



Futures Network West Midlands – FNWM

Looking to the future in an uncertain world

DRAFT NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK: CONSULTATION RESPONSE BY THE FUTURES NETWORK WEST MIDLANDS.

Futures Network West Midlands

1. This response to the national consultation is from the Futures Network West Midlands (FNWM) which comprises individuals, from planning, academic and other professional backgrounds, who have experience and commitment to strategic and spatial planning with a particular interest in the West Midlands. This part of England has a long history of effective co-operation and collaboration on strategic and 'wider than local' issues.
2. FNWM's focus is in developing a deeper understanding of the economic, social and environmental challenges facing the West Midlands, the interactions between them and the potential implications for alternative futures for people, communities and businesses in the area.
3. Nothing in our response is confidential and FNWM is happy for it to be reproduced in whole or part provided it is attributed.
4. FNWM have chosen not to respond to the specific questions in the Consultation Document, but have limited our comments to those parts of the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which most impinge on our sphere of interest.

5. Our comments are indexed to the relevant paragraphs in the NPPF or the page number and heading in the Impact Assessment (IA).

IA. Page 11- Policy Objectives.

6. We broadly support the 3 objectives which the Coalition has set for the review of the planning system, but believe that:

(i) The reduction in guidance from over 1000 to just 58 pages is too draconian with the result that, in some cases, particularly in relation to sustainable development, strategic planning and the duty to co-operate, the consequence is a lack of clarity which is likely to lead to differences of interpretation and legal challenges.

(ii) Whilst handing power to communities is a laudable objective, it is essential that communities have the time, energy and skills to take advantage of their roles and responsibilities in the new system. However much the process is simplified and made more accessible, many of the issues to be addressed remain very complex with many differing viewpoints, aspirations and policy objectives to be considered and evaluated. It is also equally important that local authorities understand the consequences of this devolution and are able to work with communities in a positive and constructive manner.

(iii) In making the system more user-friendly and accessible for the public, it is essential that access and influence are equal and fair and not biased in favour of particular groups or interests at the expense of others who may be less able to interact with the process.

7. FNWM believes that the Framework needs further elaboration to address these concerns or the understandable drive for simplicity and clarity will simply turn into confusion with significant risks to the delivery of key policies.

NPPF Paragraphs 9 – 18. Delivering Sustainable Development.

8. FNWM supports a presumption in favour of sustainable development. In particular we completely agree with the key point in Paragraph 11 that the 3 components of sustainable development - planning for prosperity, people and places - **“should be pursued in an integrated way, looking for solutions which deliver multiple goals.”** We believe that this phrase is one of the most important in the whole document and should be given much more prominence. This might also go some way to addressing some of the criticism of the Framework that it is little more than a developer’s charter.

9. Inherent in establishing a presumption in favour of sustainable development is that the converse must also be true – **a presumption against unsustainable development.** Whilst FNWM acknowledges the Coalition’s desire for the NPPF to be as positive and proactive as possible, it would increase the clarity of the Framework, if the presumption against unsustainable development where it does not combine all 3 elements in an integrated way and does not deliver multiple benefits (i.e. economic, social and environmental), was also clearly spelt out. Indeed the ‘presumption in favour’ ought to be dependent upon the ‘presumption against’ also being true.

10. FNWM welcomes the attempt in paragraph 10 to take the somewhat obtuse Bruntland definition and apply it specifically to the planning process through the concepts of planning for prosperity, planning for people and planning for place. We note however that Ministers have decided that ‘a legal definition of sustainable development is not necessarily required for planning to play an effective role in helping to promote and secure sustainable development.’ However it seems to us that as the presumption in favour of sustainable development is such a corner stone of national policy it cries out for an unequivocal definition of what constitutes sustainable development. This needs to acknowledge the cumulative impacts of individual developments and address both local circumstances in relation to neighbourhoods and communities, including the interdependence of our urban and rural economies, as well as the

wider sub regional and national issues such as globalisation and climate change. . An agreed definition is essential to provide a consistent guide for decision makers whether they are the Secretary of State, Planning Inspectors, Local Authorities, Neighbourhood or Communities. It is too important to be left to the vagaries of localism.

11. It is our experience in the West Midlands that effective, co-ordinated and consistent action across all 3 elements of sustainability and across extended areas is required to reverse the unsustainable trend of dispersal of activities and investment away from our major urban areas. This is essential if a more sustainable development pattern focussed on the renaissance of these areas is to be achieved, utilising existing infrastructure and services in the most efficient and economical way.

NPPF Paragraphs 44-47 Planning Strategically Across Local Boundaries.

12. FNWM notes with considerable disappointment that there will be nothing of a formal nature between the overarching National Planning Policy Framework and Local Plans produced for individual local authority areas. It is our strong contention that, just as Neighbourhood Plans require a local context set out in the Local Plan, a Local Plan needs a wider context within which the strategic priorities for the area can be assessed and evaluated.

