



The countryside charity Bedfordshire

CPRE Bedfordshire Planning Policy Update: Spring / Summer 2025

What impact will the Government's new planning policies have on Bedfordshire?

Since coming to power in July 2024 the Labour Government have made getting “Britain building again” a key commitment. They intend to do this by building 1.5 million homes and making decisions on at least 150 National Infrastructure Projects whilst they are in power.

To achieve this, they believe the planning system needs fundamental reform and some of the changes that they have made, and are planning to make, are listed below, together with their potential impact on Bedfordshire's countryside and green spaces.

This is not a comprehensive review – we have focused on issues which we believe are likely to be of most interest to our members. There are links to more detailed information on the various changes proposed at the end of the document.

The New National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published 12th December 2024

The NPPF is a document which acts as the rulebook for planning. It advises Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), usually district or county councils, and developers on what they can and cannot do when planning developments. The new NPPF has introduced new, and revised existing policies, including:

Grey Belt

The NPPF formally introduced the concept of Grey Belt. Further guidance was issued on this in February. Broadly Grey Belt land is poorly performing land within the Green Belt. Green Belt land must serve certain defined purposes e.g. stopping settlements merging together. Local Authorities can carry out Green Belt assessments and within these identify Grey Belt land where planning permission may be easier to justify than on other land within the Green Belt.

Housing numbers

The NPPF re-introduced mandatory housing targets for Local Authorities. The targets set the amount of housing a Local Authority should grant permission for over a certain time period. The targets had, since December 2023, been advisory with scope to vary in exceptional circumstances (for example if a large part of the Local Authority area falls within the Green Belt). They have also introduced a standard method for calculating housing targets – previously this could vary.

The five-year land supply was again introduced. This requires the Local Authority to demonstrate they have enough sites with either planning permission already granted or sites that have been

allocated in their Local Plan to provide the required amount of housing for the next five years. If this can't be shown, then a developer is able to make a stronger case on sites which are not allocated in the Local Plan including Green Belt land

The intention of these changes is to increase the amount of housing a Local Authority must provide in most parts of the Country.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill

The Bill, which is making its way through Parliament, contains provisions which are aimed at speeding up the delivery of major infrastructure projects including:

Quicker decisions on Infrastructure Projects

Changes to the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) regime to 'speed' up permissions, plus changes to various Highways Acts to reduce the time taken to deliver new road schemes. In addition, the scope for legally challenging these decisions will be reduced.

Changes to the way Local Authorities make planning decisions.

The Government, rather than each Local Authority, will decide on the type and scale of applications which should go to Planning Committees rather than be decided by a Planning Officer. The Government will also determine the size of Planning Committees.

Local Authority members on Planning Committees will have mandatory training and Local Authorities will be able to set their own planning fees.

Re-introducing Strategic Planning

The Bill also provides for the (re)implementation of a cross boundary strategic planning system. Local Authorities will have to work together to agree and adopt Spatial Development Strategies for their combined areas.

Changes to Environmental Obligations

Developers will be able to pay into a new Nature Restoration Fund (run by Natural England) rather than having to deal with certain environmental obligations. This can only happen if an Environmental Delivery Plan (also a new concept) is in place. The EDP will set out what a developer needs to pay and the measures Natural England will take to deal with the impact of development on the protected habitats and/or species.

Compulsory Purchase Reform

Reforms to the Compulsory Purchase regime to speed up the acquisition of land needed for housing and infrastructure and allow the removal "hope value" for certain types of schemes.

Development Corporations

The powers of Development Corporations – public sector organisations charged with delivering specific development – have been expanded. This includes the power to establish a single Development Corporation relating to the development of more than one new town or urban extension in England.

Other Actions

New Towns Task Force

As part of the commitment to deliver the 1.5 new homes the Government is proposing to announce around 12 “New Towns” by July 2025. These could be extensions of existing cities and towns or brand-new settlements. Each should be a minimum of 10,000 homes. There has been a call for sites and over 100 submissions have been received.

An independent panel of experts have been appointed to advise the Government on this – The New Towns Task Force.

No announcements have been made yet on the proposed locations although a development around the new station at Tempsford has been reported as one of the sites under consideration.

