

Planning Applications Committee

07 October 2026



Reading
Borough Council
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Title	National Planning Policy Framework
Purpose of the report	To note the report for information
Report status	Public report
Executive Director/ Statutory Officer Commissioning Report	Emma Gee, Executive Director Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services
Report author	Mark Worringham, Planning Policy Manager / Acting Development Manager (Planning & Building Control)
Lead Councillor	Councillor Micky Leng, Lead Councillor for Planning and Assets
Council priority	Deliver a sustainable & healthy environment & reduce Reading's carbon footprint
Recommendations	To note the report.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1. A new version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published on 17 August 2026. The NPPF is the document that sets out the government's national planning policy, and it is an important consideration in both determining applications and formulating policy. This report summarises the main changes of significance to Reading.

2. Background

- 2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is the comprehensive document setting out the government's policy on planning matters. The previous version was produced in 2024, but a consultation was undertaken on a proposed new version between 16 December 2025 and 10 March 2026, to which the Council responded. The Council's response was reported to Planning Applications Committee on 29 April 2026 (Minute 71 refers).
- 2.2 Following this consultation, the government published a new version of the NPPF on 17 August 2026. This replaces the previous version as well as a number of other national policy documents such as Planning Policy for Traveller Sites and various written ministerial statements. It is a material consideration in decision making as of the date of publication.
- 2.3 The new version is significantly different from previous versions in format, as it is now arranged around specific policies drafted in the style of development plan policies, whereas previous versions were simply set out in a number of paragraphs. This included dividing policies into plan-making and decision-making policies.
- 2.4 The original intention was that the decision-making policies would take the form of 'National Development Management Policies' that would have had the same status as the development plan and would have replaced more general development management policies in local plans. However, this intention was abandoned and they are instead expressed as national policies without having the original intended status.

3. Significant changes relevant to Reading

Plan-making

- 3.1 Policy PM1 sets the policy expectations for Spatial Development Strategies for the first time, which are the high-level sub-regional plans which will identify growth, infrastructure and investment

priorities. Reading is expected to be part of the Thames Valley SDS area including the other Berkshire authorities, Swindon, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, but the Regulations that will define the areas have not yet been published. The approach to SDSs in the NPPF was largely as expected in terms of setting out a broad spatial strategy for growth, setting housing needs for individual local authorities and planning for strategic investment and infrastructure, but the main change is that the expectation is that local housing needs will now be set for 25 years as opposed to the 20 years originally proposed.

- 3.2 Policy for local plans is set out in PM2, and this is based around the new plan-making system set out in Regulations earlier this year. This seeks to reduce the length and complexity of local plans down to a vision, up to ten measurable outcomes, policies on the amount of development, allocations and broad locations for growth, other designations, setting levels of affordable housing and infrastructure contributions, and should only include other policies where they support allocations or address specific local issues. In addition, the minimum plan period has been reduced from 15 to 10 years.
- 3.3 Supplementary plans (which replace supplementary planning documents) are dealt with in policy S4. Their role has already been restricted by legislation, but the NPPF seems to restrict these even further. For instance, their role in law can include design requirements generally, but the NPPF includes more restrictive wording that supplementary plans can set “clear design expectations that support the delivery of development”.
- 3.4 The duty to co-operate, which has already been withdrawn for plan-making, is replaced by generalised requirements for co-operation in policy PM10 and the need to produce statements of common ground in policy PM11, although it is important to note that the spatial development strategies are more significant in replacing the duty.
- 3.5 The tests of soundness for examining local plans have been amended. The test of being ‘justified’ is replaced by ‘appropriate’, and a new test around conformity with the spatial development strategy is introduced.
- 3.6 A very significant change to affordable housing policy is that the NPPF has a different emphasis on seeking affordable housing contributions from non-major development (less than 10 dwellings). It states that local plans should set out requirements for the type and mix of affordable housing needed, including the minimum proportion of Social Rent homes required as part of major development, but no longer specifically prevents local authorities from seeking affordable housing from smaller developments.
- 3.7 Plans should also define a settlement boundary, as this will allow the application of other policies in the NPPF. Reading’s Local Plan has not identified a settlement boundary for a number of years, although it would very likely largely follow the Borough boundary.
- 3.8 Policy L1 includes more detail on expectations for what plans should do to ensure the most efficient use of land, including estate regeneration, underutilised retail and business sites and surplus transport infrastructure including car parks and service facilities, which the existing Local Plan already largely complies with.
- 3.9 Specific reference is included to Detailed Emergency Planning Zones around nuclear sites in policies relating to both plan-making (P1) and decision-making (P5), whereas these facilities were never specifically referred to in past versions.
- 3.10 A new requirement for plans to be based on a ‘proportionate heritage assessment’ and be supported by a local heritage list has been introduced in policy HE1.

