

Prepared by Pathways to Growth (P2G)
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**OffshoreWind
IndustryCouncil**

**Exploring the
opportunities and
barriers to digitalising
Environmental Impact
Assessments (EIAs)**



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List of Acronyms

DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EOR	Environmental Outcomes Report
HRA	Habitats Regulations Assessment
IAIA	International Association for Impact Assessment
IEMA	Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment
IEP	Industry Evidence Programme
OCLG	Offshore Consents and Licensing Group
OEP	Office for Environmental Protection
OWEKH	Offshore Wind Evidence and Knowledge Hub
OWF	Offshore Wind Farm
OWIC	Offshore Wind Industry Council
OWIC DG	Offshore Wind Industry Council Developer Group
P2G	Pathways to Growth
PINS	Planning Inspectorate
SNCBs	Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies

Glossary

Digitalisation	The ways in which the digital world impacts people and work: the conversion of processes over to digital technologies. Examples include using cloud computing for storage, distribution and analysis of information and documents; or holding meetings virtually rather than in a physical room.
Digitisation	The conversion of the analogue to the digital (for example moving from using a material folder as a method of storage to using a computer; converting a physical document into a digital copy). Digitisation is relevant and appropriate in the context of EIA, however – owing to the considerable overlap in definitions – digitalisation is the term used throughout this research.

1.0 Executive Summary

This report has been produced by the Offshore Wind Industry Council's (OWIC) team delivering the Pathways to Growth (P2G) workstreams to explore the barriers and opportunities to integrating a digital Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) approach for offshore wind developments.

Digitalisation of EIA is understood to comprise a diverse range of actions, including automated data gathering, quick search tools, automated route planning and assessment, and more transparent standards across collection, presentation, and storage of data.

There is interest from the offshore wind sector as digitalisation is rapidly being integrated into the planning process in other sectors, and there are potential opportunities to improve decision making and speed up the consenting process. OWIC members have raised opportunities for digitalisation to make the consenting process more effective and efficient, which is a priority for the sector to meet net zero targets.

The report identifies areas where an evolution in approach is required to realise the benefits of digital EIA. Potential benefits of digitalisation are faster consenting timelines, resource efficiencies, and better decision-making. While it's plausible there will be cost increases initially as new tools are adopted, there are likely significant cost and time savings from automation and reduced physical publications. Efficiencies throughout the EIA process are a focus of current policy with the goal of speeding up the overall consents process for offshore wind.

To encourage greater uptake and transition of the offshore wind sector to digital EIA, there is a need for clear support from decision-makers and statutory advisors. Greater understanding of how decision-makers currently use or would accept digital tools, and active endorsement of tools by decision-makers were highlighted as important for developers to have confidence. Initiatives to improve approaches to data standardisation and sharing across the sector, and the need for a review of existing legislation are also highlighted. This report sets out seven recommendations to assist the transition to digitalised EIA:

1. Further research to quantify opportunities resulting from a digitalised process, focussing on cost and time efficiencies.
2. Guidance from decision-makers on the effectiveness of existing digital EIA tools, to build confidence from offshore wind developers.
3. Support the launch of the IEMA digital EIA roadmap and engage with associated workshops.
4. Create a link between the OWEKH Technical Topic Group on EIA Coordination, Approaches to Assessment & Changes to Policy and the IEMA Impact Assessment working group with the P2G Proportionate EIA roadmap¹ and working group to align efforts.
5. Explore representation from DLUHC on the P2G Coordination Group to support collaboration with government on digitalisation of the EIA process.
6. Work with the OWIC Head of Skills to identify opportunities to build digital skills within the sector.
7. Work with the P2G Proportionate EIA working group to identify legislative changes required, if any, to support the delivery of digital EIA.

The P2G delivery team approached members of the Offshore Wind Industry Council's Developer Group (OWIC DG) and Renewable UK's Offshore Consents and Licensing Group (OCLG) to gather views on the opportunities and barriers to delivering digital EIA for the sector.

Information about the methodology used to research this report is set out in section 3 of this report.

