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Opportunity East

The Infrastructure and Investment Conference

5 March 2026, The Hold, Ipswich

Post Conference Report



#InfrastructureEast2026

Opportunity East: The Infrastructure & Investment Conference 2026

The East of England has the assets, the ambition, and resources to lead on infrastructure investment. The second Opportunity East conference highlighted growing momentum and a clear determination to move from ambition to delivery. With a strong pipeline of projects ahead, the region has a valuable chance to strengthen its voice and influence within the national agenda.

Overview

On Thursday, 5th March 2026, the second Opportunity East: The Infrastructure and Investment Conference took place in Ipswich. The day brought together infrastructure colleagues from across the private and public sectors for a programme of keynote speeches, panel discussions, workshops, and networking.

The strong turnout and level of engagement across all sessions reflected the clear regional appetite for collaboration and a focus on delivering tangible outcomes for the East of England. Building on the debut event in 2025, this year's conference sharpened its focus on translating shared priorities into practical action.

The East of England's resilience, R&D clusters and solid GVA case were referenced throughout the day as foundations to build on - with the consensus that what the region now needs is a louder, more unified narrative to match its underlying strengths.

The conference heard from leading organisations shaping major investment across the region with speeches highlighting the scale of opportunities ahead, from airport expansion, major grid upgrades and transformative international visitor economy projects. A devolution focused panel also discussed how to sustain momentum and set up mayoral authorities for success in the wake of the delayed mayoral elections, drawing on lessons from the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority.



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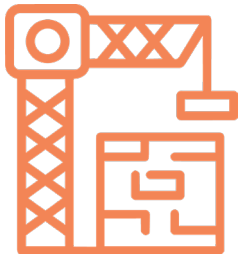
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Five challenges. One conversation

Five challenge statements shaped the afternoon workshops, with each addressing a critical regional issue. These themes spanned morning plenary and networking discussions, building a cumulative picture of where the region stands and what needs to change next.



1. Breaking down silos and barriers.

How might we create a shared regional infrastructure pipeline that aligns local authority priorities with private sector investment timelines?

There is no single, shared map of the region's infrastructure pipeline. Without centralised visibility, authorities and investors plan in parallel rather than together, leading to duplicated effort, missed sequencing opportunities, and a private sector that too often walks away when a vision is absent.

The group identified trust deficits, competing priorities, and differences between realism and idealism as persistent blockers. The absence of a clear, shared outcome and vision was cited as a root cause of fragmentation across sectors and geographies.

Key points:

- A regional spatial development plan is necessary to align local authority priorities and establish clear, costed ambitions with defined timeframes.
- Infrastructure outlasts every political cycle; governance must do the same. Cross-party, multi-authority commitment mechanisms that outlast electoral cycles are essential.
- Devolution is an opportunity if acted on now. The transition period before elected mayors are in place is a window to lock in shared priorities, not a reason to pause.
- Early engagement, the right people around the table and open conversations to build trust are the immediate steps that unlock longer-term collaboration.
- Multiple sector pipelines - not just local authority plans - must be understood and coordinated, with transparency, accountability and built-in flexibility at every stage.





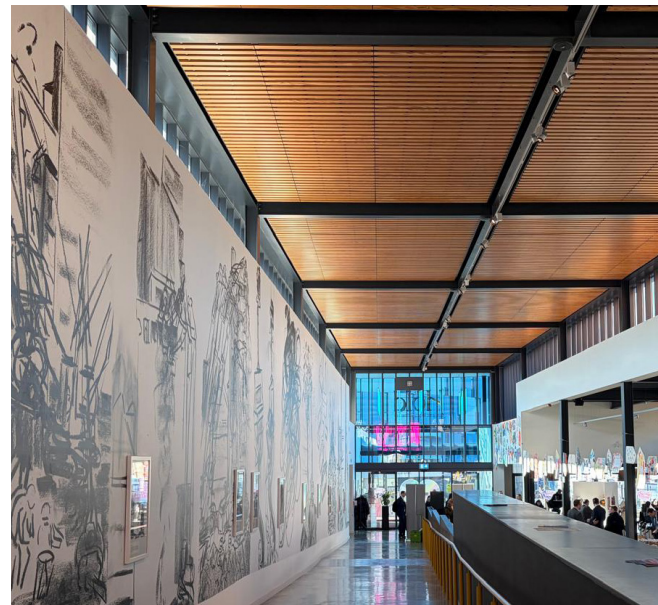
2. De-risking investment and building regional appeal.

