

Planning Policy Cabinet Advisory Group – 24 March 2026

Item 3: Preparation of the Local Plan – Timetable Update

1.0 Introduction

1.1 On 15 April 2025, Cabinet agreed the Local Plan preparation timetable for the new Lancaster District Local Plan, which was to be prepared under a new national system of plan-making. The unanimous resolution was:

- (1) That Cabinet approves the publication of an updated Local Plan preparation timetable for the Lancaster District Local Plan.
- (2) That in confirming the Local Plan Timetable to Government, officers state that this council is ready to start on a new Local Plan following publication of the appropriate Regulations and would like to schedule the first Gateway Assessment for the very beginning of January 2026 as one of the first Local Authorities to engage with the new process.
- (3) That officers take all possible steps to ensure that the process is complete to an adopted Local Plan before Local Government Reorganisation affects Lancaster District. In this respect the timetable will be kept under review, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, both when the new Regulations are published and subsequently at all relevant stages.

1.2 Since the approval of the resolution, officers have been working to advance the Local Plan in accordance with the above. This work has continued despite the challenges of vacancies to critical posts within the team, including the Service Manager post, the Planning Policy Manager post (since recruited to) and the Planning Officer (Homes and Communities) post.

1.3 A more considerable challenge has been the continued delay by Government in publishing the Local Plan Regulations. These Regulations were anticipated last year. Without certainty regarding the content of the Regulations, Councils have been unable to advance their Local Plans to the new 'Gateway 1' stage.

2.0 Work Undertaken to Date

2.1 At a recent meeting with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) (3 March 2026), the local planning authority was commended for being proactive and having completed a significant volume of early plan-making work at an early stage. This work included:

- Publication of the Local Plan Timetable (April 2025);
- Commencement of the scoping consultation (September 2025). This consultation closed in January 2026;
- Publication of the Local Plan Initiation Document (September 2025);
- The creation of an online Call for Sites to help inform the preparation of the Strategic Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment (Rolling);
- The publication of the Notice of Commencement (December 2025); and,
- Continued preparation of an extensive Local Plan evidence base (Rolling).

MHCLG officials advised that this work meant that Lancaster was well-positioned to be one of the first authorities to advance their Local Plan through the new system. It also accorded with the MHCLG guidance regarding plan preparation procedures. The work outlined in Figure 1 below must be undertaken before the 30-month process starts.

Before the 30-month process starts



Fig.1 MHCLG guidance – Before the 30 Month (Local Plan Preparation) Process Starts

3.0 The Delay in Local Plan Regulation Publication

3.1 The Government’s delay in publishing the Local Plan Regulations has meant that the local planning authority has been unable to advance the Local Plan to the self-assessment Gateway 1 stage, despite the preparatory work that had already been undertaken.

- 3.2 The Local Plan Regulations were finally laid before Parliament on 4 March 2026¹. They take effect after a 21-day period, which expires on 25 March 2026.
- 3.3 At the 3 March meeting (see Paragraph 2.1), MHCLG officials confirmed that compliance with the Regulations cannot occur until they take effect. That means that pre-30-month tasks, such as the formal publication of the 4-month notice and (potentially) running a scoping consultation, can only take place once the Regulations take effect. This adds further considerable delay. It also means that the timetable approved by Cabinet last year is not capable of being achieved.
- 3.4 There is no guarantee that further new (national) guidance will not create additional delay as the Local Plan process continues. MHCLG has already advised that there will be further guidance “*later in 2026*”. This guidance includes further details on the Gateways and the Planning Inspectorate’s (PINS’) Examination Service; new guidance regarding streamlining an authority’s local plan evidence base; guidance regarding the Local Plan tests of soundness; and guidance regarding data standards and annual monitoring.
- 3.5 PINS will play a much more active role in the new plan-making system at the later Gateway 2 and Gateway 3 stages. The publication of a Procedure Guide for ‘plans to be prepared and examined under the new system’ will be published “*shortly*” with “*further guidance and digital services to follow throughout 2026*”.
- 3.6 As well as the 1-2-1 meeting with MHCLG referred to in this report, Officers have also attended Local Plan briefing sessions held jointly by the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Planning Advisory Service (11 February 2026), and a briefing by the Government’s Chief Planner (26 February 2026). Both of these briefings alluded to the possibility of further revised plan-making processes being published during 2026.