Detailed exploration of the responses to the interviews are set out in sections 4-8.

Section 4 discusses the opportunities available with a digitalised EIA process, with a focus on cost reduction, consenting timeline reduction, and delivery of a more proportionate EIA and the potential increased resource efficiencies linked to this.

Section 5 outlines the barriers to a digitalised EIA that were identified in the research. While all participants were positive and clear on the potential opportunities for digitalised EIA, several barriers to realising these opportunities were identified. These broadly related to data handling, storage, and security and to sectoral conditions such as risk aversion and legislation. It is noted that these essential areas need to be overcome to realise the opportunities of digital EIA.

Section 6 explores routes to realising the opportunities and overcoming the barriers to a digital EIA, including recognition that there is still some way to go in this respect. The sector's lack of confidence in digital tools is identified as a key barrier.

Section 7 discusses the findings relating to user experience of existing digital EIA tools. While participants generally did not have a lot of experience using the existing digital EIA tools, those that did were positive about their interactions with the tools. It was felt that for digital EIA to be delivered successfully, greater feedback and engagement on how SNCBs and the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) would interact with digital tools would be useful.

Section 8 is a discussion of the findings of the study and lays out the seven recommendations made by the report.

2.0 Introduction

Pathways to Growth (P2G) is the Offshore Wind Industry Council's (OWIC's) Delivery Workstream focused on resolving consenting and environmental challenges that may delay or prevent the UK Government from meeting its 2030 offshore wind ambition and net zero targets.

In 2023, the P2G Coordination Group, a multi-stakeholder forum, prioritised a list of seven focus areas which set out the main areas that P2G are working on to resolve challenges in the consenting space. This piece of work aims to explore the opportunities and barriers to a digital approach to Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) and will feed into the Proportionate EIA focus area

and accompanying roadmap². This focus area seeks to support the implementation of a more proportionate approach to EIA, reduce the scale of offshore wind application documentation, and support streamlining of the consent application and preconstruction discharge of consent conditions.

This research sets out to identify and explore the opportunities and barriers to delivering a digital EIA for the offshore wind sector. The specific aims of the research are:

- To identify specific areas of the EIA which would benefit from digitalisation to improve efficiency and reduce admin burden for developers, regulators, and statutory consultees.
- To explore existing barriers to digitalisation, including public accessibility and challenges to standardisation.
- To gather initial responses and experiences of existing digital EIA tools.

To establish a clear set of recommendations to support work to unblock barriers to the digitalised process and highlight opportunities and benefits for the offshore wind sector.

Offshore wind developments are a critical element of the UK government's commitment to meet net zero by 2050. The delivery of 50GW of offshore wind by 2030³ and net zero targets are reliant on several factors including the consenting process which encompasses Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). According to WindEurope, blockages in the consenting process remain one of the largest hurdles to the expansion of wind energy in Europe (WindEurope, 2023).

The purpose of an EIA is to describe and assess the direct and indirect significant effects of a project on the physical, biological, and human environment, during the construction, operation and maintenance, and decommissioning of the project.

² The Proportionate EIA Focus Area roadmap is accessible here: [1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf \(owic.org.uk\)](https://www.owic.org.uk/1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf)

³As set out in the British Energy Security Strategy, available here: [British energy security strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/strategies/british-energy-security-strategy)

The role of EIAs in the consenting process is a long standing one. Under current EIA regulations, a requirement for an EIA is categorised by the type of construction which typically results in an EIA being required for offshore wind development under schedule 2 of the regulations. There are a series of stages within the EIA process which are set out in Figure 1 (OWIC Pathways to Growth, 2023). This includes a screening and scoping stage before an EIA is developed and the application can be submitted for consent.

