

CPRE Hertfordshire consultation response to National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes (16 December 2025)

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1. Introduction

1.1 The new draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) document was published on 16th December 2025, in conjunction with a public consultation structured around more than 200 specific questions. CPRE Hertfordshire is submitting this present document as our consultation response. We will not be submitting responses to individual consultation questions; instead, this response focuses on what we believe are the key issues with the new draft NPPF.

2. Overarching comments on consultation

2.1 The new draft NPPF seeks to impose a format for consultation responses which accepts the basic premise of the proposed changes, that is, the promotion of commercially procured development, and the removal of perceived constraints to such development. This is profoundly inappropriate when there is a considerable and growing debate on what constitutes sustainable development and the role of planning in achieving that objective.

2.2 CPRE Hertfordshire supports the provision of sustainable development in the right places, maintaining a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives. We believe the critical balance in these objectives is being lost with the proposed changes, which collectively weaken significantly the principle of protection for the countryside.

2.3 In this submission CPRE Hertfordshire identifies initially the key characteristics of the new draft NPPF. We then concentrate on our main concerns in the draft NPPF which we believe are jeopardising seriously public support for the statutory planning process which has maintained general public approval until recently.

3. Principal elements of the draft NPPF

- A radical restructure of the NPPF
- Reintroduction of strategic planning
- Extension of sustainable development
- Support for smaller developers
- Changes to protected sites and heritage assets
- Specific environmental measures

A radical restructure of the NPPF

3.1 The layout and structure of the new draft NPPF is fundamentally different from all previous versions. Paragraphs are not numbered sequentially. There are separate sections on plan-making and decision-taking. Plan-making policies which are highly prescriptive have been introduced.

3.2 In the absence of sequentially numbered paragraphs the document is complicated and confusing to read and difficult to navigate. It is unhelpful that referring to specific policies and measures will be much more cumbersome than previously.

Reintroduction of strategic planning

3.3 We welcome the reintroduction of strategic planning which is expressed through the encouragement of strategic cooperation through plan-making. National policies are established by the new draft NPPF guiding how plans should be prepared and these will include Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) to be introduced through enactment of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. Whilst welcoming the principle of strategic planning, we anticipate that the SDSs will promote development outcomes at the expense of the balanced consideration of economic social and environmental objectives as required by the NPPF, and this would be unacceptable.

Extension of sustainable development

3.4 A critical set of NPPF policies relates to the effective increase in the presumption of development to a much wider set of circumstances, whether land is protected or not, and inside and outside settlements. These issues are dealt with in further detail below and constitute a very significant diminution of constraints to development in both urban and rural areas. We wholly disagree with these changes and want to see the new draft NPPF reflect the continuing and repeated assertions by Ministers that this Government supports the Green Belt, the wider countryside, nature and the environment.

3.5 We welcome the presumption in favour of brownfield development in urban areas implied by Policy S4 but this policy needs teeth, and local authorities need greater enforcement powers, to ensure brownfield development is actually delivered. With local authorities having identified enough brownfield land for 1.41 million new homes, of which 770,000 already have planning permission, it is a travesty that brownfield development is not the first priority of the Government, with much stronger policies in the new NPPF.

3.6 We deplore the wholesale extension of the presumption in favour of development on land outside settlements, as indicated in Policy S5. The illogicalities in the Government's position become ever more apparent with regard to the designation of protected land and the lack of correlation between various policy directions and guidance on the location of sustainable development (see further detail below).

3.7 Further detail will also be provided on the continuing threat posed by the introduction of grey belt which is having a devastating effect on Green Belts throughout the country. Whereas adjustments to Green Belt boundaries through both plan-making and exceptionally through decision-making may be acceptable in line with early Ministerial statements, it is clearly apparent from recent practice that grey belt poses an existential threat to Green Belts all across England and to the principle of protection for all countryside.

3.8 It is entirely disingenuous of the Government to suggest that grey belt land is “low quality”. CPRE Hertfordshire research shows that virtually all the consents granted so far for grey belt are on open land which has not been previously developed for any purpose.

