



National Planning Policy Framework:

Proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system

10th March 2026

Chapter 2: Plan-making policies

6) Do you agree with the role, purpose and content of spatial development strategies set out in policy PM1? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Strongly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We support the principle of establishing spatial development strategies and are particularly pleased with the inclusion of clause 2e in these strategies, which will allow for planning for nature conservation at a high level.

However, we are deeply concerned with the overarching objective of the spatial development strategies and the framework as a whole, which has shifted from “sustainable development” (in previous iterations of the NPPF) to “future growth”. Efforts to align the planning system with the pursuit of short-term economic growth have already relegated environmental issues to secondary concerns within the system¹; this focal shift risks exacerbating this problem.

Maximising short-term economic growth is not an appropriate priority for the planning system. Instead, delivering sustainable development should be reinstated as the primary purpose of the NPPF (although not necessarily as defined by Chapter 4 of these proposals- see comments in that section). Indeed, it is noted in the introductory text to these proposals, in paragraphs 14-16 (pages 4-5), that contributing to sustainable development is the purpose of the planning system, inclusive of overarching environmental objectives (16c).

However, we believe this purpose and these objectives are not duly reflected in the spatial development strategies nor throughout many of the other policies in the proposed framework. Instead, a focus on short-term economic growth is apparent throughout, which risks undermining the essential safeguarding roles of the planning system, particularly with regards to the natural environment. (When discussing economic growth, we use the caveat “short-term” advisedly throughout our response, which we expand on below).

A needs-based approach, implicit within a sustainable development purpose, will deliver more appropriate outcomes for communities, including the natural environment of which they are part. Indeed, the Plan-making section of the most recent iteration of the NPPF states that the planning system should be “a framework for meeting housing needs” (page 8). Whilst clause 2.a. of PM1 of the proposed framework references a “sustainable pattern of growth”, we do not believe that “sustainable” is suitably defined in the proposal, failing, among other things, to prioritise meeting local needs over short-term economic growth.

The proposals also fail to make explicit links to existing environmental legislation and government targets, including our statutory climate change targets, biodiversity targets and the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). As such, it is not clear how the framework advances environmental policy and outcomes in England, an unacceptable oversight given the significant contributions that the planning system can and does make to our environment. We believe a more strategic approach is needed for the framework, clearly aligning it with relevant targets and policies.

Economic short-termism

We believe this framework's economic principles are outdated and short-sighted. Firstly, the proposals equate a narrow vision of economic growth with positive progress, rather than taking into account 'inclusive wealth' that encompasses sustainable development principles and the value of investing in nature (both in terms of protection and restoration) ².

Secondly, even the narrow vision of economic growth presented in the proposals is inappropriately short-term, failing to recognise the significant long-term economic benefits of protecting and enhancing biodiversity, both through realised goods and services and preventing the need to mitigate or remediate the adverse effects of environmental degradation. In this way, we believe the proposal is ultimately at odds with its primary mission to deliver economic growth.

For example, the total asset value of ecosystem services in the UK is estimated at approximately £1.8 trillion ³ and nature is estimated to contribute over £37 billion in direct economic benefits, more than any single manufacturing sector in the UK ⁴.

In terms of the adverse economic effects of failing to protect our environment, the Government's own Environmental Improvement Plan references the enormous economic risks of such a failure, conservatively estimating a fall in GDP of over 3% over the next decade as a result ⁵. Other estimates place the risk significantly higher, forecasting a 12% decline, worse than those of either the 2008 global financial crisis or COVID-19 ⁶. Climate change consequences alone could negatively impact GDP by 7% by 2050 ⁷.

Overall, we believe that spatial development strategies should be clearly aligned with existing environmental policies and the UK's statutory climate and nature targets, explicit within an overarching purpose of delivering sustainable development. We believe that it is economically short-sighted and reckless to design a planning system that does not prioritise protecting our natural environment. The proposals to shift the priority of the planning system to facilitate short-term economic growth risks a reversion to a transactional, trade-off approach to nature within our planning system, rather than

an approach that advances environmental outcomes and recognises the value of protecting and restoring nature.

7) Do you agree that alterations should be made to spatial development strategies at least every 5 years to reflect any changes to housing requirements for the local planning authorities in the strategy area? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) If not, do you think there should be a different approach, for example, that alterations should only be made to spatial development strategies every five years where there are significant changes to housing need in the strategy area?

