



HERTFORDSHIRE INFRASTRUCTURE & PLANNING PARTNERSHIP

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation Response to the December 2025 Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published on 16 December 2025. This letter represents the collective comments of the Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Planning Partnership (HIPP) on the proposals.

The Hertfordshire Infrastructure & Planning Partnership, or “HIPP,” comprises the planning / transport portfolio holders and heads of planning from the eleven councils in Hertfordshire as well as representation from Hertfordshire Futures (Local Enterprise Partnership) and others. The partnership is supported by Hertfordshire Planning Group, comprising heads of planning and invited guests, as well as sub-groups which bring together planning policy managers and development management managers.

HIPP’s overarching purpose is “to provide a forum to discuss and develop a shared view and to propose joint work programmes on planning and infrastructure issues of common concern, working co-operatively within Hertfordshire and across county borders.”

Hertfordshire is characterised by:

- 80% Green Belt coverage
- Significant cross-boundary housing and infrastructure interdependencies
- Acute water stress and environmental sensitivity
- Major transport corridors of national importance
- A complex pattern of local plan timetables and evidence requirements

We therefore welcome the draft NPPF’s ambition to strengthen strategic planning, improve plan making efficiency, and align infrastructure with growth. However, further clarification is requested to ensure the framework is workable, deliverable, and responsive to the realities of planning in a highly constrained county.

The proposed wording that a policy should be given “very limited weight” if it is “in any way” inconsistent with the NPPF creates significant ambiguity. The phrase implies that a single inconsistent criterion within an otherwise sound local plan policy could undermine the entire policy’s weight. HIPP do not consider this to be the Government’s intention and consider this should be revised to clarify that only material inconsistencies that fundamentally conflict with national policy should affect the weight of adopted local plan policies.

The introduction of a new medium-scale development category, with proportionate requirements for infrastructure contributions, needs further clarity. In Hertfordshire, developments of this scale comprise a large proportion of deliverable sites. They therefore play a critical role in funding and delivering local infrastructure. These sites also tend to be less engaged with plan making processes. There is a risk that the new category may; reduce the overall quality of development, weaken the infrastructure funding base, encourage speculative applications that do not align with strategic planning. Expectations for medium-scale developments should be clarified to ensure they continue to contribute appropriately to infrastructure and quality outcomes.

The proposed requirement for 10% of housing allocations to be on small sites risks creating an unnecessarily complex and resource intensive site allocation process. Rather than enabling councils to focus on the most sustainable, deliverable and strategically appropriate sites, it could force authorities to identify small sites that may be less suitable, harder to assemble, or more constrained. HIPP support the intention that viability should be addressed at plan making rather than decision making stage. However, in practice, viability assessments are still likely to be submitted at application stage due to the time lag between plan adoption and delivery. Without clear parameters, this risks undermining planned infrastructure delivery. Clarity should be provided on; when decision-stage viability assessments may be submitted, who is permitted to request them, and the circumstances under which they should carry weight.

Limiting pre-application advice to major development overlooks the significant impact that smaller schemes can have on local character, design quality, amenity and cumulative infrastructure pressures. Applying the requirement only to major applications risks inconsistency, missed opportunities for early issue-resolution, and avoidable delays later in the process.

Extending the expectation for pre-application engagement to all development types would ensure that development of all scales contributes positively to place-making and aligns with local priorities.

Given the time period of a local plan, it is often expected that circumstances may change, particularly towards the latter end of a plan period. Infrastructure Delivery Plans (IDP) are meant to be iterative, and the extent to which IDP inputs change over time may have an impact on the ability of a site to mitigate its impact. There should be significant emphasis on the need for applicants to justify non-compliance with policy, if a local authority has accepted the principle of development on a site, it will be at the expectation that a full suite of mitigation measures will come forward – any variance from that initial expectation should be clearly presented and understood. Any deviation from local plan policy undermines the plan-led system and reduces confidence in local authority decisions.

The decision to make National Decision Making Policies non statutory, coupled with the proposed requirement that local plans do not duplicate them has raised a concern regarding the weight that will need to be applied to non-statutory national policies. Without statutory weight it may be difficult to apply national policies effectively. This change, by potentially elevating national policy to an equal or superior status to the local plan undermines the "plan-led" system established by Section 38(6) of the

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, creating more uncertainty. Local authorities may need to develop additional local policies to avoid gaps, undermining the intended simplification.

Additionally there is concern that the ability for local policy innovation and responsiveness to local issues may be constrained. The ability to have locally specific Biodiversity Net Gain targets should be retained.

The proposed presumption in favour of development within settlements and within reasonable walking distance of train stations raises concerns that this contradicts the plan-led system and may undermine objectives relating to design, sustainability, biodiversity, heritage and resource protection elsewhere in the NPPF. The suitability of routes, not just distance needs to be carefully considered to ensure walking connections are safe and attractive, and developments should be required to enhance these routes.

Proximity to a railway station does not inherently equate to sustainable transport accessibility. In Hertfordshire many stations have limited frequencies (it is not considered that four trains per hour is equivalent to a high-frequency urban service), local journeys will remain on the local transport network. A wider multimodal assessment is considered necessary to determine sustainable locations for high density growth.

Additionally, this approach could promote small speculative development to be approved in these areas undermining the strategic plan-led ambitions for the wider area.

The removal of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) is challenging given the limited scope of replacement Supplementary Plans. Given their limited scope and requirement for examination, Supplementary Plans cannot provide the flexible, timely, and detailed policy updates that SPDs currently enable. This may result in excessively long local plan policies or a policy vacuum where guidance is required to reflect changing circumstances between plan cycles.

There is no reference to data centres in the draft NPPF. Given the recent Government announcements recognising data centres as critical infrastructure, the absence of policy guidance is a significant omission. Data centres raise complex site, design, and environmental considerations; national guidance is needed to consider these issues consistently and appropriately.

Finally, the Draft NPPF includes numerous terms that are vague, inconsistent, or undefined, making interpretation challenging.

Examples include:

- “reasonable walking distance”
- “physically well-related”
- “high level of connectivity”
- “medium development”
- “radical” (in relation to climate change outcomes)
- “safe”, “secure”, and various definitions of “harm”

- “major development” (remove inconsistency between the NPPF and the DMPO, especially important with the new Medium development definition coming in)

Such terminology increases the likelihood of inconsistency in decision-making, unnecessary disputes, and potential appeals.

I hope that this response to the consultation is of use to shaping future proposals. Please do not hesitate to contact HIPP should you require any further information. The main officer contact for HIPP is Sara Saunders, Director for Place at East Herts. Please contact either Cllr Glover-Ward via email at Vicky.Glover-Ward@eastherts.gov.uk or Sara Saunders at sara.saunders@eastherts.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

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