

Media summary - Draft National Planning Policy Framework

In order for the planning system to work properly and fairly, it is important for there to be national policies. Over recent years, however, the amount of central direction has increased dramatically: there are now more than 1,000 pages of national planning policy. The system has become unwieldy and complex, so that it is sometimes hard for experts, let alone communities, to interpret the policy.

In the Coalition Agreement, the Government committed to turning this thicket of documents into a clearer, simpler, more coherent framework, easier to understand and easier to put in practice.

A new framework for planning

The Government is launching for consultation the draft National Planning Policy Framework. It streamlines national planning policy into a consolidated set of priorities to consider when planning for and deciding on new development. These important principles will help communities enjoy a better quality of life, both now and in the future.

The draft Framework sets national priorities and rules only where it is necessary to do so. It will help ensure that planning decisions reflect genuine national objectives - such as the need to safeguard the natural environment, combat climate change, and to support sustainable local growth - while allowing for local authorities and communities to produce their own plans, reflecting the distinctive needs and priorities of different parts of the country.

The principle of sustainable development permeates the draft of the new Framework; that the actions we take to meet our needs today must not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own. And that planning decisions should not only protect, but, wherever possible, enhance biodiversity and improve people's access to our natural heritage.

Below are some of the main points in the draft Framework.

Protecting and enhancing the environment

Green Belt and natural environment

The Framework re-affirms the Government's commitment to maintaining Green Belt protections to prevent urban sprawl, as pledged in the Coalition Agreement. All inappropriate development harmful to Green Belt remains prohibited. Local authorities are encouraged to positively enhance the use of

Green Belt, including by opening up walking routes, and improving biodiversity and damaged landscapes for the enjoyment of all.

The Framework also retains protection for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and other environmental designations which protect the character of our country's landscape, stop unsustainable urban sprawl and preserve wildlife.

The Framework takes forward the Natural Environment White Paper's aims to improve the quality of the natural environment across England, halt the decline in habitats and species, and strengthen the connection between people and nature.

Green space designation

The Framework sets out a new right for local communities to protect green areas of particular importance to them. They will be able to earmark for special protection local green space land that is important to local life - whether its value is in its natural beauty, its historic resonances, its recreational value, its tranquility or its richness in wildlife. These sites will be planned so they complement and do not undermine investment in homes, jobs and other essential services.

Sustainable transport

The Government is committed to cutting down pollution and congestion through the use of public transport. The Framework makes clear that local authorities should seek to ensure good access to high quality local public transport for new developments, with priority given to cyclists and pedestrians. It encourages decision-makers to provide charging points for electric cars and other low emission vehicles. Wherever possible, key facilities essential to local life such as schools and shops should be within walking distance of most properties.

Biodiversity

A healthy and diverse natural environment is crucial to our sense of wellbeing. The Framework underlines that the planning system should seek not just to protect, but, where possible, to enhance biodiversity – making sure we don't just have isolated pockets of wildlife, but rich and connected green spaces for all kinds of species to thrive. Planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland.

Noise and light pollution

Noise and light pollution impacts negatively on people's quality of life. The Framework makes clear that planners must seek to avoid noise pollution as a result of new developments, and to protect tranquil areas prized for their

peace and quiet. By encouraging good design, planning decisions should limit the impact of light pollution.

Climate change

The Framework confirms planning's important role in tackling climate change and making the transition to a low carbon economy. Planning can help secure radical reductions in carbon emissions through the appropriate location and layout of new development, support for energy efficiency improvements to existing buildings and backing the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy including community-led initiatives. The framework paves the way for green transport of the future – the electric car- by encouraging decision makers to provide charging points;

We also want planning to ensure new development is future proofed against climate change through getting its location and design right (for example making sure that new housing estates are not at risk of flooding and have good flood storage capacity to reduce flooding elsewhere).

The Framework also meets the Coalition's commitment to preventing unnecessary building in areas of high flood risk.

Access to the coast

The Framework highlights the Government's ambition not only to protect our extraordinary coastline, but also to ensure people have access to it; it states that development should not curtail a continuous signed and managed route around the coast for all to enjoy.

Communications infrastructure

The Framework promotes growth for the telecoms industry, but reiterates that this growth should be sensitive to local areas. The policy supports the industry policy of sharing masts and using existing buildings, and well designed and camouflaged equipment.

