

The government has published a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), together with associated documents, for comment.

The NPPF is a key planning document as it sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied.

The revised document states that the twelve most significant reforms are, in summary:

1. a permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development
2. building homes around stations
3. driving urban and suburban densification
4. securing a diverse mix of homes
5. supporting small and medium sites
6. streamlining local standards
7. boosting local and regional economies
8. supporting critical and growth minerals
9. embedding a vision-led approach to transport
10. better addressing climate change
11. conserving and enhancing the natural environment
12. taking a more positive approach to the use of heritage assets

More information about the consultation can be found [here](#). Please note the consultation closes at **11.45pm on 10 March 2026**.

I shall place this consultation on the agenda for the February Council meeting, so we all have time to read it.

Briefing Note for ESALC/WSALC Members: Neighbourhood Plans and the New National Planning Policy Framework – January 2026

Health Warning!

1. This note provides a very brief and early overview of the draft new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2026) and its implications for neighbourhood planning. There are two important caveats. Firstly, it is based on a consultation draft – the final version may have important differences. Secondly, even after it is published, some of the ‘correct’ interpretation of NPPF 2026 will only become clear as it is tested in practice and in court. The other point to make is that this is a note just about NPPF 2026 and neighbourhood plans – there are lots of other very significant elements of NPPF 2026 which are not mentioned here at all.
2. Formal consultation on NPPF 2026 lasts until 10 March 2026. A final version is likely to be published quite quickly after the government has considered the responses, probably in the first half of 2026.
3. Nothing in NPPF 2026 will come into effect until the final version is published. Before then the draft can be a material planning consideration. Although it is not likely to be given weight in most planning decisions, applicants (and objectors) may well begin to reference what it says in their planning arguments. Also bear in mind that applications refused in the next few months under the current NPPF might be subject to an appeal under NPPF 2026 later in the year. NPPF 2026 will apply to the South Downs National Park Authority as it does to every other local planning authority (LPA).

No Change to the Principle of Neighbourhood Plans

4. Neighbourhood plans will continue to form part of the statutory development plan system – remaining optional, as they are now. The government has made no changes to the basic conditions or the regulations that set out the process for producing a neighbourhood plan. Nor has any change been proposed to the relationship between CIL and neighbourhood plans. The CIL share will remain at 25% where there is a made neighbourhood plan. However, changes in NPPF 2026 do mean that the role and purpose of local and neighbourhood plans is being redefined in an important way.

The Role of Neighbourhood Plans as defined by NPPF 2026

5. NPPF 2026 is structured very differently from the current document, to the extent that a side by side comparison of the two is difficult. Although many aspects of policy remain broadly the same (including the significance of maintaining a five year housing land supply) they are often expressed in a different way. Other things are completely new and will mean getting used to different terminology and ways of talking about planning issues.
6. The key change in NPPF 2026 that affects neighbourhood plans is the introduction of **National Decision Making Policies (NDMPs)**. The current NPPF provides broad policy and guidance, but NPPF 2026 introduces specific numbered policies that must be used directly for decision making.¹ These policies will apply everywhere in the country when applications are being considered. The government's aim is to introduce a more consistent and 'rule-based' approach to decision making which gives local planning authorities less scope to produce their own variations and additions to planning requirements.
7. To enforce this top down approach, new local plans and new or revised neighbourhood plans cannot include any policies that ***duplicate, substantively restate or modify NDMPs***. With a few exceptions they cannot set standards or benchmarks for applicants to meet which differ from those in building regulations or NDMPs unless this is for a very specific local reason. Once NPPF 2026 is in effect, any policy in an existing neighbourhood plan or local plan that is inconsistent with something in an NDMP will carry 'very little weight'. In practical terms those policies will be 'over-written' by the new NDMPs.
8. As a result, neighbourhood plans policies will be limited to:
 - a. making site allocations and providing detailed policies for the development of those sites in conformity with the provisions of the local plan and/or (because making site allocations in a neighbourhood plan is still discretionary);
 - b. matters arising from the specific planning issues genuinely unique to a neighbourhood area such as promoting local design and character, protecting a particular local amenity or heritage asset, or securing the provision of essential local infrastructure.

¹ Legally the NPPF will remain a 'material consideration' and so, somewhat paradoxically, the NDMPs will not form part of the statutory development plan. That is a deliberate choice on the part of government. However, the NPPF declares that its content must be observed in plan and decision making and promotes itself above any existing or future development plan policies which conflict or even differ in format from what the NPPF contains.