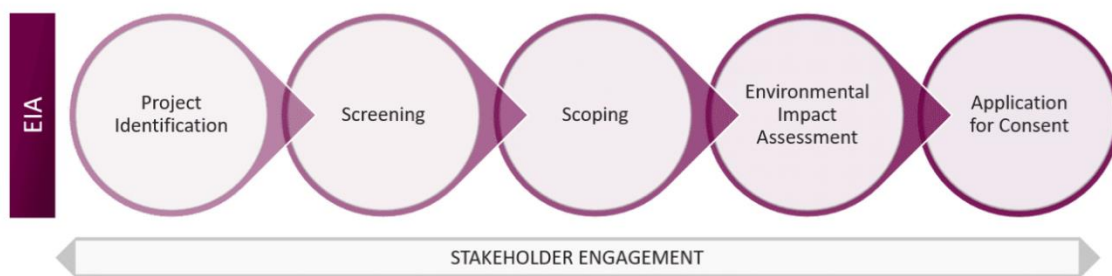


Figure 1: EIA Process Overview: Project Identification, Screening, Scoping, Environmental Impact Assessment, Application for Consent in addition to ongoing stakeholder engagement (Pathways to Growth, 2023).

In recent years, the EIA process has been criticised as overly lengthy, costly and time consuming. The increased length has been linked to an increasing scope in response to concerns of legal challenge. A 2023 consultation led by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) on changes to the EIA process described current EIA reports as being ‘repetitive, voluminous and cumbersome’ (DLUHC, 2023), which resonates with the offshore wind sector. The size of EIAs for offshore wind developments can currently extend to over ten thousand pages⁴, which places a considerable resource burden on all those involved in the process and incurs high costs in both its development and execution. In response to these challenges, a digital approach to EIA has been presented as an opportunity to deliver a more proportionate approach, increase interactivity, reduce costs, and deliver more streamlined decision-making processes.

⁴ ‘For example, the recent Berwick Bank EIA when printed numbered 13,000 A4 pages (19 folders of information)’ (ABP Mer, 2024:41).

In 2023, the UK Government explored opportunities to streamline the EIA process and consulted on a new approach – Environmental Outcome Reporting (EOR)⁵. As changes to how an EIA is carried out, including digitalisation, may require legislative change, the P2G team are awaiting the outcome of this consultation to determine the implications for the current EIA process⁶. The powers in the 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act⁷ mean that the EIA process could be replaced by EORs in the future. As further detail on how this approach could work in practice, and what it will mean for the EIA process has yet to be published, the EOR system has not been included in the scope of this report. Other areas which have been excluded from the scope of this report include the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA)⁸ process and other impact assessments, such as the Water Framework Directive⁹, although interactions between these assessments and EIA are noted.

A fully digital EIA would involve automated data gathering, quick search tools, automated route planning and assessment, and more transparent standards across collection, presentation, and storage of data.

Digitalising part, or all, of the EIA process could reduce administrative burden and possibly reduce the timeframes for consenting, as applications could be processed more efficiently. Although digital solutions to support parts of the EIA process are already available, such as the Marine Data Exchange and the use of GIS mapping tools and digital EIA products (Xodus, 2021:5), there has yet to be an example of a project undertaking a fully digital EIA. Indeed, very few digitalisation tools are in use across the sector (Xodus, 2021) and there is currently no standardised approach to digital EIA in the UK (Digital EIA, 2020).

⁵ The consultation closed on 9th June 2023. No response has yet been provided. The consultation can be accessed here: [Environmental Outcomes Reports: a new approach to environmental assessment – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/environmental-outcomes-reports-a-new-approach-to-environmental-assessment).

⁶ As of 14/05/2024, no response to the consultation has been published.

⁷ [Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/122)

⁸ HRA is required to assess if a project could impact a European site designated under the Habitats Directive to protect certain species and habitats

⁹ Further information on the Water Directive is available here: [Water Framework Directive – European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/water/).

The aim of this research is to further understand the opportunities and barriers to the delivery of a fully digitalised EIA process for offshore wind. To explore the aims of the project, this report seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the principal opportunities and barriers to digitalising EIA?
2. What are the gaps in the current approach to digitalising EIAs and how can they be bridged?
3. In what ways are current approaches to digital EIA capturing the opportunities and addressing the barriers?