Minerals

Minerals are essential to meeting society's needs. The Framework reaffirms the Government's objective of securing an adequate and steady supply of indigenous minerals needed to support sustainable growth, whilst limiting any impact on the natural and local environment.

Promoting Sustainable Growth and Prosperity

Sustainable growth

The Framework makes clear that local councils should be positive and proactive in encouraging sustainable growth and addressing barriers to

investment. They should set a clear economic vision and strategy for their area based on understanding of business needs across their areas.

Presumption in favour of sustainable development

The presumption is designed to help turn the planning system round - from one focused on barriers to one that prioritises opportunities. It requires councils to work closely with businesses and communities to plan positively for the needs of each area. And it makes clear that where plans are not in place or up-to-date, development should be allowed unless this would compromise the key principles for sustainability in the Framework, including protecting the Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The presumption will encourage plan-making by councils and communities, giving them a greater say in how they meet their development needs. It will also give communities, developers and investors greater certainty about the types of applications that are likely to be approved, and will help to speed up the planning process.

Duty to Co-operate

It is important for councils and other public bodies to work together across administrative boundaries to plan for the housing, transport and infrastructure that local people need. For example, if a significant number of people living in one council travel to work in a neighbouring city, then it is self-evident that the two councils should be working together.

For much of the last decade, the Government sought to make councils work together by setting regional strategies, prescribing where and how they should join forces. This Government thinks that this top-down approach was ineffective, and that it is better for councils to work together in ways and in structures that are designed from the bottom up. The Localism Bill will place a new Duty to Co-operate on councils to work together to address planning issues that impact beyond local boundaries. The Framework supports the implementation of the Duty to Co-operate.

Planning for strong, vibrant and healthy communities

Housing

Councils must be ambitious in delivering the much needed new homes that their communities need. Together with incentives for communities to accept growth, the Framework makes clear councils should ensure their Local Plan meets the full demand for market and affordable housing in their areas.

The Framework maintains the expectation that councils should have a rolling five year supply of deliverable sites to meet their housing needs with at least a 20% additional allowance to create competition and choice in the land market.

They should also bring back into use empty homes and buildings wherever possible.

The Framework will remove the Whitehall target specifying the levels of housing development that should take place on previously developed land. It will put decision making power back into the hands of local people, rather than imposed upon by central directives. As has been evident in the debate over 'garden grabbing', the definition of previously developed land has become discredited. In some areas, the cocktail of centrally imposed targets have had perverse outcomes - resulting in imbalances in provision such as between blocks of flats and family homes with gardens.

Town centres

The Government is fully committed to supporting town centres and protecting the local high street. The Framework makes clear that town centres should be recognised by councils as being at the heart of communities. Local authorities should pursue policies that support the viability and vitality of town centres. The Framework maintains the 'town centres first' policy approach which means that retail and leisure development should look for locations in town centres first, and only if suitable sites are not available look for edge of centre and then out of centre sites.

Neighbourhood planning

The Framework supports the implementation of neighbourhood planning - a radical new right being introduced in the Localism Bill. It will allow communities to create their vision of what their area should look like: where new shops, offices or homes should go. Local people will be able to define types of development which will be given planning permission through a Neighbourhood Development Order. If approved by a local referendum, the neighbourhood plan will need to be put into force by the local council.

Historic environment

The framework reaffirms protections for the historic environment and heritage. Development causing substantial harm or loss to an important heritage asset remains prohibited, unless in wholly exceptional circumstances. Similar protections should be given to unofficial sites of archaeological interest if it can be demonstrated they are of substantial significance. Local councils are encouraged to set out how they will protect and improve heritage most at risk through neglect or decay, for the enjoyment for communities now and in the future. They should have up to date evidence about the historic environment in their areas and use it to assess the significance of heritage assets and contribution they make to the environment.

Design

Good design is an essential part of sustainable development. The planning system should promote high quality design for all development - whether

individual buildings or whole estates, municipal facilities or parks, and public or private spaces. Local Plans, including any neighbourhood plans, should set out the quality of development expected for an area, ensuring development that reflects the character and identity of local surrounding areas.

Developers will be expected to work closely with those directly affected by their proposals to evolve design proposals that take account of the views of the community.