

# THE NEW PLAN-MAKING SYSTEM: KEY CHANGES AND WHAT THEY MEAN FOR LOCAL PLANS

225 March 2026 marks the formal introduction of England's new local plan-making system, following the Government's release of the updated framework earlier this month.

Announced on 6 March 2026, the reforms are intended to accelerate the preparation and adoption of local plans across England, improve consistency in the plan-making process and reduce the delays that have historically slowed development through the planning system. Local planning authorities (LPAs) are now being encouraged to begin preparing plans under the new framework.

## A NEW 30-MONTH TIMETABLE

One of the most significant changes is the introduction of a strict 30-month timetable for LPAs to prepare, examine and adopt their local plans.

This represents a notable shift from the previous system, where local plans have often taken many years to progress from evidence gathering through to adoption. The Government's intention is to ensure greater consistency across the country and to move towards full local plan coverage across England.

## THE INTRODUCTION OF GATEWAY STAGES

A key element of the new framework is the introduction of a three-stage "Gateway" process, designed to bring the Planning Inspectorate into the plan-making process earlier and reduce the risk of issues emerging during examination.

The three stages are:

- **Gateway 1** – Readiness and Scoping
- **Gateway 2** – Draft Plan and Early Soundness Check
- **Gateway 3** – Examination Readiness Check

Earlier engagement with inspectors is intended to identify potential concerns sooner, helping local authorities avoid delays or significant changes later in the process. Guidance and associated digital tools supporting the Gateway stages are already available, with further updates expected throughout 2026.

## DIGITAL REQUIREMENTS

The new system also introduces a number of digital requirements aimed at standardising the preparation of local plans. These include:

- Standardised digital templates
- Digital mapping
- Standardised site submission forms
- Digital site assessment tools

These changes are intended to support a more consistent and streamlined plan-making process across local authorities.

## TRANSITION PERIOD

During 2026, both the existing and new systems will operate in parallel.

Local authorities with plans already at an advanced stage may continue under the existing framework, provided their plan is submitted for examination by 31 December 2026. Authorities that are unable to meet this deadline will be required to restart the process under the new 30-month system.

## END OF THE DUTY TO COOPERATE

Alongside the new plan-making framework, the Government has also confirmed the abolition of the Duty to Cooperate, taking place on 25 March 2026.

Originally introduced through the Localism Act 2011, the Duty required local authorities to engage constructively with neighbouring authorities on strategic planning matters. In practice, however, many local plans have failed at examination due to issues relating to compliance with the Duty.

To replace this mechanism, the Government intends to rely on Spatial Development Strategies (SDSs) to provide the strategic framework for planning across wider areas, including the distribution of housing need.

Although the legal Duty has been removed, local authorities are still expected to work collaboratively on strategic issues through policies within the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Inspectors will continue to assess whether appropriate engagement has taken place as part of the plan examination process.

## OUR PRESPECTIVE

The introduction of a defined timetable and earlier engagement with the Planning Inspectorate has the potential to bring greater certainty to the local plan process.

However, the reforms will also place increased pressure on local authorities to progress plans more quickly and ensure that evidence bases and site assessments are robust from an early stage.

For landowners and developers promoting land through the planning system, understanding how and when to engage with the evolving local plan process will remain critical.

Newton continues to monitor changes to the planning system and works closely with landowners and developers to identify opportunities as local plans evolve.

If you have any questions, please [contact](#) our team to discuss how we can support you.



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