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August 2026 National Planning Policy Framework

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1. What Does It Mean For The Future Of Communities Across The Weald Of Kent?

The Government published a substantially revised National Planning Policy Framework in August 2026.

WKPS considers the August 2026 Framework to represent one of the most significant changes to the structure and operation of the National Planning Policy Framework since its introduction in 2012.

The revised Framework separates policies for plan making from those for decision making, places greater emphasis on delivery and seeks greater national consistency in how development is planned and determined.

This is WKPS's initial assessment of the August 2026 NPPF, focusing particularly on what the changes mean for Local Planning Authorities and parish and town councils across the Weald. It is intended as an initial overview rather than a definitive or exhaustive interpretation of the new Framework.

For parish and town councillors, the important question is not simply what has changed in the wording of national policy, but what the changes mean for the future location, scale, design and delivery of development in their communities.

WKPS supports the principle of well-planned and sustainable growth. The key questions, however, are where development should take place, whether sufficient infrastructure and environmental capacity exist to support it, and whether it will create sustainable communities. For WKPS, a sustainable location does not necessarily mean that the wider settlement has the capacity to accommodate the proposed scale of growth.

Potential consequence: The combination of strong housing delivery expectations and stronger national policy could increase pressure for development in communities that may have limited infrastructure and environmental capacity.

2. What Is The Government Trying To Achieve?

The Government's objectives are to increase housing supply, support economic growth and make the planning system clearer, more consistent and more effective. The Framework also separates plan making policies from decision making policies, clarifying the role of Local Plans and the consideration of individual planning applications.

The revised Framework seeks to achieve this through greater emphasis on sustainable locations, making effective use of land, appropriate densities and supporting strategic development.
For parish councils, this means that early engagement in Local Plan preparation becomes increasingly important because decisions about the location and scale of future growth will be made through the plan making process.

Local Choice to National Direction

The revised Framework represents a shift in the balance between local choice and national direction. It continues to support plan led development and local decision making, but introduces stronger national expectations around housing delivery, sustainable locations and maintaining up to date and effective Local Plans.

Its more clearly defined policies, expectations and thresholds give national policy a stronger influence over how Local Planning Authorities plan for and manage growth.

Where Local Plans are out of date or housing delivery is insufficient, the Framework provides circumstances in which national policy can have greater influence over development decisions.

For parish councils, this makes early engagement particularly important. The opportunity is to help shape where growth takes place, what scale is appropriate and what infrastructure, environmental and community requirements should accompany it. For WKPS, the objective should remain locally shaped growth, with communities able to influence where growth takes place, what scale is appropriate and what infrastructure and environmental requirements should accompany it.

Potential consequence: Where Local Planning Authorities fall behind in preparing their Local Plans, national policy may have greater influence over where and how growth takes place, reducing the opportunity for communities to shape development through the plan making process.

3. A Stronger Focus On Plan Making

For parish and town councils, the most important opportunity to influence future development is through Local Plan preparation, before strategic decisions about growth and site allocations have been settled.

The revised Framework continues to confirm that the planning system is plan led and that up to date development plans are a priority. The new plan making system places a clear timetable on Local Plan preparation, making early engagement by communities particularly important.

The development plan is where the strategic decisions about future growth are made. For parish councils, the Local Plan will usually be the most important part of that process. This includes the overall scale of growth, the broad locations for development, site allocations, infrastructure requirements and the policies that will guide how development is designed and delivered.

Once these strategic decisions have been made through the Local Plan, there is generally less scope to challenge the principle and overall location of development through individual planning applications.
This might include evidence about infrastructure, transport, water and wastewater, landscape, biodiversity, community facilities, local housing needs and settlement character. For parish councils, this local evidence is an important way of demonstrating the capacity, opportunities and constraints of their communities.

WKPS believes that parishes should seek to influence the Local Plan before sites are allocated, rather than relying only on responding to planning applications afterwards.

Potential consequence: A tighter timetable for Local Plan preparation could reduce the time available for parish councils to gather local evidence and influence strategic decisions about the location and scale of growth if they do not engage early.

