

New planning guidance on light pollution changes the system

What has changed?

A key change is that local authorities can consider whether proposed lighting "is purely for decorative purposes as opposed to being needed for functional reasons such as security". Planners are advised that "insensitively positioned decorative lighting, particularly in rural areas, can be a cause for concern".

The update includes a new focus on potential harm to road users, advising that light spill can cause "safety impacts" and that these should be considered. Authorities are also advised to consider whether new lighting will conflict with the needs of specialist facilities such as observatories, airports and general aviation facilities, as well as the impact on "particular individuals or groups". Astronomers are specifically mentioned for the first time.

Practical implications

Lee Barker-Field, head of lighting design at consultancy AECOM, does not think the distinction between decorative and functional lighting will mean major changes to most development proposals. But he says it gives planners and designers an opportunity to show adherence to good practice "because the distinction is more well-defined".

He suspects the revisions will "encourage applicants and local authority planners to think about lighting in terms of these two characteristics" and "give separate information about them". "It shows that there are some situations where the two can be assessed independently," he adds.

Barker-Field says the update encourages developers to give more specific, focused information about the potential impact on nearby specialist facilities and interest groups. "When they're making a design statement about the proposal [they're being asked] to include considerations for these groups and appropriate responses to individual needs rather than more general statements," he says.

Simone Pagani, senior partner and head of daylight and solar design at surveying consultancy GIA, says the new guidance may encourage authorities to examine schemes more thoroughly for potential light pollution issues and create a need for more specialist lighting assessment work.