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Getting involved in planning applications

The planning system encourages people with an interest in a proposed development to comment on applications.

Find out how you can help to protect and enhance your local environment by influencing planning decisions in your area.

Finding out about planning applications

To build on land, a developer must first obtain permission by submitting a planning application to the Local Planning Authority. There are a number of ways that you can find out about the planning applications in your area:

- posted at the site of the proposed development
- in the local paper
- neighbours will be notified
- at your local planning office
- the Local Planning Authority's website

Once a planning application has been announced, interested parties have to submit their responses within a minimum of 21 days.

Different types of planning application

A planning application can either be 'full' or 'outline'.

Full planning applications include every detail needed for the Local Planning Authority to decide if the proposal can go ahead.

Outline applications contain only enough information for the Local Planning Authority to decide if the principle and broad type of development is acceptable. If an outline application is approved, then the applicant must submit a 'reserved matters' application that addresses all the outstanding details, such as visual appearance, servicing and landscaping. This must also be approved before development can start.

The differences between these types of planning application can affect the scope of your comments. For example, if you missed an opportunity to comment on an outline application for a development that affects a wildlife site and it was approved, the scope of any objections to the follow-up 'reserved matters' application can only relate to the detailed design and layout of the development, not the principle of it.

Why might you take action?

You may want to object to a proposed development that will impact on the countryside and wildlife in your area. An important first step is to assess the wildlife value of the site (see our PDF *How to assess the value of a wildlife site*). You may also feel that the development could be made more sympathetic to the local environment, eg by enhancing opportunities for biodiversity.

Your involvement in the planning system need not be limited to objecting to potentially harmful planning applications. In some circumstances you might want to support an application, as it will be beneficial to biodiversity and be built with consideration for local wildlife.

Commenting on planning applications

You must send written comments to the Local Planning Authority responsible for determining the application. When submitting a written comment on an application, whether to object or support it, you should remember the following:

- All planning applications have a name and a specific reference number that you should clearly refer to.
- Clearly state why you are objecting to, or supporting, the development.
- Include the wording 'I object' or 'I support' in the text.
- Act within the set timescale, responding before the consultation deadline (if you don't have a letter from the Local Planning Authority with this on, you can find it out by ringing the council planning department).
- State how the application could be changed to address your objections.
- State your name, address and other contact details.
- Keep your letter short: a maximum of two sides – put any detailed comments in a supporting document if necessary.
- Use facts.
- Include information about important habitats and wildlife that you have found at the site (see our PDF *How to assess the value of a wildlife site*).
- Be concise and polite!

Things to avoid if you want your concerns to be taken seriously:

- Don't include hearsay or information you are unsure about.
- Don't include unsubstantiated criticism of the Local Planning Authority or the applicant, eg personal circumstances or character.
- Don't exaggerate your claims.
- Don't include information unrelated to the development or its impacts.
- Don't make reference to the effect of the development on property values.

Some additional things to consider when responding to a planning application:

- Do the proposals retain (as far as possible) any existing wildlife features on the site like ponds and hedgerows?
- Do the proposals use native plants and trees in any landscaping designs?
- Could the development be redesigned, phased or laid out differently to reduce its effects on wildlife?

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

For applications that are likely to affect the environment significantly, an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) must be carried out. The purpose of an EIA is to assess the extent of the development and try to reduce the negative impacts that it will have.

Where one must be carried out, a report on the Environmental Impact Assessment (usually referred to as the Environmental Statement) is submitted as part of the planning application and is a public document. You can include comments about the EIA and the Environmental Statement in your objection letter if you feel it does not comprehensively address all the development's likely environmental impacts.

Documents that may help you

When making detailed comments about a planning application, you may want to refer to some of the following documents:

- The Local Development Framework (LDF)

The Local Development Framework (LDF) is a collection of documents. Its function is to plan changes to local areas over the next 10–15 years, such as allocating areas for certain types of development. Some of these documents have maps of the local areas allocated for certain types of development, against which you can compare the planning application area.

The Local Development Framework documents should contain the policies of most relevance to the individual application (see our PDF *How to get involved with local development plans*).

- The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)

This is a document that sets out a broad range of issues including housing provision, transport infrastructure, the rural economy, health and quality of life. Planning applications should be broadly in line with these policies, so you can look for any obvious departures from what is said at the regional level.

- Planning Policy Statements (PPS)

Although national guidance does not deal with local specifics, such as allocation of land, it does set out broad objectives such as the reduction of car use.

There are Planning Policy Statements on a range of issues affecting how we develop the country, and they can be found on the Department for Communities and Local Government website (www.communities.gov.uk). Again, some of these national policies may be applicable to your response.

What happens to an application once your comments have been submitted?

Once your letter has been submitted, it will be considered together with others in the decision-making process.

Planning officers and planning committees

Planning officers can determine planning applications themselves through a process known as 'delegated' powers. Alternatively, they will provide the planning committee with a recommendation on the decision. When coming to a decision, they will consider letters that object to and support a proposal. They will also take local, regional and national policy into account.

The Planning Committee is composed of local councillors (in National Parks there are also Secretary of State appointed members) and is also responsible for approving or refusing applications for planning permission.

Attending planning committee meetings

Planning committee meetings are public. If you submitted a 'representation' on a planning application, the Local Planning Authority may allow you to speak at the planning committee that is deciding the application.

If you have submitted a representation, the Local Planning Authority may send you a letter saying when the application will be decided. If they do not, you can find out when the committee meeting is by ringing the relevant planning department.

Appeals against a decision

If a planning application is refused, applicants can take their application to appeal. In England, third parties (eg the general public) cannot appeal against a planning decision.

However, if you have made an objection to a planning application, which is then refused and the developer appeals, you have the right to make further representations to this appeal, and if an inquiry is held, to appear at the inquiry to make your case.

The Planning Inspectorate or Local Planning Authority should contact you with details of what you have to do when the appeal is lodged. The Planning Inspectorate website (www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk) has more information about the appeals process.

Complaining to the Local Government Ombudsman

If you have a complaint about the way a planning application was dealt with (rather than the nature of the proposal) you can report it to the Local Government Ombudsman. However, before you consider going to the Local Government Ombudsman, you should first raise your concerns with the Local Planning Authority.

Your complaint must be about the conduct of either the planning officer or a member of the planning committee. For example, a planning department may restrict people's opportunity to comment on an application by failing to publicise it.