

Electricity Network Commissioner's report sets out an ambition to halve the time taken to deliver major grid investment – but does it go far enough?

The much-anticipated report by the Electricity Networks Commissioner, Nick Winser, lays bare the scale of the challenge to deliver the critical grid infrastructure that will enable UK's energy security and net zero goals – calling for the time to deliver upgrades to be halved from the current 10–14-year timescale.

The commissioner's letter to Grant Shapps makes 18 key recommendations that focus on the need for strategic planning, a streamlined regulatory and planning process, and greater public engagement.

Regen wrote to Grant Shapps in December to call for much greater urgency in readying the grid for net zero, and recently published a [report](#) highlighting the level of action required. We therefore welcome the recommendations in the Winser report. However, given the scale and urgency of the challenge, we think greater ambition is needed in both the recommendations and the government response.

Grant Shapps' response thanked the commissioner for his thorough examination of the issue and states that the recommendations are "broadly in line" with government thinking, but is largely non-committal.

Regen would welcome greater commitment to supply chain and skills development with a national task force and a government backed strategy – as has been announced for nuclear and offshore wind – to rapidly increase the workforce and secure the supply of high voltage cables and electrical equipment.

We are also calling for accelerated action to speed up connections to the grid for key net zero projects.

We now know the scale and importance of the grid challenge. We also have a clear set of recommendations on the actions that are needed. What the Secretary of State's response shows, however, is that we do not yet have the urgency and commitment from government to drive change at the speed and scale required.

Grid infrastructure challenge and ambition to halve delivery lead-times

Regen welcomes the report and recommendations by the Electricity Network's Commissioner, Nick Winser CBE. The commissioner's [report](#), produced with the Energy Systems Catapult, and accompanying [recommendation letter](#) clearly sets out the scale of challenge that must be overcome to accelerate the delivery of major transmission network infrastructure to support both the UK's energy security and net zero strategies.

As a headline ambition, the commissioner calls for a halving in the lead-time to deliver grid infrastructure from its current level of 12-14 years. This is essential for network investment to keep up with the rate of deployment of renewables and new nuclear.

The commissioner’s letter lays bare the challenge and the problems with the existing process:

- Lack of a strategic process to identify the need for new transmission assets.
- Regulatory process that is not “settled, streamlined, regular and operating at a system level”.
- Long and complex planning processes with “little political or engineering context being established previously or at a system level”.
- National Policy Statements (NPS) that are out of date and offer little guidance as to “national engineering and environment priorities and trade-offs”.
- Lack of public guidance and understanding about the need for transmission infrastructure, the choice of solution, environmental impacts and how to trade-off global, national, regional and local impacts.
- Supply chain challenges, including the supply of high voltage cables, inverters and transformers, and the need for tens of thousands of highly trained engineers and technicians.

Recommendations

The set of 18 recommendations in the commissioner’s letter focus on improvements to the underlying process – especially the need for joined up strategic planning and regulatory approval, streamlining the planning process, working on public acceptance and community engagement, efficient delivery and tackling supply chain issues. The calls for a national strategy and a move towards thinking about overall energy system needs, rather than just individual projects, would be a significant step forward.

The introduction of a **Strategic Spatial Energy Plan** alongside updates to the **NPS** and the provision of design principles should provide much needed clarity for the planning system. Future resourcing of the planning system is also an issue that needs to be addressed.

The creation of **zonal flexibility markets** is very much aligned with our thinking on the use of flexibility and energy storage to alleviate network constraints, allowing renewables to be connected quicker and for network investment to be optimised.

Regen supports all these recommendations, which are both sensible and necessary, and would highlight the following as particularly important:

Key Recommendations

- 1 Producing a **Strategic Spatial Energy Plan** that is then supported by a Centralised Strategic Network Plan. For years, Regen and others have said that “we need a plan”.
- 2 To assess the scope of new short-term and long-term regional flexibility assets and the urgent development of **zonal flexibility markets** to reduce transmission costs and enable renewables to be deployed earlier.
- 6 An urgent update to **National Policy Statements** to provide guidelines for infrastructure investment.
- 8 & 12 To provide greater **public guidance** on the need and design principles for grid investment supported by a focused information campaign.
- 13 Clear and public set of guidelines for **community benefits**.

14	A regulatory deal that places responsibility with the Transmission Operators to address supply chain constraints.
15	A major review of engineering and technician skills led by government.
16 & 17	Creation of an Energy System Delivery Board , and a Change Management Committee to implement the changes.

All the recommendations make sense and we particularly welcome the focus on public engagement and community benefits because we cannot achieve net zero, including securing support for the development of new infrastructure, without public support and understanding.

Going far enough?

The commissioner clearly sets out the challenge and the level of ambition needed. The question, however, is whether these recommendations go far enough in the face of the challenges now faced.

While supporting the existing recommendations, there is a sense that they are running with the grain of current thinking about the role of networks, the regulator and system operator and are supported by several existing initiatives. The focus is very much on the streamlining of the process with the important addition of a layer of strategic planning.

Whilst satisfactory, it is not radical. It is difficult to imagine how these measures alone will achieve the reduction in the timescale and accelerate the £140 billion plus investment that we know is needed. If, as the commissioner suggests, grid investment should be a national priority that learns from the vaccine taskforce, then we might have expected a broader approach and perhaps something like the launch of Great British Nuclear or the Offshore Wind Task Force.

The recommendation that calls for an assessment of skills needs is weak. We already know the scale of skills needed. The commissioner could have gone further and called for the creation of a specific skills and supply chain development programme/cross industry task force, again, as we have seen for the nuclear and offshore wind industries.

The key challenge of securing high voltage cables, transformers and inverters is not going to be met simply by calling for transmission operators to enter “long term relationships”. Other countries are taking far more proactive approaches with government-backed and financed long term deals with major equipment manufacturers and a drive for home manufacturing. If we are to compete in the market for major electrical equipment then we need a more radical approach.

Government response

Secretary of State, Grant Shapps, showed great excitement this week announcing new North Sea exploration licences which will have next to zero impact on the UK’s future energy supply. In contrast, his response letter to billions of pounds of network investment and tens of thousands of jobs, which will be critical for our energy future, is polite and positive but largely non-committal.

The Secretary of State thanked the commissioner for his thorough examination of the issue and recommendations, which are “broadly in line” with government thinking. He does acknowledge the need for government to change processes and structures, but this feels comfortable within the remit of regulators and officials rather than a national priority for government.

In short, we now know the scale and importance of the grid challenge. We also have a clear set of recommendations on the action required that the government broadly accepts. What we don't yet have is the urgency and commitment from government to drive change at the speed and scale required.