

The Right Honourable Rachel Reeves, Chancellor of the Exchequer
11 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

September 2024

Dear Chancellor,

Re: UNLOCKING CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE BY INVESTING IN ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING EXPERTISE

The Autumn Budget and single-year Spending Review offer an historic opportunity for the Government to deliver long-term economic growth, make Britain a Clean Energy Superpower and begin to tackle the housing crisis. We are writing to you as a coalition of environmental organisations, businesses and unions to urge you to increase funding and capacity across the planning system, specifically for environmental and community engagement expertise. Without extra resources across government and local authorities, we will fail to halt nature's decline and achieve decarbonisation by 2030.

All infrastructure and development projects rely on high quality, timely planning advice and decisions. Whether a local housing initiative or offshore windfarm, proposed applications often have implications for biodiversity and must undergo environmental scrutiny to receive consent. Undertaken by a network of local planners, statutory nature conservation bodies and environmental specialists, Environmental Impact assessments aim to ensure that infrastructure and development projects are strategically located, improve the natural environment and bring benefits to local communities.

However, due to sustained underinvestment, a lack of capacity in environmental expertise across government and local authorities is causing significant delays within the planning system. Between 2022 and 2023, Natural England failed to meet deadlines for 17.1% of nationally significant infrastructure project applications and for over a fifth of the deadlines missed, due to under resourcing and workload issues.¹ Similarly, for local infrastructure and development project applications, Natural England missed nearly 20% of its statutory deadlines, with capacity and higher than normal levels of staff churn responsible for 83.28% of these delays.² As ambition for renewable deployment, housing building and transport rightly increase, without significant investment pressure on an already creaking system will continue to mount.

There are significant socioeconomic implications of delayed infrastructure and development projects. Research conducted by the RSPB estimates that for every 1GW of offshore wind installed, the UK economy receives £2.4 billion of investment 750 FTE jobs in construction over 4.5 years, and up to 85 FTE jobs in operation.³ Similarly, Renewable UK found that onshore wind projects can provide local communities with up to £75 million per year in targeted benefit schemes⁴. There are also significant climate and environmental consequences of poor infrastructure and development applications. Ill-located projects sometimes have to site

¹ Natural England Freedom of Information Request.

² [2022-23 Annual report to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/118842/2022-23-annual-report-to-the-department-of-levelling-up-housing-and-communities.pdf)

³ Rayment, R. (2024) Seabirds, Offshore Wind and Marine Development – The Benefits of Nature Positive Marine Spatial Planning. *A commissioned Economics Briefing Note for the RSPB*.

⁴ [Dear Prime Minister, for communities to benefit from onshore wind, you need to unblock planning. \(renewableuk.com\)](https://renewableuk.com/press-releases/dear-prime-minister-for-communities-to-benefit-from-onshore-wind-you-need-to-unblock-planning/)

cabling and grid connections directly through areas and landscapes designated their ecological significance, irreversibly damaging precious habitats and costing applicants millions in mitigation and compensation solutions.

We were encouraged by your announcement in July that local authorities would be supported with 300 additional planning officers. Set in context, however, this welcome increase is small in the face of the challenge, equating to less than one extra officer per Local Planning Authority. It was recently reported that Natural England faced a £14 million budget cut, representing around 190 FTE jobs.⁵ This would directly impact their ability to assess planning applications at pace. Additionally, 26% of Local Planning Authorities have no access to ecological expertise⁷ and only 5% had sufficient ecological resource to scrutinise all applications potentially impacting biodiversity when surveyed prior to mandatory biodiversity net gain.⁶ Without immediate increases in funding and capacity for environmental expertise across the planning system, renewable infrastructure, housebuilding, and nature targets will not be achieved.

We recommend:

- Additional funding allocations under the Spending Review to support planning related functions and environmental expertise in Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Marine Management Organisation, Historic England and Local Planning Authorities, including National Park Planning Authorities
- Resolving pay-related increases with unions for public sector bodies, to overcome recruitment and retention issues.
- Establishing regional 'Centres of Excellence' to share planning and environmental expertise for high priority applications while long-term capacity building is underway.⁷ Priority must be given to those regions with highest expected housebuilding and renewable deployment.
- Working with Skills England to prioritise identification of apprenticeship, private-sector secondments and training opportunities within the planning and environmental fields. This work should include ositively and proactively raising the public profile of the planning profession to encourage the training, recruitment and retention of planners to ensure a sustainable employment pipeline.

We come together as representatives of industry, the environment and public sector employees to highlight the urgency of the situation. We will not achieve your rightly ambitious renewables, housebuilding and nature targets without a rapid redeployment of public finances to planning and environmental expertise. The Autumn Budget and Spending Review on 30th October offer an opportunity to change that.

We have submitted detailed analysis on how best to utilise the Spending Review for nature-friendly planning reform to HM Treasury alongside this letter.⁸

Your sincerely,

⁵ [Natural England budget sees £14m drop for first time in five years \(endsreport.com\)](https://www.endsreport.com)

⁶ <https://media.adeptnet.org.uk/sites/default/files/media/2022-07/ALGE-ADEPT Report on LPAs and BNG.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/planning-waste-and-environment/major-infrastructure-projects-including-nsips/nsip-centre-of-excellence-information-for-local-authorities>

⁸ https://www.wcl.org.uk/docs/Link_CSR%20submission_September%202024.pdf

Wildlife and Countryside Link, Prospect, Aldersgate Group, E3G, The Nature Conservancy, The National Trust, Regen, Possible, Greenpeace, The Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Cornwall Seal Group Research Trust, Froglife, Angling Trust, CIEEM, The Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment, Campaign for National Parks, Buglife, Bumblebee Conservation Trust, The Rivers Trust, Badger Trust, Open Spaces Society, Butterfly Conservation, People's Trust for Endangers Species, Plantlife, National Forum for Biological Recording, Friends of the Earth, Bat Conservation Trust, Woodland Trust, The Climate Coalition and Earth Trust.





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Bat Conservation Trust



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Replies can be sent to matt@wcl.org.uk