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National Planning Policy Framework 2026

The new NPPF introduces a number of important changes for both plan-making and development management. While there is plenty to digest, several areas stand out to me, including Green Belt and grey belt assessments, the new Connectivity Tool and the increased emphasis on station-led development.

Green Belt

One of the changes that is most interesting is the introduction of Annex E. Annex E provides guidance on how Green Belt assessments should be undertaken, including how assessment areas should be defined and how their contribution to key Green Belt purposes should be judged. It introduces a more structured approach to assessing land as making a strong, moderate or weak/no contribution to purposes A, B and D, providing illustrative criteria to help inform these judgements rather than relying solely on professional judgement.

Casting my mind back to my undergraduate dissertation, I explored the lack of a nationally prescribed methodology for undertaking Green Belt assessments and the resulting potential for inconsistency between assessments. While established practice and guidance existed, authorities and consultants were able to develop their own methodologies and apply differing degrees of professional judgement, potentially leading to different interpretations of how land performs against the Green Belt purposes.

The introduction of Annex E therefore goes some way towards addressing this issue. Professional judgement will inevitably remain important, but having a clearer national framework should help provide greater consistency and transparency in Green Belt assessments and, in turn, the identification of grey belt land.

For landowners and developers, understanding how a site performs against Annex E will be an important part of early site appraisal and promotion. It also provides a useful national reference point against which professional judgements can be made and challenged.

Connectivity

Connectivity takes on greater prominence in the new NPPF, with the Government's Connectivity Tool providing a new way of assessing how well locations support access to jobs, services and facilities by sustainable transport modes. The Tool is now embedded within national policy, including in the assessment and selection of sites for development.

However, there are important caveats to its use. The NPPF is clear that the Connectivity Tool should be used alongside other relevant quantitative and qualitative evidence, rather than as a standalone assessment of a location's connectivity.

This is particularly important when considering what sits behind a connectivity score. While the Tool provides a useful quantitative indication of connectivity by sustainable modes,

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there remains a need to understand site-specific circumstances, including the quality and attractiveness of the routes that people would use.

A low connectivity score may not necessarily be permanent. Where a site benefits from proximity to services or public transport but pedestrian or cycle connections could be improved, there may be opportunities for the development itself to deliver those improvements as is often the case. The NPPF itself recognises opportunities for development to enhance connectivity and contribute towards infrastructure, such as continuous footways and segregated cycle facilities.

This raises an interesting question, to what extent should a site's existing connectivity score influence its development potential where the development itself could deliver interventions that materially improve how connected that location becomes?

Station-led development

For those familiar with the London Plan, the principle of focusing higher-density growth around accessible public transport locations may feel familiar. London Plan Policy H1, for example, seeks to optimise housing delivery on suitable brownfield sites, including those within PTALs 3–6 or within 800 metres of a station or town centre boundary.

Similarly, the new NPPF places greater emphasis on development around well-connected stations, with a more prescriptive approach to both location and density. It introduces a specific definition of a “well-connected station” based on location and service frequency, alongside a “reasonable walking distance” of generally around 800 metres or a 10-minute walk, taking account of route quality, topography and physical barriers.

Residential and mixed-use development within this distance should achieve at least 35 dwellings per hectare, increasing to 45 dwellings per hectare where service frequency is at least twice the minimum required for a well-connected station.

Perhaps most significantly, Policy GB3(4) states that where a development plan's spatial strategy identifies suitable land around well-connected stations for development, exceptional circumstances are not required to justify altering Green Belt boundaries.

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