3.0 Methodology

This research has been carried out within the P2G delivery team. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the principal form of data collection to encourage in-depth understanding of thoughts and experiences of those working on the development of a digitalised EIA process, as well as to capture views more widely across the sector. Participants were contacted via the OWIC Developer Group and the OCLG.

The interviews were structured around a series of questions which can be found in Annex A. Using a semi-structured format provided an opportunity for participants to develop their responses and move beyond the questions where appropriate.

The interviews lasted around 45 minutes and took place online. The interviews were recorded with notes taken throughout to support the data collection and analysis. Responses to the interviews were thematically coded and have been summarised in sections 4-7 of this paper.

In total, responses were gathered from four participants; three representatives of different offshore wind developer companies active in the UK, and a consultancy specialising in energy and the environment. Whilst a smaller data set can present the potential for greater depth of analysis, it can at the same time diminish the generalisability of findings. In order to build a broader picture of the barriers and opportunities for digital EIA for the offshore wind sector, the findings of this study have been compared with

wider literature on the opportunities and barriers of digital EIA and a series of recommendations have been highlighted in section 7 of this paper.

4.0 Opportunities

Digital EIA is broadly seen as a positive and natural next step for the EIA process in the UK, including for the offshore wind sector. The benefits of a digitalised process have been well documented (Fothergill & Murphy, 2021; IEMA, 2017; Digital EIA, 2020), with a digital EIA frequently cited as a more streamlined way to access information with the potential to improve decision-making processes through reducing the volume of text and enhancing the interactivity of the EIA process.

Participants of this study expressed enthusiasm for the opportunities that a fully digitalised process could bring to the consenting process, including the potential to reduce consenting timelines, costs, and delivery of a more proportionate EIA. The opportunities mentioned by participants were in line with wider literature and suggest that they are likely to be well understood across the sector.

Long-term **cost reduction** was a key opportunity highlighted by participants, as a digital EIA had the potential to transform the process and remove all printing costs and reduce administrative burden through automation of low value, resource intensive tasks (such as collation of consultation responses).¹⁰ It should be noted that it's possible there could be a short-term cost increase while stakeholders familiarise with and adopt new digitalisation tools.

Under current EIA regulations, there is a requirement for a hard copy of an EIA to be made available. Due to the size of the document, producing a hard copy can lead to thousands of pounds in printing costs. It was commented by participants that a fully digitalised EIA would not only eliminate the printing costs, but also support greater uptake of the digital approach across the offshore wind sector. It was recognised that a change in legislation could

¹⁰ Digitising the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Process: a user-centred approach to designing an EIA process for the future, Digital EIA Project Partners, 2020. Available at: <https://digitaleia.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Digital-EIA-Report.pdf>. Last accessed May 2024.

be required to achieve this¹¹. Indeed, due to existing legislative requirements, any attempt to produce a digital EIA would likely involve duplication of effort as developers would also be required to produce a non-digital version, incurring administrative costs and burden. This barrier is explored in further detail later in this paper.

All participants commented on the potential for time efficiency savings through a shift to digital. It was widely felt that these efficiencies would have an associated benefit through speeding up the consenting process. It was noted that these time efficiencies had the potential to benefit the wider EIA process. One participant commented that it would free up resource to improve the technical elements of the EIA. Another participant suggested that the time savings could be used to support and progress conversations on delivering a more proportionate EIA.

4.1 Supporting a more proportionate EIA

Overall, greater proportionality for the EIA was perceived as a likely outcome of moving to a fully digital process. For many, a digitalised EIA is also an opportunity to transform the EIA process. All participants in this study stated that digitalising EIAs would also involve transforming the EIA process which would likely deliver greater proportionality. This is also widely supported in the literature. The Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) described, in their 2017 report on delivering proportionate EIA, that the benefit of a digitalised system is that it is not just a PDF or a digital version of a hard copy but is instead a completely new way of engaging with EIAs (IEMA, 2017), creating an opportunity to address the known challenges with the current system such as over scoping and repetition.