Development Management

- 3.11 The most significant change for development management (which the NPPF refers to as ‘decision-making’) in Reading is that the presumption in favour of sustainable development has been significantly changed so that the ‘tilted balance’ that was an outcome of its predecessor would no longer be of relevance, at least for Reading. Instead, there are two relevant policies:
 - A general presumption in favour of sustainable development (policy S3) including that proposals that accord with both an up-to-date development plan and the NPPF decision-making policies should be approved without delay; and

- Policy S4 which states that proposals within settlements should be approved unless the benefits of doing so would be substantially outweighed by any adverse effects, when assessed against the national decision-making policies. There is more detail on what this would mean in practice, but the policy refers only to local policy where a site is allocated or specifically protected.
- 3.12 As a result the 'tilted balance' within a settlement (which would mean almost all of Reading) is replaced by a presumption in favour of development which prioritises national policies over most local policies. It remains to be seen how this can operate in practice when the legal basis for decision making is still the Local Plan, but it is clearly an attempt to substantially reduce policy constraints on development in urban areas, and will be important for the Council's decision making.
- 3.13 This ties in with another element of the NPPF which is the statement in Annex A that development plan policies that are materially inconsistent with the NPPF should be given very little weight unless they were examined and adopted against this version of the Framework. Again, this seeks to promote national policy to a status that could potentially be seen as inconsistent with the legislation, and this is likely to be the focus of future case law.
- 3.14 Much of the publicity around the new NPPF has been around the importance of development around railway stations. However, this is of very limited significance for Reading because it is in relation to the following:
- proposals outside settlements (policy S5)
 - proposals in the Green Belt (policy GB7)
 - establishing a minimum density of 35 dwelling per hectare around well-connected stations or 45 dwellings per hectare around stations with twice the frequency of a well-connected station (policy L3), which are levels well below the density of the vast majority of new development in Reading.
- 3.15 There are general policies around decision-making and there are a few notable elements such as the need for major developments to provide a concise planning statement and the emphasis on pre-application discussions for major development but much less so for minor developments (DM1). There is also a policy (DM2) requiring that local validation lists require certain information to support the national policies, but much of this is information that is usually required in any case. Policy DM3 emphasises that statutory and internal consultees should only be consulted where necessary and that decisions should not be delayed for a consultation response other than in specified circumstances.
- 3.16 Policy CC3 on adaptation to climate change now for the first time takes account of the risk of wildfires and incorporate measures such as firebreaks into development.
- 3.17 In terms of affordable housing, policy HO8 states that developments should meet or exceed affordable housing requirements. There was no explicit statement to this effect in the previous version, which concentrated mainly on what the plan should say rather than what a development should do.
- 3.18 There are now some fairly general development management requirements for specialist housing (policy HO9) which includes student and large scale communal provision (such as co-living).
- 3.19 Policy L2 on making efficient use of land emphasises existing policy around making best use of land in settlements and on previously-developed land, but does include wording supportive of higher buildings at street corners and additional units within residential curtilages which may have some tension with local policies on design or development in residential gardens. Likewise, there is a reference in policy L3 to development for residential or mixed use in a settlement contributing to an increase in the density of the area in which they are situated.
- 3.20 The wording around school places has been somewhat altered. Whilst the 2024 NPPF gave 'great weight' to early years, schools and post-16 facilities, these are now attributed 'substantial weight' alongside other public service or community infrastructure.
- 3.21 Policy N2 now specifically requires the incorporation of swift bricks into developments.

- 3.22 There have been changes made to how the development management policies regarding heritage operate. In particular, the concept and rules around 'less than substantial harm' have been removed, which will mean less clarity on how these more limited impacts will be weighed. However, there is now more useful wording on how to weigh impacts on non-designated assets, which would include locally listed buildings.
- 3.23 In general terms, the phrase 'substantial weight', used only twice in the previous NPPF (for use of brownfield land and harm to the Green Belt) is referred to 19 times for different matters in the new version. This will raise the issue of how matters accorded substantial weight will be balanced in practice when in conflict with one another.
- 3.24 The glossary includes a definition for 'medium' development (10-49 dwellings on a site of up to 2.5 hectares) which emerges from previous consultations. However, no policy in the NPPF applies differently to medium development than to any other major development.
- 3.25 Five-year housing land supply also now works in a slightly different manner, in that a buffer of 20% needs to be incorporated where a local plan was examined against a pre-2024 version of the NPPF (as our Local Plan Partial Update (LPPU) has been) and the annual average housing requirement is less than 80% of the national standard method. As it stands, the LPPU figure is 85% of the standard method, but the standard method figure changes each year as affordability ratios are published, and this could well push the LPPU figure below the 80% threshold in the future, making it much more challenging to demonstrate a five year supply.