Focussing development in one location rather than spreading it across a wider area has its merits, providing it is planned and designed appropriately. Importantly, as with the earlier New Towns, there has to be a mechanism for capturing and using the land value generated by the development to make sure infrastructure is in place before any major development happens. If Tempsford is selected as a location, then one of the key issues is ensuring the station works are delivered early which needs to be a government led priority.

Devolution

The Government intends to change the way Local Government is structured and financed. They have already produced a white paper and further guidance on this. This is a complex topic outside of the scope of this note – it will however affect in the future the structure of the three Local Authorities within Bedfordshire.

What does all this mean for Bedfordshire?

NPPF

Most of the Green Belt within Bedfordshire falls within Central Bedfordshire. The last Local Plan removed around 847 ha from this. You can read more about Green Belt in Bedfordshire on our website: <https://www.cprebeds.org.uk/stories/the-green-belt-explained/>

Bedfordshire’s Local Authorities five year land supply fluctuates. At the time of writing none of the three Local Authorities can demonstrate they have a five year land supply.

We don’t expect the changes in methodology to impact significantly on the current Local Plan numbers.

However, all three Local Authorities are in the process of reviewing their Local Plans which may well result in changes to the requirements.

Impact of new policies on major infrastructure projects in Bedfordshire

Bedfordshire has some very large infrastructure proposals, some of which have been around for many years.

Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor

The Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor (also known as the Ox-Cam Arc) is a large-scale development and growth project spanning the area between Oxford, Milton Keynes, and Cambridge in the UK. It aims to leverage the region's existing strengths in research, innovation, and business to create a "growth arc" and a "leading global innovation hub".

The corridor stretches across a number of counties, principally Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, and Cambridgeshire.

The area is already economically buoyant, with a significant number of jobs and a large economic output. The OxCam Arc aims to build upon this by creating a more connected and vibrant region.

The project includes plans for improved infrastructure, originally including a potential Oxford-Cambridge Expressway (now cancelled following successful campaigns by environmental groups including CPREs in the region) and an East-West Rail link which is now at an advanced stage.

A significant focus is on increasing the number of homes and supporting the growth of new settlements within the arc. The original National Infrastructure Commission report proposed that housing growth of one million homes would be needed, but this aroused widespread concern and is no longer mentioned in official circles.

The focus on growth at so called 'transformational' levels gives rise to massive environmental concerns, particularly in regard to water management and nature conservation.

The project seeks to build on the strong research and innovation base in the area, particularly in fields like science, technology, and medicine.

The project involves collaboration between government, local authorities, businesses, and other stakeholders and has attracted substantial support from these sectors. The Ox-Cam Arc was featured prominently in the Chancellor's Statement in January 2025 as an example of how government's economic growth ambitions can be realised.

The East West Rail project (see below) is the most publicly visible feature of the Ox-Cam Arc. The details regarding business activity and housing growth have not been made available.

CPRE Bedfordshire believes that there is a huge issue of equity at stake regarding the level of investment being proposed for Ox-Cam. The Arc is situated in an area which is already economically more successful than other regions in the UK, many of which are struggling and where the need for investment is more urgently required.

CPRE Bedfordshire wants strategic plans for the Ox-Cam Arc to embed environmental assessment, public engagement and for clear joint governance arrangements for future scrutiny and accountability.

Read the joint CPRE full policy statement on the OxCam Arc on our website:

<https://www.cprebeds.org.uk/news/cpres-unite-on-the-oxford-cambridge-growth-corridor/>

East West Rail

East West Rail (EWR) is a proposed new rail link that aims to connect Oxford and Cambridge. The project involves upgrading existing sections of track and re-establishing a previously closed rail line, eventually creating a faster, more efficient public transport option for the region.

The government has committed significant levels of funding to the pre-development phase and has indicated that it supports full delivery of the scheme.

A statutory consultation is expected early in 2026 alongside submission of a Development Consent Order application.

CPRE Bedfordshire support EWR in principle but object to the route chosen in Bedford Borough and have been campaigning for a different route. However, EWR Co seem firmly committed to pursuing the route that they prefer, despite opposition from a large section of the Bedford community.

