

DEMOCRACY INSIGHT

Democracy Insight

National and Local Government Explained



FREE DEMOCRACY INSIGHT EXPLAINER

Planning Decisions Explained

What Happens When a Planning Application Is Submitted

In one sentence: A planning application is judged against planning law, local policy, national policy and the material impact of the proposal, not simply whether people like or dislike it.

What planning is for

Planning is the system used to manage how land and buildings are used. It affects homes, shops, factories, roads, farms, green spaces, conservation areas and local facilities. The system tries to balance development, local impact, environmental protection and long-term need.

Planning can feel personal because it affects the places people live. But planning decisions must be made using planning reasons. Councils cannot simply approve or refuse an application because it is popular or unpopular.

Step one: the application

An applicant submits plans, forms and supporting documents to the local planning authority. This may include drawings, site plans, design statements, transport information, drainage details, heritage assessments or environmental information, depending on the scheme.

The council checks whether the application is valid. If important information is missing, it may ask the applicant to provide more before the application is formally processed.

Step two: consultation

Once validated, the application is publicised. Neighbours may be notified, site notices may be displayed and statutory consultees may be asked for views. Consultees can include highways, drainage bodies, environmental health, conservation officers and parish councils.

Members of the public can usually comment. Their comments are considered, but only planning matters can carry weight in the final decision.

Step three: assessing the proposal

Planning officers assess the application against the development plan, national planning policy and other relevant planning considerations. The development plan normally includes the local plan and any neighbourhood plan in force.

Officers look at issues such as principle of development, design, highways, access, parking, flood risk, ecology, heritage, residential amenity, landscape, noise, pollution and infrastructure. The exact issues depend on the proposal.

Material planning considerations

Material planning considerations are issues that can lawfully be taken into account. They might include overlooking, loss of light, highway safety, flood risk, design, heritage impact, noise, planning history, local plan policy or impact on protected trees.

Issues such as loss of a private view, effect on house prices, business competition, personal dislike of the applicant or private property disputes are usually not planning reasons for refusal.

Step four: officer recommendation

For many applications, a planning officer writes a report and makes a recommendation. The recommendation may be approval, approval with conditions, or refusal. Conditions can require things such as materials, landscaping, drainage, hours of operation or further details.

Officers must give professional advice. They are not there to count objections and vote with the largest number. A single strong planning objection may matter more than hundreds of comments that are not relevant to planning law.

Step five: delegated decision or committee

Many applications are decided by officers under delegated powers. Larger, controversial or called-in applications may go to planning committee, depending on the council rules.

At committee, councillors consider the report, hear any public speakers allowed under the rules and debate the planning merits. They can agree with officers or make a different decision, but they must have planning reasons.

Step six: appeals

If an application is refused, the applicant may be able to appeal. An independent planning inspector can then consider whether the council made the right decision. If the council refused without strong planning reasons, it may lose the appeal.

This is one reason councillors are cautious. A refusal must be defensible. Otherwise the decision can be overturned and the council may face costs. Unfortunately, even if you get the result you want when the proposal is considered by the planning committee, that may not be the end of the road.

How to read a planning application

- Look at the plans, not just the description and check the local plan policies mentioned.
- Read consultee responses, especially highways, drainage and environmental health.
- Focus comments on planning impact.
- Suggest conditions if outright refusal is unlikely.

Key takeaway

Planning is not a public opinion poll. The strongest voices are those that understand the rules and explain, clearly and calmly, the planning impact of a proposal.

Sources and further reading

- [Planning Portal: Planning permission](#)
- [GOV.UK: Planning and building](#)
- [National Planning Policy Framework](#)