

POLICY ESSENTIALS: PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE





ABOUT

The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 39 county and unitary councils across England. We are a councillor-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of our member councils and their communities to ensure they have a strong voice with national government, and to help deliver positive change for those authorities and the residents they serve.

The CCN aims to articulate the challenges and opportunities of its member councils, alongside their priorities, to the government and other key organisations. This is primarily done through original and impactful research across areas such as adult social care, children's services, housing and planning, and local government finance.


Building on our **Guide to CCN**, our updated series of **Policy Essentials** aims to give county and unitary councillors a short and concise overview of the most important policy issues facing their councils. This includes an overview of the key service responsibilities of councils; why it is a national advocacy priority for CCN; key developments in the national policy landscape; and CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities.

This Policy Essentials is focused on **Planning & Infrastructure**. For more information on our policy work in this area, contact:



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What role do councils play in planning & infrastructure?

The planning system is a crucial tool that helps to manage the development and use of land in the public interest. The system is used to identify land to meet housing and employment needs along with the social and physical infrastructure required to support development.

The system is enshrined in various Acts of legislation which sets out that planning decisions must be taken in line with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The 'development plan' comprises the Local Plan and other Supplementary Plans. Local Planning Authorities prepare this in line with national policy which is contained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG). The development plan will soon also comprise new Spatial Development Strategies that will plan strategically across multiple local planning authority areas.

As county and unitary authorities, CCN members have different responsibilities when it comes to planning and infrastructure. Below we set out the different roles each type of authority plays.

The role of Upper Tier County Councils includes:

- Highways – responsible for delivering and maintaining local highway infrastructure, including potholes.
- Local transport planning – including preparing a Local Transport Plan and delivering a range of transport infrastructure including public transport strategies.
- Education and public infrastructure – planning for school places and libraries and providing input on planning applications where development will place additional demand on services.



- Minerals and waste planning – preparing Minerals and Waste Plans, and determining applications for mineral extraction, landfill sites and waste processing facilities.
- Statutory consultee role for district and borough Local Plans and major planning applications, particularly those with strategic infrastructure impacts. They feedback on transport, flooding and drainage, education provision and waste and recycling.

In Unitary Councils, they have the above responsibilities plus:

- The role of Local Planning Authority – responsible for preparing the local plan and supplementary plans, and making planning decisions in accordance with the development plan.
- Developer contributions – including setting expectations for, and negotiating, developer contributions through Section 106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).
- Spending and distributing developer contributions in accordance with local priorities as outlined in the Local Plan and the Infrastructure Funding Statements.

New strategic authorities that are in the process of being established in some county areas will also have certain planning powers. These powers increase according to level of strategic authority as follows:

Foundation Strategic Authorities

- Duty to produce a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS).
- Housing and land powers, concurrent with Homes England – such as compulsory purchase powers and land assembly.
- Housing and land powers, concurrent with local authorities.



Mayoral Strategic Authorities

- Ability to establish Mayoral Development Corporations – these are statutory bodies established by a mayor to drive large-scale development and regeneration in a specific location. Development Corporations also have legal powers to acquire land, act as the local planning authority and build infrastructure.
- Strategic Development Management Powers – including the ability to ‘call in’ planning applications of strategic importance, overriding local planning authority decisions.
- Ability to prepare Mayoral Development Orders – these grant planning permission for specific development that is either unconditional or subject to conditions, which can require approvals from the Mayor or Local Planning Authority.
- Ability to set a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy – used to collect contributions from development to fund infrastructure, on top of Section 106 and CIL set by the Local Planning Authority.



What are the key issues facing CCN members in planning & infrastructure?

- **Planning reform has been at the forefront of every government's agenda in recent times, with rhetoric that it is not delivering the homes and infrastructure that the country needs.** As a result, we have a housing crisis with increasingly unaffordable housing, and slow infrastructure delivery hampering economic growth.
- While reform to the planning system is often well intentioned, the constant change and tinkering to the system has created uncertainty and instability for planning authorities, communities and developers. **A fundamental part of the planning system is that it is plan-led, and as we outline above, it is a legal requirement for planning authorities to maintain an up-to-date plan.**
- However, the pace of change to national policy, along with reduced planning policy teams owing to departmental cuts, has meant that LPA's have often struggled to keep up with keeping plans up to date. **As a result, only around a third of planning authorities have an up-to-date local plan.**
- **The lack of a local plan can leave planning authorities at risk of speculative development which often comes forward on land that is less suitable than sites that may be allocated in the local plan.** It may be less suitable because it is in less sustainable locations – outside of settlements and without supporting infrastructure. Because housing is so desperately needed, developers who appeal refusals often succeed and win permission which leaves councils at risk of having to pay costs to the developer.
- Another reason for speculative development is the requirement on planning authorities to maintain a five-year supply of land of housing which must be constantly updated. This is required even if a local planning authority has an up-to-date local plan, and many of our member councils have reported that developers are able to manipulate their five-year land supply. **This means that they are then able to get permission on sites that may be less suitable outside a local plan and are again more likely to win at appeal.** Speculative development has become a big issue for many authorities and undermines the plan-led system, and public confidence in it.



