



Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister

Creating sustainable communities

Creating better places to live

A guide to the planning system in England

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This guide will help you find out more about planning and how you can make where you live a better place both now and in the future. It will help you find out what planning has got to do with you, your family, your friends and your community.

Most of us want to live in a decent home in a place that is clean and safe, with access to the countryside, parks or other spaces. We want to feel happy and comfortable, and part of a community. We also want this for our family and future generations.

We have written this guide in plain English. It avoids jargon but sometimes it uses words and introduces ideas that you may want to find out more about. Look on page 9 for details of where you can get more information.

What is planning?

Planning is about how people make decisions about our cities, towns and countryside. Planning has a long history—even thousands of years ago people will have discussed where to build homes and shelters!

Over the centuries, a more formal way of making these decisions was set up. So when we want to build a new house or someone wants to develop a new shopping centre, your local planning authority is responsible for deciding whether it should go ahead. 'Local planning authority' usually means the district or borough council, not the parish or town council.

Without a planning system, everyone could construct buildings anywhere, or use land in any way they wanted, no matter what effect this would have on other people who live or work in their area.

This is called the planning system.

The planning system

The planning system has to balance different views and often make difficult decisions. For example, some people may really want a new sports centre in a local park so that they can exercise and get healthy. Other people may be outraged at the possible destruction of a local green space.

So, something called a plan-led system was introduced. This involves preparing plans that set out what can be built and where.

There are now two levels of plan.

- Each region (such as the north east of England) is preparing something known as a 'Regional Spatial Strategy'. This sets out things such as how many homes are needed to meet the future needs of people in the region, or whether the region needs a new major shopping centre or an airport. Regional Spatial Strategies are drafted by the Regional Planning Body.
- At a local level, there will be a plan known as a local development framework. This will be a folder of documents that sets out how your local area may change over the next few years. Local development frameworks are prepared by the local planning authority.

There may also be other types of plan, such as how to deal with waste. All these different types of plan are usually available from your local library.

All the plans must take account of the future needs of communities. They must take account of the environment as well as setting out the sorts of development needed to help people live and work in the area.

That is why it is important that you get involved when plans are prepared. Who knows better than you do the sort of place where you want to live? People who work in the local planning department are there to help – most of them decided to train as planners because they care about the environment and creating better places to live.

How development is controlled

Many people only come into contact with the planning system when it has to decide about whether something can be built in their area.

Most new buildings or major changes to existing buildings or the local environment need consent, known as planning permission. An application for planning permission is made to the local planning authority for the area. It has to include enough detail for the authority to see what effect the development could have on the area.

If the planning application is in line with the approved plan, the person applying can usually expect to receive planning permission. If the local authority refuses permission, the person applying can appeal to the Government for an independent view, usually from a planning inspector.

Some areas have special protection against development because they contain attractive landscape or interesting plants and wildlife (like national parks), or because we need to stop towns and villages spreading into open countryside (like the green belt).

Some smaller areas of land also contain ancient monuments that must not be damaged. Some buildings are specially protected (or listed) because of their architectural or historic interest.

For some types of minor building work, you do not need to apply for planning permission (such as a boundary wall below a certain height). That is because the effect on neighbours or the environment is likely to be small, and the Government has issued a general planning permission to authorise it. This is known as permitted development.

Getting involved

Planning's purpose has always been to try and make where we live as pleasant a place as possible. But surely the best way of making this happen is to involve **you** in deciding how your local community is planned.

All members of the community (you, businesses, community groups and other members of the public) can contribute to the process of preparing development plans. Your local planning authority must set out how they will involve the local community this is called a statement of community involvement. It is important to get involved in planning at as early a stage as possible to make sure that your views are heard.

Draft plans are also examined at inquiries by independent inspectors from the Government, and everyone has an opportunity to contribute to those. But it's better to get involved right at the start. Local residents must be told about planning applications, and they must be advertised to give people (known as 'third parties') the opportunity to give their views for or against them. Your council and developers may also want to consult you about big planning applications before they are made.

Obviously, other people in your community will have different views that must be taken into account. It is also unrealistic to expect that everyone can decide on the detail of everything that goes on in your area. The statement of community involvement will set out clearly how you can be involved.

More information

The planning system can look complicated and can put people off from commenting on proposals for a neighbour's house extension or getting involved in the planning process. But if you don't get involved, how can you be certain your views will count? So where can you turn for help? The first point of contact should be staff in your local planning authority. They are there to help. You can also contact the following:

- Planning Aid – a charity set up by planners to offer free and unbiased advice.
- Professional advice, such as from a qualified planning agent or consultant.
- Your local elected councillor or Member of Parliament.
- The Commissioner for Local Administration if you feel that the local council has made a mistake in its decision-making process.

Your local library or council will be able to find details for you.

Associated publications

Planning – A Guide for Householders (ODPM 2003)

Planning Permission – A Guide for Business (DETR 1998)

Available from

ODPM Publications

PO Box 236

Wetherby

West Yorkshire

LS23 7NB

Tel: 0870 122 6236

Fax: 0870 122 6237

Email: odpm@twoten.press.net

Links to websites

- Local Government Ombudsman
www.lgo.org.uk/contact.htm
- Planning Aid
www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/pa-paid.html
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
www.odpm.gov.uk/planning
- The Planning Portal
www.planningportal.gov.uk

Useful addresses

The Royal Town Planning Institute
41 Botolph Lane
London
EC3R 8DL
Tel: 020 7929 9490

The Planning Inspectorate
Temple Quay House
2 The Square
Temple Quay
Bristol
BS1 6EB
Tel: 0117 372 8000

Your views

Did this booklet help you start to understand the planning system and what you can do to get involved? Now you can decide to keep it as a handy reminder or pass it to someone else who may find it useful. If you decide you don't want to keep it, please try and recycle it. If your area does not provide recycling facilities, that could be the first point to make if you decide to get involved in your local planning system!

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