How can we collectively reduce investment risk AND build a compelling regional investment narrative that positions the East of England as THE place for infrastructure investment?

This challenge prompted reflection on the region's current identity in the eyes of investors. Attendees acknowledged that despite significant assets - from defence clusters and port infrastructure to renewable energy - the East of England is not consistently presenting a unified, compelling investment case to the market. The region is underrated and underselling itself. The gap is not in what the region offers, but in how it tells its story.

Key points:

- The East of England needs one pitch, not twelve. A single, compelling regional narrative - consistently backed by all stakeholders with political cover - is the prerequisite for serious investment.
- ROI is not purely financial. The strongest investment case combines economic return with social connectivity and quality of place, and the region must articulate this clearly.
- Urgency is the missing ingredient. Leaders agreed: the ideas exist, but there is no sustained burning platform keeping momentum alive between convenings.
- An integrated place plan and one-stop investment guide would significantly reduce barriers for investors navigating the region.
- With limited regional resources, we cannot afford duplication of effort by constituent partners. Existing partnerships - including those at risk through Local Government Reorganisation - must be resourced, built upon and utilised rather than replicated.
- Professional bodies and convening powers are an underused asset. The region has access to networks and institutions that can broker relationships and advocate collectively - but they are not yet being deployed strategically enough.





3. Funding the gap.

What innovative financing models could we deploy regionally to fund infrastructure when traditional government funding falls short?

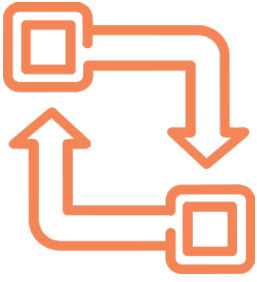
The group was clear that this is not purely a scarcity problem; it is a capability and coordination problem. The funding mechanisms exist; the region needs to sharpen its ability to access and deploy them.

A lack of confidence in public sector budget estimation, cash flow timing, and commercial skills was identified as a significant underlying issue, undermining project viability assessments and slowing decision-making.

Key points:

- The funding is out there - the region needs to get better at accessing it. Upskilling in budget accuracy and commercial capability is as important as identifying new funding sources.
- Development corporations, Tax Increment Financing and Strategic Investment Partnerships offer longer-term, less politically volatile routes to infrastructure funding - but require political bravery to pursue.
- Multiple beneficiaries must mean multiple contributors. Funding models need to reflect the fact that infrastructure rarely serves a single sector, requiring shared pipelines and masterplan visions.
- A visitor levy, broad-based, low cost per capita, and standard practice internationally, could generate ringfenced infrastructure revenue with minimal competitive impact on the region.
- Closing the Section 106 opt-out loophole and deploying seed capital through government bridge-funding models are achievable near-term steps to unlock investment in social and physical infrastructure.





4. Sharing scarce resources and working smarter.

How might we coordinate project timelines and share workforce, materials, and specialist expertise across the region to overcome capacity constraints and deliver more cost-effective schemes?

The region faces a compounding capacity crisis: too many major projects running simultaneously, not enough skilled people to deliver them, and no shared mechanism to sequence demand. Without coordination, the result is a race to the bottom - projects competing for the same workforce, materials and expertise, driving up costs and slowing delivery for everyone.

Key points:

- Too many big projects, not enough people. Better sequencing of project timelines is a regional imperative, not a local preference - particularly for smaller projects where skills demand can be more precisely managed.
- Skills infrastructure must be built alongside physical infrastructure. T-levels, apprenticeships and college-industry partnerships need to be aligned to the project pipeline from the outset, not added on afterwards.
- Standardise to accelerate. Common design solutions, simplified procurement and shared governance are not bureaucratic constraints - they are the fastest route to delivery.
- A clear national infrastructure pipeline would unlock regional action. Without precise direction from central government, regions cannot plan workforce, materials or phasing with confidence.
- Waste from one project can be reused in another. Smarter material reuse - for example, tunnelling spoil repurposed for reservoir construction - requires the cross-project visibility the region currently lacks.





5. Communities as partners.

How do we ensure infrastructure development delivers tangible benefits that communities can see and feel - through jobs, social value, and direct investment in local priorities?

Community support is not a given - it is earned through genuine engagement, visible local benefit and honest communication. The group identified a persistent gap between the ambition to involve communities and the reality of how consultation is currently conducted.