- The resourcing of local planning authorities is a key issue facing many authorities – both in terms of funding and the recruitment and retention of staff. **The Royal Town Planning Institute estimates that local authority net expenditure on planning has fallen by 43%, from £844m in 2009/10 to £480m in 2020/21 amounting to just 0.45% of local government budgets allocated to planning services.** This reflects not only the reduction in central Government funding towards planning, but also the rising pressure on authorities to deliver statutory services which means other departments inevitably have less funding.
- **The process of securing developer contributions is also challenging for both CCN's unitary and county council members.** We know that the system is never going to fund all of the infrastructure that an area needs, but the use of viability assessments to negotiate down contributions through Section 106 that are used to deliver affordable housing has been an issue for members for some time. In addition, the system is complex with Section 106 running alongside the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Not all planning authorities have adopted CIL, and there is a patchwork of different systems across the country.
- Finally, the two-tier system of local government also brings challenges, with the planning function sitting at district level and infrastructure, transport, education and social care sitting at the county level. **This has led to disjointed decision making, with counties often not involved in plan or decision making as much as they should be.**
- County councils who should also receive funds through Section 106 and CIL **often find themselves either bidding to the district or borough for funds that should go directly to them and not receiving the amount that they were expecting.** They then have to top-up funding for infrastructure projects with their own capital funding.



What is the national policy context for planning & infrastructure?

- Planning reform has been a key component of both the current and previous government’s plans to kickstart the economy and support growth, as well as delivering the homes that the country needs.
- The current Labour government first updated the NPPF within the first five months of taking office, and this included a range of policy updates with the ambition to deliver 1.5 million homes over the course of the Parliament. Central to this was the reintroduction of mandatory housing targets, calculated via the standard method for assessing housing need. The previous Conservative government had intended to reintroduce targets but after considerable backlash from its own backbenches, this was not taken forward.
- The methodology that is now used to assess housing need has been updated and sets significantly higher housing targets for authorities in county areas. The table below shows the new targets grouped by local authority type and shows the disproportionate increase that has been placed on county areas.
- Other changes that are already having an impact on county areas include changes to Green Belt policy, which makes it simpler to release Green Belt land for development along with the introduction of a new Grey Belt designation for land which has previously developed within the Green Belt. The combination of these policies for members with Green Belt land means that the Green Belt is at a higher risk of development, and many areas have seen increased applications for development on this type of land, with limited ability to refuse them.

Council type	Old Method	Proposed Method	Difference	% Difference
County & CCN Unitary	115,617	180,386	64,769	+56
Metropolitan Boroughs	48,805	57,824	9,019	+16
London Boroughs	98,822	80,693	-18,129	-18
Unitary (Non-CCN)	42,180	52,637	10,457	+25
Total	305,425	371,540	66,115	+22



- The Planning & Infrastructure Act received Royal Assent in December 2025. This introduces a range of legislation that will affect planning going forward. The legislation intends to speed up planning decisions, make it easier to deliver significant infrastructure, introduce strategic planning, better resource planning authorities and reduce environmental red tape to allow development and improve the natural environment. CCN engaged with Parliamentarians as the bill progressed through the House of Commons, and our spokesperson provided oral evidence to the Bill Committee.
- There has been a constant and steady stream of consultations both before and following the Planning & Infrastructure Act receiving Royal Assent. The key consultation has been radical updates to the National Planning Policy Framework, along with proposed changes to planning committees to streamline them and reduce the number of people sitting on them and to reduce the number and type of applications that are referred to them for decisions.
- The revised NPPF is a significant shift away from the existing document and represents the most significant change to it since it was first published in 2012. In our consultation response, which can be read [here](#), CCN set out concerns that the changes would remove significant local control from councils, centralising decision-making policies and giving planning authorities very little opportunity to set their own distinct policies for decision-making.
- We believe that the revised document is highly permissive and will make it difficult for authorities to refuse any development. Our conclusions to the consultation were that while we recognise the need for development, and particularly new housing, authorities want to plan in a positive and constructive way and our view is that the revised NPPF goes against the fundamental principles of the democratic planned system and could lead to further public distrust in the planning system. We await the government's response to the consultation.



