

National Planning Policy Framework



Introduction

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has been updated; it sets out planning policies for England and how they should be applied. The new version of the document contains reforms and changes consulted on as part of the government's plans to "rebuild Britain" and deliver 1.5 million homes and 150 major infrastructure projects before the next election. To summarise, key changes to the NPPF include:

- actions to increase mandatory housing targets for local planning authorities.
- a "common sense" approach to green belt release.
- "golden rules" for green belt development.

Housing need and supply

To assist in seeking to meet the government's overall objective of 1.5 million new homes over the course of the current parliament, the revised NPPF introduces a new standard method for calculating Local Housing Need (LHN) and strengthens the requirement for Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply (5YHLS).

The 5YHLS must include a buffer. Buffers are not cumulative therefore, one of the following should be added depending on circumstances:

- 5% - the minimum buffer for all authorities, necessary to ensure choice and competition in the market; or
- 20% - the buffer for authorities where delivery of housing taken as a whole over the previous three years, has fallen below 85% of the requirement, as set out in the last published Housing Delivery Test results; or
- 20% - a new buffer (applicable from 1 July 2026), which will apply to LPAs with a housing requirement that was adopted in the last five years and was examined against a previous version of the NPPF, and where their annual average housing requirement is less than 80% of the most up to date local housing need figure.

In rural areas, the challenge lies in balancing the demand for new housing and conserving rural landscapes, communities, and food production. There will be increased pressure to meet housing requirements, but this also presents an opportunity to enhance infrastructure and attract investment in these regions, something that is also stipulated in the updated NPPF (see "golden rules"), ensuring that developments are sustainable and benefit local communities without harming the rural environment.

In many LPAs, the new LHN figures will increase the demand for development land. This could create opportunities for landowners to promote sites as authorities seek additional land for growth. A modified 'presumption in favour' of sustainable development continues to apply in locations where the local plan is out of date.

Grey belt

The updated NPPF introduces the term 'grey belt', which is defined as green belt land that "does not strongly contribute to green belt purposes". Those purposes include limiting urban sprawl, stopping neighbouring towns from merging into each other, safeguarding the countryside from encroachment and preserving the special character of historic towns. 'Grey belt' creates new opportunities for rural land in the green belt, as well as underused previously developed sites. In an interview, Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook suggested the grey belt could include "disused petrol stations, abandoned car parks, but also just low-value scrubland". The definition of grey belt is broad and the challenge will be in its interpretation and application.

The green belt and the "golden rules"

If LPAs cannot demonstrate a sufficient 5YHLS (as above), they will now be required to review green belt boundaries to assess whether this land could be used to deliver housing. The document states, however, that green belt land remains at the bottom of the priority list for potential sites, with brownfield sites taking priority in the first instance before land in the grey belt.

A series of “golden rules” must be met to release green belt land for development:

- developments must include necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure.
- sites must provide 50% affordable housing (or 15% over the local target, subject to a 50% cap).
- sites must improve existing access to green space or create new, publicly accessible green space. The framework says explicitly residents of new developments in released green belt land must be able to access these spaces “within a short walk” from their homes.

These changes, as part of the wider measures in the NPPF, could increase the demand for development land to meet LPAs’ growth targets. The initial consultation earlier in 2024 floated the idea of using benchmarked land values to prevent landowners from profiting from the sale of land in the green belt for development, but, this was not included in the revised version of the NPPF. However, the official response from the government did note it was “keen to make greater use of local authorities’ compulsory purchase powers”. Reforms to the compulsory purchase process and the compensation framework are due to be included in the upcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

Energy and climate

This will be the first time the NPPF has referred to the transition “to net zero by 2050”, doing so in paragraph 161. Here, the planning system is required to support the transition by taking full account of all climate impacts, including global warming, water scarcity, and extreme weather events. This builds on a previous requirement to take a proactive approach to climate mitigation and adaptation.

The most significant amendment is paragraph 163, which requires climate change to be considered in preparing and assessing planning applications. Those bringing forward projects will, therefore, have to evidence the impacts of proposals and what measures have been accordingly taken. This could include carbon assessments and energy efficiency measures.

Compared to the consultation, the final version of the NPPF does not require LPAs to support applications for low-carbon energy. Instead, it includes a requirement to “give significant weight to the benefits associated with renewable and low carbon energy generation”. Following the release of the amended NPPF, the Clean Power 2030 Action Plan was also released; it promises to remove obstacles to clean power and take a more regional approach to energy planning.

Other planning matters

The NPPF consultation asked what measures could be considered to better support and increase rural affordable housing; other than those relating to the green belt, no tangible changes have been made to the NPPF to reflect this. In its consultation response, the government said it was “aware of higher delivery costs in rural areas” and wants “to see more affordable housing in these areas as part of its ambition to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation”. It said it would consider further how policy can promote rural affordable housing as part of a set of national policies for decision-making due in 2025. A recent report by Defra found in around one in five predominately rural areas, median house prices were more than twelve times higher than earnings. By focusing on rural affordable housing, rural areas may become a more feasible option for people to live and work in, supporting rural economies and decreasing rural migration for those who might otherwise move into more urban areas as rural housing is unaffordable for them.

The government response to the NPPF consultation also covered various actions relating to planning fees. The government has said forthcoming regulations will be introduced to increase householder application fees at the “earliest possible convenience, subject to Parliamentary procedures”. It will introduce new powers for LPAs to set their own planning fees under the forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill. The government says this will make “local decisions more pro-growth” to “ensure applications can be assessed in a timely and effective manner”. LPAs have been allocated £14.8 million to support the delivery of local plans and to assist with implementing the changes made to the NPPF.

A Nature Restoration Fund for England will be developed via the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. This fund will aim to help developers meet their environmental obligations quicker, accelerating the pace of housing delivery while safeguarding the environment. Under current rules, developers must secure environmental mitigation before being granted planning permission, which often delays planning processes and adds extra costs to projects. The fund aims to remove this “block”, allowing developers to pay into the fund instead and proceed with the planning process immediately. In its press release, the government said the fund would likely be overseen by Natural England, which would then be responsible for deploying the funds to secure positive environmental outcomes.

Further analysis of the NPPF is available [here](#).

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