One of the principal ways that a digitalised EIA could deliver **greater proportionality** is by using visual tools to set out evidence and survey results. In the Netherlands, it was identified that between 60–70% of the text usually present in a non-digital Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) could be

¹¹ Work to identify legislative barriers to support the delivery of digital EIA forms part of the roadmap for the P2G Proportionate EIA Focus Area. The roadmap is accessible here: [1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf \(owic.org.uk\)](https://www.owic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf)

removed through using visual techniques commonly proposed for a digital approach (Fothergill & Murphy, 2021). Participants of this study all agreed that a digital process had the potential to significantly reduce the volume of EIAs and produce a more streamlined report through the use of embedded links, layered information and visuals.

In addition to this, it was commented that the use of visuals such as interactive mapping tools, images and videos would support better decision-making as key evidence would be made clearer, more engaging and brought to the forefront of the EIA. Assessment areas such as visual and seascape impact would be much more intuitively represented through interactive tools. Several functionalities were mentioned by participants, including being able to layer maps and turn on and off features to be able to see possible effects. All participants also mentioned the benefits of embedding key guidance using links within a digital interface to direct users to guidance or additional information. One participant described how information could be layered in a digital platform so that users could access the level of detail relevant to them, rather than presenting all the information including very technical details upfront. It was also stated that presenting evidence in a digital format would make EIAs easier for decision-makers to navigate which would likely reduce the overall review time, thus speeding up the EIA and wider consenting process.

One participant highlighted the potential to use analytics within a digital report to support rationalisation of EIAs. It was commented that this could be supported through mapping how many views each chapter received which would build a picture over time of where, if any, sections could be rationalised or removed based on the levels of engagement.

Greater proportionality was also linked to the potential for **increased resource efficiencies**, with the potential to embed links to guidance likely to save time for developers of the EIA, as well decision-makers. One participant suggested that the time savings could support the development of the technical aspects of the EIA, whilst another suggested that it could allow for greater resource for stakeholder engagement on the content of the EIA and support discussions on how to reduce the scope of EIAs.

5.0 Barriers

Although all participants were positive and clear on the potential opportunities for digitalised EIA, several barriers to realising these opportunities were identified. These barriers have been grouped into those relating to data handling, storage, and security and those relating to sectoral conditions such as risk aversion and legislation. These factors were identified as essential areas which need to be overcome to realise the opportunities of digital EIA. The sectoral conditions are discussed in the following section.

5.1 Data

Data is a fundamental part of the EIA and is at the heart of the journey to a fully digitalised approach. From the data collection to the presentation, participants identified several barriers surrounding data formatting, storage, and security. The lack of standardised approach towards a digital EIA has also impacted the data at the heart of the process.

The lack of data standardisation means that data is currently stored in different formats and locations and is rarely shared within the sector. In addition to this, it was noted that data is often handled differently at a national and local level which can create access barriers. Improving standardisation of data has the potential to reduce duplication of work, consolidate resources and enhance the development of digital EIA through enabling easier access to data and improving data readability. Participants recognised the need for improved data standardisation to streamline development of EIAs and support a transition to a digital system.

Some participants spoke of the need for a "single point of truth" to support wider collaboration and to create a central point for data collection and information sharing. The recent launch of The Crown Estate led Offshore Wind Evidence and Knowledge Hub¹² (OWEKH) was highlighted as a positive step towards establishing a single source of information for guidance and best

¹² OWEKH aims to 'to support the consenting process for offshore wind projects by providing a sector-wide online portal supporting a single point of access to data and information including the latest guidance and best practice documents'. Available here: [Offshore Wind Evidence and Knowledge Hub \(owekh.com\)](https://www.owekh.com)

practice documents for the sector. It was noted that establishing a space for centrally agreed information had the potential to address existing barriers to data and knowledge sharing and support a more proportionate EIA through having a central reference point that applications could refer back to – through using embedded links, for example.

