

The Role of Independent Inspectors in Planning

Department for Infrastructure Independent Inspectors Project

3 September 2026

NILGA webinar | 12:30–1:30 pm



TODAY'S WEBINAR

- Why an additional route is being introduced
- What an Independent Inspector will do
- What changes, and does not change, for councils
- How independence will be protected
- Questions and discussion



WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

- £3m ring-fenced transformation funding to March 2029
- Capacity and timetabling pressures have affected Hear and Report work
- Delays create uncertainty for plan-making, investment and communities
- The Planning Act (NI) 2011 already allows DfI to appoint an independent person
- The project creates an additional route alongside the PAC



WHAT “HEAR AND REPORT” MEANS

- An independent person conducts the independent examination, public local inquiry or hearing, considers the evidence and reports findings and recommendations to the Department.
- Independent examination of Local Development Plan documents
- Inquiry or hearing concerning a regionally significant or called-in application
- The work may be undertaken by the PAC or by a DfI-appointed Independent Inspector.

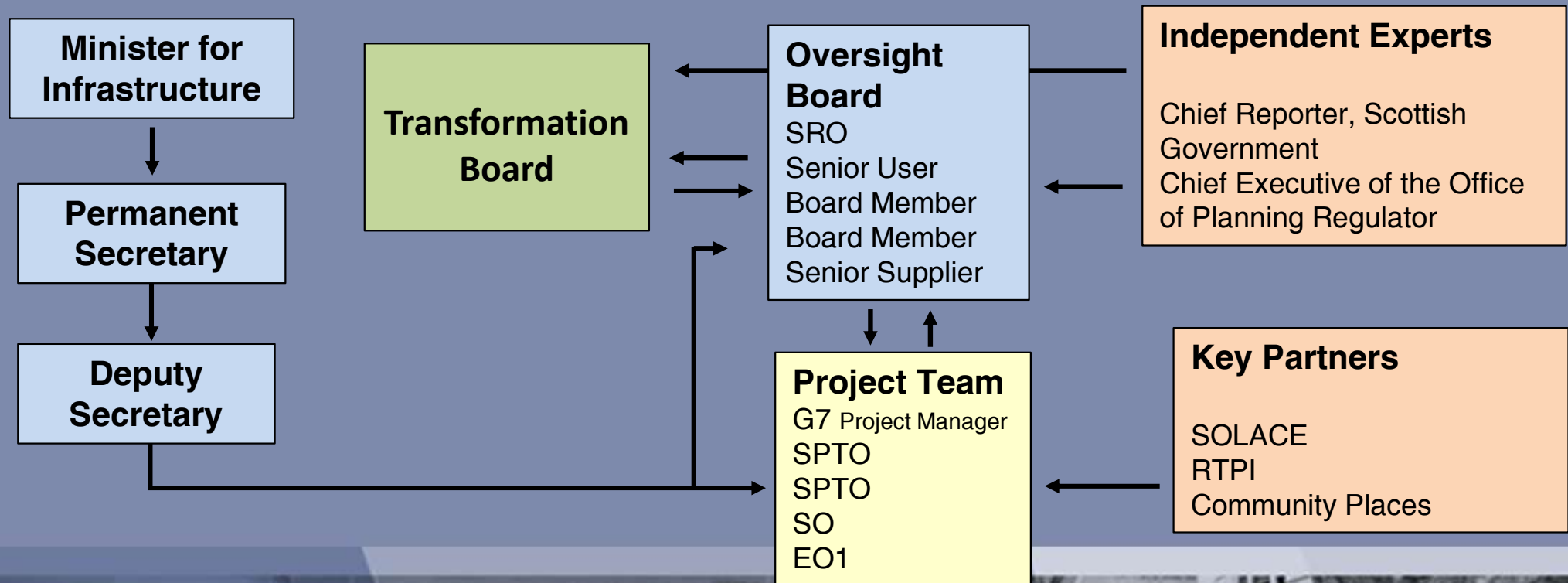


WHAT THE PROJECT IS DESIGNED TO ACHIEVE

- Additional capacity for Hear and Report work
- Greater flexibility in scheduling
- More reliable progression of plans and strategic cases
- Fair, independent and robust proceedings
- No change to legal tests, council roles or planning outcomes



GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS



PROGRESS TO DATE

7 May: appointment process launched

22 May: applications closed

29 June: initial list of Independent Inspectors established

17 August: stakeholder workshop on draft procedures and guidance

September: induction and operational preparation

End of September target: first allocation, subject to eligible work



WHAT CHANGES FOR COUNCILS

- A Dfl-appointed Independent Inspector may undertake particular Hear and Report work instead of the PAC
- A Dfl Programme Officer will manage administration and logistics
- Current, realistic Local Development Plan timetables will help Dfl assess the appropriate route under section 10 of the Planning Act
- Case-specific arrangements will be agreed when relevant work arises



SAFEGUARDING INDEPENDENCE

- Independent inspectors are not DfI employees
- Decisions on allocation route taken by a senior internal panel, separate from teams directly involved in cases
- Conflict checks take place prior to allocation and throughout the case
- Inspector controls the proceedings, evidence and report
- DfI support is administrative and cannot direct the Inspector's findings
- Support Team is organisationally separate from Plan Oversight and Casework teams
- Proceedings are governed by openness, fairness and impartiality.



HOW THE PROCESS WILL WORK

1. A Hear and Report requirement arises
2. Dfl assesses the available statutory routes and practical circumstances
3. The Allocation Panel records whether the PAC or an Independent Inspector will undertake the work
4. If the Independent Inspector route is selected, an Inspector is appointed for the specific case
5. A Programme Officer provides administrative and logistical support
6. The Inspector conducts the proceedings, considers the evidence and submits an independent report
7. Dfl takes the relevant statutory decision under the applicable legislation



WHAT DOES NOT CHANGE FOR COUNCILS

- Councils retain their plan making and development management roles
- The statutory tests and legal procedures remain unchanged
- Public participation and transparency requirements remain unchanged
- Planning appeals are unaffected
- The PAC remains available for Hear and Report work
- The Inspector reports; the relevant statutory decision remains with DfI



WHAT COUNCILS NEED TO DO

- No new general action is required at present
- Keep LDP timetables current and realistic
- Continue using established Dfl engagement channels
- If work is allocated, assist with dates, documents and communications



NEXT STEPS

- Finalise procedures and guidance
- Inspector induction in September 2026
- First allocations targeted by the end of September, subject to eligible work
- Continue engagement with councils and stakeholders



QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

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Department for
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