

Comments on the National Planning Policy Framework reform

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Commenting on the government's new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), **Ben Standing**, Partner specialising in planning and environmental law at UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson, said:

"The government's focus on the planning system is welcomed with open arms because it is failing to deliver in its current form by creating an unresolvable tension between its twin aims of delivering high-quality, sustainable places and the number of new homes we need to build each year.

"Achieving planning permission has become a slow, uncertain and expensive process that deters investment while burdening local planning authorities, resulting in the number of approvals dropping to a 10-year low. There are many reasons for this, such as the shortage of experienced local authority planners, complexity of the planning system and volume of planning applications that don't comply with policy.

"In amending the NPPF, the government hopes to set a more centralised planning policy for local decision-makers to follow. Broadly speaking, it has taken a bold, 'stick'-led approach in order to meet its ambitious housebuilding targets. However, what is less clear is how it will protect traditional planning principles designed to create great places where people want to live.

"Through this lens, the government must be careful not to ignore where local people fit into this complex placemaking jigsaw. While much of the wider narrative has focused on overhauling planning rules to tackle so-called 'Nimbyism', developers, local authorities and national government must question whether they are doing enough to communicate the benefits of development.

"We should acknowledge that communities hosting new public infrastructure – whether it's housing developments or renewable energy projects – will be negatively affected in some way. At best, this will involve short to medium-term disruption; at worst, it could lead to schools, GPs and transport networks being over capacity.

"These problems aren't going away because of tweaks to the NPPF, so it's important to follow this new policy statement with a focus on how we bring communities on board with new developments rather than fostering a feeling they have been imposed against local will.

"In a [report on community-powered regeneration](#) published in partnership with the think-tank New Local, we called for a shift from adversarial to an enabling system, which gives communities more influence to shape development and ensure it meets local needs.

"This could involve incentivising residents living near renewable energy projects with cheaper electricity and investment opportunities, or dovetailing housing developments with community funding pots that are distributed to support important projects identified by local people as helping to ensure they benefit from development."

Robert Wofinden, Partner and head of the residential team at UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson, said: "Government action to minimise the roadblocks to housebuilding is certainly a boon for developers, but by broadening the definition of what is considered as "grey belt" land, it's likely that we'll see a rise in legal challenges against development plans in the short term. Ambiguity around what is considered as "green belt" or "grey belt" will be a point of contention between developers, communities and local authorities, but once this has been stress-tested, we'll then start to see some form of clarity for developers.

"However, to reach the full potential of UK housebuilding, more action will likely be needed on boosting the number of planning officers in local authorities. In theory, the new planning framework is great news for developers, but the new guidance will be resource-intensive and,

whilst town planners being in demand is certainly a positive from a development standpoint, more than 300 new planners (previously pledged by the Government by 2026) will be needed to avoid a backlog.

“It will be interesting to see in several months’ time how successful the National Planning Policy Framework will be for UK housebuilding. This will be no quick fix, but in the long term, these plans could make a real difference.”

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