4. Main implications for Reading

- 4.1 The publication of the new NPPF has no implications for the progress of the emerging LPPU, as this was examined under the 2023 version of the NPPF due to transitional arrangements that are still in place. Implications will be felt in future versions of the Local Plan or other policy documents.
- 4.2 In terms of development management, the NPPF is relevant to all decisions made after its publication. This means that Inspectors in ongoing appeals are already enquiring about its relevance, and it also means that it needs to be taken into account where a planning application has a resolution to grant from PAC but the decision has not yet been issued. Officers are considering this carefully on a case by case basis.
- 4.3 Regarding more specific implications, the NPPF is relatively new, and its implications may not fully become apparent on first reading. However, officers have identified a number of matters which are likely to be of particular importance.
- The reduction of the minimum plan period to ten years will make it more straightforward to plan to meet development needs given that anticipated completion rates tend to tail off towards the end of the 15 year period as delivery becomes more uncertain.
 - It is likely that many of our existing SPDs would not fulfil the NPPF's restricted view on what a supplementary plan should cover, which would mean needing to ensure that key elements are within the Local Plan itself wherever this is possible rather than directly replacing a SPD with a supplementary plan. However this may be difficult in practice as the Local Plan itself is expected to become more streamlined. For clarity, existing SPDs will remain in place as long as the emerging Local Plan Partial Update does.
 - The presumption in favour of development in settlements seeks to prioritise national policies in these locations, which will mean that we may face continued challenges applying our own local policies where they diverge from national policies, and will mean that we will also need to ensure that decisions are linked to national policies wherever possible. However, conflicts between the NPPF and our own local policies are likely to be very limited.
 - It will additionally be complicated to weigh national policies when making decisions not least because so many areas now carry 'substantial weight'.
 - Some wording in the NPPF seems likely to continue to result in applicants seeking ever higher densities in particular around increasing height at street corners, dwellings within residential curtilages and generally contributing to an increase in densities.

- Although the Council's local policy seeking affordable housing from all sizes of development has continued to be supported at examination and appeal the removal of the specific restriction on seeking a contribution from sites of less than 10 dwellings will nonetheless be highly significant for future iterations of the plan and the resulting financial contributions that are vital for continued provision of Local Authority New-Build.
- There is a risk that the approach to demonstrating a five year supply of housing land will cause issues for Reading if the standard method figure increases as a result of newly published data to the extent that the figure in the Local Plan Partial Update is less than 80% of the standard method.

5. Contribution to strategic aims

5.1 The Council Plan (2025-2028) identifies five priorities for the Council over the next three years. These are:

- Promote more equal communities in Reading
- Secure Reading's economic and cultural success
- Deliver a sustainable and healthy environment and reduce Reading's carbon footprint
- Safeguard and support the health and wellbeing of Reading's adults and children
- Ensure Reading Borough Council is fit for the future.

5.2 National planning policy in conjunction with local policy will help to meet most of these objectives through securing economic, social and environmental objectives.

6. Community engagement

6.1 There are no community engagement implications of this report.

7. Equality impact assessment

7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

7.2 There are no direct equality implications of this report.

8. Environmental and climate implications

8.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers). The Planning and Building Control functions are essential in helping to address the Climate Emergency through ensuring that development is undertaken to the highest possible environmental standards in line with national regulations and local policies.

8.2 There are no direct environmental or climate implications of this report.

9. Health implications

9.1 Chapter 16 of the NPPF (containing policies HC1-HC8) deals with promoting healthy communities. Much of the content of this chapter is broadly in line with the previous version of the NPPF.

10. Legal implications

10.1 Under Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, planning applications are to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF will be considered as a material consideration within this context, although it should be noted that, as set out in paragraph 3.13, the NPPF includes wording that

development plan policies that are materially inconsistent with the NPPF should be given very little weight. This could be taken to be inconsistent with the legal basis for decision-making.

11. Financial Implications

11.1 None of this report.