

Briefing

A missed opportunity to put climate risks front and centre – the government falls short on revised planning policy

Friends of the Earth's take on the NPPF2

The government has just missed about 10 open goals to protect the environment.

It's probably the most immediate way that the public could influence the quality of life in the place they live. Yet the town and country planning system – the rules that specify what can be built, where and when – is poorly understood by so many people.

Friends of the Earth has always believed, and fought for, a participative, democratic and fair planning system. One that delivers sustainable development and safeguards the public interest. From new housing, to local renewable energy, safeguarding wildlife and nature sites and sustainable transport principles, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guides local authorities in their planning decisions. This national policy document dictates how much of a priority the environment can be given in planning decisions¹.

In April, the government published draft revisions to the NPPF that threatened sustainable development and efforts to curb fossil fuel use across England. They missed a golden opportunity to safeguard our environment for the future.

Both our planners and local group members responded to express objections. Under pressure from Friends of the Earth and others, the government abandoned its attempt to weaken the importance of the Climate Change Act when councils are taking planning decisions. This is hugely important, as without this concession, climate change considerations would have been given much less weight in planning decisions. We also worked with other organisations in ensuring that protections for local wildlife sites are maintained within the document.

Despite these concessions though, the verdict is pretty damning. The government has failed to take their chance to put climate risks front and centre. The NPPF is damaging to the environment

¹ As well as provide key principles for local plan making

in so many ways and fails to set out a sustainable pathway for the future. We've picked out just a few examples to demonstrate how it fails to tackle climate change and the fossil fuel crisis.

Coal

Just a few months ago the government were making historic steps forward, and [rejected an open cast coal mine in Druridge Bay](#) on climate change grounds for the first time ever. They have the chance to consolidate this and close the door on coal for good, but instead they have chosen to leave it open to potentially more harmful coal mining. While local authorities are no longer directed to consider the economic benefits of coal, mining can still take place if the local and national benefits are deemed to outweigh the negative environmental impacts. We want the government to firmly close the door on coal for good.

Fracking

Local authorities are now required to 'plan positively' for shale production. This means that the government has created an environment in that greases the wheels in favour of fracking companies. This flies in the face of the overwhelming rejection of fracking by local councils² and communities and ignores the planning impacts, such as noise, light pollution and increased traffic, already being experienced by local people on the ground. This is yet more interference in local democracy, when [the government are already aiming to rewrite existing planning rules³ in favour of fracking](#), taking power away from councils and local people.

These policies make the possibility of fracking happening in communities so much higher. Fracking means more fossil fuels, at a time when we're already experiencing unprecedented temperatures and wildfire around the world.

Onshore Wind

Whilst the government is pushing for fracking against the wishes of local residents and councils, they have not afforded the same principles to wind energy. Where fracking is now encouraged despite local objections, onshore wind developments now cannot go ahead **unless** all impacts on the local community are addressed, the majority of residents back the proposals and the scheme is located within an area specifically identified for wind energy in a local or neighbourhood plan⁴.

The restrictions for onshore wind development are so stringent that they effectively ensure there will be no new onshore wind. This ignores the government's own advice from the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) that significant scaling up on wind schemes could go a long way to getting the UK on track to meet the next round of carbon budget targets.

² County or Unitary

³ Current consultations include 1) whether non-fracking drilling should be considered Permitted Development and 2) whether fracking production should be considered a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project, meaning decision making would be made by the Government instead of local elected councillors.

⁴ Internal Friends of the Earth shows that for 20 newly adopted or published local plans, **none** had made suitable wind allocations

So what next?

You'd have thought, with a national policy document with such potential for significant environmental impact, the government might have...looked at the scale of potential environmental impact or considered alternatives. Unfortunately, they didn't. As a result, we are currently considering taking legal action against the government over this huge oversight.