# National Infrastructure Commission highlights need for integrated governance and local action in UK infrastructure overhaul



The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) has recently published responses to its priorities for the second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2), which is due to be released in 2023. The NIC set out key areas of focus, including digital transformation, decarbonising energy, infrastructure resilience, and urban and inter-urban mobility. Over 100 stakeholders contributed to a consultation on NIA2’s approach, among them the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE), which provided evidence reflecting several pressing concerns in infrastructure planning and delivery.

The consultation responses broadly supported the nine challenges identified by the NIC but called for heightened attention on issues such as biodiversity loss, infrastructure maintenance, and the embodied carbon footprint of construction materials. ICE emphasised the necessity of strong governance frameworks, systems thinking, sustainable funding streams, and greater devolution to regional and local authorities to more effectively meet these challenges. ICE also highlighted the importance of gaining public support for the transition to net zero and referenced the potential of ‘pay-as-you-go’ road charging as a future funding mechanism. The NIC’s report underscores the scale of the challenge: many respondents pointed out that a lack of coordination in critical areas like energy security complicates efforts to reduce emissions. There was a strong consensus in favour of decentralised action led by subnational authorities, particularly in promoting local energy generation. Opportunities also exist in reducing energy demand through efficiency measures and behaviour change, though these remain underexploited. However, confidence in technologies such as hydrogen and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) was more cautious, reflecting ongoing uncertainties about their practical roles in decarbonisation.

ICE broadly agrees with the NIC’s identification of the key infrastructure challenges but stresses that achieving the desired outcomes requires integrated, systemic policy approaches rather than siloed efforts. Looking at infrastructure as an interconnected system is crucial, and the NIC’s acknowledgment of governance, funding, devolution, and systems-thinking as essential components is encouraging. The recent NIC progress report also warns that policy gaps threaten the UK’s long-term infrastructure goals, raising the urgency of addressing these issues.

In a parallel development, the NIC has explored how infrastructure can contribute to improving quality of life across the UK, one of its four overarching objectives alongside economic growth, competitiveness, and climate resilience. Quality of life is broadly defined by the NIC as an objective and subjective assessment of wellbeing, incorporating factors like wealth, health, and life satisfaction. Recent data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggest average life satisfaction in the UK dipped during 2020-21, likely reflecting the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. There are also notable regional disparities in quality of life, which the government aims to mitigate through its levelling up agenda.

The NIC’s report highlights that the relationship between economic infrastructure and quality of life is complex and often indirect. Infrastructure can affect quality of life through multiple channels such as health outcomes, environmental quality, connectivity, affordability, convenience, and employment opportunities. While infrastructure has traditionally provided vital services and economic benefits, poor planning can sometimes lead to negative social and environmental impacts, including exacerbation of regional inequalities due to uneven access or resilience.

Placing quality of life at the heart of infrastructure planning involves maximising benefits while minimising adverse effects. This requires good design that is responsive to community needs, enhances a sense of control among users, respects natural environments, and ensures resilience against shocks. Early engagement with local communities and incorporating their input into project design are vital steps. ICE’s recent work on levelling up has underscored how local needs assessments and community participation are critical for delivering social as well as infrastructural value.

To support these aims, the NIC has created a framework for measuring infrastructure’s impact on quality of life using objective indicators such as air quality, data coverage, household spending, and user satisfaction surveys. However, the report acknowledges data gaps, especially at local levels, that need to be addressed to track progress effectively.

This growing emphasis on linking infrastructure with quality of life aligns with broader policy goals such as levelling up and responding to the climate emergency. ICE’s consultation responses echoed the sentiment that these goals cannot be tackled in isolation but require integrated programmes that deliver multiple social and environmental outcomes simultaneously. The NIC report advocates for strategic frameworks and principles that embed quality of life considerations firmly into infrastructure decision-making processes.

Beyond these thematic insights, the NIC’s NIA2 will outline a comprehensive vision for transforming the UK’s infrastructure over the next three decades. Recommendations under consideration include accelerating renewable energy deployment, electrifying heating systems in buildings, enhancing public transport in major cities, improving road maintenance, and promoting resource efficiency through recycling targets—specifically aiming for a 65% recycling rate by 2035. Achieving these ambitions will require significant public and private investment, long-term policy stability, and streamlined planning mechanisms.

Various professional bodies have responded to these proposals. For example, the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) supports industrial decarbonisation and the reinforcement of packaging and waste policy reforms. Similarly, the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) has highlighted the importance of including the resources and waste sector in the NIA2, supporting accelerated recycling progress and policy reforms for better waste management.

