runway at Heathrow the best way of meeting the need? And, what viable alternatives existed?

Arguably, those objecting would never have agreed to a third runway, but the process never afforded them a real chance to have their say.

Public consultation opportunities were weighted with the assumption that the runway would be built, only asking for views on the details, not the proposal itself, and they were heavily prescribed and rule bound.

This illustrates the way consultation around infrastructure is often perceived as part of a project's machinery, not as a meaningful opportunity to discuss or influence change. By the time consultation begins, the opportunities to influence whether and how a project gets prioritised and what alternatives might have been considered are in the past, and did not include the public.

Yet Heathrow is also a reminder that democracy can work both ways. In this case via a democratic mandate for elected representatives to oppose the scheme. The runway was tirelessly challenged on community, climate change, noise and air quality grounds. Opposition manifested itself in court cases, in parliament with representations to MP committees, in economic analysis of the plan's assumptions, in democratic pressure on local MPs with seats to defend, in protest, in flash mobs and in the fields of the climate camp.

Rather than a public dialogue being built into the process, it emerged anyway through other means. Ultimately this swayed decision makers, the project lost political support and plans were dropped.

Better dialogue may not have changed public opinion, but it would certainly have enabled wider debate about options and alternatives, and less time and resources would have been taken up by proponents and opponents in reaching a resolution.

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## The danger of ignoring the public



“Infrastructure is not simply an intellectual question to be wrestled with. It requires a public mandate, which current approaches to consultation frequently fail to secure.”

Any effort to build a public mandate for new infrastructure will need to reconcile two very different perspectives. A strategic, national perspective on what is needed to achieve social goals and to support a much lower carbon economy in the future, and the intensely personal experience of infrastructure, such as improved commuting time, changes to a much loved view or extensive and lengthy disruption during construction.

A new approach to planning for infrastructure has been developed for the Labour party by Sir John Armitt and is now in draft bill form. Although this creates a framework for longer term planning, it assumes that parliamentary consent will create sufficient democratic mandate for the plan to be deliverable.

Armitt’s approach will see UK infrastructure needs studied in the round, with projects underpinned by an evidence-based assessment of their role in securing economic growth and meeting climate change targets. Rather than the infrastructure pipeline simply being an aggregated list of projects in development, a national infrastructure assessment will set out what is needed and when over a 25-30 year time scale. This will be a significant step forward, helping to overcome the short termism of political cycles and providing greater certainty for investors.

But infrastructure is not simply an intellectual question to be wrestled with. It requires a public mandate, which current approaches to consultation frequently fail to secure.

Consultation tends to be done on a project by project basis, occurring long after trade-offs have been made. As a result it lacks legitimacy, decisions are perceived as inevitable and confrontation often emerges. As with Heathrow, consultation on HS2 rapidly moved to focus on the detail, with the assumption that the project will go ahead as its backdrop. This has not generated any confidence among the public that the project is needed, offers genuine benefits, addresses a strategic gap in the UK’s rail and transport capacity and is anything more than a political flagship.

This can be particularly problematic when it comes to projects involving newer technology, such as fracking. The public may have questions that are more fundamental than where a project will be built. Earlier engagement in infrastructure planning will give debates like these more space

to discuss which technologies are best suited to meeting the needs identified. They will involve complex questions, but evidence suggests that people are more than ready to play their part. On energy, for example, research has found that the public understands and expects change in how we meet our energy needs and notes that “if actors do not consider and take into account public values in their decision making, resistance to energy system transformations or conflict over particular issues is more likely to result.”<sup>7</sup>

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The positive flip side of this is that working to understand public values and opinions, and pursuing change in a way that accommodates them, has the potential to form a “social contract for change”.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps another way of thinking about the public mandate that infrastructure planning will need.

The draft infrastructure bill offers little progress in this regard. It fails to acknowledge the tenacity of local and national opposition to large scale infrastructure projects and the need for a new approach. Public consultation on the sector infrastructure plans is indicated, but no detail is provided on what it will look like. If it is merely an opportunity to comment on final drafts of the plans, it will be little better than the project by project consultation currently available. Building a public mandate for new infrastructure will require far more.

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## Democracy at the core



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Letting democracy into the process of infrastructure planning sits well with the social democratic tradition, and commitment to devolution offers a powerful way of making dialogue happen.

Opposite is an outline of the approach set out in the draft infrastructure bill. It indicates where two interventions could build dialogue into the process: a stakeholder council to inform the national infrastructure assessment and city and county dialogues to inform sector infrastructure plans.

