



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Dear Sir/Madam,

I write as the MP for Runnymede and Weybridge in response to the Government's consultation on operational reforms to the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project consenting process.

As you may be aware from my previous responses to planning consultations, I have consistently advocated for changes to our national planning laws to make these fairer, greener, and more community focused. My previous responses can be found here: [www.drben-spencer.org.uk/campaigns/Clean%20Up%20Our%20Waterways%20and%20Protect%20Our%20Natural%20Environment](http://www.drben-spencer.org.uk/campaigns/Clean%20Up%20Our%20Waterways%20and%20Protect%20Our%20Natural%20Environment)

I am proud of my work in this area, and the response and approach of the Government on these issues. This includes introducing my own Private Member's Bill to parliament, the Planning (Enforcement) Bill, which sought to address concerns over serious and repeated planning breaches, as well as the impact these can have on our communities and natural environment. I am pleased that aspects of this are being taken forward in the Government's Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.

It is vital that local communities are involved and engaged throughout the planning process. This remains an important principle even when dealing with nationally significant infrastructure projects, as these can have a material impact on many local communities.

I welcome that the Government's consultation will expedite the consent process for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects through a number of key proposals including:

- Expanding the services offered by the Planning Inspectorate at the pre-application stage (in advance of development consent order (DCO) application submission) to support applicants. These enhanced services will range from assistance with drafting documents to advice on the merits of the application, early identification and mitigation of issues which are likely to come up during examination of the project by examining authorities, and support in engaging expert Government bodies. This enhanced support will be provided and charged for on a tiered basis, depending on the complexity of the project.
- The introduction of a new fast track route to consent for projects capable of meeting certain quality standards. These projects will be supported to progress through the process with a non-statutory 12-month target timescale from DCO application

acceptance to Secretary of State's final decision. The Planning Inspectorate's role will be enhanced to advise applicants on demonstrating how a proposal satisfies the proposed fast track quality standard.

- Ensuring effective and proportionate consultation through an early 'adequacy of consultation' milestone, in which applicants, local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate will work together to assess the appropriateness of proposed consultation arrangements early in the pre-application process.

'Adequacy' should ensure enough time for residents to respond, including additional time where the consultation material is particularly technical, complex or lengthy; as well as taking into account key stakeholders, breadth of communication and publication.

These improvements could deliver material improvements to the engagement and speed of national infrastructure projects, and I support the proposals set out in the consultation.

### **River Thames Scheme**

The importance of these changes, and the impact they could have, can be understood most clearly when compared to the current system. This is shown by the process underway with the River Thames Scheme (RTS) in my constituency.

The RTS is an ambitious, large-scale infrastructure project which – in the coming years - will see the construction of two new waterways to provide flood relief to thousands of homes and businesses in Runnymede and surrounding areas.

In addition to reducing flood risk, the RTS will also deliver a number of wider community benefits, including sustainable travel routes, new green spaces with opportunities for leisure pursuits, and areas for canoeing and kayaking. The scheme will also play a vital role in increasing biodiversity. This will benefit and be used by the local community. Effective community engagement is therefore vital if the maximum benefits of the project are to be delivered.

This project is a £500million, multi-agency project, vast in terms of size, cost and complexity. I am aware how hard all parties involved have been working to progress the scheme, but the nature of the project and the current process means that, despite work on this project having already taken place for a number of years, it is not expected to be completed until 2030.

Reform of the consenting process for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects is therefore important and much needed. The proposals contained in the Government's consultation will be vital for ensuring that future projects proceed at pace, driving employment opportunities, fuelling growth and benefiting communities.

### **Timings**

It is now 10 years since the inception of the RTS, and it is envisaged that the scheme will be put out to statutory consultation early in 2024 as part of the DCO pre-application process. One thing that I hear loud and clear from my constituents in relation to the RTS is "*why can't we just get it done?*".

I sympathise greatly with this sentiment expressed by residents whose day-to-day lives are impacted by the worry of regular flooding. I have relayed this message clearly to the project leaders Surrey County Council and the Environment Agency, as well as in my recent meeting with the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Each of these stakeholders has stated that the current statutory process for reaching DCO application stage makes expediting this critical project extremely difficult. I therefore welcome the proposals contained in the consultation for streamlining the DCO pre-application process; in particular, enhancing the support provided to applicants by the Planning Inspectorate on a tiered basis, depending on a project's complexity as outlined above.

