



WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF WATER CONSERVATORS

Promoting a diverse and sustainable environment

RESPONSE TO THE MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNMENT (MHCLG) ON PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PLANNING FRAMEWORK

FEBRUARY 2026

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>

PROLOGUE

1 The Worshipful Company of Water Conservators (WCWC) is a City of London Livery Company focussed on the long-term health of our water resources and the broader related industries and their regulators, along with others who share our concern for water and the environment. Our experience and knowledge ranges from the complexities of environmental sciences, through the application of engineering to deliver the goals identified by those sciences, and the subsequent management of assets created. The WCWC's purpose is *promoting a diverse and sustainable environment*.

2 As part of that purpose, the WCWC has been responding to relevant consultations particularly on matters relating to water conservation. These are archived on its website. It has been advocating a further review of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for some time. It responded to the previous Consultation in September 2024 in which it expressed the view that insufficient consideration was given to matters related to water. It was not satisfied with the changes made eventually in December 2024

<https://waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/filr/3043/Sept24-PLANNING-Response-to-Consultation.pdf>

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67aafe8f3b41f783cca46251/NPPF_December_2024.pdf

3 The WCWC has also made submissions on related planning consultation during 2025, culminated in the passing of the Infrastructure and Planning Act in December, which are summarised in an overview of its work during the year.

<https://waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/filr/4112/Jan-25-PLANNING-Response-to-Defra-and-Ministry-Working-Paper-on-Nature-Recovery.pdf>

<https://waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/filr/3224/Jan-25-PLANNING-Further-Reponse-to-Defra-%5E0-Ministry-Working-Paper-on-Nature-Recovery.pdf>

<https://waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/filr/4194/JAN-26-OVERVIEW-of-consultations-and-thinkpieces-in-2025.pdf>

4 Underpinning the responses is the commitment by the WCWC to the principles of sustainable integrated natural resources management and it expects that the planning system must assist those.

5 The WCWC is very much aware of the Government's focus on the planning system and that it should be an enabler and not a blocker to its plans for development including 1.5 million new homes during this Parliament. This comes at the same time as the Government has also published its White Paper on the future of water management in England.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-new-vision-for-water-white-paper>

6 Water resources availability and the abilities of wastewater systems are key interfaces of two major government policies. Easier planning will be a boon to the water sector in terms of its assets, yet it could be a bane in that the speed of development might overwhelm even the best water services management. The Ministry Blog issued after the consultation was launched shows the drive, but WCWC is disappointed that there was no quote from the water sector.

<https://mhclgmedia.blog.gov.uk/2025/12/17/coverage-of-our-major-consultation-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework/>

7 This response contains background information to aid readers other than the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. There are many papers, reports, consultations and initiatives relevant to the topics addressed by the WCWC and more emerge daily. It is impossible to capture them all. So, the WCWC recommends that readers follow environmental news agencies such as ENDS and CMS. Indeed, there is a constant stream of consultations even whilst this consultation has been in the public domain.

8 Whilst the principal focus of the WCWC is water conservation, it does have sufficient broad experience on the impact on planning to offer some thoughts and suggestions on proposals related to the broader issues of environmental conservation. The experience of the members of the WCWC in coping with planning in water conservation also provides insight to how well systems work. However, in view of the complexity of the proposed changes, this response does focus particularly on water issues. The WCWC has members from all parts of the UK and notes that the delivery of planning differs in each UK country and that this consultation and response focusses on England.

9 The WCWC observes that the proposed NPPF is 123 pages long with 225 questions. It is couched in complex language with no real explanation of its place in a diversity of other policy and strategy initiatives, including the Government White Paper on the future water framework. The WCWC repeats its suggestion that it would be helpful if there could be a series of simply worded summaries of policy papers explaining how individual initiatives fitted together, such as Vision for Water, and planning development. Even the attempt at a simple explanation, the 'Easy Read' in this consultation, is 100 pages long with a difficult response format and water forms a very small part of it.

10 To structure its response and to aid readers a summary of the Consultation is given in Appendix 1 and of aspects relevant to water in Appendices 2 and 3.

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE DETAIL OF WATER

11 The WCWC welcomes the new focus on water management, but the consultation document is difficult to penetrate even by aficionados of the subject. So, the WCWC makes a number of straightforward points.

Coordination with the White Paper on the future of water

12 The WCWC welcomes the inclusion of a specific section on water, but the document fails to spell out the detail of what policy W4 is. So, it is difficult to comment in response to Q99. The WCWC reiterates its suggestion for a much closer coordination of the NPPF with the notions of the White Paper. Both must share a commitment to national consistency and to appropriate local flexibility. Both must be committed to a deep and broad English water strategy. The WCWC will be responding to the White Paper on this.

