

Planning Policy Cabinet Advisory Group – 13th January 2026

Item 1: National Changes to the Plan-Making System and its Implications for Lancaster District

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 PPCAG Members will be aware that for some time local planning authorities who are in the early stages of plan-making (as we are in Lancaster) are expected to be advancing their new local plans under a new system of plan-making.
- 1.2 This has presented challenges to many authorities, including here in Lancaster, not in the least due to the limited amount of guidance and direction provided by Government on the processes involved in this new plan-making system. Whilst some degree of information has been presented via past [Government consultations](#) on potential changes and, more latterly, through [correspondence](#) from the Government's Chief Planning Officer, the level of detail around where local planning authorities should go next with their emerging plans has been vague.
- 1.3 However, in the latter part of 2025 further information and direction has been provided by Government on the key stages of the new plan-making process which has either gone to re-affirm earlier expectations or to provide more detail on the relative roles and responsibilities for planning authorities moving forward.
- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to set out and clarify the nature of these key stages of plan-making and their implications for plan-making in Lancaster District as the Council progresses its Local Plan Review.

2.0 Timeframe for Preparation

- 2.1 A summary of the new plan-making process is set out in Appendix A of this note and this highlights one of the key expectations of Government under this new system. That it wishes to speed up the timescales for preparing local plans to a 30-month period.
- 2.2 Moving forward, the Government have set an expectation that Local Plans should be prepared over no more than 30 months to allow for their content and direction to be more responsive and adaptive to local events.
- 2.3 This, in principle, is a reasonable expectation for the Government make under a new system. For a number of years one of the key criticisms of current local plans is that they take too long to prepare and, in regard to some of its content, the issues that the plan are trying to address have already advanced and changed before the document is formally adopted for planning purposes. In that context, the ambition around speeding up the preparation of plans is something which should be supported.
- 2.4 However, preparing a document which is complex, evidentially based, subject to numerous rounds of consultation and deals with highly controversial matters is not something which can

be undertaken quickly. There are risks to its preparation, many of which are set out in the Council's [Local Plan Initiation Document](#) (LPID) which can have implications on the timeframes of plan-making and can incur delays. Therefore, it is not yet clear whether the ambitions of preparing an evidentially based, thoroughly consulted, Local Plan in that 30-month period can be demonstrated as realistic. Time and experience will tell.

- 2.5 Advice from Government on how to ensure that local planning authorities have the best chance of meeting that 30-month timeframe is simply one of preparedness. Ensuring that substantive element of the evidence base have been completed and some of the early engagement processes have been undertaken appear to be key if local planning authorities are to stand the best chance of advancing plans with 30-months.
- 2.6 It is not yet clear whether there will be any repercussions for local planning authorities for failing to meet its 30-month timeframe for plan-making. Any further direction on this issue will be reported to PPCAG Members.

3.0 Role of Gateway Assessments

- 3.1 A further key element in the new plan-making process which the Government believe will help local planning authorities keep to their 30-month timescales is the inclusion of a series of three gateway assessment at key stages of a plan's preparation.
- 3.2 The role and purpose of these assessments is initially (via Gateway 1) a checklist to make sure the necessary components for preparing a sound and robust plan are in place before the latter two assessments provide recommendations and advice to the local planning authority from external, independent, assessors.
- 3.3 The Gateway 1 Assessment takes place following the completion of the first 'Scoping & Early Participation Stage' and prior to work commencing on the 'Visioning & Options' Stage. The Council are now rapidly approaching that stage and, as the second agenda item suggests, work will begin on that self-assessment Gateway 1 process shortly.
- 3.4 **It is important to note that the publication of the Gateway 1 Assessment represents the formal start of that 30-month plan-making process and so it is critically important that the Council recognises the implications of publishing the assessment and that it is ready to make efficient and effective progress in its preparation of the new Local Plan.**
- 3.5 The Gateway 2 Assessment takes place in advance of the Council publishing a draft Local Plan and will involve an independent assessor (likely from the Planning Inspectorate) providing recommendations on the content and direction of the emerging local plan. The recommendations from that independent assessor are indicated to be 'advisory' and therefore the Council can either seek to follow those recommendations or (with due reason) disregard them. However, given the context and status of the Gateway 3 Assessment (as set out in paragraph 3.6) serious consideration should be given to the implications of disregarding these 'advisory' recommendations at this early stage.
- 3.6 The final Gateway 3 assessment takes place just before the Council is ready to publish and submit its final version of the Local Plan to Government, thus to commence the Public

Examination process. Again, the Gateway 3 Assess will involve an independent assessor providing recommendations on the emerging Local Plan.