Participants also mentioned barriers associated with data ownership and storage. These referred to a lack of clarity on how data would be managed after the submission of a digital EIA and who would be responsible for the storage of the data after the development phase. This has been highlighted as a challenge for digital approaches more widely. Fothergill and Murphy give the example of the proposed Burfell wind farm project in Iceland whose digital Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is no longer available online following the decision not to grant consent (2021). Guidance on longer term data storage within a centralised and secure location will likely be needed to ensure that issues of longevity for online content are addressed, so that digital EIAs can be accessible and maintained beyond the submission deadline.

Data security was also highlighted. Participants commented on the need to establish suitable methods to digitally redact publicly sensitive data where needed, to ensure that the level of access was suitable for different users throughout the EIA process. It was suggested that this could be achieved through creating password protected parts of the EIA. Indeed, as with other barriers linked to data, participants viewed this as an area that could be easily built into a digital EIA tool, further supporting the view that barriers to digitalised EIA are surmountable.

It was also noted by participants that the right digital infrastructure will need to be in place to ensure an effective transition; this includes digital upskilling, ensuring suitable connectivity, and access to the right software and equipment to enable decision-makers to process EIAs digitally. This is not unique to the offshore wind sector. A study into the future delivery of digital EIA found that a new set of skills were required for both the private and public sectors to deliver digital EIA (IEMA, 2020). It has also been suggested that organisations might need to consider upskilling or bringing on board

professionals with knowledge of data systems to support a transition to digital EIA (Fothergill & Murphy, 2021). A recent report by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) also commented on the lack of digital technology in the planning system (OEP, 2023), which supports the notion that a switch to digital cannot take place without the appropriate infrastructure in place across the sector.

Resourcing was highlighted by one participant as an area which is currently impacting the EIA process and which a digital process could improve, through increasing the efficiency with which applications are processed. It was noted that contrary to the idea that digitalisation places jobs at risk, a digitalised process would encourage better and more proportionate use of resource – for example, taking less time to find the element of an EIA being sought. A quantification of how a digital process would support greater resource efficiencies would likely provide additional evidence to support greater adoption of digital EIA.

In order for a digital EIA to be realised, further work is needed to ensure that systems can support a transition to a fully digital process. In addition to this, a greater focus on education, training and awareness raising is needed to ensure that the appropriate level of skill is present across the sector including the planning sector, Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs), government, developers, and consultancies to support a transition to a digital approach.

6.0 Realising the Opportunities/Overcoming the Barriers

Whilst the opportunities of a digitalised approach to EIA were clear to participants, it was noted that there was still a long way to go before they would be realised. When asked about the gaps and what was needed to encourage greater uptake of digital approaches in the sector, the principal reason identified was the sector's lack of confidence in digital tools. Although participants were divided on the scale of the testing, it was widely felt that tried and tested examples were required to give confidence that consent could be granted using a digital EIA. It was noted that the size of the tested project was perhaps less important than having a real-world example of a

successful consent application using a digital EIA, as the process was easily scalable.

All participants acknowledged that there was hesitancy in the sector to be a 'first mover' due to the costs involved and the level of perceived risk. The current legislative landscape was also linked to the hesitancy to develop digital EIAs as developers would still be required to produce a non-digital EIA alongside a digital version, therefore duplicating effort and increasing costs. Linked to this was the awareness of the time pressures surrounding the consent process and the need to ensure that any risks to not receiving consent were minimalised.

In a recent consultation into the proposed changes to the EIA regulations, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) recognised the role of a fear of legal challenge as a cause of the increase in the length of EIAs (DLUHC, 2023), supporting the notion that there is a tendency towards a more risk averse approach to EIAs. This will likely need to be addressed for a digitalised process to receive widespread uptake. Further research could be beneficial to determine the extent to which this is present across the sector, and to support approaches to build confidence and challenge perceptions of risk associated with approaching an EIA through digital platforms.