9. Policies in an existing local plan or neighbourhood plan that remain 'consistent' under the new system will still carry weight. They will not be redundant just because they were agreed under a previous NPPF rather than NPPF 2026.
10. Under this new approach when a planning application is considered, the decision maker will take into account:
 - a. the national decision-making policies
 - b. any local plan or neighbourhood plan policies that still carry weight
 - c. any other material considerations
11. Representations from consultees (including parish councils) and members of the public will still play the same role in the system, but the relevant policies they will make reference to are going to include NDMPs – in fact they will be mainly NDMPs. That will take some getting used to.
12. Which policies in an existing neighbourhood plan or local plan are inconsistent with NDMPs and which are not is bound to be a source of argument and challenge. It can only be determined on a case by case basis, and while many will be obvious, others may be difficult to agree on. A neighbourhood plan group may well think that a policy is consistent with the NDMPs, whilst an applicant, or the LPA, might disagree. A lot of the uncertainty will eventually be flushed out of the system because any overlap or conflict in new or revised plans will be dealt with at the examination stage. In the meantime, decision makers will have to make a judgement.
13. The presumption in favour of sustainable development is now built into the policies of NPPF 2026. However, NPPF 2026 also contains an NDMP policy² which says that if a neighbourhood plan allocates sites to meet the local housing requirement (in full) and is less than 5 years old then it is likely to provide **substantial weight** towards refusing development that conflicts with its policies. This is similar to the approach in Paragraph 14 of the existing framework.
14. Whilst that may seem reassuring, remember that NPPF 2026 limits the scope of the policies a neighbourhood plan can contain (and the ones that still carry any weight). So there may be fewer neighbourhood plan policies that an application can be in conflict with in the first place.

² Policy S6

What does this mean for Neighbourhood Planning?

15. In 'process' terms nothing has changed - neighbourhood plans are still an integral part of the planning system and a qualifying body can still produce one for the first time or revise/replace a previous version. None of the mechanisms or requirements for producing a neighbourhood plan have been amended.
16. A neighbourhood plan can still allocate sites for development once the LPA has worked out a housing requirement for the neighbourhood area. Your LPA will determine the 'cut off' in size between the strategic sites to be included in the local plan, and those it leaves to neighbourhood plans (if any). NPPF 2026 provides a set of steps for making site allocations which are helpful in their clarity but relatively onerous for a small or less well-resourced neighbourhood group to undertake. If you do wish to make housing allocations, when you can begin work on a new/replacement plan depends on when your LPA is able to provide you with a definitive housing requirement at neighbourhood level. That in turn is based on the strategy the LPA intends to adopt and the progress of its own local plan.
17. Making site allocations in a neighbourhood plan remains a choice, even if there is an identified housing requirement for the area. You can still leave the whole task to the LPA and engage with them in that process. For many communities that is an entirely sensible option. Any made neighbourhood plan triggers the 25% CIL allocation – not just those with site allocations.
18. What neighbourhood plans will not be able to do is to take a divergent, local approach to matters that are specifically dealt with NDMPs. Some existing neighbourhood plans include policies which take their own position on broad issues such as climate change, biodiversity or what constitutes sustainable development. This sometimes includes setting their own standards or requirements for development to meet without an explicit local justification. These sorts of policy are unlikely to be acceptable (or carry any weight) under NPPF 2026. Policies will have to be 'grounded' in what can be demonstrated to be necessary given local circumstances, with good evidence provided. The challenge for plan makers and decision takers will be knowing where the boundaries lie and that is going to take some time to sort out.

Next Steps and Implementation

19. Areas with a made neighbourhood plan will find that some of its more general policies cease to carry any weight after the publication of NPPF 2026. That alone might seem like a reason for an urgent review. But bear in mind that even a newly minted neighbourhood plan cannot modify NDMPs. Existing policies that do not 'survive' in the new system cannot be reintroduced by way of a new plan. Knowing which is which is going to be a key

question. For that reasons it might be sensible to allow the new system to settle a little before assessing what policies are still needed (and permissible) locally. That is especially true in areas where your LPA is at an early stage of reviewing its local plan and because it will have to decide how to proceed in the light of what NPPF 2026 has to say about the content of local plans.

20. As mentioned above, the ability of a neighbourhood plan to allocate sites in a way that gains 'protection' under Paragraph 14/NDMP S6 depends on your LPA being able to provide a reliable housing requirement figure for your area. That may be another constraint on your timetable.
21. Emerging neighbourhood plans that have reached at least Regulation 15 stage when NPPF 2026 comes into effect can continue to be examined under the current system. However, once made they will be impacted by the changes introduced by NPPF 2026. The government suggests that these draft plans could be withdrawn and updated in accordance with NPPF 2026 before proceeding further. That might require them to repeat at least the Regulation 14 consultation stage and of course some draft policies may have to change. It would be sensible to discuss this with your LPA or the examiner if they have been appointed.

Summary

22. The impact of NPPF 2026 will take some getting used to and adjusting to it is likely to be messy. At its heart is a move to reduce the number and complexity of development plan policies. Outside of NDMPs the government wants any policies to be derived from genuinely local issues or local requirements. It wants them to be written in a way which makes it obvious what an applicant has to do, and easy to determine whether or not it has done so.
23. Policies in new or revised neighbourhood plans will therefore tend towards being more site, location or character based because that is the essence of 'local' in land use terms. The government would say that this does not undermine the role or purpose of neighbourhood plans – it keeps them focussed on the neighbourhood itself, as was always intended.
24. Whether your area needs to produce or revise a neighbourhood plan will depend on the extent to which those issues exist in your area (including site allocations), and whether or not you consider the NDMPs will be able to deal with them adequately. If you do decide to produce or revise a neighbourhood plan it may be slightly easier to focus, make progress and some plans will definitely be shorter than they would otherwise have been.