

What to expect from the proposed changes to National Planning Policy Framework

12 August 2024  Kelsey Richardson

The new Labour government has published its plans for reforming the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

On 30 July, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Angela Rayner, set out the changes that she hopes will deliver 1.5 million homes in the next five years.

We set out below a couple of the key issues from our perspective – however, there are many more. What is needed now is for local planning authorities (LPAs) and others impacted by the changes to respond in detail to the government consultation, so there is a clear understanding about how this is going to work in practice.

Mandatory housing targets

The new wording indicates that LPAs are to meet the identified housing need in their area – rather than as much as possible. The proposals not only include the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets, but changes to the methodology used to calculate these targets.

The current method of calculated local housing need identifies the minimum level of housing an LPA should plan for in its area, using a baseline of household projections.

This figure is adjusted to account for affordability. This minimum is then used with a view to inform the local plan and establish the housing requirement for that area. In the 20 most populous urban planning areas, an additional 35% of housing is applied to this figure.

Chapter 4 of the [consultation version of the NPPF](#) indicates that housing need will instead be calculated using a baseline set at a percentage of existing housing stock levels.

This is designed to drive a proportionate delivery of development that is proportionate to the existing size of settlement and ultimately better reflect growth in the Midlands and the North of England. The government proposes a stronger affordability multiplier, which increases the baseline in proportion to price pressures and to remove arbitrary caps and additions.

This proposed change intends to reflect the urgency of the supply of housing in individual LPAs.

It is significant, as it means there is less scope for councils to avoid planning for housing. This is particularly relevant to green belt authorities, which will be left with little choice but to release land from the green belt.

Green belt vs grey belt

Paragraph 142 of the consultation text for the proposals sets out that “green belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation or updating of plans”.

The document goes on to set out that “exceptional circumstances” covers a scenario where the LPA cannot meet its identified need for housing, commercial or other development through any other means. LPAs are then responsible for reviewing the green belt boundaries

and proposing alterations to meet these needs **in full** unless the alterations would fundamentally undermine the function of the green belt in the area.

The proposed guidance does set out that if the LPA thinks it is necessary for green belt land to be released, plans should give consideration to previously developed land in sustainable locations, then consider grey belt land – which is not already previously-developed – in sustainable locations, and **only then** consider other sustainable green belt locations.

Grey belt has been defined as: “For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, “grey belt” is defined as land in the green belt comprising previously-developed land and any other parcels and/or areas of green belt land that makes a limited contribution to the five green belt purposes (as defined in para 140 of this framework) but excluding those areas or assets of particular importance listed in footnote 7 of this framework (other than land designated as green belt).”

To add to these changes, there will be a requirement for green and grey belt sites to include 50% affordable housing and infrastructure going forward. There are changes to the viability of land too.

Despite this, it is a fundamental change to the current position. The key question is whether release of large amounts of the green belt would ‘fundamentally undermine the function of the green belt across the area of the plan as a whole’. It is unclear how this will be interpreted, which it is likely to mean that significant areas of green belt will be released for development.

Duty to co-operate

Paragraph 27 of the new proposal indicates the Labour government’s aim to strengthen the duty to co-operate. Policy-making authorities are to make sure there is consistency between their policies and other bodies, where a strategic relationship exists. Plans should ensure:

1. Consistency
2. Neighbouring areas’ unmet development needs are accommodated
3. All relevant authorities manage any allocation / designation which cuts across boundary areas

These changes are expected to be followed by further reforms, in the form of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. The government intends to use this bill to introduce a national scheme of delegation, focusing planning committees on the most important applications. Ultimately, the government aims to avoid arbitrary re-reviews of applications and to ideally place trust in professional planners.

Whilst this sounds positive, we have previously seen how difficult a ‘duty to cooperate’ is to comply with in practice. Issues such as resourcing and political differences often play a significant role.

Other changes

Other changes include removal of the infrastructure levy, a focus on proposals contributing to meeting a net zero future, oversupply not counting to five-year housing plan supply in subsequent years and an increase to some planning fees.

Overall, this is one of the biggest changes to planning policy in the past decade and all those impacted should be clear in the consultation about the practical impact of these changes.

While it is broadly accepted that the planning system needs to be quicker and cheaper, we mustn’t forget that it’s not just the physical process but those making decisions as part of this that are key.

We must remember to invest in professional planning officers and ensure that place-making is a career to aspire to.

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