



Dithering not Delivering

Labour set to miss their 150 infrastructure project target as more than half of all decisions delayed

By Ben Hopkinson

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are the backbone of a growing economy. They include large energy plants, motorways, railways, and expansions to airports. On coming to power, Labour promised to accelerate their delivery, setting a target of making a decision on 150 major projects. However, that target is already in jeopardy – and it is partly ministers' own fault.

The path to approval for NSIPs has statutory timelines. It is meant to take approximately 15 months from the acceptance of an application to its decision. However, there is one stage that is consistently liable to delay: final approval by the relevant Secretary of State, which is meant to take three months but can be continually pushed back.

Of the 27 projects that have had a decision made or were expecting a decision to be made in 2025, 14 of them (52%) have seen a delay. In total, across the 14 delayed projects, ministers have been responsible for 1,333 days of dithering beyond the initial three-month period just this year. That's nearly four years of delay to major infrastructure projects just in 2025. That's time that these infrastructure projects will not get back.

Delays and uncertainty about approval makes it harder to build major infrastructure projects. An uncertain timeline for approval means that projects either have to risk demobilising staff or postpone organising construction until after consent is secured. Given that a project has about a coin toss's chance of facing a delay of unknown length, even projects that get through on time are impacted. This uncertainty slows down construction and makes our infrastructure more expensive to deliver.

For example, the Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant Relocation – which would have unlocked around 8,500 homes – faced a six-month ministerial delay. After the project was eventually approved, it was cancelled due to rising costs, to which a six-month delay in a time of high construction inflation undoubtedly contributed. All told, over [£80m](#) was spent on the planning process just for the project to ultimately be cancelled. That includes £14m spent by the council at a time when local government budgets are already stretched, plus additional funding from the national government and Anglian Water.

It is not just about ministerial delays, of course. Of the 24 projects that were approved by the Government this year, four have faced or are in the process of facing a legal challenge. Legal challenges can delay a project by a year or more at significant cost with the Banner Review estimated that these challenges increase the cost of projects by up to £121m in the case of motorways. Even the threat of legal challenge adds costs to projects, as defensive paperwork, studies, and consultations are done to triple-check boxes.

The projects now facing legal challenges include both of the airport expansions that have been approved (Luton and Gatwick's Northern Runway). The High Court dismissed the legal challenge against Luton's expansion in mid-December, more than eight months after the development consent order was approved. Yet that does not spell the end of the legal hurdles, as the anti-expansion campaigners are considering an appeal, which would stretch the legal limbo far into the new year.



These legal delays to airport expansions are also a warning to the Government's attempt to build a third runway at Heathrow. With the time it takes to assemble an NSIP application, get approval, and fight off any legal challenges, the project is increasingly unlikely to see spades in the ground before the next election, unless the Government acts quickly to speed up the process.

The result of both of these factors, and the burden of submitting an application in the first place, is that the Government is falling behind on infrastructure. Labour pledged to make a decision on 150 infrastructure projects within the five-year parliament. Up to the end of 2025, they have made 32 decisions. To keep up with their target, they should have made 45 decisions by now.

We can also forecast the potential decisions that they will have an opportunity to make by looking at the pipeline of projects. From acceptance to decision, the NSIP process takes 15 months if everything goes according to plan.

In addition to the 32 projects that have already received a decision, there are a further 27 projects that have at least passed the acceptance stage. If these all pass through each stage, and if none are withdrawn or face any delays, then we can expect the Labour Government to have made 59 decisions by March 2027.

At that point, to keep up with its 150-project target, the Government would need to have made 82 decisions. Even making very generous assumptions – especially given that over half of all projects this year have been delayed – the Government would still be 23 decisions off the pace. That's about the same number of decisions that they've made in all of 2025.

Unless more projects rapidly are introduced into the nationally significant infrastructure projects pipeline, the Government looks set to miss the 150 decisions goal. At their current rate of approving projects, they're set to miss this target by nearly a third (107 projects out of 150).

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