Support for smaller developers

3.9 Measures to encourage the greater involvement of small and medium sized developers are welcomed. Smaller scale and more appropriate sustainable development can make a considerable contribution to the provision of much needed rural housing in appropriate locations but the suggested provisions of the new draft NPPF remove and dilute important constraints on development.

3.10 It is proposed to reduce affordable housing requirements, design code and quality compliance and environmental and technical safeguards which are fundamental to achieving sustainable development. The cumulative effect of removing these constraints introduces inconsistency in policy and inconsistency in the development management process, and further diminution in the quality of development to be achieved.

Changes to protected sites and heritage

3.11 We are deeply concerned about the impact of Part 3 of the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 with regard to nature protection which is reflected in the proposed new draft NPPF policies. Specific policy proposals, for example relating to Environmental Delivery Plans and payments are vague and denote a huge reduction in previous requirements for developers’ planning obligations in this area.

3.12 We deplore the loss of the concept of valued landscapes. We also strongly oppose the diminution of protection of critical habitats, and of heritage assets, as reflected in the new draft NPPF. This reflects a continuing growth in the imbalance of treatment of opportunities and constraints to development in the planning balance, leading to the perception that development must be permitted at all costs.

Specific environmental measures

3.13 The assault on nature and biodiversity continues with proposals for exemptions on smaller sites, with biodiversity net gain (BNG) requirements being considered for removal on sites of up to 2.5 hectares. We strongly oppose this provision. By contrast we welcome provisions encouraging the protection of chalk-streams and veteran trees, however these proposed provisions are weak and need strengthening in order to have meaningful effect.

4. Key concerns

4.1 A number of concerns arise from the draft NPPF proposals which are likely to lead to very significant damage to the countryside. These arise from the cumulative effect of measures which have been introduced by the previous revision of the NPPF (December 2024) as well as certain provisions of the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 and the new draft NPPF.

4.2 The structure of the present consultation format prevents several aspects of the same concern from being considered together, specifically the interaction of different factors which act cumulatively to cause harm to designated protected land.

4.3 The following key concerns may now be considered in further detail:

- Green Belts and grey belt
- Necessity for development
- Extension of exemptions
- Valued landscapes and nature
- Transport and station realities

Green Belts and grey belt

4.4 Changes to the new draft NPPF Green Belt chapter (chapter 13) appear to be minimal from the previous NPPF but the situation for designated Green Belt land is dire and worsening rapidly. The concept of grey belt was introduced in the revised NPPF in December 2024 as part of the Government's mission to streamline the planning process to encourage development and had been widely promoted as the re-use of previously developed land including disused car parks, derelict petrol stations and abandoned garages.

4.5 No indication was provided as to how much of the Green Belt should be so defined and the definition of grey belt included in the revised NPPF 2024 related to only three of the five purposes of the Green Belt. Yet the Government insisted it still supported the Green Belt (NPPF 2024 paragraph 143)). The inconsistency in this position has already had and is continuing to have profound effects on large areas of open countryside, particularly in the London Metropolitan Green Belt but also elsewhere in the country

4.6 The new draft NPPF goes much further in weakening the protections provided by the Green Belt in its amended definition of grey belt in the Glossary. The existing Glossary definition in the NPPF 2024 refers to Footnote 7 which identifies the policy areas where grey belt should not apply, including SSSIs, National Parks, National Landscapes and Local Green Spaces.

4.7 The new draft NPPF Glossary omits any reference to Footnote 7 (NPPF 2024), and Footnote 23 in the new draft NPPF applies only in relation to plan-making. This constitutes a massive extension of the scope of grey belt and accordingly the weakening of protections offered to nationally significant areas of environmental importance with regard to decision-making on planning applications.

4.8 The lessening of protection due to the amendment to the definition of grey belt is likely to be exacerbated extensively by the increased exemptions for "sustainable development" in the new draft NPPF. These are discussed in more detail in paragraph 4.22 seq. below. Since the introduction of grey belt in 2024, Hertfordshire has already seen large numbers of speculative planning applications on greenfield sites in open countryside within

the Green Belt, where the application argues that the site is grey belt. Examples are given immediately below.

Hertsmere Borough Council

4.9 There were sixteen major applications where the application argues the site is 'grey belt'. Of these sixteen, only one is on previously developed land and the other fifteen are on open countryside in the Green Belt, amounting to 302 hectares.

