



For the attention of Committee for Infrastructure
C/O Michael Potter, Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure
Northern Ireland Assembly

NILGA Submission – Committee for Infrastructure Call for Evidence
Review of Planning Decisions for Regionally Significant Projects (RSPs)

21st May 2026

1. NILGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's call for evidence on the review of planning decisions for Regionally Significant Projects (RSPs). As the representative body for local government, NILGA is clear that the planning system must be efficient, transparent and accountable, while properly balancing regional priorities with local impacts.
2. NILGA emphasises that this review must be aligned with the ongoing Planning Improvement Programme led jointly by the Department for Infrastructure and local government. To proceed in isolation would create unnecessary duplication, weaken coherence and risk fragmented reform. A coordinated, system-wide approach is essential if the Committee is to deliver credible and lasting improvement.
3. From a local government perspective, councils fully recognise that the timeliness of decisions on major and regionally significant applications is a material issue. However, such decisions sit within a broader project delivery framework, and delay frequently arises from statutory consultee responses, application complexity and the risk of Judicial Review. The evidence from councils, demonstrates that decision-making times must be assessed within this wider system context rather than attributed narrowly to one part of the process.
4. NILGA recognises the importance of investor confidence and the contribution of an effective planning system to economic growth and infrastructure delivery. However, certainty will not be secured by prioritising speed alone. It must be delivered through consistent, system-wide improvement that addresses the underlying causes of delay and strengthens confidence in the integrity of the process.
5. NILGA is clear that accelerated decision-making must not come at the expense of robust environmental assessment, transparency or meaningful community engagement. Any reform that weakens these safeguards would undermine public confidence and diminish the legitimacy of outcomes. The appropriate objective is a balanced system that enables timely delivery while maintaining trust and

accountability.

6. Evidence across the system also highlights the critical role of statutory consultees and the wider planning and appeals framework. Capacity constraints, resource pressures and the complexity of technical assessments can all contribute materially to delay. If reform is to be effective, it must address resourcing, set clearer expectations and promote earlier engagement in order to reduce duplication and improve overall system performance.
7. Community and public perspectives must be properly reflected in any credible decision-making framework. Although Regionally Significant Projects deliver regional benefits, they are located within specific council areas and can have profound local impacts.
8. Presently, applications submitted to local councils as local developments can be called in by the Department without clear or transparent criteria. This creates uncertainty for applicants, councils and the public, and weakens confidence in the process. NILGA therefore recommends a review of the Department for Infrastructure's oversight role to ensure that any intervention in council decision-making is limited, proportionate, transparent and timely, with greater accountability for performance in relation to holding directions and notifications. The establishment of clear criteria to invoke call-in and a process to allow for local engagement would improve transparency and ensure local views are taken into account. Without this, confidence in centrally determined decisions will inevitably be weakened.
9. Taken together, these issues demonstrate that the challenges associated with RSP decision-making are systemic and cannot be resolved through isolated or partial measures. They require stronger coordination, greater clarity and better alignment across all actors involved. The focus of reform should therefore be on improving overall system effectiveness and timeliness, reducing unnecessary duplication and delay, and addressing the impact of Judicial Review where appropriate.
10. Accordingly, NILGA recommends that the Committee's review should:
 - 10.1 Align any changes arising from this review with the existing Planning Improvement Programme so that reform is coherent, coordinated and avoids unnecessary duplication across the system.
 - 10.2 Publish clear and transparent criteria for Departmental call-in decisions, and require a defined process for local engagement when applications are called in, so that councils, applicants and communities understand how decisions are made.
 - 10.3 Embed structured engagement between central government and councils at key stages of the process, ensuring that local knowledge, community impact and place-based evidence consistently inform outcomes.

- 10.4 Review the role, responsiveness and resourcing of statutory consultees, and strengthen pre-application coordination, so that avoidable delay, duplication and uncertainty are reduced across the wider planning system.
 - 10.5 Protect a balanced planning framework that supports timely infrastructure delivery while maintaining robust environmental assessment, legal certainty, transparency and public confidence.
11. In conclusion, NILGA supports a more efficient and joined-up approach to planning for Regionally Significant Projects, but reform must be evidence-based, balanced and designed with councils rather than around them. Greater speed, on its own, will not resolve the underlying causes of delay. Lasting improvement will depend on a planning system that is clearer, better coordinated and more accountable, with councils fully recognised as essential partners in shaping place, representing communities and supporting delivery on the ground.