13. It is also disappointing that there is no specific reference to the spatial dimension of planning which is fundamental to achieving good outcomes and improved wellbeing through the process. It has never been more important to ensure that all the aspects which contribute to sustainable communities (e.g. transport, climate change, low carbon, infrastructure, economic growth, social cohesion etc) are tackled in an integrated and holistic way. Without this broader perspective FNWM fears that competition between Local Authorities and LEPs will lead to increased polarisation and greater inequalities between places and communities.

14. FNWM completely agrees that Local Plans must be based on adequate, up-to-date and relevant evidence about the economic, social and environmental characteristics and prospects for the area (paragraph 27). It is our experience in the West Midlands that this evidence base often needs to cover a very wide area to ensure that all the ramifications can be taken into account in formulating appropriate responses to change and planning positively for them.

15. Migration patterns, housing market areas identified through Strategic Housing Market Assessments, jobs markets and travel to work areas, retail catchment areas, transport networks, mineral and waste locations, infrastructure and energy networks, water supply and biodiversity and green infrastructure are all likely to extend well beyond individual or even adjacent local authority boundaries. In order to understand properly the underlying trends and the inter-actions and issues associated with them, there is often a need to undertake analysis on a wide geographical area. This also needs to be undertaken on a collective basis if there is to be a mutual ownership and trust in the evidence base by all the authorities and interests involved.

16. In turn, it is then essential that local authorities, working with LEPs , other organisations and private sector businesses such as the energy companies, are in a position to develop co-ordinated and complementary policy responses to the evidence base (i.e. on such matters as those noted above). A clear example within the West Midlands is the strategy to achieve a renaissance of our major urban areas (Birmingham, the Black Country, Coventry and North Staffordshire) through an integrated approach to growth and regeneration. This requires co-ordinated and collaborative policies to stem the unsustainable tide of outward migration of people, jobs and investment both by positive and proactive policies within the conurbations and by appropriate policies to achieve complementary rural renaissance in surrounding areas sometimes many miles away. It is likely that the abolition of the national priority for 'brownfield first' will make it much harder to achieve the regeneration and renaissance of our major urban areas. FNWM believes that one of the keys to sustainable development must be to realise

growth potential in all areas whilst not drawing investment away from those areas in greatest need.

17. FNWM is concerned that the policies in this section of the Framework seem to be predicated on co-operation between immediately adjacent areas but are too weak to ensure that the technical and governance arrangements to achieve the level of co-ordination required will be effective.

18. Co-ordinating the activities of different public and private bodies to achieve a greater whole than the sum of the parts has long been the holy grail of public administration. This was important enough in the good times, but in an age of severe restraint in both public and private finances, it is even more important to co-ordinate policy and programmes so that every investment contributes to delivering the greatest overall impact.

19. FNWM notes that much is expected of the “duty to co-operate on planning issues that cross administrative boundaries, particularly those which relate to strategic priorities....” FNWM believes that there will inevitably be tensions between the Coalition’s localism agenda and the embodiment of local discretion in statute with the duty to co-operate. There is little or no guidance on what the duty means in practice nor is it clear what effective sanctions could be applied if local authorities and the myriad of other organisations and businesses involved in the planning process fail in this duty..

20. To be effective, co-operation and collaboration needs to be:

- Based on a shared and agreed evidence base at an appropriate geographical level.
- Geared to the achievement of common goals and outcomes.
- Continuous and ongoing.
- Able to make explicit choices in a collective way
- Holistic - incorporating all relevant players and interests, including business and the third sector.

- Able to broker agreements between parties where there is a need to balance local and 'wider than local' interests.
- Based on effective governance arrangements including mechanisms to seek appropriately balanced and sustainable solutions and resolve disputes.

21. It seems that the only sanction against a lack of co-ordination or where only lip service has been paid to co-operation is when a Local Plan has been submitted for Examination where this will be one of the tests of soundness. Such a sanction is much too late in the process. As the early adoption of Local Plans is one of the core objectives of the NPPF, a sanction only applied at the Examination stage will result in frustration and delay. **The FNWM therefore believes that the “duty to co-operate” needs to be substantially strengthened, preferably in the Localism Bill or by much clearer guidance in the NPPF as to how it will work, be monitored and be policed.**

Conclusion

22. FNWM welcomes the Coalition's bold attempt to distil 100s of pages of guidance into a succinct statement of national planning policy which avoids repetition and contradiction and sets out the Government's objectives and aspirations for the planning system. We do believe, however, that in a number of the most crucial parts of the Framework the desire for brevity has been at the expense of clarity. The test of the new framework will be if it can deliver the housing, jobs and infrastructure required to meet the country's needs in a genuinely sustainable way. Our concern is that the framework could be a change for the different rather than the better.

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