Universal Studios

Universal Studios is proposing a huge film related theme park resort on the former Kempston Hardwick brickworks and nearby land, near the A6 and the A421 between Stewartby to the south, Wootton to the west and Kempston to the north.

The scale of the development cannot be overestimated, it will have a massive impact both on the immediate area around the site and the wider area of Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire, in terms of the environment and local economy.

A visitor attraction on this scale is likely to be highly popular and will attract visitors from all over Europe and other parts of the world. If delivered with due consideration for the environmental impacts and careful stewardship, the park project brings rare opportunities to deliver environmental as well as economic benefits to the site and local area.

We recognise that Universal have a well-established international reputation for delivering very high quality attractions and CPRE Bedfordshire see no reason to doubt the expressed commitment to develop the whole site with appropriate landscaping to protect the local area from intrusive impacts. CPRE Bedfordshire therefore takes a balanced view of the project. We see the clear potential benefits to the local area. The one major concern we have about the project is the impact on the Local Plan and the need for Bedford Borough Council (BBC) to find an alternative location for the 4,000 houses proposed for allocation on this site. This is a matter that BBC will need to address in the way that it takes Local Plan 2040 forward.

Airport policy and Luton Airport expansion

One of the clear indications of the Government's commitment to economic growth taking priority over all else, including environmental commitments, has been the recent decisions to invite new proposals for the third runway at Heathrow and allow the expansion of Gatwick and Luton Airport.

The evidence of climate change is all around us. The aviation sector is one of the major and fastest growing contributors to Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. Reducing these emissions is dependent on development and adoption of new technologies and working practices. Even the Aviation Sector

are sceptical about how quickly and successfully measures such as large-scale production of sustainable fuel and electric planes can be developed and used effectively.

The Government cannot credibly stand by Rachel Reeves' Spring statement that this Government will "lead the way to Net Zero" - the Government's commitment to ensuring by 2050 we will not be adding to the amount of GHG in the atmosphere.

In the case of Luton Airport, the Government has ignored their own Independent Planning Inspectors' recommendations and allowed Luton Airport to nearly double its passenger numbers to 32 million per year.

We have been objecting to these massive growth plans, 77,000 more flights and over 40,000 extra passengers a day, since they were first proposed.

The expansion will have a devastating impact on the surrounding area including the Chilterns National Landscape (AONB), Green Belt and the award-winning Wigmore Park. The local infrastructure can't cope with this level of growth which will cause significant noise and air pollution affecting so many residents across Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and adjoining areas.

All these concerns were recognised by the Inspectors who in their lengthy report concluded that the substantial harm caused by "additional noise, increase in traffic, the effects on the Chilterns National Landscape, the release of additional GHG emissions, landscape and visual effects and the effect on heritage assets" outweighed the socio economic benefits including job creation. Because of this they recommended the application for expansion should be refused.

This decision is now the subject of a legal challenge.

We appreciate that Government is trying to create the right climate for growth but surely not at what will be such a devastating environmental cost.

Conclusion

Bedfordshire is facing a period of massive and rapid change. A careful balancing act will be required over the near future to maintain and grow our local economy as well as protecting and improving our precious countryside, green spaces and local environment.

Here at CPRE Bedfordshire we continue to monitor what is happening and what is getting built where, working independently and with you to ensure this change leaves Bedfordshire a better place to live work and enjoy. You can see more of what we are doing by visiting our website <https://www.cprebeds.org.uk/>

We'll keep standing up for the Bedfordshire countryside. Want to stand with us? Join us as a member from as little as £5 per month: <https://www.cprebeds.org.uk/get-involved/become-a-member/>

Further reading

- National CPRE response to the new Planning and Infrastructure Bill: <https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/our-response-to-the-new-planning-and-infrastructure-bill/>
- National CPRE briefing on value of local planning committees: <https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/cpre-publishes-new-briefing-on-value-of-local-planning-committees/>
- Can the Planning and Infrastructure Bill strengthen local democracy? (Paul Miner, CPRE Head of Policy and Campaigns): <https://www.cpre.org.uk/opinions/can-the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill-strengthen-local-democracy/>
- Government Guide to the Bill: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill/guide-to-the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill>