

Regulation reset to fast-track homes, transport and clean energy

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Major boost to sustainable development, as £100 million invested to speed up planning approvals.

Communities will get new homes, better transport and cleaner energy sooner, thanks to a more dynamic, modern approach to regulation.

New guidelines in the form of Strategic Policy Statements will give Natural England and the Environment Agency – the two most powerful environmental regulators – a mandate to prioritise outcomes over process, speeding up decision-making while maintaining high environmental standards. This will be backed by £100 million, spread over three years, to fund specialist staff and modern digital systems, so regulators can help developers to complete environmental assessments more quickly and accurately – cutting costly delays.

A new Infrastructure Unit will keep major projects on track, tackling planning problems as they emerge, with the most complex issues passed to the Defra Infrastructure Board for further scrutiny. Moreover, a new Development Industry Council will bring developers and government together in the spring to discuss practical solutions to planning challenges.

That same drive to streamline decision-making is behind the appointment of a single, Lead Environmental Regulator for East West Rail. Rather than the developer dealing with a merry-go-round of overlapping environmental bodies, the Environment Agency will coordinate streamlined, joined-up advice from all relevant regulators. This more efficient and streamlined way of working will allow East West Rail to focus on delivering this transformative rail project for communities in Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Bedford and beyond.

East West Rail is set to unlock £6.7 billion in economic growth, support 100,000 new homes, and provide more frequent trains for passengers between Oxford and Cambridge. It represents a significant step towards delivering the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, which could add up to £78 billion to the UK economy by 2035 and supports the Chancellor's drive to move "further and faster" to kick-start growth.

Emma Reynolds, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said:

"Our regulators do vital work protecting the environment we all depend on. These Strategic Policy Statements give them a clear mandate to deliver on our twin missions – economic growth and nature recovery.

"Having one Lead Environmental Regulator in charge speeds up approvals and helps projects like East West Rail to progress at pace, without compromising our ironclad commitment to the environment. This is a win-win situation for jobs, prosperity and nature.

"Today marks a decisive shift in our drive to make regulation work for the people of Britain, as we build more homes, restore nature and strengthen our communities in a decade of national renewal."

Environment Agency Chief Executive Philip Duffy said:

“These measures will accelerate the Environment Agency’s ongoing shift from process-driven to outcomes-focused regulation, helping to unblock development while protecting the environment we all rely on.

“We will play a key role as Lead Environment Regulator for East West Rail, bringing developers and regulators together to prevent environmental damage and streamline approvals.”

Natural England Chief Executive Marian Spain said:

“The clear direction set out by government today directly aligns with our new corporate strategy, which sets how we are going further and faster to recover nature to support growth, public health and food security.

“Natural England’s work as Lead Environmental Regulator for the Lower Thames Crossing is already paying dividends, enabling faster decision-making for one of the greenest roads ever. We look forward to seeing similar results for the Environment Agency on the East West Rail project.”

David Hughes, Chief Executive Officer, East West Rail, said:

“We warmly welcome the appointment of a Lead Environmental Regulator for East West Rail. This single point of contact will make a huge difference, as it will ensure that key decisions can be made efficiently and effectively. Crucially, this will deliver momentum for the construction of the railway, helping us deliver infrastructure that works for nature and communities, allowing the region to feel the economic and social benefits of East West Rail far sooner than would have otherwise been the case.”

New Strategic Policy Statements for Natural England and the Environment Agency set out how the regulators should use constrained discretion to support sensible, place-based decision-making, including as part of planning approvals, while ensuring full compliance with environmental law. The regulators will use their professional judgement to reach faster decisions that protect nature while supporting the government’s growth mission. This will ultimately drive better outcomes for nature recovery, sustainable growth, housebuilding, and infrastructure delivery.

The appointment of a Lead Environmental Regulator for East West Rail builds on the model already being trialled for Falmouth Docks, as well as the Lower Thames Crossing. Natural England’s pilot role as Lead Environmental Regulator for the Lower Thames Crossing has been extended by eight months until September 2026, following early success in finding practical ways to streamline regulatory processes.

These measures directly support the government’s Plan for Change commitment to build 1.5 million homes and fast-track 150 planning decisions on major infrastructure projects by the end of this Parliament.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulation-reset-to-fast-track-homes-transport-and-clean-energy>