



NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK (NPPF)

BRIEFING NOTE FOR HITCHIN FORUM

1. Presumption in favour of sustainable development

Draft NPPF placed emphasis on economic growth, and downplayed the environmental and social aspect of sustainable development. *HF (like most consultees) argued that all three aspects needed to be given equal weight, and that core sustainable principles needed to be comprehensively identified.* The final NPPF does both of these (paras 8 and 17).

2. Local Plans

Draft NPPF stated that the fall back position if Local Plans were not up to date and reflecting the NPPF was for the NPPF to be the basis for decisions. *HF expressed concern that this would give developers the opportunity to seek and store up permissions under the NPPF, outside a democratically directed process.* The final NPPF reinstates the local development planning process as the starting point for decision making and specifies that “saved policies” will be given due weight until local planning authorities have prepared updated plans (para 12 and Annex 1, para 215).

3. Joint working

Draft NPPF placed a duty on public bodies to co-operate on strategic issues such as housing and jobs (in the absence of strategic planning at regional level). *HF expressed concern that the town’s location means that it could be affected adversely by the needs of neighbouring areas.* The final NPPF retains the duty (paras 171-181), and Inspectors will be expecting evidence of such joint working (for instance with Stevenage BC) before commencing Examination of the Local Plan.

4. Town centres

Draft NPPF suggested local planning authorities should ‘prefer’ that retail and leisure uses be sited in town centres where practical. *HF requested that the uses should include offices and that the use of prefer was too weak.* The final NPPF uses the word ‘require’ and adds reference to offices, cultural and other uses (paras 23 and 24); and a reference to ensuring markets remain attractive and competitive (para 23).

5. Transport

Draft NPPF had no specific reference to parking standards. *HF expressed concern that there were to be no national maximum parking standards to control provision at out of town developments.* The final NPPF supports the setting of local parking standards, and refers to the quality of provision and the need to set parking charges that do not undermine the vitality of town centres (paras 39 and 40).

6. Housing

Draft NPPF continued the expectation of a 5 year rolling programme of sites but with a 20% additional allowance to ensure choice and competition. *HF expressed concern that this would allow*

developers to cherry pick greenfield sites; and also asked for more guidance on housing assessments and encouragement for self build and local house builders. The final NPPF limits the 20% figure to authorities where there has been persistent under delivery (para 47). There is reference to people wishing to build their own homes (para 50). There is no reference to additional guidance on assessments, and there is likely to be continued challenge on what is meant by viability of sites (Footnote 12 and para 173).

7. Design

Draft NPPF used the term 'promote' good design, and suggested that design policies should avoid unnecessary prescription or detail. *HF asked that statements should be more positive and require good design.* The final NPPF uses 'requiring' in the title of the section; and includes references to 'establishing a strong sense of place' (para 58), and 'seeking to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness' (para 60).

8. Natural environment

Draft NPPF omitted reference to priority for use of brownfield land, made no mention of loss of garden space, and gave only passing reference to protecting valued landscape. *HF asked for all these aspects to be reinstated and clarified.* The final NPPF reinstates reference to brownfield land (paras 17); but leaves local planning authorities to set their own targets (para 111). It mentions protection of residential gardens (para 53); and includes reference in the core planning principles to 'recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside' (para 17).

9. Other topics

Issues such as green belt and the historic environment were well covered in the draft NPPF and these sections have remained largely as they were. Climate change is also substantially the same, but there is now a reference to the Climate Change Act (Footnote 16), and inclusion specifically in the core planning principles (para 17).

10. Conclusions

The provision of a single planning document of 50 pages is a major achievement. It provides a balanced framework of policies that endorses a plan led system aiming to achieve sustainable development in the true meaning of the term. The document makes it easier for local communities to understand the system and therefore influence outcomes.

However, it places major onus on the local planning authority to produce an up-to-date Local Plan; and in the meantime there are significant opportunities for developers to challenge decisions. Hitchin Forum, meanwhile, should consider two things: what role it has to play over the next year while NHDC is developing an appropriate Local Plan; and whether establishing a Neighbourhood Forum¹ is a useful way forward in this context.

AG 6 April 2012

¹ Neighbourhood planning is covered only briefly in the NPPF, and is the subject of regulations related to the Localism Act. The issues are being given further consideration by HF, and a separate note will be provided when the issues have been examined in the context of the NPPF, the Localism Act, and any advice notes being prepared by NHDC and others.