- 3.7 However, unlike the outcomes of the Gateway 2 assessment, the outcomes and recommendations of this final Gateway 3 Assessment are mandatory. This means that the plan cannot advance past this stage if the Council do not follow the recommendations and outcomes of the independent assessor. If the Council seek to not accept the recommendations of the independent assessor at this stage, then the only other alternative is to restart the process. Consequently, it is important re-iterate that dis-regarding any recommendations at the Gateway 2 stage is not an advisable course of action without sound reason.
- 3.8 The aim of the three Gateway Assessments is to ensure that Local Plans are being prepared in sound and robust manner from the outset and emerging issues which could affect that soundness are dealt with prior to the finalisation of the plan and the commencement of Public Examination. It is well documented that the length of some public examinations can take years due to the major issues not being dealt with prior to the formal submission of the plan to Government.

4.0 Drafting, Consulting and Preparing the Local Plan

- 4.1 As PPCAG Members will note from Appendix A, the other key stages of the plan-making process remain relatively unchanged from the previous system. There remains a requirement for the Council to publish a draft version of a Local Plan for public consultation, and it is anticipated that this draft Local Plan contains preferred options around issues such as site allocations and policy positions.
- 4.2 The publication of a draft Local Plan still provides the opportunity to consider any consultation responses from key stakeholders and refine the content and direction of the plan accordingly.
- 4.3 Following consultation on the draft Local Plan, any refinement required from consultation responses and a successful outcome to a Gateway 3 assessment. The Council will be able to proceed to Publication and Submission of the Plan to Government. Again, these are familiar steps to the previous system as is the role of Public Examination.
- 4.4 It is anticipated that the time taken for the Public Examination Stage should be reduced, as any fundamental issues with the content and direction of the plan will be addressed through the prior three Gateway Assessments (particularly Gateway 3). It is still anticipated that the Examination sessions will be held by an independent Planning Inspector who will conclude on the soundness of the Plan in the context of national planning policy.
- 4.5 Following a successful Examination the Council will be in a position to formally adopt the Plan for planning purposes.

5.0 Key Issues for Lancaster District

- 5.1 In regard to the new timetables for plan-making, the Council have been preparing for this eventuality for some time. Indeed, the Council's latest [Local Development Scheme](#), published in April 2025 has already factored in the need to condense some of the key stages of plan making into this 30-month timeframe.
- 5.2 Furthermore, mindful of the need to complete as much preparatory work as possible before commencing the formal 30-month plan-making process, the Council have made good progress in advancing a wide range of the necessary evidence base which is needed to inform the content and direction of the plan. This process has been ongoing for the last 18 months and PPCAG (formerly LPRG) Members have been updated on the wide-ranging evidence which has been prepared. Whilst there remains evidence work to undertake during the course of 2026 and into 2027, the Council is well position in regard to its evidence base.
- 5.3 Coupled with the evidence, the Council is also in a favourable position in regard to the extent of early consultation which has already been undertaken to scope the context of the plan and the issues which need to be prepared. Through the course of 2024 the Council undertook consultation on matters of scope and key issues which, whilst prepared under the old plan-making system, outcomes remain equally valid now. This consultation has also been supplemented by a further round of 'Scoping & Early Participation' which is a requirement of the new system.
- 5.4 Whilst the Council are well placed to meet the timeframes for plan-making envisaged by the new system, there remain a number of risks that could impact on the timescale for the local plan. These are well described in the Council's Local Plan Initiation Document (LPID) and will need to be key under review as the local plan progresses.
- 5.5 In regard to the Gateway Assessments, the independent assessment of the emerging Local Plan at Gateway 2 and 3 should provide a beneficial and objective view on some of the key issues that the plan many be facing. In this context, the outcomes and recommendations of the independent assessor should be welcomed and, where appropriate, acted upon in an objective manner. Doing so should ensure that the Council can have confidence that the Plan should be found sound when reaching the examination stage.
- 5.6 However, there is an inherent risk that should the independent assessor's recommendations and outcomes not be followed at either stage that the Local Plan will not be able to reach examination and cannot be completed. It is therefore important that at both assessment stages that all key issues are explored fully and the local planning authority are fully aware of the implications of the recommendations and outcomes identified.

6.0 Publication of National Planning Policy Framework (December 2025)

- 6.1 To supplement the changes to the plan-making process, the Government published its new National Planning Policy Framework on 17 December for consultation. The Framework remains the starting point in regard to the establishing the content and direction of Local Plans.

6.2 There have been a number of changes proposed within the new Framework, the greatest of which being the inclusion of a wide range of non-statutory national development management policies. Officers are currently considering the implications of the new Framework and will be drafting up a response to the ongoing consultation. Members of both PPCAG and Planning Committee will be updated with the proposed changes to the Framework, their implications locally, and the proposed consultation response in due course.

Appendix A: Overall Summary of the New Plan-Making Process

Figure 1: The new 30 month plan timeframe