Recognising that regeneration takes time, alterations should be made in longer cycles, preferably every ten years. This would support regeneration plans and help to avoid new Green Belt areas being released for development, a potential consequence of brownfield sites requiring time to be brought into buildable condition. For example, see the Wirral Local Plan 2022-2040 ⁸ and the examination of the plan ⁹, particularly the response to question 9, which demonstrates a circumstance where longer cycles are required to address planned housing need.

Additionally, alterations should be considered if and when new significant evidence arises, including for nature conservation, particularly as ecosystems respond to climate change. For example, new areas may become suitable or available for nature conservation, or new opportunities may arise to connect or restore habitats within the strategy. If the focus of spatial development strategies is shifted to sustainable development, as suggested above, such changes would be implicit within this focus.

9) Do you agree with the role, purpose and content of local plans set out in policy PM2? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the vision in clause 1 that local plans should contribute to “improving the environment at a local level”. “Improving” must encompass plans to restore and connect existing habitats, and create new habitats, in line with Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs).

However, as a consequence of the lack of focus on environmental outcomes in PM1, we are concerned this aim may be easily sidelined, given the supporting role of local plans compared to spatial development strategies. As stated above, realigning the framework towards prioritising sustainable development would help safeguard environmental considerations within the Framework. Local plans could aid in this respect by explicitly setting nature and climate targets and outcomes for the local environment.

The relative weighting of plans and policies, not just between PM1 and PM2, but across the whole framework, should be made clearer. This amendment is also recommended by the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), who have highlighted that the NPPF would be strengthened by clarifying how various policies, strategies and plans should be taken into account in different contexts, as well as their relative weight in the planning system ¹⁰.

10) Do you think that local plans should cover a period of at least 15 years from the point of adoption of the plan? Yes/No

Yes. This would help to provide a level of certainty to developers, particularly when considering sites with complex circumstances, such as some brownfield sites.

a) If not, do you think they should cover a period of at least 10 years, or a different period of time. Please explain why.

11) Do you agree with the principles set out in policy PM6(1c), including its provisions for preventing duplication of national decision-making policies? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We support the inclusion of the use of environmental assessments in the plan-making principles. We believe this is a vital step, necessitating a change in wording from “should” to “must” in PM6 clause 1.

However, in terms of environmental improvement, these plan-making principles are a backward step from those in the previous iteration of the NPPF, which explicitly mentioned “including opportunities for net gain” among its environmental objectives. We believe this wording should be re-instated in this version of the NPPF to ensure the framework remains aligned with wider Government environmental objectives, including biodiversity net gain (BNG).

13) Do you agree with the approach to the preparation of plan evidence set out in policy PM8? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We agree with the vision of clause 1, that plans should be evidence-based and consider the unique challenges and opportunities of the areas to which they apply. We believe this policy would be strengthened, and help the framework better align with national environmental policies and targets, by explicitly referencing environmental evidence needs, including LNRs and data from Local Environmental Record Centres (LERCs) to capture the unique contexts, which this policy sets out to do.

14) Do you agree with the approach to identifying land for development in PM9? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome a systematic approach to identifying land for development.

With regards to the contribution the planning sector can and must make to wider environmental efforts, we echo the recent words of the OEP: that the planning system is overly focussed on avoiding harm from development, rather than planning for nature recovery¹⁰. Therefore, this policy could be improved by explicitly identifying land not suitable for development, including land needed for climate change mitigation and adaptation, or land needed for nature restoration. This approach should also include identifying areas necessary for mitigation as a result of development activities, where relevant.

Identifying these areas should be an explicit requirement to ensure the framework contributes to existing statutory targets, complies with existing environmental policies, and meets our proposed revised objectives for the framework (namely sustainable development).

19) Do you agree that the tests of soundness set out in policies PM14 and PM15 will allow for a proportionate assessment of spatial development strategies, local plans and minerals and waste plans at examination? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) If not, please explain how this could be improved to ensure a proportionate assessment, making it clear which type of plan you are commenting on?

