

East Herts Council Non-Key Decision Report

Date: 13 February 2026

Report by: Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward – Executive Member for Planning and Growth

Report title: Proposed Reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary

- This report proposes East Herts Council's response to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework (2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION: the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government be informed that East Herts Council:

- A) Welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework; and**
- B) Submits the responses to the consultation questions included at Appendix B to this report as its detailed response to the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the implications of the proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and other changes to the planning system for East Herts, and to agree this Council's response to the consultation.

2.0 Background

2.1 The government published the new version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for consultation on 16 December 2025. The draft framework represents the most significant overhaul of national planning policy since the NPPF

was first introduced in 2012, and represents a significant shift in the format of the guidance since the last major changes made at the end of 2024.

- 2.2 The draft document entirely restructures the current document around a series of policies within thematic chapters. Most chapters are split between plan-making policies and decision-making policies. Alongside the draft NPPF a consultation document has been published which asks 225 questions. Because of the wide-ranging changes and implications of the new NPPF, this response has been a joint effort between several teams to put together this response, including Planning Policy, Development Management and Urban Design and Conservation.
- 2.3 A briefing note was issued to all Members at the beginning of this year, which set out the twelve most substantive reforms alongside a summary of the main proposals set out in the draft framework. This has been attached at **Appendix A**.
- 2.4 The consultation began on 16 December 2025 and will close at 11:45 pm on 10 March 2026. It is anticipated that the Government will aim to have a fully revised version of the Framework available in summer 2026.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 The NPPF was originally introduced in 2012 to consolidate the Government's planning policies for England. It guides local decision makers on the Government's national policy objectives, providing a framework within which locally prepared plans are produced, and national policies to be taken into account when dealing with planning applications. When a local planning authority brings forward a plan, they have a statutory duty to have regard to these national policies, and the Framework is therefore drafted with the expectation that plans will be consistent with the policies contained within it. The Framework is also a 'material consideration' in decision-taking.
- 3.2 A key aim of the current Government is to address the 'acute and entrenched' housing crisis that it believes the country remains in the grip of. It believes that addressing this will also have beneficial consequences for our economy and the wider public services that the country relies on, by easing the need to spend public finances on matters related to housing and instead

redirecting this to supporting economic growth and increasing productivity.

3.3 At the start of its term, the Government committed to an ‘incredibly stretching’ housebuilding target of 1.5 million new homes across this Parliament and acted quickly to revamp the planning system to enable this target to be met. This included consulting upon, and finalising, a revised National Planning Policy Framework by December 2024 which, among other things, revised the methodology for assessing housing needs, strengthened policy towards developing brownfield land and provided a means of reassessing green belt in a bid to start a conversation about how this resource could also contribute to meeting housing needs.

3.4 The proposed reforms to the NPPF consultation sets out the changes that the Government proposes to make to the NPPF (subject to and following this consultation). The twelve most substantive reforms are:

- A permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development.
- Building homes around stations, a ‘default yes’ for suitable proposals that develop land around rail stations within existing settlements, and around ‘well-connected’ train stations outside settlements, including on Green Belt land.
- Driving urban and suburban densification to support higher density development in sustainable locations, with good access to services.
- Securing a diverse mix of homes, including rural social and affordable housing, and setting clearer expectations for accessible housing to meet the needs of older and disabled people.
- Supporting small and medium sites.
- Streamlining local standards to speed up local plan production.
- Boosting local and regional economies by giving substantial weight to the benefits of supporting business growth.
- Supporting critical and growth minerals, recognising their economic importance.
- Embedding a vision-led approach to transport, moving away from a ‘predict and provide’ approach.
- Better addressing climate change taking a proactive approach to mitigation and adaptation.
- Conserving and enhancing the natural environment to reflect

Local Nature Recovery Strategies, to recognise landscape character, and to incorporate swift bricks.

- Taking a more positive approach to the use of heritage assets to better support heritage-related development.

3.5 The issues raised by the proposals as they apply to East Herts are summarised in more detail below and **Appendix B** to this report contains the Council's response to the 225 specific consultation questions raised.

3.6 Importantly, the new NPPF splits its guidance into 'plan-making policies' and 'decision-making policies'. Plan-making policies are intended to support the implementation of the new plan-making system and supports plan preparation, scope and process.

3.7 The decision-making policies are designed to shape planning proposals and are intended (according to Annex A of the NPPF, Implementation) to be material considerations which must be taken into account in decision-making from the day of its publication. As a result of this, development plan policies which are in any way inconsistent with the national decision-making policies in the NPPF should be given very limited weight, except where they have been examined and adopted against the Framework. Other development plan policies should not be given reduced weight simply because they were adopted prior to the publication of this Framework.

