

BRIEFING



National Planning Policy Framework

6 Sept 2011

The Government has recently published their official draft of the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The consultation period for the document runs until the 17th October 2011

Background

Following the 2010 general election the Coalition Government announced the intention to scrap the Regional Spatial Strategies as part of their localist agenda. This intention, though challenged, meant that a policy vacuum emerged which allowed Local Authorities to reduce housing numbers and delay or defer decisions on planning applications with a resultant decline in development activity.

In January 2011 the Government began to ask interested parties to help draw up a new planning policy document that would a) simplify and streamline the planning system b) be localist, empowering local communities as far as possible c) create economic growth and increase the number of homes built.

A practitioners group, comprising representatives from the development industry, environmental groups, local Government and planners produced a draft proposal for the NPPF for consideration in May 2011. This informed the Government's own official proposal for the NPPF which was put out for consultation in July. The consultation closes on October 17th 2011.

HBF and the NPPF

HBF has long recognised that an effective NPPF is vital to housing delivery under the new planning regime proposed by the Government. It will provide the 'nuts and bolts' of the new planning system and work in conjunction with the Localism Bill, currently being debated in the House of Lords, to determine how Local Authorities will govern housing delivery in their areas. As such HBF has been involved as far as possible throughout the drafting process to ensure that the Government proposed a NPPF that could lead to increased housing delivery.

On the whole HBF has been supportive of the draft NPPF since it was published. Crucially, it contains a 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' that places a requirement on

Local Authorities to explain why a development is not sustainable, rather than require applicants to demonstrate why it is. The presumption would have most direct effect where there is no adopted local plan or local plan policies do not clearly address the circumstances. Local plans themselves should be based on and contain the principle of the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Though the word 'sustainable' is important, like current planning policy the NPPF places equal importance on the social, economic and environmental impacts of development in its definition. The NPPF's key change of emphasis from the current system is therefore in practice to state that developments which are sustainable in local plan terms should expect to be approved.

HBF believes that the NPPF does give local communities more say over development in their areas but that this is only the case where local authorities and local residents actively and properly plan for the future of their area taking into account a robust assessment of housing need.

The NPPF in the News

The NPPF has very quickly become a controversial policy proposal.

Environmental groups have recognised the shift in focus of the new NPPF and are running a concerted lobbying campaign to put pressure on the Government to weaken or remove the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

This campaign has encompassed many different arguments about the NPPF (see below) but essentially comes down to creating fear that developers will be able to develop wherever they want and that the countryside – greenfield and GreenBelt - is at risk. The anti-NPPF lobby has been guilty of using inaccurate and mis-leading information to bolster its case.

The last fortnight has seen an increase in the media coverage given to the opinion of these groups, led by the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the National Trust – particularly as the Government initially forcefully attacked the anti-NPPF organisations and created a full-scale row.

The Daily Telegraph in particular is supporting the campaign against the NPPF and has run numerous scare-mongering and inaccurate articles that resonate with its readership. It has now launched a 'Hands off our Land' campaign that contains few references to the economic or social implications of a continued under supply of housing, and focuses entirely on a perceived and inaccurate threat posed to rural England.

Other broadsheets, such as the FT and the Times are being less sensationalist. They have looked into the economic implications of further constraining development and further balanced their articles with an acceptance that from a social perspective, the country needs to build more homes.

The debate is also being featured on numerous TV and radio broadcasts where again the reports have been more balanced.

Anti-NPPF Campaign Implications

There is a significant danger that Government ministers will be influenced by the pressure being brought to bear by these large membership organisations and the media campaign they have started.

This danger is increased because many members of the organisations are likely to be coalition voters and the Telegraph represents the views of many in the Conservative party. There has already been some doubt voiced by Conservative backbenchers about the NPPF. A watering down or delay in implementation of the NPPF would be fatal to attempts to increase house-building. In particular a removal of the 'presumption in favour' would in effect result in a negation of the new system and it becoming increasingly difficult for house builders to get planning permissions from Local Authorities not minded to grant them.

HBF Work So Far

Having worked hard on the creation of the NPPF, HBF has also been extremely active in the public debate since its publication.

In recent weeks we have provided numerous background briefings, comments and statistics to journalists alongside issuing a range of press releases.

Our central arguments have been that the anti-NPPF lobby are scare-mongering and that the NPPF strikes the right balance between protecting the environment and ensuring that the houses that are desperately needed are built.

We can use the pure weight of factual evidence to back up our arguments and are asking as yet unanswered questions of the campaigners against the NPPF – the key one being, where exactly do you want the homes built that will house future generations given your stated recognition of the need to build more?

The FT and the Times have carried HBF messages and statistics in numerous articles. Both have published HBF letters sent in response to ones from the green lobby. HBF also coordinated a letter signed by a broad range of housing and development bodies supporting the NPPF that was published in the Times. This was subsequently sent to the Prime Minister. HBF used its latest Housing Pipeline report, that showed planning permissions granted in Q2 of this year had dropped significantly, to highlight the need for a pro-growth planning system, that gained coverage across the media.