A spotlight on Spatial Development Strategies

- A key element of the Planning & Infrastructure Act is the reintroduction of strategic planning through the creation of Spatial Development Strategies (SDS's). This is something that CCN has long been calling for. New SDS's will be high-level vision-setting documents that will be prepared sub-regionally, and Local Plans will need to be in 'general conformity' with the SDS, and this will be tested at examination. They will take responsibility for the distribution of housing development, although they cannot allocate sites, they should set out strategic infrastructure requirements. They should help to set out a strong case for institutional investment, and they will have a statutory role in the planning system meaning that they will have real teeth in the system. The Government's aim is to have universal coverage of SDS across England by the end of the Parliament.
- Upper tier councils, or groups of them, will initially be responsible for the preparation of SDS's before Mayoral Strategic Authorities are established. We know the Government is currently preparing secondary legislation that will underpin SDS's. This will include defining the governance, boundaries and procedural requirements including the process of establishing strategic planning boards, defining the SDS geographies (which will match devolution geographies where possible) along with procedural guidance and details about examination.
- Although the updated NPPF included some guidance on the differences between SDS's and Local Plans, we have called for more guidance to make this distinction clearer for authorities. There will also need to be a significant resource injection to fund these new plans and CCN has been and will continue to be working with Government as policy and legislation is written.
- Finally, the Labour Government set out within their manifesto a pledge to embark on the delivery of the next generation of new towns and set up a New Towns Taskforce which was tasked with making recommendations to government on the location and delivery of new towns. A shortlist of site recommendations was published in September 2025, and it is understood that sites are being taken forward in Bedfordshire, Leeds, Manchester, Enfield, Greenwich, South Gloucestershire and Milton Keynes.



What are CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities?

CCN's Business Plan 2026/27 sets out the networks priorities for planning and infrastructure over the coming year. In relation to planning, the plan sets out that CCN will continue to influence planning reform, and seek to shape legislation for SDS's as this emerges. In particular we will:

- **Support a locally led and plan-led planning system**, ensuring reforms (including the Planning & Infrastructure Act and revised NPPF) retain **local democratic accountability** while enabling delivery at scale.
- **Influence the design and implementation of planning reform**, shaping secondary legislation, guidance, and national policy to reflect the **specific needs and operating context of county and unitary councils**.
- **Strengthen strategic planning across functional geographies**, advocating for county and unitary councils to play a **central leadership role in Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs)** alongside combined authorities.
- **Support councils through planning changes linked to local government reorganisation (LGR)**, including the **integration of planning functions** and the implications of merging authorities.
- **Tackle workforce and capacity challenges**, particularly shortages of skilled planners, by advocating for **increased resourcing and workforce support** for planning authorities.

[Read more about all our advocacy and research in the CCN Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27.](#)





In relation to infrastructure, we will continue highlight the severe infrastructure challenges that counties face, and the importance of increased resources to support development and encourage economic growth. In particular, we will:

- **Advocate for fair and sufficient infrastructure investment**, making the case for greater upfront (forward-funded) infrastructure funding to **unlock development and support sustainable growth**.
- **Ensure infrastructure delivery (including schools, health, transport, and digital connectivity) keeps pace with housing growth** across all development areas, including new towns and existing settlements.
- **Influence reforms to developer contributions**, including improving Section 106 arrangements, ensuring they are fair, effective, and reflect local authority needs.
- **Shape the emerging strategic planning system** so it enables clearer identification and planning of infrastructure requirements at the appropriate spatial scale.
- **Improve infrastructure funding frameworks** by working with areas to assess and develop more effective funding and delivery models as new systems are implemented.
- **Highlight and address the growing challenge of ageing infrastructure**, including critical assets such as bridges and concrete structures.
- **Continue to secure a fair share of central government capital funding** for county areas to unlock major development and support infrastructure delivery.

[Read more about all our advocacy and research in the CCN Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27.](#)





Reports

- [Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework: consultation response \(2026\)](#)
- [County Councils Network - County Spotlight - Housing and Planning \(2025\)](#)
- [County Councils Network - Housing in Counties \(2024\)](#)
- [Pragmatix Advisory - Improving Infrastructure Funding and Delivery \(2023\)](#)

Press Releases



- [17 March 2026 - Councils warn that the government's new planning rules override local voices and could leave rural areas vulnerable to speculative development](#)
- [12 February 2026 - Consultation opens on geographies for Spatial Development Strategies](#)
- [4 September 2025 - Report spotlights how counties are building homes of all tenures and raising the bar on standards](#)