13 There needs to be clarity on the role of water companies in the planning process reflecting the changes proposed in the White Paper reference Q96 in this consultation.

New Homes

14 It would have been useful to see some commentary on the relevance of the proposals to the implementation of the recommendations of the New Towns Task Force.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government>

15 One contentious issue has been the concept of 'Grampian conditions' for planning consent but these can be controversial. No mention is made of this. This ties in with the concern of the WCWC that no real attention has been made to the consequences for the rights of developers to connect to sewers under S106 of the 1991 Water Industry Act

<https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/environment/grampian-planning-conditions/>

16 Developers should not be allowed to get round the strictures of the planning processes, as set out on page 29, and this must apply to all water matters.

Water consumption in homes

17 There needs to be more clarity on what is expected in planning consent and what is expected in building regulations. For example, it has been the case that consent for building in water stressed areas will only be given with tighter building controls on water consumption.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/housing-optional-technical-standards>

<https://lichfields.uk/blog/2025/december/18/what-the-consultation-nppf-means-for-optional-technical-standards#:~:text=Accessibility%2C%20where%20local%20need%20justifies,areas%20of%20serious%20water%20stress.>

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c3ceeed915d76e2ebc01d/scho1009bqzr-e-e.pdf>

18 The consultation introduces a fundamental reset in how technical standards will operate through development plans. This is primarily delivered through draft Policy PM13, which significantly narrows both the scope and purpose of locally set quantitative standards.

PM13 demonstrates a clear preference for Building Regulations to take precedence over local standards. It states that, LPAs should avoid duplication with Building Regulations, except for:

- a. Accessibility, where local need justifies local authorities to set separate requirements for M4(2) and M4(3) dwellings (subject to draft Policy HO5 discussed below); and
- b. Water efficiency, where tighter optional standards may be justified, and more stringent local standards be applied in areas of serious water stress.

19 At the end of 2025 the government consulted on tightening building regulation standards to which the WCWC replied. These do not tie in the Ofwat Environmental Incentives Framework of which there is no mention in this consultation.

<https://waterconservators.org/wp-content/uploads/filr/4071/DEC-25-WATER-EFFICIENCY-Response-to-Defra-consultation.pdf>

Sustainable drainage

20 The WCWC is concerned that there is not unequivocal commitment by the government to implement statutory SuDS. There is commitment to common standards. So, the WCWC gives its support to policy F8 with that caveat. Equally the WCWC is pleased to support all initiatives which exploit surface water which might otherwise be lost and has expressed concern on the thinking behind some proposals for water reuse schemes.

Overall design criteria which must be used in selecting development sites

21 The WCWC submits once more its suggestions for a variety of criteria for home design, and these must determine where homes can be located. These take into account the Ofwat Environmental Incentives Framework

<https://www.ofwat.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Environmental-Incentives-Common-Framework—English-New-Connection-Rules—effective-April-2025.pdf>

For homes in Flood Risk Areas

- Buildings in flood zones should be constructed with flood-resistant materials and raised floor levels to protect against flooding.
- Water fittings for 105 l/p/d, optional for 90l/h/d with incentives for less than 90 l/p/d as per the Ofwat scheme
- Ordinary water meters, maybe with a new incentive to install smart water meters
- Compulsory enhanced SuDS with no incentives as offered in Water Company schemes
- 'Bag and bin it' compliant bathrooms and toilets for sanitary waste preferred

For homes in Water Stressed Areas:

- All water fittings for 90 l/p/d with incentives offered for less where needed in extremis
- Smart water meters
- Voluntary SuDS, with incentives as per Water Company schemes
- 'Bag and bin it' compliant bathrooms and toilets for sanitary waste preferred

For homes in Stressed Catchments, apart from water stressed, e.g. nutrient neutrality and Stressed Drainage Plans

- Water fittings for 105 l/p/d with options for 90 l/p/d and incentives for less
- Ordinary water meters, maybe with a new incentive to install smart water meters
- Compulsory enhanced SuDS, no incentives as per water company schemes
- 'Bag and bin it' compliant bathrooms and toilets required

For all other homes

- Water fittings for 105 l/p/d with no incentives envisaged for less
- Ordinary water meters, except shared properties with smart water meters, with a new incentive for smart water meters in other properties
- Voluntary SuDS with incentives, as per water company schemes
- Bag and bin it' compliant bathrooms and toilets for sanitary waste preferred

Biodiversity

22 The WCWC has expressed some view on biodiversity net gain during 2025 and has suggested that there ought to be a concept of BNZ (Q179, Q180) Biodiversity Net Zero for all projects (no loss), and it is concerned that Environmental Delivery Plans must be bought into Catchment Management Plans (Q184). See the 2025 Overview.