Footnote 19 (PM14) allows for the Secretary of State to override the need for an independent examination of spatial development strategies, a loophole that has not been included in previous iterations of the NPPF. We are concerned as to why the inclusion of this loophole is necessary, particularly as the proposed shift in the focus of the framework suggests that this loophole could be used to avoid proper scrutiny of plans (particularly environmental safeguards) in order to facilitate short-term economic gains. This loophole must be removed, as every part of the framework serves a purpose - it must not become possible for individuals to override the need for scrutiny of plans.

Furthermore, we believe that the focus of PM14 is inappropriate, with the “Positive” (2a) criterion being centred on short-term economic growth. This focus could potentially conflict with the next statement of meeting an area’s “objectively assessed needs” – the pursuit of growth goes beyond a needs-based assessment, leaving space for unnecessary development to be deemed sound in the name of short-term economic growth. For this “Positive” assessment, we suggest the removal of the delivering growth priority and a return to the “objectively assessed needs” wording of this section in the previous iteration of the NPPF (clause a, paragraph 36).

Chapter 3: Decision-making policies

22) Do you agree with the policy DM2 on information requirements for planning applications? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

Whilst we support the vision for a more consistent and clear set of information requirements, we are concerned about the lack of explicit environmental assessments in this information (Annex C). We believe this omission may cause difficulties for decision-makers in assessing the impact of potential developments, undermining the purpose of this policy.

24) Do you agree with the principles set out in DM3? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the proactive approach to working with applicants.

However, there is little focus in DM3 on legitimate refusals or limitations on development, particularly for environmental reasons, including references to statutory targets or compliance with existing environmental policies. Without a clear reference to these concerns, clause 1d may be redundant, with limited “necessary” circumstances for consultation. Assessing a development in this regard should be an explicit requirement of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in this policy, and these concerns should be accepted as a legitimate reason to refuse a proposal.

Chapter 4: Achieving sustainable development

34) Do you agree with the proposed approach to setting a spatial strategy in development plans? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We believe, as stated in our response to question 6, that pursuing and ensuring sustainable development should be the primary focus of this framework. However, this is not adequately defined in this chapter, nor in the glossary (Annex B). A definition should be provided in Annex B in line with the sustainable development description listed on pages 4-5 of theses proposals, and this should be clearly referenced in the stated objectives of this chapter. This would ensure improving biodiversity, and climate change mitigation and adaptation, are explicitly stated objectives for policies in this framework.

We welcome references in policies S1 and S2 to environmental improvement and climate change mitigation, in particular the protection of “assets of particular importance” in S1 (footnote 23). However, the wording of these clauses is weaker than in the equivalent section of the previous iteration of the NPPF, which states plans “should” mitigate climate change, rather than “seek to” as is the case in this proposed revision. Likewise, it would be helpful for the previous wording of “including by making effective use of land in urban areas” (paragraph 11a, page 6, NPPF 2024) to be reinstated at this point.

In line with our previous comments, we believe the proposals for development plans in this chapter should be explicitly aligned with existing environmental legislation and statutory targets. Societal changes are required to meet these targets and meaningfully respond to the Nature and Climate Emergency - planning policy has a significant role to play in this regard and, as such, this policy should set out how it will contribute to this end.

36) Do you agree with the revised approach to the presumption in favour of sustainable development? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

The definition of sustainable development outlined in the objectives of this chapter is incompatible with our understanding of “sustainable”, as well as the components of sustainability listed on pages 4 and 5 of the proposals and the previous iteration of the NPPF (Chapter 2, clause 7, page 5).

For example, the objectives in this chapter make no reference to meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, nor do the objectives reference environmental concerns - an evaluation over whether a development is sustainable is not possible without recognition of the environmental limits in which it would operate or the environmental impact it may have. We believe the stated objectives of this chapter must provide greater detail on the meaning of sustainable development.

We welcome the reference to policy N6 as criteria for assessing sustainable development - this is much closer to the definition we wish to see explicitly outlined in this chapter. However, given our reservations about other aspects of policy N6 (see response to question 37), this reference alone is insufficient to give us confidence that the framework’s revised approach to the presumption in favour of sustainable development will actually deliver such development.

Overall, we believe this policy does not fulfil its stated objectives. This policy has been criticised in previous iterations of the NPPF for allowing unsustainable development by: introducing a policy route whereby developments can only be refused with overwhelming evidence of harm; by exploiting the absence of up-to-date local plans, thereby ignoring new evidence and contexts; and (similar to our criticisms above) using a definition of sustainable that does not meet other standard definitions ¹¹.

