



District Councils' Network
Local Government House
Smith Square
London
SW1P 3HZ

The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP
Secretary of State for Communities
and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Dear Secretary of State

National Planning Policy Framework Consultation

The District Councils' Network (DCN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on this consultation. The DCN is a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Group. It is a single voice for districts to central government and national organisations. It represents over 180 district councils.

The DCN welcomes the Government's intention to reform national planning policy guidance with a radical reduction to the volume, complexity and prescription of the current system. However, we have some major concerns about the draft Framework. The attached formal response details these concerns. What follows in this letter is a summary of the main concerns and some additional comments not covered by the formal questions in the consultation.

Our concerns set out in the attached response include: the guidance on the presumption in favour of sustainability and viability; the absence of clear guidance that the local plan is the sovereign document; the guidance on housing land supply and developments of national significance; the role of statutory consultees; and the absence of appropriate transition arrangements for existing local plans.

We also have an overall concern that making something shorter does not necessarily make it clearer. This is likely to lead to the need for clarification through the courts – resulting in delays and increased costs – which we assume can not be the intention of the Government.

In relation to delivering sustainable development, the DCN strongly supports the sentiment that economic growth is essential for a sustainable future and that a positive planning process will make a contribution to encouraging growth. However, the planning process is by no means the only factor involved; more significant factors are the

national and local economic situations. Allowing development proposals to be assessed solely against national policy is surely contrary to the principles of localism.

The Framework's guidance regarding viability appears heavily weighted towards financial viability (as against environmental and social viability), which is weighted wholly in favour of viability for the developer. The Framework does not provide sufficient leverage to negotiate contributions that will make a development viable and attractive for the locality/community in economic, social and environmental terms.

The DCN notes also that the Framework does not indicate how the current lack of demand will be tackled. The current demand deficit means that sites that have been allocated are no longer viable, opening opportunities for developers to seek new allocations that may not be sustainable in terms of the local vision and aspirations.

The Framework makes only a brief reference to developments that are not subject to a separate national policy statement, but might be considered to be of national significance. The DCN would appreciate clear guidance that government departments, which may be promoting these developments, will also be bound by the same Framework.

The Framework rightly refers to the importance of statutory consultees providing advice in a timely manner, but does not indicate how local planning authorities can act if that timely advice is not forthcoming.

It is essential that the absence of appropriate transition arrangements for existing local plans is addressed. We estimate that 30 per cent of core strategies have been adopted. So, the declaration that permission should be granted "where the plan is absent, silent, indeterminate or where relevant policies are out of date" is a major issue. An increase in appeal activity is likely as developers move to take advantage of this strategic vacuum; increasing both costs and delays.

It is vital that local planning authorities have a realistic chance of getting up-to-date plans in place. The strategic intent of planning authorities is clear and there is need for protection until core strategies receive a certificate of soundness. It will take time for the Planning Inspectorate to visit all councils and we contend that, in the meantime, it is wholly unreasonable that councils should suffer from speculative development. The DCN proposes, therefore, that there should be protection to the point where the Planning Inspectorate accepts or rejects the local plan.

Transitional arrangements for having plans approved or certified in conformity with the Framework must be simple and streamlined. The DCN considers that transition arrangements will operate more effectively, if the Planning Inspectorate allocates a link officer to each local planning authority to act as a 'critical friend' and support effective and timely delivery.

I hope you and your officials find these comments and the greater detail in the attached formal response, valuable. We would be happy to meet to discuss our comments so that we can all make sure that the final version of the Framework results in change for the better.

To discuss the District Councils' Network response please contact Emma Tucker (emma.tucker@local.gov.uk or 0207 664 3049).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gillian Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cllr Gillian Brown
Planning Lead
District Councils Network

To The Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Department for Communities and Local Government

cc The Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Department for Communities and Local Government
Alan C Scott, Department for Communities and Local Government