

National Planning Policy Framework (2026) – Briefing Note

After months of anticipation, the Government has today published the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), representing the most significant overhaul of national planning policy since the Framework was first introduced in 2012.

Encouragingly, the final version broadly retains the pro-growth, pro-delivery direction established by the December 2025 draft and builds upon the housing and economic growth agenda embedded within the February 2025 NPPF, providing greater clarity, a more structured policy framework and, in our view, a generally positive platform for accelerating plan-making and decision-taking across England.

In this note we pick up on the most poignant updates from our client's perspectives.

Plan-making policies

The NPPF August 2026 presents a continued commitment to a genuinely plan-led system, with greater emphasis on strategic planning, plan delivery and consistency across authorities. While many of the consultation proposals have been retained, the final framework places increased importance on ensuring plans are practical and deliverable. In this regard, the NPPF provides a more interventionist and standardised approach to plan-making, with a stronger expectation that authorities maintain up-to-date plans capable of meeting identified development needs. This is clearly presented within the fixed plan-making timetables:

- New Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) (PM1) will provide a 25+ year strategic framework, distributing development needs, identifying growth and Green Belt review locations, coordinating infrastructure, and aligning with economic growth priorities. Replacement or altered versions of SDS will be commenced within seven years; and
- Local Plans (PM2) to be adopted within 30 months and replacement plans commenced within five years.

In the London context, the GLA gains a stronger strategic role, making housing redistribution across boroughs easier to justify. However, in relation to plan-making, the Draft London Plan's acknowledgement that it cannot accommodate the Government's assessed housing need of 848,840 homes may attract greater scrutiny. The strengthened emphasis on positively meeting identified development needs and preparing effective, deliverable plans suggests that examination is likely to focus on whether all reasonable opportunities for growth have been exhausted before accepting a housing shortfall. This could increase pressure to demonstrate that

capacity has been maximised through intensification, regeneration, transport-led growth and other sustainable development opportunities, potentially strengthening the case for additional site allocations capable of contributing towards London's unmet housing need.

Decision-Making Policies

The adopted NPPF streamlines decision-making and reduces procedural barriers to development. Compared with the consultation draft, the final NPPF reinforces expectations that local planning authorities adopt a pragmatic and proportionate approach to determining applications, whilst placing greater emphasis on early engagement and front-loaded problem solving. The adopted wording presents a conscious attempt to reduce avoidable delays associated with consultation processes, excessive information requests and protracted negotiations. These changes indicate a shift towards a more delivery-focused system, where the emphasis is increasingly placed on resolving issues positively rather than allowing process to impede decision-making.

While this sets an optimistic baseline, there are clear tensions between policy, and the realities of how many increasingly resourced constrained Local Planning Authorities operate. In practice, many authorities frequently seek extensive pre-application engagement, refuse to accept amendments during determination, or delay decisions pending consultee responses. The revised framework therefore has the potential to increase scrutiny of decision-making practices where authorities are perceived to prioritise procedural compliance and risk management over constructive engagement and the delivery of sustainable development.

Achieving Sustainable Development

Although the settlement-based framework proposed in December 2025 has been largely retained, the August 2026 version further strengthens the principle that sustainable development should be directed towards existing settlements and locations capable of supporting growth. In practical terms, this creates a more positive policy environment for urban intensification, regeneration and sustainable urban extensions, whilst maintaining tighter controls on development in less sustainable countryside locations. Greater weight is therefore placed on meeting development needs and supporting growth within settlements, making it increasingly difficult to resist development proposals solely on the basis of local character or settlement-edge locations where broader sustainability objectives are met.

Delivering a sufficient supply of homes

At the heart of the August 2026 NPPF is a strong emphasis on increasing housing delivery and ensuring that development plans make adequate provision for current and future housing needs. The new Framework strengthens the requirement for authorities to identify a sufficient supply and mix of housing sites, maintain a deliverable five-year housing land supply and plan for the different sizes, types and tenures of accommodation required by their communities. It also supports a more diverse portfolio of sites, including strategic growth locations and a greater proportion of small and medium-sized sites, to improve choice, competition and delivery.