The focused support from the Planning Inspectorate in maintaining pace on the applicant's programme, and support towards the fast-track quality standard to access the streamlined project approvals process, would also have a material impact on delivering the benefits of nationally significant infrastructure projects faster, with the possibility of also reducing costs.

## **Community Engagement**

As I have been clear in every planning consultation on which I have provided feedback, public participation and community support for projects of a significant scale is key to their success.

Done well, consultations have the potential to attract maximum engagement and allow communities to communicate their concerns and aspirations for projects so that these can harness positive outcomes for residents. This local knowledge can also benefit the project as a whole, providing insight that may not exist in the professional project team.

As I stated in my response to the Government's Planning for the Future consultation in October 2020, ensuring that information on planning proposals is widely accessible, and ensuring that there is a sufficient public consultation period, is vital for ensuring democratic input in relation to major projects. Although I am supportive of the proposals contained in the consultation which are aimed at speeding up the process for valuable infrastructure projects, this must never be at the expense of proper public engagement. I agree with the emphasis in the document on "proportionate consultation" which seeks to address the tension between ensuring proper engagement and the desire of communities to "*just get on with it*" for projects with evident benefits for the public.

I welcome that the Government has dedicated considerable thought to this critical issue, including its plan to revise pre-application guidance to provide greater clarity on community engagement expectations and proportionality throughout the consenting process. I am supportive of the proposed 'adequacy of consultation' milestone which envisages applicants, local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate working together to assess the adequacy of proposed consultation arrangements early in the pre-application process.

As the consultation acknowledges, Local Authorities can often be intermediaries between residents and applicants for projects of large-scale significance. Their role is vital in helping to ensure that local issues are considered and understood. I welcome the additional round of funding to the Innovation and Capacity fund to support local authorities with allocating sufficient resource to engage effectively with DCO applications.

Finally, the move to digital submission and publication of key documents must not mean that residents without the know-how or tools to access them should be disenfranchised in the planning process. Applicants and local authorities (where appropriate) should be mandated to consider publishing planning documents for consultation through a range of media to make these as accessible to the public as possible.

## **Environmental gains**

I welcome the Government's stated aim of realising better outcomes for the environment through its planned changes to the DCO process (albeit that this is not the subject of the current consultation), including introducing biodiversity net gain and developing principles for marine net gain for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects.

Local environmental considerations will clearly be as important as national "net" results in increasing biodiversity. My constituency has a number of waterways running through it, including the Thames, Bourne, and Wey rivers. Protection and enhancement of riparian biodiversity is therefore a crucial aspect of the RTS, alongside its primary aim of flood prevention.

Cleaning up our waterways is a key component of my local plan. I am glad that Runnymede and Weybridge has a number of active groups dedicated to the protection of local wildlife and waterways such as the Broadwater Lake Conservation Society amongst others. A proportionate approach to planning should ensure that local environmental groups and experts are engaged in appropriate way to provide local insights, in addition to statutory

consultees on environmental matters.

### **Building the skills to support our infrastructure ambitions**

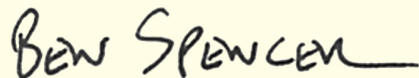
The Government has rightly recognised that to fuel our vital infrastructure project aims the UK will need to build capacity for our future workforce. I am therefore strongly supportive of the funding announced by the Government as part of this consultation to help local authorities to recruit and develop skilled planners and built environment professionals. I would like the Government and local authorities to go further and identify what ability such projects may have to support local apprenticeships and other training opportunities.

One of my key local aims is to strengthen training opportunities between our local schools and businesses, to ensure that our young people can achieve their career aspirations and our industries have the workforce they need to fuel growth. Both schools and businesses tell me of the benefits this brings, giving students invaluable contacts and insight into future training and employment opportunities.

By placing this goal at the centre of large infrastructure projects we could not only deliver even more benefit to communities, but also grow the skilled workforce of tomorrow.

I would of course be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this response in further detail, as required.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

**Dr Ben Spencer MP**