3.8 Officers have therefore taken a rigorous approach to reviewing and commenting upon the draft document, and the main concerns to be raised are summarised below:

- the structure makes national policies clearer and easier to comprehend, and to find specific guidance on topics (see Q2-3);
- there is a lack of clarity over where weight should be given, and how to offset 'substantial weight' against instances where no weight is prescribed (e.g. in assessing sustainable energy / design on houses in isolated locations) (see Q5, 190);
- there is concern over loose, inconsistent and poorly defined terminology throughout the document, which makes interpretation open. There are many examples of this, but key ones include, 'reasonable walking distance' (e.g. in relation to station distance or distance to hot-food outlets), 'physically well-related' (e.g. in relation to stations and

settlements), 'high level of connectivity' (in relation to efficient land-use), 'radical' (in respect of hoped-for outcomes on climate change), and 'medium development', especially in relation to 'major development' (see Q5, 42, 87, 115, 121, 124, 214). It also relates to simpler words like, 'safe' and 'secure' (in relation to routes, play spaces and the quality of accommodation) (see Q73, 158) and definitions around 'harm' and how to 'avoid' it in relation to heritage assets (see Q190, 192);

- there is concern over the introduction of green belt concessions around railway stations and in relation to proximity to settlements. Some of this may undermine or disregard green belt assessments and the preference for grey belt areas before green belt and within East Herts there are stations in the green belt that would appear to be targeted in unsustainable locations (Bayford being the particular concern) (see Q40, 132, 133);
- there is concern that some ideas seem to be poorly evidenced, or not fully thought through in terms of possible unintended consequences. This includes green belt concessions around railway stations (see Q122, 133, 136), but there is also confusing and unclear interplay between some key policies, notably L2 (making effective use of land), S3 – S5 (sustainable development and development within and outside settlements) (see Q116, 125), particularly around assumptions about where railway stations are and what form of development density they should be able to accommodate (see Q136). Policies S3 – S5 are key policies in determining development inside and outside of settlements, and there are some shortcomings that would impact on East Herts, such as an absence of a definition of 'predominantly built-up area' and a lack of a distinction between villages and hamlets (see Q35-39);
- there is concern that such a wide application of decision-making policies could stifle innovation that some authorities may want to pursue locally (e.g. locally specific / responsive densities, climate change or building design and regulation) or prevent particular objectives being met (e.g. accessible housing, or going further on the health advantages from limiting the location of take-aways in relation to schools) (see Q18, 122)
- there is a lack of recognition for longer term strategic planning alongside major infrastructure which often requires longer time frames than a local plan and coordination across

local authority boundaries (see Q10), and a need to recognise the differences between places and the efforts required to encourage more sustainable forms of transport dependent on the circumstances of place (see Q150). The NPPF makes no reference to possible future means of transport and distribution (e.g. drones) (see Q156)

- Generic density standards may not be appropriate in many cases (see Q121, 123), and density requirements are not always fully cross-referenced between policies (see Q115);
- Greater clarity required on the role of design codes and design advice and the interplay between the NPPF and the Design PPG (see Q148);
- Occasional absence of guidance and support for certain groups of people (e.g. for those using wheelchairs or with pushchairs, and those seeking safe and inclusive play facilities (see Q158, 159), and for the safety of women and girls (see Q225).

3.9 East Herts Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed reforms to national planning policy. Whilst there is broad support for many of the proposed reforms, the Council would like to see further justification for some of the suggested changes, together with further clarity on a number of areas.

3.10 The Council will submit the response in **Appendix B** to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government before the consultation closes on 10 March 2024.

4.0 Options

4.1 The Council could choose not to respond to the consultation.

5.0 Risks

5.1 Not responding to the consultation will mean that the Council misses the opportunity to respond to the Government in relation to key concerns about the proposed planning reforms.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 This report sets out the Council's response to the Government's consultation on reforms to the NPPF and other changes to the planning system.

Community Safety

There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

Data Protection

There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

Equalities

There are no direct equality, diversity, or inclusion implications in this report. The consultation document seeks views on the Public Sector Equality Duty and any potential impacts on persons with a relevant protected characteristic as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Sustainability

There are no environmental sustainability implications arising from this report.

Financial

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

Health and Safety

There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.

Human Resources

There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

Human Rights

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report

Specific Wards

All

7.0 Background papers, appendices, and other relevant material

7.1 The new draft NPPF is available to view [here](#).

7.2 The accompanying consultation document is available to view [here](#).

7.3 A written ministerial statement has also been published which is available to view [here](#).

Contact Member

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