Giga-industries

23 There has been considerable discussion around the development of giga industries, such as data processing centres and hydrogen production in particular the impact these have on water resources. The WCWC has suggested persistently that these should be located on coasts to exploit seawater and in doing so help to regenerate the economies of coastal communities. See the 2025 Overview.

Residual land value land

24 With reference to Q212 that residual value of agricultural land represents the amount remaining after deducting all development costs – including construction, fees, finance, planning obligations development costs – including construction, fees, finance, planning obligations. And seeks comment. There is a need to ensure that "planning obligations" includes covering all impacts and costs of supplying the water and sewage treatment for the new houses and their impacts on water infrastructures. At present, NPPF does not deal adequately with such water matters.

APPENDIX 1 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN POINTS OF CONSULTATION

Purpose of the Consultation

- The government is seeking views on **major proposed reforms** to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- The reforms aim to **support growth, unlock housing supply, modernise planning, and simplify national policy**.
- The consultation accompanies a **draft revised NPPF** and includes additional questions on:
 - Energy thresholds and data centres
 - Standardised viability inputs
 - Reforming site thresholds

Key Objectives of the Reforms

1. **Make national planning policy clearer and easier to use.**
2. **Create separate national policies for plan-making and decision-making.**
3. **Introduce a more rules-based system** to give greater certainty and speed up decisions.
4. **Ensure national policies apply consistently across England**, reducing duplication in local plans.

Why Non-Statutory National Policies (for now)?

- Although legislation allows statutory National Development Management Policies, the government proposes **not** to introduce them yet.
- They believe the same aims can be achieved through:
 - Clearer national policies
 - Preventing local plans from repeating or contradicting them
 - Giving national policy immediate weight
- Statutory status may be reconsidered later.

Structural Changes to the NPPF

- Reordered chapters for clarity.
- New chapters on:
 - **Energy and water**
 - **Flood risk and coastal change**
- Policies split into:
 - **Plan-making policies**
 - **National decision-making policies**
- Additional annexes to incorporate essential guidance (e.g., housing need calculation, grey belt identification).

Twelve Major Policy Reforms

1. **Permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development**, especially in urban areas.
2. **Default “yes” to development around rail stations**, including some Green Belt areas.
3. **Higher urban and suburban densities**, including infill and upward extensions.
4. **More diverse housing mix**, including stronger support for rural affordable housing.
5. **Support for small and medium sites**, including a new “medium development” category.
6. **Streamlining local standards** to reduce variation and duplication.
7. **Boosting local and regional economies**, with substantial weight for business growth.
8. **Support for critical minerals** but further restrictions on coal extraction.
9. **Vision-led transport planning**, moving away from “predict and provide”.
10. **Clearer climate change policies** for mitigation and adaptation.
11. **Stronger natural environment protections**, including swift bricks and nature recovery strategies.
12. **More positive heritage policies** to support appropriate development.

Plan-Making Reforms

- Faster plan production: **local plans must be adopted within 30 months.**
- Plans must be updated every **5 years.**

- Stronger cross-boundary cooperation.
- Clearer rules on evidence, land identification, and developer contributions.
- Limits on local standards, especially where national standards or building regulations already apply.

Decision-Making Reforms

- More **proportionate**, **positive**, and **timely** decision-making.
- Reduced information requirements for small and medium developments.
- Clearer rules on viability assessments to prevent unnecessary renegotiation.
- Greater consistency in planning conditions and obligations.

APPENDIX 2 WATER RELATED SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED NPPF REFORMS

1. A New Chapter on “Securing Clean Energy and Water”

- The draft NPPF introduces a **dedicated chapter** grouping policies on **energy and water infrastructure**.
- This is a structural change intended to make water-related policy clearer, more explicit, and easier to apply in both plan-making and decision-making.

2. Stronger National Policy on Water Efficiency

- Local plans will **still be allowed** to set tighter water-efficiency standards **where local supply pressures justify it**.
- This is one of the few areas where local variation is explicitly permitted, reflecting the seriousness of water scarcity in parts of England.

3. Integration with Climate Change and Sustainable Development Policies

- Water management is tied closely to the chapters on:
 - **Climate change mitigation and adaptation**
 - **Sustainable development**
- These chapters frame how water supply, water efficiency, and water-related infrastructure should be considered in planning decisions.

4. New Chapter on Flood Risk and Coastal Change

- Flooding and coastal erosion are separated into their own chapter to give **clearer, more explicit policy direction**.
- This includes updated flood zone tables and vulnerability classifications (moved into annexes).

