



National Planning Policy Framework: Cities briefing

Tom Bolton, July 2011

DCLG has published the draft National Planning Policy Framework for consultation, after much anticipation and some delay. The consultation closes on 17 October, and includes four “*planning reform workshops*” in early September in London, Leeds, Birmingham and Bristol. As this is the third draft (following the practitioners’ draft published in the Spring, and the draft framework leaked in June) there is a feeling this is more of a policy statement than a consultation, and that major changes are unlikely before the final version comes into force in 2012.

The NPPF is the centrepiece of reforms that aim to streamline the planning system, and introduce a “*presumption in favour of sustainable development*” for applications as long as they have “*no overriding conflict with the NPPF as a whole*”. These will be much-reduced, with a single 50-page document replacing 25 Planning Policy Statements and Guidance notes, and 15 Minerals Planning Statements.

Principles

The NPPF sets out the Government’s intention to “*provide local communities with the tools they need to energise their local economies, meet housing needs, plan for a low-carbon future and protect the environmental and cultural landscapes that they value.*” The stated purpose of the document is to “*ensure that the sustainable development needed to support economic growth is able to proceed as easily as possible.*” This is not a complete free-for-all: the NPPF will work with the existing plan-led approach, but if local plans are not up-to-date or clear, planning permission will be granted by default.

The NPPF also aims to “*ensure the planning system is more responsive to changing economic conditions*”, and makes special note of the role market signals play in indicating demand for land. The draft also states that “*There is no necessary contradiction between increased levels of development and protecting and enhancing the environment.*”

Sustainable development

The NPPF uses the Brundtland definition of sustainable development as development “*that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*” It points out that a sustainable future is impossible without growth, and describes the presumption in favour as “*a golden thread running through both plan making and decision taking*”.

Duty to co-operate

Local Planning Authorities are expected to work collaboratively across boundaries, with “*other bodies*” including consultation with LEPS on economic growth. They are asked to consider formal and informal joint plans, and to produce evidence of co-operation such as joint committees or memos of understanding. As

many have pointed out, there are no apparent sanctions for failing to deliver any of these requirements, although the local plan will still be subject to an assessment of soundness by the Planning Inspectorate.

Business and economic development

The text heavily emphasises economic growth as the core objective of planning policy. This section sets out three sub-objectives:

- plan proactively to meet the development needs of business
- promote the vitality and viability of town centres
- raise the quality of life and the environment in rural areas

The final objective applies specifically to rural areas, but not apparently beyond. While there are 15 uses of “*rural*” in the document, the word “*cities*” is, disappointingly, not mentioned once. There is one use of the word “*urban*”, coupled with “*rural*” in the context of planning encouraging “*multiple benefits from the use of land*”.

There isn’t actually much detail on economic development. The main guidance consists of six bullet points of varying substance. They range from the general – a requirement to set out a clear vision and strategy for growth and to identify “*priority areas for economic regeneration, infrastructure provision and environmental enhancement*” – to the fairly prescriptive – support existing sectors (expanding or contracting) and planning for new ones; planning for “*clusters or networks of knowledge driven, creative or high technology industries*”; and, most specifically, supporting live/work.

There is significantly more detail on town centres as part of this chapter, focusing on the need to support the viability and vitality of town centres, expand them where necessary, and allocate “*edge of centre*” sites only where appropriate town centre sites aren’t available. Town centre residential is still encouraged on “*appropriate sites*”. Retail and leisure development will still be subject to the “*sequential test*” – town centre first, edge of centre second, out of town as the final option. Office development, however, will no longer be subject to sequential planning.

A section is included on viability which points out that it is crucial Local Plans are deliverable, and that the “*cumulative impact of these standards and policies should not put the delivery of the development plan at serious risk across the economic cycle.*” This appears to have been watered down from an earlier leaked draft, that reportedly said “*that the sites and the scale of development-identified in the plan should not be subject to such a scale of obligations and policy burdens that their ability to be developed viably is threatened*”, a wording that deals much more specifically with the impact on individual developments.

Neighbourhood plans

The NPPF states that it is introducing “*a radical shift in the balance of power*” by “*giving communities the ability to plan by themselves.*” One of the main reasons for reforming the planning system is to ensure it becomes a “*creative enterprise*”. Parishes and neighbourhood forums (to be signed off by LAs) can create neighbourhood plans to set development policies through a “*shared vision*”, and grant planning permission directly via Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Buy. However, neighbourhood plans will need to be “*in general conformity*” with the Local Plan on strategic issues, while taking precedence on “*non-strategic policies*” (small developments, in other words). An independent examiner will check this is the case, and it will then go to a local referendum. There is no reference to the separate business referenda that have been discussed.

Areas previously covered by planning policy statements are dealt with in various dedicated chapters setting out bullet pointed requirements of local plans, which should be based on “*a proportionate evidence base*” including market and economic signals. Highlights include:

- **Housing:** The Government’s aim is to increase housing supply and home ownership, while creating “*sustainable, inclusive and mixed communities*” (a phrase that feels as though it belongs to the Prescott version of CLG, not the Pickles one). It reinforces the message on mixed communities by stating that affordable housing requirements should be met on site unless there’s a “*robust*” reason to do otherwise. LAs will be required, as they are now, to identify a rolling 5-year supply of “*specific, deliverable sites*” for housing, but they will also have to add an extra 20 percent to their land supply to “*ensure choice and competition in the market for land*”. If they don’t have this in place, applications are likely to go through on appeal. There’s a brief reference to housing density, which LAs can set to suit local circumstances.
- **Transport:** Transport policy should aim both to facilitate economic growth and “*where practical support reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and congestion*”. All developments generating significant amounts of movement will need to produce a “*TravelPlan*” showing how they will do this.
- **Design:** Policy aims to deliver “*high quality and inclusive design*” which is explained as not only “*visual appearance and architecture*” but also “*the connections between people and places*” and “*the integration of new development into the natural, built and historic environment*”. LAs should have local design review arrangements in place and ensure they “*add to the overall quality of an area*”. Design codes are also encouraged.

What does this mean for cities?

Although the NPPF is only a draft, industry sources suggest that it will now be treated as a material planning consideration and could result in applications and appeals receiving consent more quickly from now on. This means that cities without an adopted core strategy will be scrambling to get policy in place before a queue of appeals renders local planning irrelevant.

In the longer-term, implications for cities are far from clear. Several issues will need to play out. Neighbourhood planning is an unknown quantity in places without parish councils, so the formation of neighbourhood forums will be both time-consuming and potentially significant in cities. Each will need sign-off from the relevant council before coming into operation, and will only then be able to submit a neighbourhood plan for inspection and a local referendum. This process won’t be resolved in a hurry. Probably more significant will be the impact of the national presumption in favour of development. If the planning system is a real barrier to growth in cities, the presumption should unlock it, but only once any conflict between development allocation in a local plan and preferred development sites has been resolved. Between now and the end of 2012, the reformed planning system will be tested as never before, and judgements on its success in stimulating economic growth will be made in our cities.



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