4. National Policy and Local Judgement

The revised Framework seeks greater national consistency, but local judgement remains important. Local Planning Authorities must still consider local needs, opportunities, constraints, infrastructure capacity, environmental assets and settlement character.

National policy sets clearer expectations about matters such as housing delivery, sustainable locations, development around well connected railway stations, densities and the efficient use of land. This does not mean that every site in a nationally supported location should be allocated, or that every community should accommodate development at the same scale or density.

Potential consequence: Stronger national policies could increase pressure for development in places that appear suitable under national policy, such as well-connected locations. However, this does not mean that the settlement can accommodate development at the proposed scale. Parish councils should therefore provide clear local evidence about infrastructure capacity, environmental constraints and settlement character to demonstrate whether the proposed scale of growth is appropriate.

5. How Should Parish Councils Assess An Emerging Local Plan?

The revised Framework places greater emphasis on evidence, infrastructure and delivery when determining where and how much development should take place.

Local Planning Authorities need to demonstrate that proposed growth is supported by an appropriate evidence base and can be delivered sustainably.

WKPS considers that housing need, location, site capacity, transport, water, infrastructure, environment, design and delivery need to be considered together rather than separately.



For parish councils, the above structure provides a practical way of testing an emerging Local Plan: does the evidence demonstrate that the proposed growth is in the right place, at an appropriate scale, supported by the necessary infrastructure and capable of being delivered?

Growth should create sustainable communities, not simply deliver additional housing. The scale and location of development should therefore be considered alongside the infrastructure, services, environmental capacity, employment opportunities and design needed to support the resulting community.

6. How Could The Revised NPPF Affect Communities In Practice?

The revised NPPF contains a number of policies that could have a direct effect on the scale, location and form of development in communities across the Weald.

The following examples illustrate what some of the changes could mean in practice. Some policies contain specific national thresholds or expectations, while others depend more heavily on local circumstances and evidence.

Development Around Railway Stations

The revised NPPF provides stronger support for residential and mixed use development around well connected railway stations, including stations within the top 80 Travel to Work Areas by Gross Value Added. A well connected station is subject to specified service frequency criteria, with around 800 metres, or approximately 10 minutes walking time, identified as a reasonable walking distance, subject to factors such as topography, route quality and physical barriers.

For the Weald, a railway station does not make every surrounding site suitable for development.

Potential consequence: Stronger emphasis for development around well connected railway stations could increase pressure for housing and higher densities around some stations. However, proximity to a station does not by itself establish that a site is suitable or that the wider settlement can accommodate the proposed scale of growth, particularly where infrastructure or environmental constraints limit capacity.

Higher Densities

The revised NPPF establishes minimum density expectations around well connected railway stations. Within reasonable walking distance, residential and mixed use development should normally achieve at least 35 dwellings per hectare, rising to 45 dwellings per hectare where the station has a service frequency at least twice the minimum required for a well-connected station, subject to specified exceptions.

What may be appropriate around an urban station may not be appropriate in a rural village.

Potential consequence: Higher density expectations could increase pressure for higher density development around some railway stations, potentially changing the scale, form and character of rural settlements. Parish councils should therefore consider whether proposed densities are appropriate to the settlement, can be supported by suitable road and transport networks and other infrastructure, and are compatible with local character and the creation of well-designed and sustainable communities.

Development Outside Settlements

The revised Framework introduces a more location based approach to development outside settlements. Certain forms of development could be approved unless the benefits would be substantially outweighed by adverse effects, subject to the conditions

in the Framework. These include certain development around well connected railway stations, development addressing an evidenced unmet need and development on allocated land.

For parish councils, the important questions are whether a site is appropriately related to an existing settlement, whether there is an evidenced need, whether infrastructure can accommodate the proposed development and whether the scale of development is appropriate to the character of the community.

Potential consequence: A more location based approach could increase pressure for development outside existing settlements where national policy provides greater support. Evidence about settlement capacity, infrastructure, local need and local character will therefore become increasingly important in assessing whether the location and scale of development are appropriate.

Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood plans remain part of the statutory development plan system.

They continue to provide an opportunity for communities to influence matters such as development, design, environmental assets and local character.