Key points:

- Local employment must be written into contracts, not hoped for. Procurement policy needs to guarantee local supply chain, apprenticeships and direct job creation - not leave it to chance.
- Communities don't oppose infrastructure - they oppose being ignored. Early, genuine engagement that shapes what gets built creates trust that lasts through construction and beyond.
- Good community engagement - must be defined, measured and held to account. "Engagement" means different things to different people - the region needs a shared standard for what good looks like, with measurable outcomes across employment, social cohesion and wellbeing.
- Community benefit agreements should be the regional standard. From energy discounts to green funds, the tools to share the value of infrastructure locally already exist - they just need to be systematised.



Wider findings



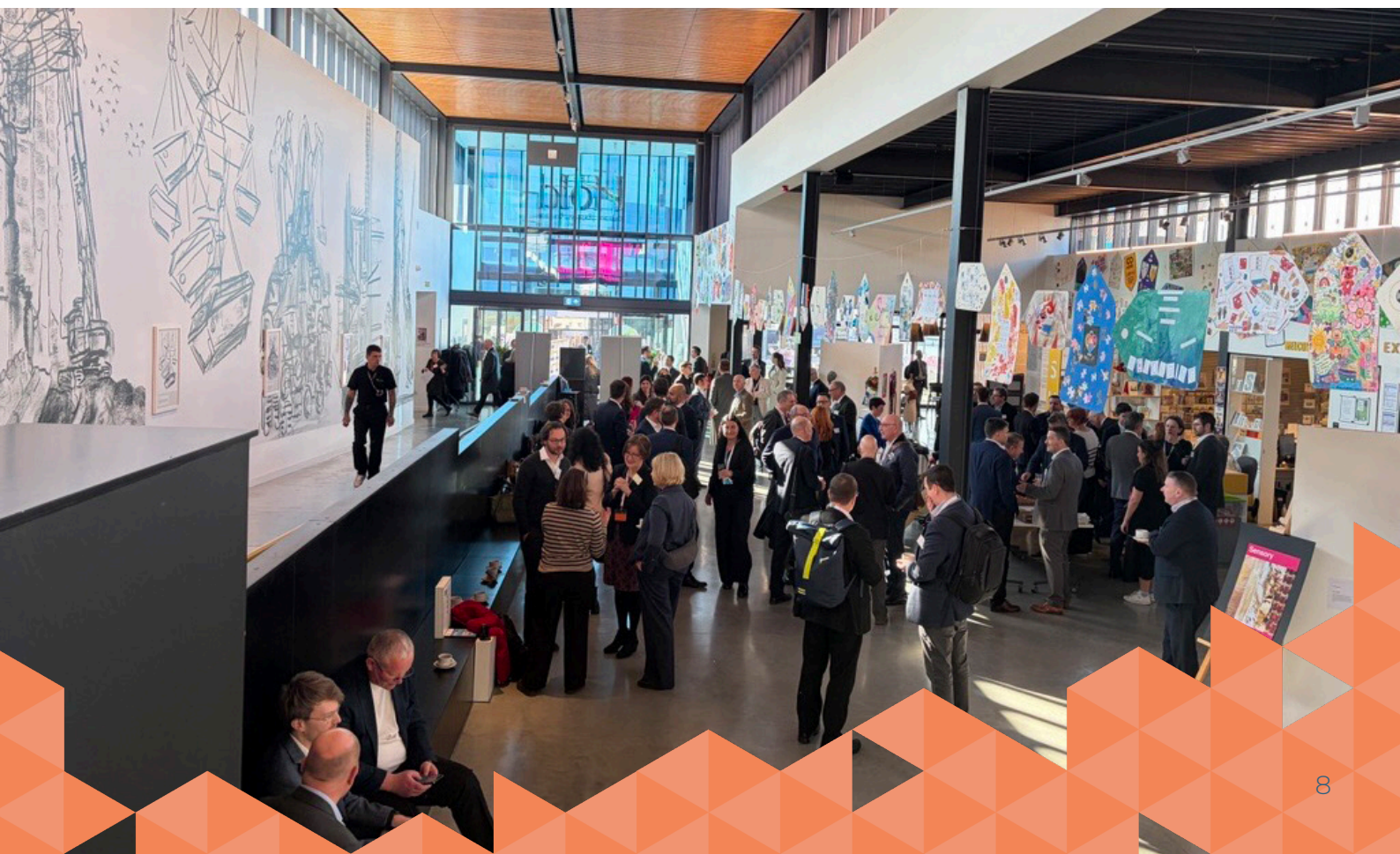
- 1 Procurement spikes, overlapping project timelines, and supply chain constraints:** including global demand for cement and steel, are creating bottlenecks that individual authorities cannot manage on their own. Skills and resource shortages, compounded by the loss of in-house technical capability in local authorities, are undermining delivery capacity across the region.