Public dialogue should be part of the national infrastructure commission’s core remit, rather than a bolt on. This should be reflected in commissioner appointments, with at least one or two commissioners recruited for their expertise in public dialogue. And it should be reflected in commission staffing, with a small team dedicated to supporting the stakeholder council and the localised public dialogues indicated in the diagram opposite.

As with any public body, the commission’s allocation of resources will be under scrutiny. It may be tempting to see public dialogue as a ‘nice to have’. But as we have argued, and as past infrastructure delays and failures more ably demonstrate, successful dialogue is at the heart of whether the commission will succeed in its brief. There is a strong case for allocating resources to this important aspect of their work, to ensure long term success.

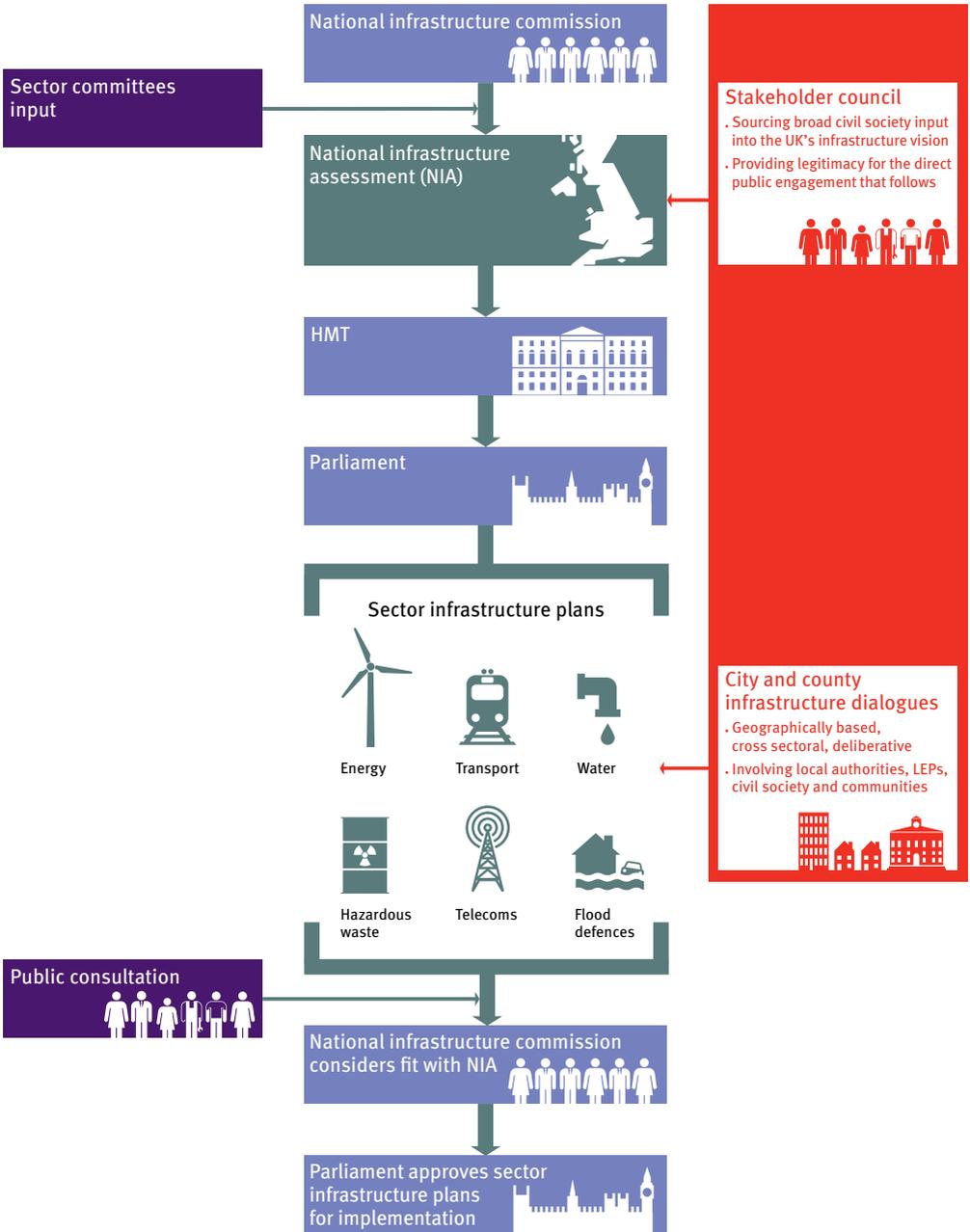
The government’s infrastructure pipeline currently contains 646 projects. Fifty seven of these are onshore wind projects, likely to face some level of opposition.<sup>9</sup> Some of these 646 projects will face few obstacles, but many will be drawn into protracted planning battles that sap the resources of those involved, such as local authorities, and sap the willingness of communities to consider and accept infrastructure projects in the future. Investing in substantive public dialogue will not avoid opposition entirely but it is an investment worth making, laying strong foundations for the public mandate and buy in that will see infrastructure projects move from plans on paper to reality.