The revised Framework also recognises the role of neighbourhood plans in establishing locally specific policies and design requirements, including design codes. For parishes with an existing neighbourhood plan, or considering preparing or updating one, the practical question is whether it remains sufficiently up to date and locally specific to influence the form and design of future development.

For parish councils, neighbourhood planning therefore remains an important opportunity to establish locally specific policies and design requirements that reflect the particular circumstances, character and environmental assets of their communities.

Strategic Sites

The revised Framework gives greater recognition to strategic development.

A strategic site will typically involve development of at least 1,500 dwellings for residential led development, although the Framework recognises that the appropriate scale will depend on the nature and mix of uses. These sites can create new communities or substantial new parts of existing settlements and may require significant infrastructure, phasing and masterplanning.

For parish councils, the focus should be on the community being created, the infrastructure required and how the development will be phased and delivered. At this scale, infrastructure provision should be planned and committed alongside the development, with delivery phased to coincide with housing delivery where necessary.

Potential consequence: At this scale of development, infrastructure must be capable of being delivered alongside housing, with appropriate commitments and phasing to ensure that new communities are supported as they grow.

Smaller Sites

The revised Framework gives greater emphasis to smaller development sites.

It expects Local Plans to allocate at least 10% of their housing requirement on sites of 1 hectare or less, together with a further 10% on sites between 1 hectare and 2.5 hectares, unless there are strong reasons why these targets cannot be achieved. The Framework also expects Local Plans to allocate sites that support rural communities and enable villages to grow and thrive.

Several smaller developments may each appear modest when considered individually, but together they may have a significant effect on infrastructure, transport, landscape, settlement character and community facilities.

For rural communities across the Weald, WKPS considers that the key issue is cumulative impact. Parish councils should therefore consider the combined effect of planned growth and whether the settlement has the infrastructure, environmental and community capacity to accommodate it.

Housing and Affordability

The Government retains a strong emphasis on increasing housing supply and meeting identified housing needs.

The revised Framework requires development plans to address the housing needs of different groups and to set policies for the type and mix of affordable housing needed to meet identified needs.

WKPS accepts the need for housing growth but considers that the focus should be on meeting identified needs, including genuinely affordable housing and social housing. Growth should create sustainable communities, not simply deliver additional housing.

Parish councils should therefore consider not only the number of homes proposed, but whether the housing mix responds to identified local needs and whether the proposed development can be supported by the infrastructure and services needed to create a sustainable community.

Water Infrastructure

The revised Framework gives greater importance to water when planning future growth. Water supply, wastewater, drainage and flood risk should help determine where development takes place, its scale and its timing.

The issue is not simply whether enough water is available. Local networks must also have the capacity to supply existing and new development. Where capacity is constrained, growth may require additional local storage, improvements to distribution networks to maintain water pressure, and increased wastewater capacity.

Drainage and flood risk must also be considered. Development can increase surface water runoff and place additional pressure on existing drainage systems. Sustainable drainage should reflect local conditions and the capacity of the receiving system.

For parish councils, the key question is whether existing water and drainage infrastructure can support the proposed growth, and what improvements would be needed if it cannot.

Potential consequence: Growth in areas with constrained water or drainage capacity could require significant investment in storage, distribution, wastewater and drainage infrastructure. Where this cannot be provided, the scale or timing of development may need to be reconsidered.

Design and Local Character

The revised Framework continues to support good design and locally specific design codes. This provides an opportunity for parish councils to establish expectations about settlement character, building form, materials, streets, public spaces, landscape and green infrastructure.

The Framework also recognises masterplans and design codes as important tools for strategic development. Design should ensure that new development responds to the character of individual communities rather than applying a uniform approach.

Parish councils should consider whether the emerging Local Plan and any proposed design code properly reflect the character of their settlement.

Landscape, Heritage and Local Green Space

The revised Framework requires landscape character and the countryside to be considered, with specific protection for Protected Landscapes and other environmental assets. WKPS considers that landscape and settlement character should be assessed at an appropriate wider scale, particularly where several developments could together create significant cumulative impacts.

Parish councils should provide clear evidence about landscape character, natural beauty, settlement character and cumulative landscape effects when contributing to Local Plan preparation.

