Accelerating Electricity Network Connections for Strategic Demand[1]

Community Planning Alliance Response

Proposal 2 – Introducing prioritisation mechanisms

7. We propose to introduce mechanisms to reserve future capacity, reallocate released capacity, and prioritise Government-identified strategic demand projects within transmission network design batches. To what extent do you agree that these proposals would be an effective approach to enabling faster access to the electricity network for strategic demand projects? Please explain your reasoning and provide any relevant evidence.

Neither Agree nor Disagree

We are concerned that the government is taking a rather piecemeal approach to identifying strategic demand projects. There is, for example, a New Hospitals Programme[2]. How will the demands of initiatives such as this be balanced against the huge demands that will be placed on energy supply by data centres?

Whilst we totally understand the drive to accelerate the number of data centres in the UK, prioritising their place in the 'queue' must not be at the expense of, for example, vulnerable households (new social housing initiatives), emergency services (new expanded hospital capacity), small and medium sized businesses (who are already struggling to survive in the current climate). How will the government's proposals for reserving future capacity and prioritising 'strategic demand projects' minimise the effects on other essential schemes?

We note that there are already 140 data centres in the 'queue'. We are concerned that this prioritisation approach will override the concept of 'need'. The immense impact of these developments on the environment, nature and resources (such as water use) must be considered strategically and controlled tactically.

The government must make its decisions based on complete and accurate data, to ensure any modelling related to data centre demands is credible and reliable. Prioritisation of grid connections should ensure there is balance. Data centre demand for power must not lead to quick and dirty solutions (such as expanding the use of fossil fuel power sources).

Data centre growth should also not lead to increased profits and dividends for private sector companies and shareholders, whilst increasing costs for households, small businesses and the public sector.

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69b2aa5bc8010d37b34e0070/accelerating-electricity-network-connections-for-strategic-demand.pdf

[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-hospital-programme-review-outcome/new-hospital-programme-plan-for-implementation

At a tactical level, the prioritisation process must approve data centres by exception, the decision should be made by the Secretary of State, taking into consideration the existing pipeline of centres, grid/water availability, and the environmental, ecological and citizen impact of the location. The planning system should mandate that all such developments must always be a minimum of 500m from the nearest residential property and must minimise environmental and ecological harm, utilising the mitigation hierarchy to ensure the most sustainable locations are chosen.

Whilst the government may consider data centres to be an essential element of their growth ambitions, it should be acknowledged that the Office for National Statistics[3] natural capital accounts demonstrate the importance of the value of nature to the wider economy, which should be taken into consideration when making decisions that may impact our natural capital or ecosystem services. The natural capital accounts confirm that the total annual value of ecosystem services in the UK was £41 billion (in 2023), and the total asset value was £1.6 trillion (in 2023).

The pipeline should be updated on the basis of user need (not on developer-led lobbying initiatives, nor the outcome of auctions), and, as industry self-regulation is currently inadequate, all data centres should be required to meet specific sustainability objectives, including in relation to decarbonisation efforts, to reduce the risks to the UK's net zero ambitions.

Prioritisation should also consider constraints, such as supply chain issues and shortages of skilled and experienced human resources. Transparency is also needed in relation to concerns about the security of personal information and freedom of information in relation to the spend of public funds to support data centre growth.

Proposal 3 – Strategic Alignment of data centre connections

8. Government is exploring aligning data centre connections to regional infrastructure targets set out in a future data centre strategy. Do you agree that this would be an effective approach to Objectives A, B, and C, set out above? Please explain your reasoning and provide any relevant evidence.

Neither Agree nor Disagree

We do not believe the government currently has an effective strategy in relation to data centre growth. This is particularly important due to the continuous advances and innovations in technology (which, as just one example of past experience, saw huge reductions in the size and weight of mainframe computers, whilst increasing storage and processing power exponentially and reducing their massive power needs and the special liquid cooling systems they used).

The government should drive data centres to become more sustainable. It should, therefore, be anticipated that similar radical enhancements will be made to all aspects of data centre facilities and functionality, leading to reduced size, power and cooling requirements, for example. The data centre strategy must, therefore, be reviewed at least annually for technology and user requirement updates and must include the exploration of innovative locations (prioritising reuse of previously developed land and investigating the opportunities for underground and undersea facilities) to bring the most benefits to UK citizens at the least environmental and ecological cost.

[3] https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/uknaturalcapitalaccounts/2025

In developing the data centre strategy, there would be many benefits of learning from Europe and the US. Their underground locations, for example, have increased energy efficiency (reducing water resource needs), enhanced security (protection from both natural disasters and physical intrusion), improved sustainability (through reuse of server heat to support communities) and reduced the pressure on land availability.

9. Are there any alternative approaches we should consider to achieving the policy objectives laid out in this consultation?

The government does not appear to be considering alternatives, such as introducing targets for the data centre industry to (for example) accelerate reductions in power and resource demand through greater automation, fewer carbon emissions, reduced water usage, waste management, and increased localised processing on smaller, more sustainable sites.

13. Do you see a role for auctions in the reservation or reallocation of capacity for strategic demand projects? Please explain your reasoning and provide any relevant evidence.

We disagree with the concept of auctions. Reservation and reallocation should be based on need, not on the depth of an organisation's pockets!

Kind regards

Marj Powner

Vice Chair

Community Planning Alliance

07801917375

About the Community Planning Alliance

The Community Planning Alliance[4] is a national umbrella group for over 700 communities[5], all are campaigning against inappropriate development in their areas, and all disagree that decisions are being made in the 'public interest'. We have extensive knowledge and experience of the planning system, and our aims include seeking increased community participation, better environmental protections and the right homes and infrastructure in the right places.

[4] https://communityplanningalliance.org/

[5] https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?ll=52.97433203327261%2C-1.0471043976708527&z=7&mid=1nFg3i1Ft5-K4LadaEMCb0wr17-I33Kk