The Guardian and Independent have both run housing stories that covered the need for more housing, albeit from a social housing perspective. We are also working closely with the tabloid media to generate stories around the social issues associated with the country's 'housing shortage'.

Many regional newspapers have picked up HBF's national messaging. We will build on this focus in coming weeks through the release of a number of targeted regional 'housing crisis' reports to demonstrate the need for new housing through the local media.

HBF staff have undertaken numerous national and local TV and radio interviews on a range of outlets, including flagship programmes such as Radio 4's Today Programme and the BBC TV news.

Recent Developments

It was heartening that the Chancellor, George Osborne, and Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, wrote a joint article in the Financial Times on Monday 5th September supporting the NPPF.

This followed an article by David Cameron the day before which specifically mentioned the planning system's role in growth and the changes being introduced.

This demonstrates significant support for the NPPF at the top of Government.

Action to take

It is essential that HBF and its members do everything possible to prevent any watering down of the NPPF.

HBF will continue to proactively search for opportunities to stress the need for a robust planning system, through both political contacts and the media.

We would also urge members to get involved, both from a company and individual perspective. Our industry employs hundreds of thousands of people, who together can form a powerful voice.

We would encourage you, your staff and your suppliers and contractors to write to politicians and the media, both nationally and near to where you live and work, and stress the need for more housing in your area, and a planning framework that will allow this.

We have attached a template letter to MPs which we would recommend you amend to suit your local circumstances and send to local politicians along with our HBF Factsheet, also attached.

The current media focus on housing makes it more likely that such opinions will be picked up, and editors undoubtedly are influenced by their readerships' thoughts on an issue when deciding what their editorial position is to be.

Likewise, MPs are reliant on the support of their constituents and allow their positions to be influenced by them. This week sees MPs return to Parliament after their summer break. With the ongoing media focus, planning policy will undoubtedly feature highly on their agendas. It is vital we inform their thinking.

Key Arguments to combat anti-NPPF campaigns

1) ***The NPPF is a builders' charter which will enable developers to concrete over the countryside.'***

This is not true. The NPPF gives local people more of a say in local development and growth alongside the responsibility to properly plan for the future of their area, meet housing need and take into account the need for, and positive aspects of, economic growth.

2) ***The NPPF removes protection of the Green Belt.***

This is not true – Green Belt protection is maintained along with that for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and SSSIs and protected wildlife habitats. The Government also proposes to introduce a new local green space designation with equivalent status to the Green Belt.

3) ***The NPPF will mean that Greenfield land is built on and acres of unspoilt but unprotected countryside are concreted over.***

This is not true; there remains the same priority to brownfield land as is currently part of the planning system. If 250,000 homes were built every year for 25 years only 1% of the England's land mass would be used.

4) ***The country is already over-developed and over-crowded, why do we need more homes?***

The total area of the country which is developed is 10%. Even the South-East – excluding London – is only 12% developed. In contrast even the CPRE admit that around 48% of land is protected.

5) ***There are 700,000 empty homes in England – they should be used to meet housing need.***

There are actually only around 300,000 homes that have been empty for six months or more – the others are normal transactional vacancies. In fact we have one of the lowest vacancy rates in Europe. We absolutely agree that empty homes should be tackled but with a shortfall approaching 1million homes and a current need for 230,000 homes a year empty homes can not be the solution to our current housing crisis.

6) ***It's not the planning system that is preventing building – it's the economy***

While it is absolutely true that the general economic climate and current restrictions on credit are a major factor in the housing market there can be no doubt that our historic undersupply of homes – over some 20 years at least - is a result of a planning system that has not been fit for purpose for some time.

A survey by the Killian Pretty Review in 2008 found that only three out of 64 planning applications went ahead without difficulties, while over half encountered substantial problems. According to the National Audit Office, planning laws create the highest regulatory costs of any type of regulation.

7) ***The top 18 house builders have 280,000 consented plots***

While this may seem a large number it is scarcely more than we should be building in one year and only a two and a half years' building pipeline even at today's historically low construction rates. The home building process is an uncertain and long-term one, it is

necessary to have a pipeline of planning permissioned land.

8) *There is more than enough brownfield land for the housing which is needed*

The industry has been building 80% on brownfield land in recent years and is happy to build on brownfield sites where these are suitable and viable. Not all brownfield sites are appropriate for housing, however, and local authorities may often wish to allocate them to other uses, including public open space and amenity. Brownfield development is also often expensive and technically difficult meaning that such land may not be viable to develop. Some greenfield land will therefore need to be used for housing.

And a key question for organisations who are anti NPPF

As both of our organisations agree on the desperate need for many more homes and the projected population increase to 71million by 2033 (UK), could I ask that you outline exactly where you would like the homes built to house our population over the coming decades?

If you need any further information on how to get involved, please contact steve.turner@hbf.co.uk

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