

The **National Planning Policy Framework published on 17 August 2026** is a significant rewrite, not simply another technical update. It changes both the structure of national policy and, importantly for you as a member determining planning applications, **the way the planning balance is intended to operate.**

The Government has deliberately moved towards a more **rules-based, nationally standardised development-management system**, separating policies for making plans from policies for deciding applications. Those national decision-making policies took effect immediately on **17 August 2026.**

For Stroud District, this is particularly important because the Council began preparing its **new Local Plan under the new plan-making system on 29 June 2026**, with an identified requirement to plan for at least **846 homes a year.**

The biggest change: think “national rules first” much more than before

The old NPPF was largely an overarching framework sitting alongside locally drafted development-management policies. The 2026 Framework goes considerably further.

There is now a dedicated suite of **National Decision-Making Policies** dealing directly with matters such as location, transport, design, housing, heritage, biodiversity, flooding, community facilities and the countryside. The Government’s intention is explicitly to standardise matters that apply everywhere, remove duplication and reduce unjustified local variation.

That has a very practical consequence.

You should no longer approach an application simply as:

“Does this comply with the Stroud Local Plan?”

The better approach is now:

Development Plan → applicable national decision-making policy → statutory protections → other material considerations → overall planning balance.

The legal starting point remains section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004: applications should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF is an extremely important material consideration.

But Annex A of the new NPPF adds something particularly important: where an existing development-plan policy is **materially inconsistent with a new national decision-making policy**, that local policy should normally be given **very limited weight**, unless it was examined and adopted against this version of the Framework.

That is potentially very significant for Stroud’s older policies.

1. There is effectively now a stronger “yes” within settlements

This is one of the most important provisions for Development Control Committee members.

New policy **S4 – Principle of development within settlements** says:

Development proposals within settlements should be approved unless their benefits would be substantially outweighed by adverse effects when assessed against the national decision-making policies.

Notice the wording.

It isn't simply saying:

“approve sustainable development.”

It establishes a positive starting point and then asks whether the adverse effects are sufficiently serious to **substantially outweigh** the benefits.

What that means for you

For development inside recognised settlement boundaries, you should increasingly be asking:

“What is the actual planning harm that outweighs the benefit of allowing this?”

rather than:

“What reason can we find not to allow it?”

That doesn't prevent refusal. But a refusal needs to identify **real, evidenced harm grounded in policy**.

Design, highway safety, flooding, heritage, landscape, residential amenity and biodiversity can still justify refusal.

Local opposition by itself cannot.

2. Development outside settlements is now much more explicitly categorised

Policy **S5** provides a specific list of forms of development that can be acceptable outside settlements.

That includes agriculture, horticulture, forestry, outdoor sport, infrastructure, telecommunications, certain housing circumstances and rural development. Where development falls into an accepted category, the policy again says it should generally be approved unless adverse effects **substantially outweigh the benefits**.

For a predominantly rural district such as Stroud, this matters considerably.

It means arguments like:

“It is outside the settlement boundary, therefore it is unacceptable”

will increasingly be inadequate.

The first question must be:

Does S5 expressly contemplate this type of development outside a settlement?

If it does, you move on to assessing its impacts.

3. Brownfield, infill and densification receive much stronger support

The new NPPF strongly favours getting more development from land **within existing settlements**.

Policy L2 gives **substantial weight** to benefits arising from:

- bringing vacant and underused land back into use;
- redeveloping underutilised retail/business land;
- building over car parks and service yards;
- using airspace above existing buildings;
- upward extensions;
- infill;
- development within residential plots.

That is a major policy signal.

It means a proposal shouldn't necessarily be rejected merely because it is **denser than its surroundings**.

Indeed, policy L3 says residential and mixed-use development within settlements should normally **increase the density of the area**. Existing character remains relevant, but it should not automatically prevent making more effective use of land.

As a councillor

If an officer says:

“The density is higher than neighbouring development”

you should ask:

“But is that actually contrary to L3, which specifically expects increased density within settlements?”

Conversely, developers don't have carte blanche. Amenity, daylight, privacy, design, infrastructure and character remain legitimate constraints.

4. Development around railway stations is given exceptionally strong encouragement

This is another major change.

Government describes the policy as a **“default yes” around well-connected stations** and broadened the policy following consultation.

Residential or mixed development within reasonable walking distance of a qualifying well-connected station should generally achieve **at least 35 dwellings per hectare**, increasing to at least **45 dwellings per hectare** where the station has particularly frequent services.

The NPPF also says these minimum densities should be exceeded where possible.

For Stroud District, therefore, locations with strong rail connectivity become increasingly important when the Council determines both applications and future Local Plan allocations.

This potentially strengthens development arguments around the district’s better-connected railway locations significantly more than remote car-dependent locations.