Notably, Policy HO7 provides that substantial weight should be given to the benefits of delivering homes which contribute towards meeting evidenced accommodation needs. This represents a clear and important direction for decision-making, strengthening the weight to be afforded to housing delivery not only where there is an identified shortfall, but wherever proposals would help meet the needs of the community, including for affordable housing, older people, families, disabled people, renters and other groups.

The new Framework also places greater emphasis on strategic growth opportunities, higher densities in sustainable and well connected locations alongside aligning housing delivery with the timely provision of infrastructure. Strategic housing sites are also expected to be supported by appropriate transport, services and employment opportunities, while development around well-connected stations is expected to make efficient use of existing and planned public transport infrastructure.

Importantly, there is also a renewed focus on ensuring that permitted housing sites are built out without unnecessary delay. Major housing proposals should be capable of bringing homes forward within a reasonable period, while consideration should be given to imposing shorter commencement periods where this would expedite delivery without threatening the development's implementation or viability.

Overall, the new Framework introduces a more proactive and delivery-focused policy framework, providing stronger support for residential development than previous iterations of the NPPF and placing increased pressure on authorities to translate identified housing need into deliverable sites and completed homes.

Building a strong, effective economy

The new NPPF significantly strengthens the pro-growth economic agenda compared with the February 2025 version. It introduces explicit links to the UK Industrial Strategy, Industrial Strategy Zones, AI Growth Zones, data centres, grid infrastructure, innovation clusters and logistics networks. It also requires plans to

address barriers to investment and gives substantial weight to commercial development that supports national growth priorities. The draft 2025 NPPF proposed most of these changes, but the final 2026 version strengthens the wording and embeds them into both plan-making and decision-taking.

Unsurprisingly, it is clear that there is much stronger policy support for employment led development, logistics, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, AI and data-centre schemes.

Data Centres

The new NPPF creates policy recognition for data centres alongside industrial strategy, AI growth, freight and logistics, ports etc. and as such gives data centres greater weight in economic growth and expressly supports associated infrastructure and is a major step as one of the biggest hurdles was power availability to data centres rather than land supply.

It also supports a more proactive approach to power provision and infrastructure co-location, helping address one of the sector's key delivery constraints. Compared with the December 2025 draft (which almost treated data centres as a 'planning issue' rather than being part of the wider employment and technology sector), the final NPPF largely confirms and embeds these proposals, providing greater policy certainty and a clear positive signal that data centres are critical to the UK's economic growth, digital resilience and AI ambitions.

In this context, policy certainty means developers, investors, operators, grid providers and local planning authorities have greater confidence that data centre proposals are supported in national policy and are less likely to be challenged on matters of principle.

Ensuring the vitality of town centres

The new 2026 NPPF retains the sequential test (with an updated definition of 'edge of centre' in the absence of a defined primary shopping area) and impact assessment (including 2,500sqm threshold) from the February 2025 NPPF but modernises the purpose of town centres. The latest version thankfully recognises that successful centres require a broader mix of uses, majoring on residential accommodation, but also capturing leisure, community and flexible commercial activity. The draft 2025 NPPF first introduced this shift; the final 2026 version confirms it and gives 'substantial weight' to development that improves vitality and viability through diversification, intensification and bringing vacant premises back into use.

Importantly, the policy moves away from protecting retail for its own sake and towards supporting adaptive, mixed-use centres.

Making effective use of land

The latest NPPF places greater emphasis on the proactive optimisation of previously developed and well-connected urban land than the previous Framework, moving beyond a general encouragement of efficient land use towards a clearer expectation that sites should contribute as fully as possible towards housing, infrastructure and economic needs. Policies L1-L3 reinforce a plan-led approach to growth, support higher-density development in sustainable locations and place increased weight on making best use of existing urban land and public-sector assets. This shift is likely to provide stronger policy support for the intensification, refurbishment and reconfiguration of established sites, particularly within London where land is constrained and accessibility levels are high.

Whilst good design, heritage and environmental considerations remain critical, the revised Framework signals a greater willingness by Government to support proposals that optimise land use and unlock additional capacity within existing urban areas where this can be achieved sustainably.