4.0 Impact upon Timescale

- 4.1 Given the above, it is clear that the timetable adopted at Cabinet in April 2025 is no longer achievable. The re-setting of the timetable caused by the publication of the new Regulations means that no local authority in Lancashire will be able to complete (adopt) a local plan under the new system prior to Vesting Day (Local Government Reorganisation - LGR). Even allowing for a perfect scenario of no additional procedural delays and a seamless Gateway 2 and Gateway 3 process, including no significant intervention from PINS at Gateway 3, the earliest that a plan could be submitted to PINS for formal examination would be Autumn 2028. There would then be a further 6 months for the external examination and subsequent adoption of the Plan (Spring 2029).

¹ [The Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2026](#)

- 4.2 Other changes to the national planning system may have an impact upon timetabling. A revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published for consultation on 16 December 2025. Planning Policy Cabinet Advisory Group (PPCAG) considered the City Council's draft response at its February 2026 meeting, with further consideration later that month by the Council Business Committee. The response was subsequently submitted prior to the 10 March 2026 deadline. It is possible that the Government's response to the consultation, which is anticipated in Summer 2026, could make further changes to the plan-making process (albeit this is considered a low risk).
- 4.3 A further imminent change is the reinstatement of a strategic planning system in England, via the introduction of new Spatial Development Strategies (SDS). A separate report regarding the current national consultation regarding SDS geographies and the implications for strategic planning in Lancashire is also being considered on today's PPCAG agenda. The new SDS system will inevitably have implications for resources (staffing), given that the creation of an SDS for Lancashire will be a joint enterprise for all local planning authorities in the county. Given that all new Local Plans will have to be in "*general conformity*" with the SDS, there will clearly be challenges caused by plan sequencing.
- 4.4 Additional risk to progress is the availability of PINS' resources to provide support at Gateway 2 and Gateway 3, and at formal examination. The Chief Planning Inspector recently confirmed that PINS are seeking to grow its "*inspector cohort*" by "*approximately a quarter*" to meet demand.
- 4.5 There are some cut-off points for all local authorities who intend to advance a Local Plan under the new system. They must give (4-month) notice by 31 December 2026 or by the time the authority's current adopted plan is 4 years and 8 months old, whichever is the latest; and then publish their Gateway 1 self-assessment no later than 30 April 2027 or by the time the authority's plan is 5 years old, whichever is the latest. In Lancaster's case, the authority must give notice by 31 December 2026 and publish their Gateway 1 self-assessment by 30 April 2027.
- 4.6 Lancaster can still give notice well before 31 December 2026 and publish their Gateway 1 self-assessment well before 30 April 2027. Given that the intention to 'go early' with the new plan-making system was predicated on having a Local Plan capable of being adopted before LGR, which can no longer be achieved, there is a decision to be made regarding revisions to the timetable. These will be formally considered via a report to Cabinet, following discussion at this PPCAG meeting.
- 4.7 One matter that is likely to influence the revised timetable is the potential for additional funding. The local planning authority made a bid for new system funding earlier this year. This funding opportunity is available for Councils who commit to preparing a plan under the new system and who will publish their notice by 30 June 2026 and then publish their Gateway 1 self-assessment 4 months later (i.e. 31 October 2026). Complying with these dates would result in submission of the

Plan to PINS in October 2028, with possible adoption 6 months later. Authorities will be informed whether they have been successful in being awarded funding in March 2026.

5.0 Next Steps

- 5.1 The Local Plan Regulations will formally 'switch on' the new plan-making system on 25 March 2025. Local authorities have been advised that this will restart their 4-month lead in period.
- 5.2 Now that the Regulations have been published, officers are seeking further assurance from MHCLG officials regarding the Gateway 1 self-assessment, which triggers the 30-month process.
- 5.2 Following clarification, it is the intention to take a report to Cabinet with an updated Local Plan timetable. If the local authority is awarded funding (see paragraph 4.7), then the recommendation will be to maintain progress so that notice can be published by 30 June 2026, and to publish the Gateway 1 self-assessment 4 months later (no later than 31 October 2026).