St Albans City and District Council

4.10 There were nine major applications where the application argues the site is 'grey belt'. Of these nine, only one is on previously developed land and the other eight are on open countryside in the Green Belt, amounting to 204 hectares

Dacorum Borough Council

4.11 There were ten major applications where the application argues the site is 'grey belt'. Of these ten, two are on previously developed land and the other eight are on open countryside in the Green Belt, amounting to 259 hectares.

4.12 As noted above, an Applicant can claim that land is grey belt if it does not fulfil just three of the five purposes of the Green Belt identified in NPPF paragraph 143 and this is now proposed to be codified within the new draft NPPF, as opposed to being previously identified in the Glossary and Planning Practice Guidance. We wholly disagree with this and continue to campaign for a change in the definition of grey belt, to restore pre-2024 protections of the Green Belt.

4.13 The continuing purposeful illogicality present in the new draft NPPF is that the purpose previously most used by Local Planning Authorities to refuse permission, that is, "to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment" is not included in the three purposes which may permit "development not to be regarded as inappropriate" as originally specified in the NPPF 2024 paragraph 155. This is despite the Government professing itself to be continuing to promote all five purposes of the Green Belt in the new draft NPPF.

4.14 Chapter 13 of the new draft NPPF opens with the rubric "The objective of Green Belt policy... is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The government attaches great importance to Green Belts, the essential features of which are their openness and permanence". This is followed by Policy GB2 which restates the five purposes of the Green Belt, including 1.c. "Assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment".

4.15 The impact of this illogicality (versus the definition of grey belt) has been instantaneous and legal advisers to developers have been vocal that the introduction of grey belt changes fundamentally the balance which was previously inherent in planning decisions. Leading planning KC Zack Simons has been unequivocal: "the Government's approach to the grey belt within the Green Belt is a seismic reversal of the policy test that applies to hundreds and hundreds of sites all over the country".

4.16 The effects are also clear on the ground. Thus far CPRE Hertfordshire has made representations to Local Planning Authorities on 65 planning applications that have argued the site is grey belt either at the time of application, or later on appeal. A handful of these applications pre-date the December 2024 revised NPPF but were appealed following its publication on grounds including grey belt, including a major planning application made originally in 2022 for 400 dwellings on Leighton Buzzard Road, Hemel Hempstead.

4.17 These 65 applications cover just over 1,138 hectares of land, or the equivalent of about 1700 football pitches. They include proposals for 10,000 dwellings, two large-scale data centres, eight commercial solar installations and one stand-alone Battery Energy Storage System (BESS). Thirteen of these 65 applications have now been granted permission either by the Local Planning Authority or on appeal; covering 203 hectares with housing plus the two data centres and three solar installations; the rest are still awaiting decisions.

4.18 These sites are neither poor quality land nor previously developed and they are most certainly not disused car parks, derelict petrol stations or abandoned garages. They are frequently highly valued landscapes, mostly agricultural fields and pastures, usually with Public Rights of Way that provide local residents with their daily dose of nature and visitors with access to the benefits of green space, let alone the contributions they make to climate change amelioration and the protection of wildlife habitats.

4.19 The Government must come clean on whether it still believes in the principle of protection for the countryside because the introduction of grey belt is an existential threat to the Green Belt. Coupled with strident Ministerial calls for development everywhere, the concept of balance in development decisions is being lost and the arguments for countryside protection are not being heard.

Necessity for development

4.20 The travesty is that much of this rampant speculative planning application activity in the countryside is unnecessary. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) published research in February 2025 showing that developers have secured planning permission for more than 1.4 million homes in England since 2007 (and more than 1.1 million homes between 2010 and 2020) that **have not been built**.

4.21 According to the IPPR: “common reasons for this include developers wanting to increase the land’s value before selling it on and land banking to slow building rates and maintain high house prices.” The IPPR goes on to recommend that “government considers measures to force developers to build, or face sanctions.”

4.22 In addition, CPRE research identifies enough previously developed land for 640,000 new homes that do not yet have planning consent. Adding these two figures together makes it clear that more than 1.7 million new homes could be delivered now, without any

planning applications in the Green Belt. This would more than achieve the one and a half million houses which the Government says are necessary to address the housing crisis.

