

What opportunities are there to use EBI guidance to strengthen how governments do strategic infrastructure planning?

ICE Presidential Roundtable summary

April 2024

Background

Strategic planning is the key to unlocking sustainable and resilient infrastructure, and governments around the world are grappling with the task.

Limited fiscal budgets, growing demand for infrastructure, and the need for sustainable development all require careful consideration. Furthermore, political inconsistency, stop/start planning, and a focus on projects over outcomes create barriers to a long-term, strategic approach.

Despite these challenges, some governments have successfully developed long-term processes to identify their infrastructure objectives, assess current and future needs, and develop a clear plan for delivery.

Sharing good practice can help other governments build certainty, pace, and efficiency in infrastructure procurement and delivery. Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Netherlands are examples of countries where one or more government departments have put effective measures in place.

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) convened the Enabling Better Infrastructure (EBI) [programme](#) to help governments look beyond the uncertainties of the day to develop stable, sustainable, and investable infrastructure project pipelines. EBI guidance helps governments [understand](#) which inputs are necessary when translating their vision for infrastructure into reality. In addition, the EBI programme connects government and specialists to share advice on strengthening their strategic planning process.

To better understand how and when governments can make best use of the guidance, the ICE convened a roundtable of experts, chaired by the ICE Senior Vice President and EBI Steering Group Chair, Prof. Jim Hall.

Participants included:

- Civil servants (UK and international)
- Multi-lateral Development Banks (MDBs)
- Thinktanks and research organisations
- Practitioners

Focusing on upfront considerations

Many countries follow a stop/start approach to infrastructure planning and delivery. This can undermine services and hinder outcomes for users and investors.

A focus on upfront considerations, as well as consensus across a range of non-government stakeholders, can boost political interest in strategic infrastructure planning at a national level, helping it transcend political cycles.

This includes:

- Preliminary financial, technical, and delivery needs.
- Skills development and research.
- Specific financing measures.
- Cost-benefit analysis for all environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns.
- Affordability analysis that focuses on whole-life value.

International development initiatives run by governments and external financing institutions focus on providing support for this very purpose. EBI guidance provides a common framework for these organisations to work to. A benefit of EBI is that it focuses explicitly on infrastructure.

Sustainable development

Another challenge governments face is integrating the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into strategic infrastructure planning. Strategic planning is more meaningful when infrastructure visions align with international best practice frameworks. Using the SDGs as a baseline for infrastructure planning is at the heart of the EBI approach.

Alternative infrastructure solutions, such as low- or no-build and [nature-based](#) solutions, present further opportunities. EBI guidance includes assessing infrastructure service needs to support a wider range of options later in the lifecycle.

Consensus building

Experts identified the first hurdle to strategic planning as identifying accountability and mandate. In other words, who 'owns' the process?

Infrastructure systems comprise various types of infrastructure, with different sectoral approaches and operational mandates. Government decision-making typically happens in siloes. But infrastructure services are delivered via a network of interconnected systems.

Building government-wide consensus with one department leading the process is not easy. One pitfall is the tendency to forget that infrastructure projects connect with the wider system – as in the case of the UK's High Speed 2 rail project ([HS2](#)). A successful strategic planning process entails joint ownership by two or more stakeholders.

Consensus between different arms and levels of government is essential for developing a meaningful infrastructure plan. Collaboration with other key stakeholders, such as the public, MDBs, think tanks, research institutions, and practitioners, is also essential.

Initiatives such as Quality Infrastructure Investments ([QII](#)) help foster collaboration and partnership in strengthening strategic infrastructure planning globally. Another example is that MDBs and capacity-building programmes – within government or externally – often have the same objectives when it comes to identifying and delivering on infrastructure needs. Working more closely together helps to access opportunities across countries, financial support, or shared learning.

Evidence-based prioritisation

Articulating the value of strategic infrastructure planning can be challenging.

Canada undertook global benchmarking to build the case for a strategic approach. At an international insight-sharing session in Toronto, influential stakeholders from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand agreed that, despite the clear benefits, it can be difficult to quantify them.

Using evidence to articulate these benefits through the EBI programme would add value. The EBI programme cultivates an insight-sharing network of government and other stakeholders involved in strategic infrastructure planning. This shared insight can build an evidence base that governments can use to reprioritise their infrastructure pipelines.

Another example of a knowledge-sharing portal is the [Global Platform for Sustainable Cities](#), which houses newsworthy articles and blogs incorporating evidence-based insights.

In many cases, upfront infrastructure decisions are wholly cost-based. The EBI programme and supporting guidance can encourage governments to think more broadly than this. Evidence on the benefits of strategic planning can create a clear picture of what infrastructure is necessary and how it can meet a nation's economic, environmental, and social needs, now and in the future.

Questions to take away

- What are the key barriers to taking a whole of government approach?
- How does wider consensus stimulate political buy-in to strategic infrastructure planning, and how can this be replicated elsewhere?
- What more is needed to articulate the benefits of strategic infrastructure planning for governments?

Further reading

- EBI guidance: [Driving purpose, certainty, and pace in strategic infrastructure planning](#) (2024)
- EBI journal article: [Tried-and-tested guidance for helping governments deliver the infrastructure people need](#) (2024)
- ICE Presidential Roundtable summary: [How can governments incorporate nature-based solutions in their infrastructure systems?](#) (2024)