# Including public dialogue in infrastructure planning

Planned external input

The process as set out in Armit's draft infrastructure bill

Where public dialogue could fit



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## A stakeholder council: informing the national infrastructure assessment

The infrastructure planning process, as envisaged by Armit, has two stages. First, a national infrastructure assessment will identify key needs around the country. Sector infrastructure plans will then decide the nature and location of the infrastructure that will meet the identified needs.

Building public engagement into this process will require different approaches. The opportunity to provide input will inevitably be more attractive and tangible to members of the public when it is rooted in their locality. But this will only be possible at the sector plans stage and engagement cannot be delayed until then. The national assessment will be the backdrop to localised consultation. People need confidence that they benefited from a range of inputs they recognise and trust, and to accept it as an approach with boundaries they are happy to work within.

A stakeholder council sitting alongside the commission will allow it to retain strategic focus, whilst ensuring that engagement is built into the process as a whole. The council would fill a dual role:

- co-ordinating input into the national infrastructure assessment and subsequent reviews of it;
- overseeing the city and county dialogues that inform the sector infrastructure plans.

The mix of representatives on the council will need to reflect different interests and build trust amongst a wide range of constituencies. In addition to business groups, they could include, for example, trade unions, environmental and conservation organisations, professional associations, groups representing different age groups, the interests of the low paid and unemployed, and infrastructure users, eg rail, road, cycling, energy consumers, water consumers etc.

They will be able to provide insight into which outcomes the people they represent or work with value most, their views on the different ways infrastructure can achieve them and the trade-offs that will inevitably be involved. They will also be able

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The NHS Citizen approach is an innovative way of sourcing a wide range of public views.”

to ensure that infrastructure planning focuses on enabling outcomes that society values.

Members of the council would be expected to reach out and source views on the infrastructure assessment among organisations working on similar issues to them. More importantly, they would be encouraged to get views from the sections of the public they work with, such as their members.

There is a risk that the national assessment is too intangible to get direct input from members of the public. But organisations on the stakeholder council will be well placed to initiate consultation that can make the relevance clearer to the people they work with, enabling them to elicit and feedback their views. This approach will lend legitimacy to their input and to the national infrastructure assessment overall, creating a strong foundation for directly engaging the public on the sector infrastructure plans. Regular rotation of council members will be important if they are to avoid institutional capture. This is a feature which NHS Citizen is building into its approach (see page 17).

There is already a tradition of early engagement within Whitehall, from which the stakeholder council can draw lessons. Since 2004 the Sciencewise programme has enabled public dialogue on emerging science and technology issues, such as nanotechnology. The principle behind this is to initiate dialogue well before major policy decisions are made. This approach would be very relevant to infrastructure questions.

In France the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) provides a much valued function that embeds dialogue into infrastructure decision making (see page 14). It has been very successful and increasingly carries out upstream engagement on infrastructure plans, in addition to project specific work. A stakeholder council and public dialogue function at the national infrastructure commission could apply much of the CNDP's approach to great effect. The NHS Citizen approach is an innovative way of sourcing a wide range of public views and funneling them up to inform strategic decision making.

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## The French National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP): effective participation from the start

The CNDP is an independent body created by the French government with a mandate to ensure that the public participates in the planning of infrastructure projects. Projects of a certain scale or nature are automatically considered by the CNDP while others can be referred to it. The CNDP decides if a public debate is needed and either organises it or oversees it being run by the project team. It strives to ensure that all participants are considered equal and that there is genuine transparency of information.

The CNDP was originally conceived as a means of engaging the public on specific projects at an early enough stage of development to make real influence possible. Over time it has progressed to working further upstream, for example on the future development of Brittany's economic development and transport network.

Since 2002 a third of projects debated by the CNDP have been radically modified or abandoned, and another third have undergone significant changes. For example, when an airport link into central Paris was considered, the conclusion was to improve existing rail links, rather than build the proposed new railway. These statistics may alarm decision makers and infrastructure developers, but all parties understand the landscape, the point at which the debate is taking place and the prospects for change, rather than taking a defensive position.

In the UK this model could revitalise consultation on individual infrastructure projects. But it may have even greater application earlier on, for sourcing public input into the overall national infrastructure assessment.