5. Water as Part of Environmental Protection

- The natural environment chapter emphasises:
 - Protecting water-dependent habitats
 - Recognising landscape character, including water features
 - Supporting nature recovery strategies that often rely on water-related interventions

6. Evidence Requirements for Water-Related Planning

- Plan-makers are encouraged to **reuse existing evidence** and work jointly across boundaries—important for water catchments that rarely align with local authority borders.

7. Water Infrastructure as a Strategic Consideration

- Spatial development strategies and local plans must consider **long-term water supply and wastewater capacity** as part of their strategic planning role.
- This aligns with the government’s push for faster plan-making and more predictable infrastructure planning.

8. Water in Decision-Making

- National decision-making policies will include **clearer information requirements** for:
 - Flood risk assessments
 - Water supply and wastewater capacity

- Drainage strategies
- The aim is to make decisions more proportionate and consistent across England.

In Short

The reforms significantly elevate water within national planning policy by:

- Creating **dedicated chapters** on water and flood risk
- Allowing **tighter local water-efficiency standards** where needed
- Embedding water considerations into climate, environment, and infrastructure policy
- Strengthening evidence and decision-making requirements related to water

APPENDIX 3 WATER RELATED CHAPTER

Chapter 10: Securing Clean Energy and Water

This new chapter is proposed in recognition of the importance of improving energy and water infrastructure. It brings together existing policies on renewable and low-carbon energy with two new policies on planning for energy and water infrastructure, and decision-making on water infrastructure.

Plan-making policies

W1: Planning for Energy and Water

This policy requires development plans to reflect the capacity of, and future requirements for, energy and water infrastructure. It emphasises the need for early engagement between relevant plan-making authorities, utility providers, regulators and network operators to establish a clear understanding of energy supply, network capacity, water supply, drainage, and wastewater capacity. The aim is to make sure that potential constraints caused by current or future deficits in capacity are identified and addressed proactively at the plan-making stage.

The policy also expects plans to make appropriate provision for new and upgraded infrastructure, and to include measures to avoid constraining the operation or expansion of water and electricity networks.

96) Do you agree with the approach to planning for energy and water infrastructure in policy W1? Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree. a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree, what alternative approach would you suggest?

W2: Securing Renewable and Low Carbon Energy and Electricity Network Infrastructure

This policy updates paragraph 165 of the current Framework. In addition to renewable and low-carbon energy development, the policy now refers to electricity network infrastructure. This is because this type of infrastructure is commonly developed as standalone projects and not necessarily always in association with renewable and low carbon projects. A definition of electricity network infrastructure is proposed for inclusion in the glossary to ensure consistent interpretation. The definition of renewable and low-carbon energy has also been updated.

The policy requires development plans to identify areas suitable for renewable and low carbon energy development and electricity network infrastructure, including future re-powering and life extensions. Identification is only required where it would help secure development for these uses.

97) Do you agree with the amendments to current Framework policy on planning for renewable and low-carbon energy development and electricity network infrastructure in policy W2? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.* a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.

National decision-making policies

W3: Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Development and Electricity Network Infrastructure

This policy consolidates current Framework paragraphs 168 and 169 and introduces references to electricity network infrastructure. This is because this type of infrastructure is commonly developed as standalone projects and not necessarily always in association with renewable and low-carbon technologies.

The re-cast policy goes beyond the existing by indicating that substantial weight should be given to benefits for energy security, economic development and net zero, the additional benefits from re-powering, and the contribution that small-scale and community-led developments can make.

Additionally, the policy clarifies the need for decommissioning and site restoration for time-limited developments, recognising that most renewable and low-carbon energy schemes are permitted on a temporary basis.

Current Framework paragraph 169 is proposed to be modified, so that where these types of development come forward outside areas identified in the development plan, they should be assessed against the national decision-making policies as a whole, rather than the criteria used for identifying suitable areas in the development plan. This is to reduce any uncertainty about how this policy should be applied in practice, and to reflect the more comprehensive role that national decision-making policies are intended to play in assessing development.

98) Do you agree with the proposed approach to supporting development for renewable and low carbon development and electricity network infrastructure in policy W3? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.* a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree, and any changes you would make to improve the policy.

W4: Water Infrastructure

This new policy supports the delivery of water supply, drainage and wastewater infrastructure where it is not already covered by permitted development rights and does not require approval through the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects regime. The policy gives substantial weight to proposals that increase capacity to support planned development, strengthen the security of supply for existing users, improve water quality, and reduce water-borne pollution.

99) Do you agree with the proposed approach to supporting development for water infrastructure in policy W4? *Strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree nor disagree, partly disagree, strongly disagree.* a) Please provide your reasons, particularly if you disagree.