Protecting Green Belt Land

The August 2026 NPPF retains the long-standing principle that great importance should be attached to the Green Belt, with its fundamental purpose remaining the prevention of urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Inappropriate development continues to be harmful by definition and should not be approved except in very special circumstances, with substantial weight afforded to harm to the Green Belt, including harm to openness.

However, the new Framework continues to promote the use of Grey Belt land, recognising its potential to unlock suitable and sustainable sites for housing and other development. Importantly, the revised definition of 'grey belt' removes the previous exclusion relating to land where the application of policies protecting the areas or assets formerly listed in footnote 7 provided a strong reason for restricting development. This likely provides greater clarity and means that the presence of such an asset or designation will no longer automatically prevent land from being identified as Grey Belt. Any effects on protected areas or assets must nevertheless still be assessed separately under the relevant national decision-making policies. Alongside this, the new Framework also seeks to provide greater clarity when determining whether development would be located sustainably. Policy TR3 notably requires the Government's Connectivity Tool to be used alongside other relevant quantitative and qualitative evidence when assessing the connectivity of locations proposed for development. This should provide a more consistent evidential basis for considering access to employment, services and facilities by sustainable transport, although it does not replace the need for a site-specific assessment of local accessibility and transport conditions.

Most notably, the Framework also introduces a new route through which residential and mixed-use development around well-connected stations can be treated as not inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Development within a reasonable walking distance of a qualifying railway, Underground, tram or light-rail station, generally around 800 metres, is not inappropriate where it is physically well-related to the station or the settlement in which it is located, is of a scale that can be accommodated by existing or proposed infrastructure, and would not prejudice proposals for longer-term comprehensive development in the same location. This route is also embedded within the Framework's plan-making provisions. Where a development plan's spatial strategy identifies suitable land around well-connected stations for development, Green Belt boundaries may be altered without the need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances.

Overall, the new Framework represent a comprehensive evolution of Green Belt policy and, while retaining strong protection for Green Belt land, provide clearer opportunities to deliver development in suitable and sustainable locations across England.

Achieving well-designed places

Section 14 of the new NPPF represents a significant evolution of national design policy, replacing the relatively high-level design guidance in the 2024 NPPF with a more structured framework built around four new policies (DP1-DP4) and a set of national decision-making criteria.

Most notably, DP3 introduces seven specific design principles, covering liveability, climate, nature, movement, built form, public space and identity, which will form the basis for assessing whether development is well-designed.

Importantly, the policy makes clear that responding positively to context should not preclude innovation or increased density where justified, providing stronger support for urban intensification, regeneration and higher-density schemes. DP4 also extends the role of design beyond the submission of a planning application, requiring design quality to be maintained throughout the evolution, approval and delivery of development.

For applicants, the practical implication is that issues often treated as separate technical workstreams, such as climate resilience, overheating, biodiversity, green infrastructure, sustainable drainage, active travel, public safety and social inclusion, must now be integrated into the design narrative from the outset rather than addressed later through specialist reports.

The chapter also signals a growing reliance on design codes, design guides and masterplans, meaning that securing influence during plan-making and masterplanning stages is likely to become increasingly important.

Overall, the reforms create a more comprehensive but also more objective framework for judging design quality, giving greater certainty to applicants who can demonstrate compliance with the new principles, while supporting ambitious, innovative and sustainable development proposals.

Conserving and Enhancing the Natural and Historic Environment

The latest NPPF does not fundamentally alter the protection afforded to environmental and heritage assets, but it does raise expectations around the positive contribution development should make to environmental enhancement and placemaking.

The most significant shift, first signalled in the December 2025 consultation draft and now embedded within adopted policy, is the move from a largely mitigation-led approach towards one focused on nature recovery, ecological networks, habitat creation and wider environmental enhancement. For developers, biodiversity, green infrastructure and ecological strategy are increasingly becoming core components of the planning case rather than standalone mitigation measures.

By contrast, changes to the historic environment chapter are more evolutionary, retaining the established policy tests whilst providing greater clarity around significance, setting and heritage-led design.

The overarching implication is that compliance alone is becoming less persuasive; schemes that can demonstrate meaningful biodiversity enhancement, contribution to nature recovery and a positive response to heritage significance are likely to attract greater weight in the planning balance than those which simply seek to minimise harm.