5. Transport arguments have changed — and this matters enormously for Stroud

This is one of the sections I would pay particular attention to given the transport problems surrounding Stroud’s Local Plan.

The Government has embedded a **“vision-led” approach to transport**.

The philosophy is moving away from simply:

predict how much traffic a development generates → calculate congestion → build additional road capacity.

Instead, transport planning should consider:

what sustainable transport pattern do we want this development to produce, and what interventions are necessary to achieve it?

Policy TR3 nevertheless still requires significant adverse impacts on network capacity, congestion or highway safety to be mitigated to an acceptable degree.

So this does **not** mean highway capacity no longer matters.

For Stroud applications affecting the A38, M5 J12/J13/J14 or constrained rural networks, I would ask officers:

“What does the vision-led transport assessment actually assume residents will do differently, and what measures secure that behaviour?”

That is more powerful than simply arguing that “there will be more traffic”.

If the transport case assumes substantial modal shift, ask:

- where is the bus service?
- what frequency will it have?
- who funds it?
- for how long?
- are walking/cycling connections genuinely practical?
- what happens if the proposed modal shift doesn't occur?
- what highway capacity remains once realistic assumptions are applied?

That is where the transport debate is likely increasingly to sit.

6. Infrastructure remains a legitimate constraint

There is sometimes a misconception that the new NPPF means “housing overrides infrastructure”.

It doesn't.

Policy L3 expressly requires consideration of **the availability of infrastructure and its scope for improvement**.

Transport policy also requires unacceptable transport consequences to be addressed.

Therefore, for a large Stroud development, questions concerning:

schools, GP capacity, drainage, wastewater, highways, public transport and utilities

remain completely legitimate.

The important distinction is this:

“The infrastructure is under pressure” isn't necessarily enough.

You need evidence that the development produces an unacceptable impact which **cannot adequately be mitigated**.

7. Protected Landscapes remain strongly protected

This is particularly significant for Stroud because of the Cotswolds National Landscape.

Following consultation, Government actually **strengthened/reinserted protection**.

Policy N4 says substantial weight must be given to conserving and enhancing natural beauty, and:

major development in Protected Landscapes should be refused except in exceptional circumstances and where demonstrated to be in the public interest.

This is a powerful policy.

It means the pro-development direction of the rest of the NPPF should **not** simply be read across into the Cotswolds National Landscape.

For proposals there, ask:

Is this “major development” in the NPPF landscape sense?

Importantly, that isn’t determined solely by the ordinary statutory definition of a major planning application. The decision-maker considers its **nature, scale, setting and potential impact on the designated landscape**.

That gives members meaningful judgement.

8. The countryside isn’t simply “available for housing”

This is another important overall reading.

The opening sustainable-development chapter simultaneously says government wants:

maximum growth on suitable land within settlements

and

limited development away from settlements to safeguard the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

Therefore the 2026 NPPF shouldn’t be characterised as:

“Everything should now be approved.”

A better description is:

“Approve considerably more development in places national policy considers suitable, while retaining strong protections for specified environmental, landscape, heritage, flooding and other constraints.”

9. Affordable and social housing have been strengthened

Policy HO8 says proposals should meet or exceed up-to-date development-plan requirements for affordable housing, including the required proportion of **Social Rent**, normally on site.

There is also stronger support for **rural exception sites** meeting identified local affordable-housing needs.

For Stroud's rural communities this gives you quite a useful policy distinction.

You can be sceptical about generic speculative market housing outside settlements while strongly supporting:

genuine local-needs affordable housing.

The NPPF explicitly supports that distinction.

10. The category of “medium development” is new

The Framework now formally defines **medium development** as housing schemes of **10–49 homes on sites of up to 2.5 hectares**.

This is intended to make planning requirements more proportionate and improve opportunities for smaller and medium-sized developers.

That matters because government is deliberately trying to address a planning system increasingly dominated by very large developers and very large sites.

For Stroud's new Local Plan, I would therefore question whether enough **small and medium sites** are being identified rather than relying excessively on a handful of strategic allocations.

11. Strategic sites are formally recognised

At the opposite end of the scale, Government now recognises a distinct strategic-site category at approximately **1,500 homes or more** and has policies specifically supporting their planning and delivery.

That is relevant when judging proposals such as new settlements.

But recognising strategic development does not remove the requirement for:

infrastructure, deliverability, sustainable transport, environmental constraints and appropriate phasing.

For councillors the key question becomes:

“Is this genuinely deliverable strategic development, or simply a very large allocation?”

Those are not the same thing.

12. Economic development receives greater weight

The framework is explicitly more growth-oriented.

Government wants planning decisions to support business growth and sectors including logistics, agriculture, rural businesses, telecommunications, energy infrastructure and other nationally important industries.

So when you are determining an employment proposal, the economic benefits need to be given proper positive weight.