The threshold for refusal has been raised over time (in progressive iterations of the NPPF), most notably in the most recent iteration, exacerbating this issue ¹². By raising the threshold once again, this proposal further increases the risk of planning policy paving the way for unsustainable development.

**37) Do you agree to the proposed approach to development within settlements?
*Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.***

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

Whilst we welcome the inclusion of designated habitats in clause 2.a.ii, we believe policy N6, in its currently proposed wording, does not provide sufficient safeguards to these habitats. Policies S4 and N6 refer to “overriding public importance” or benefits that “clearly outweigh” (or words to that effect) as circumstances in which it would be

permissible to approve developments that would damage these habitats, including for irreplaceable habitats.

These circumstances are ill-defined and open to interpretation, and it is unclear by whom these decisions will be made in every instance. Considering our reservations about the shift in focus of the NPPF in this proposal, away from sustainable development to short-term economic growth, we are not confident that policy S4 will provide adequate protection to our most important habitat sites and natural infrastructure.

Furthermore, we believe the binary presented between “public benefit” and protecting designated habitats is inappropriate in the extreme. This false dichotomy disregards the multiple ecosystem benefits provided by habitats in good condition, including social and cultural benefits ¹³, and reinforces the false narrative that nature is a blocker to development, a fallacy about which this Government has previously been warned ¹².

Indeed, this false narrative is implicit throughout much of these proposals, given the watering down of environmental safeguards in many of the policies. The government should instead direct its attention to the more systemic barriers facing housing delivery, highlighted by the Environmental Audit Committee in the previous reference.

We fear the leniency shown in this policy risks undermining attempts to protect and restore nature in urban areas. This is particularly concerning given millions of people already live in nature-deprived urban areas ¹⁴ and the associated negative impacts on their health and wellbeing this may cause ¹⁵. Worryingly, the limitations on BNG proposed by this framework risk exacerbating this situation.

We believe the policy would be improved by acknowledging the potential significant ecological importance of brownfield sites. Some brownfield sites host rare species and/or may be a vital space for communities to access nature ¹⁶. The policy should explicitly reference brownfield sites of such a high environmental value, rather than treating all brownfield sites as synonymous with “previously developed land”.

**38) Do you agree to the proposed approach to development outside settlements?
*Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.***

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome limiting development outside of existing settlements and support the framework’s efforts to do so. However, as with our comments on policy S4, we would

welcome greater clarity over what constitutes substantial benefits or adverse effects, and by whom these decisions are made.

Furthermore, we believe policy S5 is too permissive with respect to allowing developments that could have negative environmental impacts. Notably, clause 1.a. includes mineral extraction as a form of sustainable development - we believe this is inappropriate, particularly for non-renewable energy minerals to encourage the further use of fossil fuels. In line with our previous comments, we strongly believe the planning system must be part of a wider systemic effort to deliver on our statutory nature and climate commitments - permitting the development of the countryside in the name of fossil fuel use is antithetical to this mission.

Chapter 5: Meeting the challenge of climate change

42) Do you agree with the approach to planning for climate change in policy CC1? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the inclusion of nature-based solutions within the policy, and would suggest adding “blue infrastructure” alongside green infrastructure in clause d. We are similarly supportive of the link between this policy and LNRs. However, we are concerned, once again, that proposed limitations on BNG may impact the good intentions of this policy.

We are pleased to see this policy making an explicit link to the Climate Change Act 2008 – we highlight this as a rare example of good practice that should be replicated in other sections of the framework. The link in this section of the framework helps contextualise the policy and guide ambitions, something we feel is of critical importance for other policies within the framework.

Planning policies should expand on the issue of water supply. We welcome provisions in the policy to allow local authorities to set local standards for water efficiency, and would like to see further safeguards preventing these decisions from being overturned.

43) Do you agree with the approach to mitigating climate change through planning decisions in policy CC2? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) If not, what additional measures could be taken to ensure climate change mitigation is given appropriate consideration?

We are pleased that this policy recognises the important role nature can and must play in climate change mitigation and adaptation, particularly as noted in clause 1f. This policy could be strengthened by making explicit reference to other habitats that can act as carbon stores, particularly grasslands¹⁷, recognising the role of soil in carbon sequestration, as well as recognising the role of ‘blue carbon’ stores in coastal sediments¹⁸. The policy should also guide decisions by clearly stating that all habitats listed should be in good ecological condition in order to maximise their contributions in this regard.

