NPPF changes – brief note

1. Overview & Immediate Effect

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published the finalized rewrite of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on **17 August 2026**.
Unlike previous revisions, this update completely restructures how national policy operates. It strips away local planning discretion by explicitly stating that local plan policies conflicting with National Decision-Making Policies (NDMPs) carry **very limited weight**. The new rules took effect immediately with **no grace period** for decision-making.

---

2. Major Structural Shift: The Death of the "Tilted Balance"

The historic 243-paragraph continuous prose format has been replaced by 131 coded policies across 20 chapters.

- **The Settlement Presumption (Policies S3–S5):** The familiar "tilted balance" under the old Paragraph 11 has been abolished. It is replaced by a rigid location-based spatial framework.
- **Policy S4 ("Automatic Yes"):** Any residential or mixed-use development proposed **inside a designated settlement boundary** must be approved by default unless the adverse impacts "substantially outweigh" the benefits.

Parish Council Impact: For parishes with defined settlement boundaries, protecting infill spaces or edge-of-village green gaps from development has become significantly harder. Speculative applications within village boundaries now carry a heavy policy presumption in their favour.

---

3. Comprehensive Green Belt Overhaul (Policies GB1–GB8)

Green Belt rules have been split between plan-making (GB1–GB5) and decision-taking, heavily shifting from "uniform protection" to land performance.

- **The Elevation of "Grey Belt" (Annex E):** Grey belt criteria are now explicitly embedded into national policy via **Annex E**. Grey belt includes previously developed land (PDL) and any Green Belt land that fails to strongly contribute to three specific purposes: checking urban sprawl, preventing towns from merging, and preserving historic town settings. The previous "Footnote 7" restrictions that developers routinely fought over have been removed.
- **The Sequential Test for Release:** When a Local Planning Authority (LPA) cannot meet its housing targets, a Green Belt review is effectively mandatory. LPAs must prioritize allocations in a strict sequence: **PDL first, Grey Belt second, and low-performing Green Belt third**.
- **Station-Led Growth (Policy GB7(h)):** This is the most disruptive change for rural or semi-rural parishes. Exceptional circumstances **are no longer required** to alter Green Belt boundaries or approve major residential developments if the land sits within **800 metres (a 10-minute walk) of a well-connected railway, tram, or Underground station** within the top 80 Travel to Work Areas. These sites face national mandatory minimum densities of 35–40 dwellings per hectare (dph).
- **The "Golden Rules":** Any major development unlocked via Grey Belt or station-led Green Belt release is subject to strict conditions: delivering up to **50% affordable housing** (or 15% above local policy), providing matching infrastructure, and securing local green space.

4. Direct Implications for Parish Councils & Neighbourhood Plans

1. Boundary Alterations Shifted to Neighbourhood Plans

Crucially, **Policy GB3 explicitly permits Neighbourhood Plans to amend Green Belt boundaries**. If your parish wants to proactively shape where housing goes rather than waiting for the LPA's strategic review, updating your Neighbourhood Plan to allocate specific "Grey Belt" parcels is your strongest shield.

2. The 75% Housing Delivery Test Trigger

If your overarching District or Borough Council falls below **75% of its mandatory housing delivery target**, an "unmet need" designation is automatically triggered. In these scenarios, developers can bypass local plan restrictions to target local Grey Belt or station-adjacent land directly via planning appeals.

3. Rural Infilling & Housing Exceptions

- **Policy S5.1(e):** Outside formal settlement boundaries, limited infilling is strictly confined to "recognisable house groups".
- **Isolated Dwellings (Policy HO11):** Continues to tightly restrict isolated rural housing to essential rural workers, heritage retention, or truly exceptional architectural design.
- **Renewable Energy (Policy W3):** Renewable infrastructure (solar farms, battery storage) has been given "substantial weight" nationally. However, the framework clarifies that large-scale commercial renewables inside the Green Belt are still classified as "inappropriate development", requiring developers to prove very special circumstances.

4. Loss of Consultation Power

Parish Councils can no longer rely on niche statutory consultees to fight local developments.
The **Gardens Trust and Theatres Trust have lost statutory consultee status** (downgraded to mere notification requirements). Natural England and Historic England also face higher thresholds before they are legally required to intervene in a planning application.

---

5. Recommended Action Items for Parishes

1. **Audit Local Railway Stations:** Determine if any transit hubs in your parish trigger the 800m station-led growth rules. If so, immediately assess the surrounding land using the **Annex E Grey Belt criteria** to anticipate developer interest.
2. **Review the Weight of Your Neighbourhood Plan:** If your current plan features policies that broadly contradict the strict wording of the new NDMPs, assume those policies will carry **very limited weight** at upcoming planning committees.
3. **Proactive Grey Belt Allocation:** Consider a fast-track review of your Neighbourhood Plan to identify local, lower-performing Green Belt sites where your community *wants* growth, using the 50% affordable housing "Golden Rule" to secure local starter homes.