- 2 Data fragmentation remains a critical barrier:** there is no single picture from which to schedule and budget interrelated projects. Integrated planning and improved data sharing are essential prerequisites for the coordinated approach the region needs.



- 3 Adaptability, flexibility and risk-sharing mechanisms** are essential given political cycles and external shocks. The region cannot afford governance structures that break under pressure - it needs frameworks built to flex.



Conference takeaways

The discussions throughout the day were open, constructive, and forward-looking, highlighting a region with a strong sense of direction and a clear understanding of both its opportunities and the changes still required to move ahead.

- 1. There is no shared map.** The region lacks a centralised, visible infrastructure pipeline; without it, authorities and investors will continue to plan in parallel.
- 2. One pitch, not twelve.** A single, unified regional narrative with political backing is the prerequisite for serious investment in the East of England. The region has limited resources and cannot afford duplication of effort - constituent partnerships, including those at risk from Local Government Reorganisation, must be properly resourced and built upon.
- 3. The funding exists - access is the problem.** Capability gaps in budget estimation and commercial skills are holding back viable projects as much as funding scarcity.
- 4. Sequencing is a regional responsibility.** Too many major projects running simultaneously without coordination is creating a workforce and materials crunch that no single authority can solve alone.
- 5. Community support is earned, not assumed.** Local employment guarantees, community benefit agreements and early genuine engagement are not add-ons - they are conditions for delivery.
- 6. Governance must outlast electoral cycles.** Cross-party, multi-authority commitment mechanisms are essential to keep infrastructure moving regardless of who is in office.
- 7. Devolution is a window, not a reason to wait.** The transition period before elected mayors are in place should be used to lock in shared priorities and frameworks.
- 8. Skills infrastructure must be built in parallel.** Training pipelines, apprenticeships and college-industry partnerships need to be aligned to the project pipeline from day one.
- 9. Professional bodies and convening powers are underused.** The region has access to networks that can broker relationships and advocate collectively; they need to be deployed strategically.
- 10. Political bravery is required.** Long-term infrastructure delivery needs decisive national leadership - the region cannot sequence, fund or govern its way to success without clear direction and commitment from the centre.
- 11. Interface with national infrastructure strategy is essential.** The region needs a much closer, direct relationship with Treasury and national government - a structured interface with the National Infrastructure Strategy and Investment Pipeline (NISTA) - to ensure the East of England's priorities are consistently reflected at the national level.



Looking ahead

The second Opportunity East Infrastructure & Investment Conference confirmed both the scale of the region's ambition and the clarity of the work still to be done. Closing remarks called for a focus on maximising benefits rather than mitigating challenges, drawing on the region's resilience as proof of what coordinated action can achieve. **The conversations held at the conference must now become the decisions and partnerships that help define the East of England's infrastructure ambitions for the next ten years.**



Call to action

A proposal to establish an Infrastructure East Alliance - a standing body with the mandate and resources to drive collective action across the region - emerged as one of the outcomes of the day's discussions.

Towards an Infrastructure East Alliance

The proposed Alliance would focus on a small number of clear, practical priorities. It would develop a joined-up, costed regional infrastructure pipeline aligned with Spatial Development Strategies and national programmes such as National Highways, Great British Railways and NESO. It would also provide a clear route into national decision-making, ensuring the East of England's priorities are recognised and not overlooked.

Importantly, the Alliance would build on existing organisations across the region, including partners such as Water Resources East and Local Government East, rather than creating new layers or duplication- especially during a period of local government reorganisation. It would bring together the public and private sectors in a lasting partnership designed to endure beyond political cycles.

This work would need proper resourcing and dedicated capacity, not reliance on stretched teams, so that the momentum from this conference is carried forward. There was a clear sense that by the time of a third conference in 2027, the region must be able to demonstrate real progress - something the Infrastructure East Alliance is intended to deliver.

Useful resources

This year's conference draws on several years of work by Local Government East and their partners, building the case for major investment throughout the East of England.

Featured reports



Opportunity East



Opportunity East: The East of England Investment Prospectus



Opportunity East: One Year On

Website

www.localgoveasteng.gov.uk

www.infrastructure-matters.co.uk

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