44) Do you agree with the approach to climate change adaptation through planning decisions in policy CC3? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) What additional measures could be taken to ensure climate change adaptation is given appropriate consideration?

We welcome clause 1d. The policy could make explicit reference to green roofs and walls and the increased benefits they can bring to buildings and wider communities (such as reducing urban heat island effect, reducing stormwater run-off and providing wildlife habitats) through more nature-positive designs, considering elements such as plant diversity and substrate depth ²⁰.

Likewise, we welcome the recognition of the role of SuDs, and the link between climate change and other environmental issues, such as wildfires and flooding ²⁰.

We believe the policy could be strengthened by recognising that minimising the risk of flooding over the lifetime of a development is difficult. We suggest replacing “or” with “and”, so the policy reads “Be located where the risk of flooding is minimised and can be managed...” We believe this is more appropriate due to the changing risks of flooding over time, particularly due to climate change, which will likely see millions more properties at risk of flooding over the next few decades ²¹.

Chapter 12: Making effective use of land

114) Do you agree policy L1 provides clear guidance on how Local Plans should be prepared to promote the efficient use of land? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

115) If not, what further guidance is needed?

We welcome the vision to re-use previously developed land. The stated objectives of this policy could be strengthened to provide a clearer vision by having an explicit aim to minimise urban expansion and protect the Green Belt.

In line with our comments on the potential ecological significance of brownfield sites in our response to question 37, the wording in the previous iteration of the NPPF regarding the potential for undeveloped land to support wildlife (125a, page 36) should be reinstated, recognising that some brownfield sites support important species or habitat^{22, 23} and therefore should not be prioritised for development.

116) Do you agree policy L2 provides clear guidance on how development proposals should be assessed to ensure efficient use of land? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We support the vision of the policy to remediate land and re-use previously developed land or vacant buildings, in line with our comments above, particularly as these measures can help protect Green Belt land.

Once again, as stated above, we believe this policy would be strengthened by recognising brownfield land of high ecological value. The policy must require an assessment of the ecological value of the land proposed for development, in order to ensure important ecological sites are not damaged or lost. Aligning the framework with existing environmental policies and targets would help deliver this policy.

117) Do you agree policy L2 identifies appropriate typologies of development to support intensification? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) If not, what typologies should be added or removed and why?

We welcome the efforts to prioritise previously developed land before developing on new land through the use of remediation and using vacant buildings.

Chapter 13: Protecting Green Belt land

130) Do you agree that policy GB1 provides appropriate criteria for establishing new Green Belts? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Strongly disagree.

131) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We believe this policy not only profoundly misunderstands the role of the Green Belt but also misses significant opportunities to promote the benefits Green Belt land can secure for communities and the wider environment. Clause C in particular is concerning, framing the Green Belt as an impediment to short-term economic growth, rather than a vital resource.

In line with many of our comments throughout the rest of this response, we believe this framing is unacceptable in several ways. The planning system's overarching objective should not be to deliver short-term economic growth but rather to ensure sustainable development. Green Belt land makes vital contributions to sustainable development in numerous ways, including public access to nature, climate change mitigation and adaptation, nature recovery, and protecting and enhancing a plethora of other ecosystem services to benefit communities and the environment of which they are a part ²⁴.

As a national framework, the NPPF should seize the opportunity to harmonise Green Belt policy across England in a way that promotes the often unrealised multifunctional benefits of Green Belt land ²⁵.

Given the important contributions that Green Belt land can make to nature restoration and climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, identifying and establishing new Green Belt land should take into consideration LNRs (as noted in policy GB5) and be aligned with national statutory nature and climate targets.

132) Do you agree policy GB2 gives sufficient detail on the expected roles spatial development strategies and local plans play in assessing Green belt land? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

Whilst we welcome the inclusion of an assessment of the role of the Green Belt in the preparation of spatial development strategies, we believe the current strategic role of the Green Belt is inadequate, as it does not contain a specific role for climate change mitigation and adaptation nor nature recovery. We believe aims to this end must be added to the official strategic role of the Green Belt as a matter of urgency, reflecting the significant ongoing decline of nature in England and the progress towards our statutory nature and climate targets ²⁵.