Local authorities and combined mayoral authorities play a pivotal role in delivering these ambitions on the ground. Reports suggest a shift away from centrally allocated transport funding towards devolved, flexible, long-term budgets to better reflect local priorities. Extending and devolving funds such as the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund directly to local bodies is advocated to facilitate targeted investments, including infrastructure for electric vehicle charging.

The National Infrastructure Assessment’s strategic themes—net zero, reducing environmental impacts, and levelling up—form the backbone of the UK’s infrastructure vision. Integrating digital technology to enhance infrastructure performance and adopting supportive regulatory measures, particularly under the UK’s Resources & Waste Strategy, are also key elements to drive the country’s transition towards sustainable, resilient infrastructure systems.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/new-nic-reports-support-ice-evidence-and-look-at-planning-for-quality-of-life), [[4]](https://www.iom3.org/resource/iom3-responds-to-national-infrastructure-assessment.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/new-nic-reports-support-ice-evidence-and-look-at-planning-for-quality-of-life), [[6]](https://www.walkermorris.co.uk/comment-opinion/national-infrastructure-assessment-2023-performance-and-priorities/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/new-nic-reports-support-ice-evidence-and-look-at-planning-for-quality-of-life)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/new-nic-reports-support-ice-evidence-and-look-at-planning-for-quality-of-life), [[2]](https://nic.org.uk/studies-reports/quality-of-life/), [[4]](https://www.iom3.org/resource/iom3-responds-to-national-infrastructure-assessment.html)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ice.org.uk/news-views-insights/inside-infrastructure/new-nic-reports-support-ice-evidence-and-look-at-planning-for-quality-of-life> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://nic.org.uk/studies-reports/quality-of-life/> - The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) defines quality of life as an objective and subjective assessment of an individual's overall wellbeing, encompassing factors such as wealth, health, and life satisfaction. The NIC's report outlines how infrastructure can impact quality of life through various domains, including health, local and natural surroundings, connections, affordability, comfort and convenience, and employment. It emphasizes the importance of good design and planning in infrastructure projects to enhance these aspects and suggests that infrastructure should be considered as a complete, interconnected system to achieve positive outcomes for communities.
3. <https://www.bclplaw.com/en-US/events-insights-news/second-national-infrastructure-assessment.html> - The National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2) outlines a comprehensive programme for transforming the UK's infrastructure over the next 30 years. Key recommendations include accelerating the deployment of renewable energy sources, electrifying heating systems in buildings, enhancing public transport in major cities, improving road maintenance, and implementing reforms to achieve a 65% recycling target by 2035. The report emphasizes the need for significant public and private investment, policy stability, and streamlined planning processes to meet these objectives and support economic growth and climate action.
4. <https://www.iom3.org/resource/iom3-responds-to-national-infrastructure-assessment.html> - The Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining (IOM3) responds to the National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2), highlighting the need for industrial decarbonisation, implementation of packaging policy reforms, and better understanding of commercial and industrial waste. IOM3 supports the recommendations for accelerating the deployment of renewable energy sources, electrifying heating systems, and improving recycling rates. The response underscores the importance of long-term policy stability and a skilled workforce to achieve a low-carbon, resilient, and resource-efficient society.
5. <https://www.ciwm.co.uk/ciwm/news-and-insight/poltech_blog_pages/the_second_national_infrastructure_assessment.aspx> - The Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) discusses the National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2), noting the inclusion of the resources and waste sector, which was absent in the first assessment. The report recommends accelerating progress towards a 65% recycling target by 2035 and implementing the 'simpler recycling' initiative. CIWM emphasizes the need for urgent action to meet these targets and supports the Commission's call for policy reforms to improve recycling rates and waste management practices.
6. <https://www.walkermorris.co.uk/comment-opinion/national-infrastructure-assessment-2023-performance-and-priorities/> - Walker Morris provides an overview of the National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2), highlighting three strategic themes: reaching net zero, reducing environmental impacts, and helping level up communities across the UK. The report identifies priorities such as decarbonising energy, improving recycling rates, and addressing long-term investment needs for surface transport. It also discusses the role of digital technology in enhancing infrastructure performance and the importance of supportive measures under the UK's Resources & Waste Strategy to achieve net zero across the sector by 2040.
7. <https://localpartnerships.gov.uk/2023/10/19/national-infrastructure-assessment/> - Local Partnerships discusses the role of local councils and mayoral combined authorities in delivering the National Infrastructure Commission's Second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA2). The report suggests moving away from centrally allocated funding for transport and towards flexible, long-term, devolved budgets for local authorities. It also recommends extending the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund and devolving it directly to local authorities, acknowledging their unique position to identify local charging needs and facilitate private investment in charging infrastructure.