No approach is wholly transferable, but the CNDP merits further investigation, as it has a strong track record, is widely respected and is seen as a valuable conduit for enabling public debate in the infrastructure planning process.

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## City and county infrastructure dialogues: informing sector plans

After completing the national infrastructure assessment, the commission will oversee two years of developing sector infrastructure plans. Where the national assessment may identify the need for additional connectivity in a particular region, or the need for a new reservoir, the sector plans will set out the form that connectivity will take, or where the reservoir should be sited.

The intention is for relevant government departments to oversee the production of these plans. There is a mention of public consultation, but no details about what form it could take. Without local input, there is a risk this process will just be a theoretical exercise. Although national in scope, infrastructure is always local in its impacts. The UK's infrastructure plans should, therefore, harness the power of devolution and reflect an understanding of what local economies need to prosper. They should be strongly informed by an understanding of what cities and counties see as their priorities, what will have appeal and support on the ground and the value placed on alternative ways of achieving objectives.

Enabling areas to be part of the discussion when options are under debate is far more likely to build longer term support for the projects ultimately agreed. This will be a particular strength where local areas are required to carry a heavier burden of impact for nationally significant projects. Their representatives are more likely to make the case for infrastructure if they feel they have had a meaningful opportunity to explore alternatives, maximise the benefits and limit the impacts.

The national infrastructure commission's public engagement function would manage these dialogues, with input and oversight from the stakeholder council. They would bring together local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), civil society groups and communities. Key features will be their independence, their deliberative nature and their cross-sectoral approach. The latter aspect is a particular asset. While the commission will identify the links between sector infrastructure plans, input from cities and counties will be inherently strategic and consider infrastructure in the round. Local authorities and LEPs will already have views on the

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infrastructure needed to realise their ambitions, the pros and cons of different options and public views on them. In many cases this includes 'larger than local' projects and their connection with nationally significant infrastructure.

Public dialogue of this nature will also be a vital conduit into communities and provide insight into the projects and approaches they will value, versus those that will face significant opposition. Communities are often the most tireless opponents of new infrastructure. Engaging them in dialogue will be invaluable at the point when options can be debated and when decisions about their area's role in delivering national infrastructure are really open to discussion.

The current time given for developing sector infrastructure plans is two years. If they are to be meaningfully informed by public dialogue then the timescale is tight. LEPs currently offer the most obvious scale to carry out dialogue. Even assuming some rationalisation of LEPs, as recommended by the Adonis growth review, this still means around 20-25 dialogues. If the value of investing in public dialogue upfront is genuinely recognised, then it will be necessary to extend the timescale for sector plans and allocate resources appropriately.

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## NHS Citizen: negotiating major change

Infrastructure has a lot in common with the NHS. People rely heavily on both but largely take them for granted, and are resistant to disruption and change. Change is inevitable though, and the question of how to involve the public is a vital one. NHS Citizen is a new collaborative model being planned by the NHS in an effort to bring citizen voices directly into strategic decision making. Even the concept and approach is being designed openly with public meetings. It will have three 'spaces':

- **Discover:** A digital platform where people can discuss NHS issues and connect with participation opportunities already underway. Non-digital opportunities will also be provided. Overall, it will provide insight into the 'state of the conversation' on health and the NHS.
- **Gather:** This will facilitate people in gathering around issues of shared concern. They will be able to access support to work together on how to raise the profile of the issue they care about, for example by putting it to the NHS England board at assembly meetings.
- **Assembly meeting:** The most complex issues will be considered in twice yearly assembly meetings. Where an issue warrants further investigation the assembly can commission citizen panels. This will be an opportunity for citizens to meet face to face with the NHS England board. There will be term limits on being an assembly member.

This is a powerful example of an organisation building dialogue into its decision making and being willing to accept some of the uncertainty that comes with that.

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## Other benefits of public dialogue



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The complex and evolving nature of the Armitth commission’s work will make it difficult to follow the debate on infrastructure, but a public dialogue function will help this. It can provide a space for new ideas to emerge and be tested with civil society and the public. In particular, a richer process of dialogue may have a greater chance of stimulating new ideas for demand side solutions and infrastructure ownership.

Infrastructure is not an end in itself. It should be a route to better social outcomes and greater resilience. Armitth’s approach indicates that infrastructure planning will take account of climate change goals and a strong relationship with the Committee on Climate Change will assist with this. But infrastructure planning should also be open to the idea that some of its aims could be achieved through other means. The UK’s energy demand, for example, is not fixed. Assumptions made about what energy infrastructure is needed should be strongly informed by the potential reduction in demand that could be achieved via a national energy efficiency programme. Such an approach is likely to be cheaper and will avoid building infrastructure which subsequently becomes obsolete with greater efficiency.

