

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF): proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system – response from Community Rail Network – March 2026

Introduction and about us

Community Rail Network is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, and ensure local people benefit from railways and stations.

Community rail therefore sits at the intersection of transport delivery and strategy, placemaking, and community engagement, helping ensure that the railways, rail infrastructure and stations contribute to sustainable development, inclusive mobility, and thriving local places. As such, the community rail movement has a strong interest in how the planning system supports sustainable transport and development around railway stations.

The community rail movement now includes 77 community rail partnerships (CRPs) and c. 1,300 station friends' groups and other local groups, spread across Britain.

These are community-based and -led groups and organisations, working closely with the rail industry, to:

- Enhance the railways' contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
- Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
- Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.

Find out more about our work, and our members, at communityrail.org.uk

We are providing answers related to a small number of questions within the consultation, informed by insights from across the community rail movement, and building on our [response](#) to a previous consultation on changes to the NPPF from September 2024.

A vision-led approach to transport: (questions 150 and 153)

The consultation states that changes have been made to what is now Chapter 15 of the NPPF (Promoting sustainable transport) to further embed a 'vision-led' approach to transport, in relation to both planning and decision-making. This is an approach that we certainly support.

In policy TR1, the commitment to early engagement in plan-making to promote a vision-led approach, and the new specific reference to the Department for Transport (DfT) Connectivity Tool as a method for assessing site connectivity and informing site selection, are welcome additions. We are currently looking to develop some training for CRPs and other community rail groups to help develop their skills and knowledge around the tool, ensuring they can play as full a role as possible in developing sustainable local transport networks.

Also welcome is the addition in policy TR4 of a more cohesive and holistic approach to transport considerations in the design of schemes. The consultation highlights new provisions for incorporating facilities that prioritise sustainable transport and adds explicit references to meeting the needs of older people, children, and disabled people. These conditions should help to ensure that sustainable transport networks are inclusive and accessible to all, which is a key part of the ethos and work of the community rail movement. In our experience, local communities experience a raft of barriers and impediments to using rail and sustainable transport (i.e. modes that don't depend on private car ownership: public and community transport, active travel and shared mobility). Community rail experience adds to the extensive bank of wider evidence showing that breaking these barriers down is critical to promoting more equal access to opportunity, bolstering inclusive and sustainable economic development, improving public health, enabling decarbonisation, and improving local environments.

This approach should also ensure stronger alignment between local plans, transport strategies, and rail investment, so that new development is planned in a way that maximises the value of existing rail, public transport and active travel infrastructure and supports increased use of these modes. However, policies promoting a vision-led approach to transport will only result in more sustainable travel options and behaviours if they can be effectively translated into action.

The NPPF states that transport should be considered from the earliest stages of development proposals, with opportunities to promote walking, cycling and public transport pursued. We agree that this early consideration is vital: it is still clearly not happening enough at present. Also, consideration of transport is not enough on its own: transport needs to be considered and prioritised in a way that aligns with the sustainable transport hierarchy, prioritising sustainable and inclusive mobility, and supporting the shift we need away from private car dependency. This is not only essential for achieving Net Zero and tackling transport-related exclusion but delivers extensive co-benefits for local communities and economies (see evidence in this Sustainable Transport Alliance report on ['Accelerating modal shift: evidence on carbon savings and co-benefits.'](#)) We therefore recommend overt and strong recognition and reflection in the NPPF of the need to support and encourage far greater levels of active travel, public transport, community transport and shared mobility, over and above private car use, in order to achieve Net Zero, widen access to opportunity, tackle inequalities, and achieve sustainable and inclusive economic development.

Greater attention should also be given to connectivity between sustainable modes, given the extent to which a lack of integration poses a barrier to sustainable travel at present. In particular, our experience shows the importance of strengthening first and last mile connectivity to railway stations, including safe walking and cycling routes, accessible station environments, and integration with local bus and community transport services. While work is taking place within the rail industry and linked to rail reform to develop the railways' approach (including the type of projects highlighted in our ['Connected Stations'](#) report), this must be supported by, and integrated with, changes to the planning system.

Despite sustainable travel commitments in the NPPF, developments currently still often do little or nothing meaningful to encourage and enable sustainable transport, and options are sometimes not fully considered until the development control stage of planning applications, which is too late. To better integrate transport into the planning system, we support embedding meaningful community engagement and a dual commitment to low-carbon and inclusive mobility in the planning process. Community rail offers up valuable examples and lessons as to how this can be delivered effectively.