It was acknowledged that concerns around the consenting timeframes for offshore wind development were set in the context of a policy ambition to deliver 50GW of offshore wind by 2030 – as set out in the British Energy Security Strategy – with decarbonisation of the UK's energy supply also a fundamental part of the UK's net zero by 2050 commitment. Indeed, this is supported by wider research which notes that 'one of the major challenges facing the offshore renewable energy sector is the speed and the extent of deployment needed to meet Net Zero targets' (ORE Catapult, 2019: iii). Whilst digital EIA has the potential to increase the efficiency of the EIA process and speed up timelines in the long term, trust in the process is needed to ensure that it works in an effective way and until legislative changes are brought forward, pursuing digital approaches could lead to an increased administrative burden in the short term.

Cross sectoral learnings could have a role to play in the development and uptake of a digital EIA for the offshore wind sector. It was noted that a digital process has been successfully implemented for other sectors including highways (IEMA, 2020), with the potential for lessons learnt to support uptake of a digital process for offshore wind developments.

Participants highlighted numerous barriers, but it was notable that none relate to gaps in the technological capabilities to deliver a fully digitalised EIA, with the emphasis more strongly on conditions and approaches within the sector as well as wider questions on data handling and management. Digitalising the EIA process was seen positively by participants who felt that the identified barriers were surmountable and a digitalised approach to EIAs achievable for the sector. This mirrors the conclusions of the 2018 Industry Evidence Programme (IEP) report that found that improvements to the EIA process would be advantageous for the sector (IEP, 2018).

7.0 User Experience

There are already several digital EIA tools such as Envigo by Eon+, iReport developed by Royal HaskoningDHV, digital reporting provided by RPS, and eBase developed by Xodus. Despite the presence of these tools, most participants did not have first-hand experience of using a digital EIA tool for an offshore wind EIA. Participants were nevertheless positive about the digital EIA tools they had come across and commented on the potential to incorporate digital EIA tools with other tools such as GIS mapping and stakeholder management portals, which had the potential to further streamline the EIA process.

Typical services offered by those promoting EIA tools include:

- Presenting EIA information in a user-friendly format, including interactive tools, video and audio.
- Smart stakeholder management, including understanding stakeholder interactions with materials, supporting quicker access to required information and providing more opportunities for feedback.
- Interactive and customisable maps.
- Early visibility of constraints and challenges to support better planning.

- Automation of repetitive tasks, freeing up team resources.

It was noted by respondents that for digital EIA to be successfully delivered, there needed to be greater feedback and engagement on how SNCBs and the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) would interact with digital tools. In addition to feedback from decision-makers, it was also noted that endorsement of digital tools by those involved in the review and decision-making process would increase confidence in the available tools and likely encourage wider uptake, and therefore boost confidence in the digital approach as more examples are made available. In addition to this, it was commented that whilst larger consultancies were more likely to have the financial ability to develop these tools, smaller consultancies also needed to be brought along on the journey to a digital EIA. This would likely require additional investment to support development of tools and support innovation in this space.

Support for smaller consultancies is also likely to be needed to ensure that their market share is not impacted through a transition to digital, as larger consultancies are more likely to lead the way on digital approaches (Fothergill & Murphy, 2021). Additional research to capture feedback on existing digital tools and their development from decision-makers would be beneficial to build confidence in the sector and encourage uptake.

Most participants mentioned that there needed to be a balance between encouraging innovation through supporting the development and testing of digital tools, whilst also ensuring that the market remains easy for developers to navigate. The question of standardisation and the potential for associated benefits was welcomed by participants. It was largely felt that some level of standardisation would be needed to ensure that digital platforms remained easy to navigate for decision-makers and followed a similar format. It was noted, however, that there was a balance to strike between delivering some level of standardisation and not stifling innovation. Indeed, it was noted that development of these tools should not be delayed in order to wait for standardisation to be agreed and introduced, as this was likely to take time and could slow down the transition towards a digitalised process.

8.0 Discussion and Recommendations

Transitioning to a fully digitalised EIA has some clear and well explored opportunities for the EIA process and the offshore wind sector more widely. Speeding up the time frames of the consenting process is an area that has been highlighted in recent government strategies, such as 2021 British Energy Security Strategy¹³, and has been highlighted as an important area to be addressed to support delivery of the 2030 ambition and 2050 sector target. This research has reiterated some of the known and anticipated benefits of a transition to a digitalised approach to EIAs; principally the potential to reduce consenting timelines, increase efficiencies in the process, and positively impact the decision-making process.

