

IS 2025 THE BLOCKBUSTER YEAR FOR PLANNING?

Posted on February 12, 2025



As the dust still settles on 2024 and the realities of the new NPPF very much hit, we look at what's in store for 2025...

1. Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Would planning reform be complete without a new piece of legislation front and centre? The new bill, which the Government deem a key piece of the puzzle for solving the planning woes and accelerating growth, includes

- **Nutrient Neutrality:** Developers may soon pay a charge to address pollution impacts, with councils designing solutions.
- **Streamlined Planning Committees:** A national delegation system could shift more decision-making to officers.
- **Joint Spatial Development Strategies (SDS):** Local authority groups may be directed to collaborate on regional planning.
- **Compulsory Purchase Reforms:** Lowering land costs and speeding up development.
- **Local Planning Fees:** Councils may set their own planning fees, introducing flexibility.
- **NSIP Regime Overhaul:** Simplifying the process for major infrastructure projects and establishing the National Infrastructure Service Transformation Authority (Nista).

Reports are that the bill is anticipated in the first quarter of 2025, inevitably there will be a high level of scrutiny by parliament.

2. National Development Management Policies (NDMPs)

The government is set to consult on NDMPs this spring which will standardise planning rules on common issues. These policies will:

- Carry equal weight to local plans but take precedence in conflicts.
- Address areas like flood risk, affordable housing, and small site development.
- Introduce "brownfield passports" to encourage urban land development.

Once NDMPs are in place, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will undergo another revision, accounting for the changes. We consider that consistency in DM policies could prove helpful in tackling the unpredictability of planning. Different areas even across local authority areas face their own challenges, in the plan-making process focusing on these issues could help to foster a 'plan-led' system. It may also help proper scrutiny being given to these policies and their implementation, which as practitioners we are often grappling with, as do planning officers.

3. A New Strategic Planning Tier

Back in full force is strategic planning, seeking to rectify which many considered the biggest mistake in planning of the last couple of decades. As outlined in the English Devolution White Paper, the ideas being floated are:

- Requiring all areas to develop *Spatial Development Strategies* covering multiple authorities.
- The SDSs would contain housing needs and infrastructure priorities across local authority areas.
- Giving mayors and the Secretary of State powers to resolve disputes and move plans forward.

This will be implemented through English Devolution Bill, which is anticipated after the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Depending on the Government's willingness to push through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill we anticipate this in the mid-term of this parliament.

4. Updates to Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)

Several PPG updates are on the way, including:

- **Green Belt Reviews:** Guidance to identify "grey belt" land for development.
- **Viability Assessments:** Tweaks to optimize developer contributions.
- **Carbon Accounting:** Support for reducing emissions in development proposals.
- **Local Nature Recovery Strategies:** Clarifying their role in planning decisions.

We anticipate the revised PPG will be rolled out over the course of 2025. It is important to note that PPG cannot change policy – it merely adds guidance to help understand it. Of particular note will be the guidance on grey belt which seems to be dominating all planning conversations.

5. New Local Plan System

Labour is advancing the streamlined local plan system inherited from the previous government. Highlights include:

- A 30-month timeframe for plan preparation.
- Gateway checks and reduced evidence requirements.
- A revised deadline for plans under the old system: December 2026.

The new system is expected to launch later this year, providing clarity for planning authorities. Dealing with the fall out of the uplift of housing requirements, the government clearly anticipates all systems local plan to enable delivery if they have any hope of their 1.5 million homes target.

6. NSIP Regime Changes

Labour plans to simplify the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) process. Proposed changes include:

- Updating thresholds for onshore wind and solar projects.
- Adding data centres, labs, and gigafactories to the NSIP regime.
- Regular updates to National Policy Statements.

A new infrastructure delivery body, National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority ('Nista'), will also merge existing entities to streamline oversight. The intention is for Nista to launch in Spring 2025 and lead on strategic planning of major infrastructure projects as well as on their delivery.

Final Thoughts

The Government has wasted no time in shaking up the Green Belt, however if all goes to *plan* we could be looking at a very different game at the back of 2025 and through to 2026 (including a whole new set of acronyms to excite us). We are hopeful that removal of barriers will enable SMEs back into the market, they deliver quality and are integral to getting within distance of the level of housing delivery that the Government envisions. Resourcing is consistently highlighted as the Achilles heel, there was a promise of 300 officers, and there are 317 authorities so that equates to fewer than 1 new officer per authority. Plainly the narrative from the Government is to get building, leveraging your team to make the most of the changes to enable faster and effective planning is crucial.