People are often most concerned about whether new projects are actually needed. More open dialogue about how need is identified and the merits of alternative means of reaching the same outcome will do a lot to increase the credibility of infrastructure planning with the public.

Questions around who benefits from and owns infrastructure are also growing in prominence. They can be influential factors in determining whether the public supports a project or not. Innovative approaches, such as Good Energy’s local tariff, which offers reduced rates for customers living near a wind farm, are helping to build support for infrastructure which may otherwise have been opposed. Crowd funding for renewable energy projects is also growing in profile, as is talk of green ISAs, through which consumers could directly benefit from the infrastructure they fund.

The social democratic tradition also has a strong focus on the co-operative approach, which is growing in the energy sector. Prescribing the ownership of infrastructure and the

sharing of benefits will be beyond the remit of Sir John Armit's process. But a more open process of dialogue will allow consideration of different approaches to flourish, build support for innovation, strengthen dialogue about how to secure benefits for communities from privately owned infrastructure and help to identify which approaches will achieve public support.

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## Conclusion



Without better public dialogue UK infrastructure planning is unlikely to work effectively. Delivery will remain slow, fractious and won't provide the certainty that investors need.

But public support can be achieved if dialogue is built into the infrastructure planning process. With a core function included in the commission and two substantive programmes of dialogue at key points in the commission's work, the Armitth proposal could deliver both better planning and a public mandate for it.

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Infrastructure will never be free of controversy and opposition. By its nature and scale it involves upheaval and a mix of benefits and impacts that do not always feel fair or worthwhile to the public. But, at its best, infrastructure should provide significant value to society, the economy and the environment. To have a hope of achieving that consistently, a shared understanding of intended outcomes and infrastructure's role in realising them, as well as acceptance of the likely impacts, is necessary. Such understanding and public acceptance will always be elusive unless it is the starting point for infrastructure planning.

Public dialogue should be built in from the beginning of the process, when a national overview is being developed, and at the detailed plan stage, when the realities of infrastructure delivery for communities around the country can be influenced.

With consensus on the infrastructure challenges that face the UK, we can't afford to watch as project after project becomes mired in delay and confrontation. Armitth's proposed approach would inject much needed strategy into infrastructure planning, but its benefits will only be realised if the strategy is matched by an equal commitment to public dialogue. The infrastructure that results will be better, as will be the quality of our democracy.



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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> City Growth Commission, 2014, *Connected cities: the link to growth*, RSA
- <sup>2</sup> Labour Policy Review, 2013, *The Armitt Review: an independent review of long term infrastructure planning*
- <sup>3</sup> CBI, 2014, *Building trust: making the public case for infrastructure*
- <sup>4</sup> HM Treasury, December 2014, *National Infrastructure Pipeline*
- <sup>5</sup> Ed Balls, 10 July 2013, 'Labour's vision for a green economic future', *New Statesman*
- <sup>6</sup> CBI, 2014, *Building trust: making the public case for infrastructure*
- <sup>7</sup> N Pidgeon et al, 2013, *Transforming the UK energy system: public values, attitudes and acceptability*, UKERC
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>9</sup> HM Treasury, December 2014, *National Infrastructure Pipeline*



“Britain’s infrastructure needs to change significantly over the next decade to become both smarter and greener. This cannot be something which is ‘done to’ people, it must be done by and with the people of this country, in everyone’s interest. This paper seeks to set out the way in which the public mandate for low carbon infrastructure can be strengthened so we can build out the infrastructure we need.”

Chi Onwurah MP

“Opening up decision making can be an intimidating prospect, but it will be richer as a result. And this bold step is essential if we are to deliver the infrastructure our country urgently requires to meet citizens’ needs, remain competitive and help us tackle climate change.”

Huw Irranca-Davies MP

“The public have to pay for and live with low carbon infrastructure as well as using it. Getting wider support is essential not just for getting what we need built, but also for democratic legitimacy. This report is an essential guide to how we can do that.”

Dr Matthew Lockwood, senior research fellow,  
Energy Policy Group, University of Exeter

“Meaningful public dialogue is essential. It starts with trusting people to understand the challenges and make decent choices. The evidence says they will. Without decent public dialogue, people will simply say ‘no’ to change they don’t understand to meet needs they don’t recognise for benefits they don’t value.”

Simon Roberts, chief executive, Centre for  
Sustainable Energy