For an application involving significant investment, high-value employment or expansion of an established local employer, I would expect an officer report to **identify and weigh those economic benefits explicitly**, rather than treating them as incidental.

13. Pubs and community facilities get stronger protection

The new policy specifically strengthens protection against losing facilities including **public houses**.

A pub or key community facility should not simply disappear because an owner wants another use. Where viability is claimed, the NPPF expects evidence that reasonable attempts have been made to market it for continued use.

That is particularly useful in villages.

You can reasonably ask:

“What evidence establishes that the facility genuinely cannot reasonably continue?”

rather than accepting the assertion at face value.

14. Nature policy becomes more prescriptive in some respects

The Framework now explicitly expects development to consider Local Nature Recovery Strategies, retain important natural features where possible and incorporate nature-positive design.

Interestingly, it now specifically says developments should normally incorporate **integrated nest boxes/swift bricks**, unless compelling technical reasons prevent it.

But there's an important counterbalance.

Councils generally shouldn't impose **local biodiversity-net-gain requirements exceeding the statutory regime**, except where an up-to-date site-specific allocation policy properly justifies it.

That's part of the Government's wider attempt to restrict councils inventing additional local quantitative requirements.

15. Local councils have less freedom to create their own standards

This is a recurring theme throughout the 2026 NPPF.

Government explicitly says quantitative local standards should be limited to circumstances where local variation is justified.

That affects things such as:

- energy requirements;
- internal space/layout standards;
- parking;
- environmental requirements;
- development-management criteria.

So during preparation of Stroud's new Local Plan, members should repeatedly ask:

"Is this genuinely locally necessary, or are we duplicating national policy/Building Regulations?"

If there isn't an evidence-based local justification, the policy may struggle at examination.

16. Heritage policy has been rewritten to be more explicitly balanced

The heritage chapter is reorganised and is somewhat easier to navigate.

Importantly, designated heritage harm remains important. Any harm must receive considerable weight.

But the Framework expressly acknowledges that public benefits can include things such as:

bringing vacant or underused listed buildings back into productive use and enabling energy-efficiency improvements.

Therefore heritage protection isn't intended to mean "freeze buildings in time".

For committee purposes:

identify significance → identify the degree of harm → identify public benefits → perform the required policy balance.

17. Climate adaptation is broader

Development is now expected to consider the impacts of climate change **over its lifetime**, rather than merely present-day conditions.

The Government has particularly emphasised resilience, flooding, overheating and other climate impacts.

For Stroud, the flooding implications are particularly important.

Development in sensitive parts of the Severn Vale should therefore be tested not simply against:

"Does it flood now?"

but:

"What does the flood-risk position look like during the lifetime of this development under climate-change allowances?"

18. Planning conditions should become more disciplined

This is another very practical committee point.

Policy DM6 says conditions should be necessary, relevant, precise and reasonable. It also says national model conditions should normally be used where relevant and pre-commencement conditions should be avoided unless clearly justified.

So don't use conditions to avoid answering a fundamental question.

If an issue determines whether development is acceptable in principle, the committee should generally know the answer **before granting permission**.

19. Separate regulatory regimes shouldn't normally be duplicated through planning

DM7 is important.

Planning should consider **land-use effects**, but members should ordinarily assume separate regulatory regimes will function properly unless there is clear evidence otherwise.

For example, objections concerning matters controlled primarily by environmental permitting, licensing or building regulations may carry relatively little planning weight unless there is a genuine land-use consequence.

This is one of those areas where committees occasionally stray.

20. Intentional unauthorised development can count heavily against an applicant

Policy DM8 confirms that where unauthorised development was intentional, **substantial weight** should be given to that fact when deciding whether retrospective permission should be granted.

However, retrospective applications still have to be assessed on their planning merits.

So it isn't:

"They built it without permission, therefore refuse."

It is:

"Was it intentional, and if so how much additional negative weight should that carry in the planning balance?"

What all this means specifically for Stroud District

There is an unusual position at Stroud at present.

The **2015 Local Plan remains the adopted plan**, while its attempted replacement submitted in 2021 remains at examination; meanwhile SDC formally commenced an entirely **new Local Plan on 29 June 2026** under the new plan-making regime.

That makes the 17 August NPPF extremely important.

The new Local Plan being prepared now must be prepared under this Framework. Annex A expressly provides that plans under the new statutory plan-making system should comply with the 2026 Framework from **17 August 2026**.

That means SDC can't simply take its previous spatial strategy, repackage it and assume it satisfies national policy.

The Council now needs to demonstrate that its strategy properly responds to:

846+ homes annually, settlement hierarchy, brownfield capacity, station accessibility, increased densities, infrastructure, strategic sites, small/medium sites, affordable housing, protected landscapes, flooding, rural communities, economic growth and transport connectivity.