

## Bristol's draft local plan is finally here. What's in it and what comes next?

After five years of development, [Bristol's new draft local plan](#) was published on Friday (20 October) in advance of an Extraordinary Full Council meeting taking place on 31 October. Once adopted, it will replace the current local plan agreed in 2014.

### How did we get here?

The refresh of the local plan commenced in 2018, led by a cross-party working group of eleven councillors, chaired by Cllr Nicola Beech. Extensive public engagement and consultation has taken place.

In the absence of a strategic-level plan following the [withdrawal](#) of the West of England Joint Spatial Plan in 2020 and the subsequent [halting](#) of the WECA Spatial Development Strategy in May 2022, preparation of the local plan has reverted to the 'duty to cooperate' to address cross-boundary strategic matters. This means Bristol City Council has been liaising with B&NES, South Glos, and North Somerset councils on regional issues such as jointly meeting the area's housing needs. This collaboration is ongoing.

### What comes next?

If Full Council approves the new plan on October 31, it will be available for Regulation 19 pre-submission public consultation lasting six weeks starting in **November 2023**.

Subsequently, the plan will be submitted to the secretary of state in **Spring 2024** for independent examination, a process usually taking at least a year. The inspector's report could be received from Spring 2025 onwards, and if the plan is deemed sound, Full Council might adopt it in **Spring/Summer 2025**.

With the **local elections** taking place in May 2024, Labour may seek credit for the more positive aspects of the plan, given that it has been developed during their time in power. It is likely to be a key part of their campaign.

By the time the plan comes back from the inspectorate to be adopted by Full Council in 2025, a **new administration** (potentially Green led, with different priorities) and the committee system will have been in place for over a year. The new administration will however be bound by the plan's priorities without supplementary planning documents.

### What are the plan's key priorities?

The new local plan has a particular focus on:

- delivering new homes through regeneration of previously developed land
- addressing the climate emergency with measures to reach net zero
- proposals to tackle the ecological emergency by protecting and enhancing nature
- supporting a thriving citywide economy to achieve inclusive, sustainable growth

## Housing delivery

- The plan proposes delivery of **1,925 new homes** on average each year from 2023 to 2040 (34,650 homes in total) including the delivery of at least **12,000 new affordable homes** in this time.
- To protect greenfield land, most homes will be constructed on well-connected **brownfield land** near the city centre. This aligns with the ongoing citywide discussion about expanding "up or out." Mayor Rees emphasised in his [State of the City Address](#) that Bristol has only **42 square miles** for development. Ongoing council debates include issues like the future of Bristol's [last working farm](#).
- The majority of the **greenbelt** on the city's edge will be unchanged, other than a few releases for housebuilding.
- Residential developments with 10 or more dwellings must provide a **minimum of 35% affordable housing**, reflecting the priority the Labour administration places on maximising affordable housing. In the city centre a '**threshold approach**' will be used. If the developer's offer includes at least 20% affordable housing, viability testing will not be required during the application stage. This approach acknowledges viability challenges in specific areas and addresses recent disputes between the administration and developers.
- **Build-to-rent homes** will be supported to diversify the city's housing offer. This aligns with a broader drive to innovate in housing design, construction, and location. The [administration recognises](#) a pressing rental crisis and the need for increased supply. Cabinet Member for Housing Delivery, Cllr Tom Renhard, is particularly passionate about this issue.
- All new-build housing must be designed to be **accessible and adaptable** and at least 10% of new-build housing in proposals of 10 dwellings or more designed to be wheelchair accessible.
- For residential development, a **minimum net density** of 50 dwellings per hectare will be expected. **Tall buildings** are supported, provided they are located and designed to create a "positive feature in the urban environment".
- There will be a cap on the number of **student homes** that can be built in each area. In doing so, the plan recognises the impact of university expansion but accepts that some supply is required to tackle a growing issue.
- The plan also introduces '**affordable student housing**', in which no more than 35% of student homes in a development can charge rent exceeding half the maximum maintenance loan. This aims to ensure that new accommodation isn't exclusively available to the wealthiest students and counter arguments against building Purpose-Built Student Accommodation.

## Tackling climate and ecological emergencies

- The plan suggests an urban development pattern that optimises land use, **minimises travel requirements**, and ensures easy access to infrastructure and amenities. This aligns with the recent trend of marketing several developments in central Bristol as '**car-free**'.

- Policies drive new developments to achieve **net-zero** emissions and promote the use of **renewables** and **heat network** development. Bristol positions itself as a national leader in this regard, actively engaging in substantial decarbonisation projects like [Bristol City Leap](#).
- The city's important **green spaces will be protected** through Local Green Space or Reserved Open Green Space designations.
- The plan includes policies for enhancing **biodiversity** and building **green infrastructure**. This includes a ban on artificial grass in new developments, plus requirements for swift bricks, hedgehog holes, and pollinator infrastructure.

### Economy

- The plan provides a further 164,000 square metres of additional **office floorspace**, and 155,000 square metres of net additional **industry and distribution floorspace**.
- For the first time, there will be a requirement to deliver **affordable workspaces** to support start-ups and creative industries.
- Recognising the significance of Bristol's numerous high streets, the plan strives for a '[15-minute city](#),' ensuring that essential facilities are within close proximity to people's residences. It proposes enabling these local centres to diversify while remaining integral to their communities. Similar initiatives have been undertaken by urban local authorities like Oxford, but this measure may generate contention, given the central government's [critical stance](#).
- The new plan reinforces existing **protections against the conversion of local pubs** into housing. Conversion is allowed only when it can be demonstrated that the pub is economically unviable or when there is already a diverse range of pubs within a short walking distance. This issue has been a source of debate in the city, with recent disputes concerning the preservation of pubs [The Windmill](#) and [The Rhubarb Tavern](#).
- Major developments that are open to the public should provide and secure the future management of free, **publicly accessible toilets** suitable for a range of users.

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We will share further analysis of the discussion around the local plan after Full Council meets on 31 October. Should you have any queries in the meantime, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

24 October 2023