In order to realise these benefits, it is clear that there are a number of areas that need to be addressed to encourage greater uptake, and build confidence and the necessary infrastructure to deliver a transition away from non-digital approaches to EIAs. To achieve this, participants of this study have highlighted the need for greater testing and real-life examples of consents approved using a fully digital EIA, greater engagement with decision-makers on their experience using digital tools, and initiatives to improve approaches to data standardisation and sharing across the sector.

In addition to this, a review of existing legislation is needed to reduce the costs and administrative burden on developers looking to support digital approaches. Several participants highlighted the need for greater clarity on the EOR approach proposed by the UK government. Although the existing legislation presents possible drawbacks in the short term, the positivity of participants towards the benefits of a digital process highlighted the ambition currently within the sector to overcome these challenges and unlock the benefits in the long term. Greater buy-in across the sector is likely to support a transition to digital and grow confidence. This could be supported by additional research into the experience of decision-makers with existing digital tools. A quantification of the benefits to the sector from a

¹³ The British Energy Security Strategy set out an ambition to reduce consenting times from up to four years to one year: [British energy security strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92122/bes-2021.pdf)

transition to a digital process, including time saving and more precise cost savings would also likely encourage greater uptake of digital approaches.

A full transition to digital is likely to take time and will need to involve all actors along the way, including ensuring that there are sufficient skills, funding, and digital infrastructure within the sector to deliver a transition to digital. Whilst there are no easy fixes to these challenges, working collaboratively with existing groups such as the OWEKH technical topic group and with the IEMA Impact Assessment working group to support future research into unblocking challenges and building confidence would likely help to support the transition to a digitalised EIA.

Summary of recommendations:

1. Further research to quantify opportunities resulting from a digitalised process, focussing on cost and time efficiencies.
2. Guidance from decision-makers on the effectiveness of existing digital EIA tools, to build confidence from offshore wind developers.
3. Support the launch of the IEMA digital EIA roadmap and engage with associated workshops.
4. Create a link between the OWEKH Technical Topic Group on EIA Coordination, Approaches to Assessment & Changes to Policy and the IEMA Impact Assessment working group with the P2G Proportionate EIA roadmap¹⁴ and working group to align efforts.
5. Explore representation from DLUHC on the P2G Coordination Group to support collaboration with government on digitalisation of the EIA process.
6. Work with the OWIC Head of Skills to identify opportunities to build digital skills within the sector.
7. Work with the P2G Proportionate EIA working group to identify legislative changes required, if any, to support the delivery of digital EIA.

¹⁴ The Proportionate EIA Focus Area roadmap is available here: [1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf \(owic.org.uk\)](https://www.owic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/1c0521_6965a2e453c34b8a8425d1cf8e39ef57.pdf)

Annex A: Interview Questions

Opening question

1. Could you tell me a bit about your experience overall with the current system for EIAs.

Section 1: Benefits of digitalisation

2. What would you see as the main benefits of the digitalisation of EIA?
3. How do you think these benefits can be realised?
4. How could a digitalised EIA process also support more proportionate EIA? Please give details.

Section 2: Barriers to digitalisation

5. What are the principal barriers to the implementation of digital EIA?
6. In your opinion are there any gaps in current approaches that need to be addressed to overcome these barriers?

Section 3: Feedback on experiences using digitalised EIA tools (if any)

7. A. What experience do you have using tools to digitalise parts of the EIA process (such as RHDHV ireport, Xodus eBase, RPS Digital reporting series....etc.) B. Please give details/ If you've not used a digitalisation tool could you explain why.
8. **If no**, what would need to change for you to consider using one of these tools?
9. **(if applicable)** In your experience have/does this/these tool(s) capture the opportunities/ overcome the barriers to digital EIA?

Closing question

10. Is there anything that you'd like to add on the digitalisation process more widely that hasn't already been mentioned?

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