Inclusion of these aims would then allow spatial development strategies to take into account environmental objectives.

134) Do you agree the expectations set out in policy GB5 are appropriate and deliverable in Local Plans? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Strongly agree.

135) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We are supportive of the clauses in this policy, particularly clause b, which we would like to see reflected in the official strategic role of the Green Belt.

We recommend further clarification of clause d regarding what “improvements” and “environmental quality” constitute, and would like to see biodiversity specifically referenced in the latter.

136) Do you agree policies GB6 and GB7 set out appropriate tests for considering development on Green Belt land? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

Whilst we support the inclusion of policies recognising that inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt, we are unconvinced that policy GB7 is entirely appropriate or comprehensive.

We have reservations over clause f of GB7 regarding some of the permitted development in the Green Belt, particularly mineral extraction or engineering operations. Whilst we appreciate that the policy recognises the need to “minimise” impacts on the Green Belt and ensure that there is no “significant conflict” with Green Belt purposes, we ask for clarity on the definition of these caveats and by whom these assessments are made, particularly given our noted concern with the short-term

economic focus of this iteration of the NPPF and the potential for this to influence any decisions.

We believe GB7 should explicitly permit development whose primary purpose is nature restoration. This would aid in realising the potential of Green Belt land to contribute to communities and other environmental outcomes, as noted above in our response to Question 131.

139) Do you agree that site-specific viability assessment should be permitted on development proposals subject to the Golden Rules in these three circumstances? Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

With regards to clause 1.c.ii we believe a description or guidance would be beneficial for planners to allow them to assess whether a proposal will support nature recovery.

Chapter 14: Achieving well-designed places

148) Do you agree policy DP3 clearly set out principles for development proposals to respond to their context and create well-designed places? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the inclusion of clauses c and d in particular. We believe clause d could be improved by clarifying what is meant by “strengthen” habitats, as this could incorporate a number of ecological and social concepts, and should ideally incorporate them all: restoration, expansion, improving connectivity and improving accessibility.

The tree cover element of this clause should prioritise native broadleaf species, ideally of local provenance.

Chapter 19: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment

179) Do you agree that the proposed approach to planning for the natural environment in policy N1, including the proposed approach to biodiversity net gain, strikes the right balance between consistency, viability, deliverability, and supporting nature recovery? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Strongly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We believe the approach to biodiversity net gain is unnecessarily limiting in terms of environmental ambition. CIEEM is a signatory to a recent Wildlife and Countryside Link (WCL) briefing urging the Government to protect the ambitions of local authorities in this regard ²⁶.

Similarly, we have previously endorsed another WCL briefing on BNG that highlights why 10% must be a minimum requirement, not a cap on ambition, as well as providing examples of local authorities who wish to go beyond 10% ²⁷.

Indeed, Defra's own impact assessment notes that 10% is the lowest level that could confidently be expected to deliver meaningful net gain and that numerous local authorities have had success with levels significantly higher than 10% ²⁸. This demonstrates that the limits proposed by this policy could seriously hamper the ability of BNG policies to deliver on the outcomes for which they were designed.

The proposed approach also fails to consider different contexts. For example, in certain highly urbanised areas, contributions greater than 10% are required to make significant gains - such circumstances are captured in local plans, which should take precedence over plans as proposed in this policy. Again, Defra's own work referenced above recognises that certain contexts make gains above 10% eminently achievable, therefore it is unjustifiable for the NPPF to seek to place limits on BNG ambition.

In addition to being unnecessarily limiting, we believe the policy's wording on BNG is confusing, seemingly contradicting existing BNG policy, which sets 10% as a minimum standard.

The wording of the policy should be adapted to be more instructive and less suggestive. For example, 1b states that development plans should "identify opportunities" for nature conservation and recovery. Given the Government's recognition that we are in a Climate Emergency (and the recognition that we are in a Nature Emergency from many other levels of government, public bodies, and NGOs) the multiple statutory targets active in UK policy, and the multiple benefits that increased biodiversity brings to

communities, we believe that plans must stipulate that appropriate actions be carried out to realise these identified opportunities. In doing so, an ambition would be set at the highest level of this policy (i.e. the plan level). Once again, a failure to do so highlights the disconnect between this framework and existing policy, particularly with regards to the vision for planning set forth in the EIP.