They can also help protect valued places by identifying important landscapes, heritage assets, green spaces and potential Local Green Spaces early, and assembling clear evidence of their value before sites are allocated. For Local Green Space, this should demonstrate why the area is demonstrably special and locally significant to the community.

Potential consequence: Pressure for growth could increase cumulative effects on landscape and settlement character, making early local evidence increasingly important when decisions about the location and scale of development are made.

Biodiversity Net Gain for Very Small Sites

Parish councils should not assume that a small development is exempt from Biodiversity Net Gain. The 0.2 hectare threshold relates specifically to the statutory Biodiversity Net Gain regime and is separate from the definition of a small site used for Local Plan purposes.

A site may therefore be considered a small site for Local Plan purposes but still be subject to the statutory Biodiversity Net Gain requirements. Where development is exempt from the statutory Biodiversity Net Gain regime, biodiversity remains a material planning consideration. Policies protecting habitats, protected species, trees, hedgerows, ecological networks and green infrastructure may still apply.

For parish councils, a Biodiversity Net Gain exemption does not mean that biodiversity can be ignored. Very small developments can still have important environmental and cumulative impacts.

Higher Biodiversity Net Gain Requirements

The statutory Biodiversity Net Gain regime establishes a 10% net gain objective, subject to its exemptions. The revised Framework allows a Local Plan to set a higher Biodiversity Net Gain requirement for specific site allocations where this is fully justified and deliverable. Higher local requirements should not apply to development that is exempt from the statutory Biodiversity Net Gain regime.

For parish councils, this means that biodiversity should be considered when sites are being assessed for allocation, not left until a planning application is submitted. Where a site has particular biodiversity value, the parish should identify this early and provide evidence to support appropriate requirements through the Local Plan.

Accumulative Potential Consequences

More development around railway stations, higher densities and a greater number of smaller sites could place additional pressure on local infrastructure and services. This could affect water and wastewater capacity, drainage, roads, schools, healthcare and community facilities. It could also change the character and appearance of rural settlements and their surrounding landscapes.

Parish councils should therefore consider the combined impact of development across the parish, rather than considering each site or proposal in isolation.

7. What Does This Mean For Parish Councils?

a) Influencing Local Plan Preparation

This is the main opportunity to influence where and how growth takes place.

Parish councils should provide local evidence about settlement character, infrastructure, transport, water and wastewater, landscape, biodiversity, community facilities, local housing needs and opportunities for appropriate growth.

The objective should not simply be to oppose development. WKPS encourages parish councils to use the Local Plan process to identify where growth could be appropriate, what scale could be accommodated and what infrastructure, environmental and design requirements should accompany it.

b) Influencing Planning Application Decisions

Planning applications provide a different opportunity to influence development.

Once a site is being considered through a planning application, the main focus is on whether the proposal is consistent with the development plan, national policy and other material considerations, and whether the proposed development is acceptable.

Parish councils should continue to comment on matters such as design, access, infrastructure, landscape, biodiversity, heritage, local character and the cumulative effects of development. Comments should focus on material planning considerations and be supported by relevant local evidence wherever possible. Parish councils should also use Section 3, Decision Making Policies[1], of the Framework to identify and support their arguments.

Use the Local Plan to influence where and how much growth takes place. Use the planning application process to influence how individual developments are designed and delivered.

8. WKPS Perspective

WKPS considers that the August 2026 NPPF represents a significant change in how development is planned and delivered. It strengthens the Government's emphasis on housing delivery, faster plan preparation and national consistency.

The plan led system remains, national policy now has greater influence over how Local Planning Authorities plan for the location, scale and density of development.

For WKPS, the message for parish councils is clear:

i. Early engagement and strong local evidence are more important, not less.

ii. Local democracy is most effective when communities help shape the Local Plan before strategic decisions about growth and site allocations have been made.

iii. Good evidence can help communities challenge inappropriate development while also supporting their ambitions for well planned, sustainable growth.

iv. Development should be planned around the capacity of places to accommodate sustainable communities, rather than housing numbers being considered separately from infrastructure, environment, design and delivery.