Local groups, especially those involved in sustainable and inclusive travel and mobility such as CRPs, need to have the opportunity to influence local plans and development proposals from an early stage, to ensure those without access to a car are well catered for and their needs understood, and to help inform developments that steer people towards greater public transport use rather than locking in car dependency. Community rail partnerships can provide valuable local evidence about travel patterns, barriers to rail use, and opportunities to improve sustainable connectivity. We recommend that it is made clear and explicit that a ‘vision-led’ approach to transport involves effective community engagement and attention to local views and voices on how sustainable and inclusive mobility can be achieved. To ensure effective and meaningful community engagement in rail and transport projects, this approach should ensure that planners and developers treat communities as partners in the planning process, including:

- Drawing on the knowledge and input of local groups and organisations and their beneficiaries, including through transport policymaking, planning, and regeneration/development, seeking to understand and address local needs and barriers, to at once support modal shift and tackle transport-related social exclusion;
- Using meaningful, empowering community engagement to identify and overcome barriers to sustainable transport use and address car dependency. This should include a range of methods that enable people to come together, deliberate and feed in views, creating momentum and positivity about change. As much as possible local agents should be empowered to lead engagement, such as interactive workshops, participatory mapping, creative projects, youth/citizen-led campaigns, community-led audits, meetings, and events.

Building homes around stations: (questions 40, 126, and 133)

One of the most significant reforms within the proposed NPPF focuses on a new approach to building homes around stations. The aim is to establish ‘in principle’ support – a ‘default yes’ – for suitable proposals that develop land around railway stations within existing settlements, and around ‘well-connected’ train stations outside settlements, including on Green Belt land.

We are certainly supportive of developments that act as catalysts for regeneration around stations and their surrounding areas, where new residents and businesses can make use of existing rail infrastructure. Community rail is playing an increasingly important role in ensuring stations and station-related projects make positive contributions in terms of local regeneration, placemaking, local economic development, and delivering social value. See our recent report on [‘community rail: placemaking and local identity’](#) for various examples of this work.

However, in order to justify a ‘default yes’ position, and for us to agree with this principle, a crucial element would be that all developments would need to pass rigorous assessments that ensure they are indeed ‘suitable proposals,’ and meaningful engagement of existing local communities would be critical to ensuring this. We recommend that the NPPF explicitly specifies the need for early and meaningful community engagement in station-area development to ensure proposals reflect local needs and aspirations and serve to enhance local environments. This should be directly reflected in the wording of the NPPF.

Consideration should also be given (working collaboratively with the rail industry as well as local communities) to sustainable travel links to railway stations, service frequency, station accessibility, and the capacity of local rail services, to ensure development around stations

genuinely supports sustainable travel rather than simply locating housing near rail infrastructure. A development could be sited very close to a station, and yet still not provide for suitable, sustainable and inclusive access to it, so this must not be taken for granted.

We note that the NPPF (policy L3) is also proposing a minimum density of 40 dwellings per hectare around all railway stations and 50 dwellings per hectare around those defined as ‘well-connected’ stations. The aims are to maximise opportunities for sustainable development, make the most of high levels of connectivity, and improve access to jobs and services.

We would support all of those aims in principle. However, if minimum density targets are imposed without sufficient flexibility, there is a risk that these targets could override meaningful community engagement and place-sensitive design. If communities are not at the heart of any ‘vision-led’ approach to developments around stations, then there is a risk of ‘business as usual,’ and the use of ‘predict and provide’ planning processes which persist in building car-centric developments. There is also the risk of significant environmental harm, at a time when we need to accelerate action on the climate and biodiversity crises (both issues which, in our experience, communities care deeply about and wish to spearhead further action on.)

If engaged in the planning process for developments around stations, community rail, and other community-led initiatives advancing sustainability and inclusivity, can support such projects by:

- Feeding into the planning and development process at various stages, offering knowledge and understanding that contributes to the evidence base related to proposed developments;
- Providing expertise in community engagement, and the ability to bring diverse stakeholders together and link communities with planning and transport authorities/operators;
- Assisting in securing and maximising developer contributions and potentially act as a delivery vehicle to implement small-scale improvement projects to connect new developments with the railway;
- Supporting sustainable travel behaviour change in new communities through engagement, awareness campaigns, and partnerships that encourage rail/sustainable travel use and reduce car dependency.

We are increasingly supporting community rail partnerships and groups in this area of work (see our guidance on [‘community rail: engaging in local planning and development’](#)). If adopted effectively, a ‘vision-led’ approach could open up greater opportunities for community rail to feed in knowledge and evidence to support the case for rail and connected sustainable travel networks to play a stronger role serving new developments and wider regeneration around stations. However, it is vital that communities are empowered to shape that vision, their own sense of place, and the suitability of local developments, if such an approach is to succeed.

If supported within the planning system, the community rail movement can play an important role in ensuring that development around stations not only increases housing supply, but also creates well-connected, inclusive and sustainable communities where rail plays a central role in community life and everyday travel.

To discuss any elements of this submission further, please contact Rob Lawson at rob@communityrail.org.uk.