4.23 The charity Action on Empty Homes reports that government data shows there are 300,000 long-term empty homes in England which may be added to the list of available and potentially available housing. The consultation on the new draft NPPF omits entirely any consideration of these alternative solutions to the unfettered use of open land and this is deplorable. Delivering the unimplemented consents, building out identified brownfield opportunities, and bringing long-term empty homes back into occupancy should be the highest priority in any planning system.

Extension of exemptions

4.24 Coupled with the damaging introduction of grey belt, the draft revised NPPF, specifically in Policies S3 to S6, retains and expands the presumption in favour of sustainable development, extending the impact of policies by large margins on the amount of rural land which is now under threat of development. Rules are proposed to be introduced for a wider range of contexts than previously, which will make the demonstration of harm inordinately difficult.

4.25 This extension of presumption undermines plan-led decision-making by enabling development outside, or in advance of, plan-making, leading to speculative and ill-located development in high quality and highly valued landscapes. Inevitably, final outcomes in both Local Plans and decision-making arising from the extension of the presumption in favour of development will be subject to extensive legal argument. Such an approach also hugely dilutes local democratic control over decision-making in sensitive and protected areas.

4.26 Together with the changes to the “standard method”, the new draft NPPF will result in housing targets for Local Plans which are impossible to meet and lead to local planning authorities (LPAs) being incapable of maintaining a five-year housing supply. This then triggers a continuous flood of speculative planning applications and consents but leaves LPAs without any means of requiring delivery, adding to already unacceptable land-banking and no way of clearing the back-log.

Valued landscapes and nature

4.27 We also strongly disagree with provisions in the new draft NPPF that weaken protection for landscapes that are valued locally but lack national designation such as Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, Local Green Spaces and heritage landscapes. The removal of the consideration of “valued landscapes” presently in the NPPF and the increased emphasis on development risks under-valuing landscape character, beauty and tranquillity and local authorities are likely to feel pressured to release sensitive land even when it conflicts with long-standing landscape protections.

4.28 The new draft NPPF rebalances planning priorities in favour of development at the expense of environmental safeguards. Nature recovery and climate resilience are treated as secondary considerations rather than fundamental planning principles.

4.29 The new draft NPPF clearly weakens a strategic approach to protecting and enhancing ecological networks by extending the presumption for development as noted above. Development on greenfield and edge-of-settlement sites risk habitat fragmentation, loss of species-rich farmland, hedgerows and wetlands, with damaging implications for protected species.

4.30 The new draft NPPF limits the ability of Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans to protect valued landscapes, and local communities will lose meaningful influence over decisions affecting their local environment. Many Hertfordshire local authorities have declared climate emergencies and the new draft NPPF clearly prioritises short-term housing numbers over long-term environmental sustainability, which we deplore.

Transport and station realities

4.31 We have concerns with regard to the emphasis on land near railway stations as a focus for sustainable development, ostensibly denoting accessibility and connectivity. The proposed prescriptive one-size-fits-all approach to development near stations, including those in rural and semi-rural areas, without a rigorous examination of the relevant factors in each case, is likely to lead to fewer opportunities for sustainable development.

4.32 A number of railway stations in Hertfordshire are in rural or semi-rural locations with little or no supporting infrastructure such as shops, schools, or other facilities or services. These stations are served by commuter routes to London on Monday to Friday which demonstrate a level of connectivity, but with much more limited services at the weekends. If new residential development is built in these areas, residents will be totally dependent on private vehicles for all activities other than going to work in London.

5. Conclusions

5.1 CPRE Hertfordshire remains deeply concerned about the maintenance of the principle of protection of open countryside which is a vital element of the statutory planning system. It is being jeopardised by the proposals for grey belt and the extension of exemptions which increase very considerably the amount of rural land which is now under threat of development.

5.2 The proposed draft consultation NPPF contains profound dangers for valued landscapes and nature and proposes simple and inappropriate measures for complex problems of housing and infrastructure provision. We will continue to campaign vigorously for the balanced consideration of economic, social and environmental objectives which is at the heart of good planning and lacking in this new draft NPPF.

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