Furthermore, the policy must introduce stronger safeguards to ensure planned environmental actions are actually carried out. Recent research shows significant amounts of planned enhancements (well over half in many circumstances) have not been realised, either being entirely absent or incorrectly installed ²⁹. Given that BNG is, partly, used as a justification for increased development, this situation, where even modest gains are not realised, simply cannot be allowed to continue. Robust guidance and enforcement are desperately needed to rectify this issue, including addressing a skills and knowledge gap to this end. This research highlights the need for the framework to do more to realise the benefits of BNG, not limit its ambition.

Unlike the equivalent chapter in the most recent iteration of the NPPF (footnote 68, page 55), policy N1 does not refer to Circular 06/2005 when referencing biological and geological diversity. We believe this exclusion is an oversight and unnecessary - the link with Circular 06/2005 should be restored to this chapter for improved clarity.

180) In what circumstances would it be reasonable to seek more than 10% biodiversity net gain on sites being allocated in the development plan, especially where this could support meeting biodiversity net gain obligations on other neighbouring sites in a particular area?

We believe there are many circumstances in which a more ambitious net gain target is reasonable, including to meet local ambition as highlighted in our response to question 179 - we refer back to the referenced WCL reports for examples of local authorities who have gone beyond the 10% target.

Particular circumstances where a more ambitious target would not only be reasonable but desirable include: providing green infrastructure to maintain habitat connectivity; to help deliver larger scale habitat creation, particularly where such priorities are identified within LNRs; or in areas with a significant nature deprivation or which are facing significant biodiversity loss, particularly due to cumulative development pressures. Indeed, as referenced in our response to question 179, in many instances, going above 10% is not only desirable but also eminently achievable, particularly in cases where LNRs have mapped a particular area with targeted habitat actions, such as creating buffers or creating habitats to improve connectivity.

181) Do you agree policy N2 sets sufficiently clear expectations for how development proposals should consider and enhance the existing natural characteristics of sites proposed for development? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly agree

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the inclusion of nature-based solutions in clause 1.e. We believe there are other areas of the proposed framework (e.g. see responses in chapters 1 and 4) that should also reference the opportunities that nature-based solutions and improving biodiversity offer to developers, including, for example, the economic benefits possible from a well-functioning BNG market ³⁰.

Similarly, we are pleased to see the inclusion of green infrastructure and other biodiversity enhancements in the policy, as well as the link to LNRs.

We are also pleased to see hedgerows included in this policy, the first time hedgerows have been recognised in the NPPF.

However, once again, as highlighted in our commentary on policy N1, we believe N2 repeats the unnecessary limiting of ambition with regards to biodiversity net gain: footnote 69 points out developments proposing to go above the statutory limit should not be given weight.

Compared to the equivalent policy in the previous iteration of the framework, the wording of N2 is weaker: the policy has moved from an objective to “promote... conservation, restoration and... enhancement” to merely “identify opportunities” to these ends. Whilst we believe identifying these opportunities is important, the wording of the proposed policy is suggestive, rather than proactive. We fear, at best, this may obscure environmental aims for planners, and, at worst, is part of a wider dilution or sidelining of environmental concerns throughout the framework, as we have described throughout our response, particularly question 6. This policy, like the rest of the framework, must make clear links and set robust expectations about how it contributes to statutory targets and the ambition of the EIP.

We are highly supportive of policy N2.2 and the recognition of the mitigation hierarchy in this clause. We believe this policy would greatly benefit from further clarification, specifically over what constitutes “significant harm” and which aspects of biodiversity are relevant to this judgement. Harm may constitute, among other things, loss of habitat or species, degradation of the condition of a habitat, loss of connectivity, or loss of opportunity to regenerate, expand or connect.

We believe this clarification is necessary given other parts of this proposal (e.g. Chapter 4) allowing for an ill-defined “public benefit” to override biodiversity concerns.

Clarification is therefore required on what constitutes “significant harm”, who makes this decision, and how such a decision links to other sections of the framework.

The reference to species in N2.1.f would also benefit from clarification, as several different official legal definitions of “priority” or “threatened” species could be assigned. Policy N1.1.b refers to “species of principal importance”, which is defined in Annex B. Given the unofficial wording used in N2.1.f, and the reference in this policy to specific groups of animals, the current wording of N2 is slightly obscure. Therefore, to aid planners and developers, it should be re-written to be explicit about which species are included.

We believe that “geological diversity” should be included in this clause alongside “biodiversity”, recognising the importance of geological and physiological features in the natural environment, and make this policy more coherent with policy N1 (see N1.1.a).

182) Do you agree the policy in Policy N4 provides a sufficiently clear basis for considering development proposals affecting protected landscapes and reflecting the statutory duties which apply to them? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, including how policy can be improved to ensure compliance.

As with our response to questions in this chapter and Chapter 4, we believe the “public interest” clause of this policy is underdeveloped. As such, it is too open to interpretation by individual decision-makers to assure us that environmental considerations will be given appropriate consideration. If “public interest” refers to cases as outlined in Section 64 of the Conservations of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017), this should be made clear. However, our comments below reflect the current wording of the proposed framework, where “public interest” is not defined in the main body, footnotes, or Annex B of the proposed framework.

Whilst we welcome the brief exploration of what may constitute “exceptional circumstances” to this end, the list provided is non-comprehensive and thus still considerably open to interpretation, particularly for development needs that are not listed.

Furthermore, as stated above, we believe the framework’s interpretation of public interest fails to take into account the public interest of not carrying out certain activities that may damage habitats, species, geological features or other aspects of the environment. Again, these considerations must consider the ecosystem services

provided by biodiversity, protecting the availability of nature-based solutions for other public interest cases (now or in the future).

Once again, the framework is poorly linked to other areas of national policy. N4 fails to reflect the strengthened duty introduced through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act for relevant authorities to seek to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes. Policy N4 must make explicit reference to this duty to ensure the framework is correctly aligned with national policy.

183) Do you agree policy N6 provides clarity on the treatment of internationally, nationally and locally recognised site within the planning system? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We welcome the explicit policy protection given to local sites in clause 1c, an important addition that has been missing from previous iterations of the NPPF.

N6 allows for EDPs and/or the nature restoration levy to be potential routes for enabling development to proceed that would impact internationally and nationally important sites, in the absence of demonstrating adverse effects on the integrity of these sites. This risks creating a “cash to trash” approach to previously well-protected habitats. Given that these policies were designed to demonstrate no adverse effects on these sites, opening the way for a cash to trash approach is a serious and worrying fall in the level of protection.

Similarly, the policy does not specify the compensation requirements to address adverse effects on sites in the absence of an EDP. This must be rectified as a matter of urgency, particularly as EDPs are not fully operational in all areas at present. An additional clause should be added to each of N6a, N6b and N6c to allow for suitable compensation to be provided by developers in cases where there are no satisfactory alternatives and compensatory measures are necessary to ensure the overall coherence of the national network of these sites is protected.

Regarding internationally important habitat sites, clause 1.a.i. must reflect all stages of a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA), as required by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). With respect to Stage 3: Derogations, only instances of overriding public importance are referenced in this policy - there are no references to the assessment of alternative solutions prior to this, nor the consideration of Priority Features and how they affect the overriding public importance consideration, or that adequate compensation must be secured. The HRA process will continue to

apply where a relevant EDP is not in place, and this should be made clear by this clause.

This policy also does include a comprehensive suite of areas that are of particular importance for biodiversity, dealing only with designated sites. Annex 1 habitats should be covered at the decision-making level, as well as the plan-making level.

184) Are there any further issues for planning policy that we need to consider as we take forward the implementation of Environmental Delivery Plans?

EDPs must have appropriate and robust safeguards built into them through secondary legislation. These should include clear guidelines on where EDPs cannot be used, such as instances impacting irreplaceable habitats, or where offsetting via nature restoration payments is not feasible.

We also seek clarification over whether the practice of ‘sanitising’ of development sites by removal of a species covered by an EDP will be a licensed activity, or if the existence of an EDP acts as a license.

Annex C: Reforming site thresholds

213) Do you agree that a 2.5 hectare threshold is appropriate? [With regards to a “medium” category in Framework - see page 117] *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.*

Partly disagree.

a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

We believe further clarification is needed in order for us to make a full statement on this threshold. However, we are concerned about the rationale for introducing a new category and are worried this classification may be designed to justify reductions in developer contributions, particularly for BNG. A 2.5ha site can contribute significantly to environmental outcomes, particularly outside urban areas.

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