



Access to Information about Planning Applications

Guidance for Councils

Background

1. Research by the London Forum shows that there is a wide variety of policy and practice across councils in London in how they allow members of their communities to gain access to information about planning applications. This applies to all stages of the planning process, from pre-application discussions through to Section 106 agreements and the final determination of the application. The decision-making process is in some cases far from transparent. Engagement between local communities and their planning authorities often depends on personal connections and dogged persistence, and on the goodwill of individual case officers.
2. The Forum is particularly concerned that the National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions due to be implemented after the end of October 2026 will make the decision-making process even less transparent than it is at present, with even fewer opportunities for engagement. The already-small proportion of applications determined by committees – under five percent in most London boroughs – will fall even further, and the opportunities to make representations will also fall. If current practice is maintained, *information about any discussions between developers and council officers will continue to remain secret, and officers' reports on the reasons for decisions that may have major implications for local communities will be withheld until after the decision has been made.* There is a real risk that trust in the planning system will be further, and seriously, undermined. This draft Guidance is intended to guard against that risk, drawing on best practice already in place across some councils.

Pre-Application Discussions

3. Pre-application discussions play an important role in shaping many planning applications, from householders as well as major developers. It is right that such discussions should be held in private. But in a transparent system, best practice should include:
 - Requiring applicants to engage with neighbours and the wider community, as appropriate, about their proposals
 - Establishing Design and/or Quality Review Panels (DRPs/QRPs), including heritage and conservation specialists, to review initial proposals. They should operate in line with the requirements of the NPPF and the London Design Review Charter. Panels' advice should be made public once an application is submitted for approval. Councils should also consider the case for involving community representatives on DRPs/QRPs.
 - Including officers' pre-application advice to applicants in the case file once an application is submitted

Published Applications

4. Councils are required to post site notices on or near the property to which an application relates, and to send the notice to the owner or occupier of adjoining properties. Some but not all councils also send notices to a wider group of neighbours who might be affected. Councils also publish weekly lists of applications, and some also provide on request weekly emails which may be tailored to cover specific types of applications, or areas such as wards, conservation areas or even specific streets. Best practice should include

- Sending notices to neighbouring residents and businesses whose properties might be affected by the proposed development
- Ensuring that notices and list entries are accurate and easy to understand, especially with large-scale developments where repetition of the descriptions of long sequences of previous applications often makes it difficult to discern the precise nature of each specific application.
- Providing information on notices and lists of any deadline (at least 21 days) for the receipt of comments and objections, and to whom they should be sent.
- Informing those who have submitted comments or objections if substantive changes are made to applications before they are determined.

Comments and Objections

5. Comments and objections from members of the local community play an important role in minimising, mitigating or preventing potential harms that may arise from proposed developments, especially those of large scale and those in sensitive locations such as conservation areas. Best practice should include
 - Including major local community groups as formal consultees
 - Making it clear that comments and objections may be submitted beyond the statutory 21-day consultation period, up to the point where a decision is about to be made.
 - Ensuring that all comments and objections are accessible in full on the planning website.
 - Considering the case for establishing – re-establishing in some cases – advisory committees of experienced local representatives to review applications that may adversely affect heritage assets including listed and locally-listed buildings, parks and gardens, conservation areas, and local designated views.
 - Ensuring objectors are notified of any minor amendments to an application post approval.

Case Officers and their Reports

6. Few councils currently make it straightforward for local residents and representatives of civic societies to communicate directly with case officers about individual applications. In most boroughs, it is in effect impossible. This refusal to engage has become increasingly unacceptable, and it will be the more so once many of the already-small proportion of applications that are currently referred to committees will instead be determined by officers. Best practice henceforth should include
 - Making reasonable efforts to ensure that interested parties can make effective contact with case officers before a decision is made.
 - Ensuring that officers' reports include a detailed analysis of comments and objections; an accurate narrative of those made by statutory consultees and by recognised civic and amenity groups.
 - Considering the case for publishing draft officers' reports before making a final decision, with a short deadline for comment or objection.

Planning Committees

7. From 31 October 2026, only the largest and most important applications will be referred to planning committees. It is therefore critically important that councils adhere to the statutory requirement that agendas and papers must be published a minimum of five working days before the meeting. Best practice should include

- Ensuring that late papers are published only in the most exceptional cases, and that they should not cover substantive issues that should have been published within the deadline.
- Making reasonable provision for short representations to be made in person to the committee.

Appeals

8. If an applicant submits an appeal against refusal of their application, Councils must ensure that they comply promptly with their duty to inform anyone who has submitted an objection or comment, so that they have the opportunity to follow the course of the appeal.

Section 106 Agreements

9. Section 106 agreements may be finalised some weeks or months after a planning approval, and they may include commitments that are of major importance to local communities. Hence they must by law be published on the planning register. Councils must ensure that this is done before the grant of permission is finalised and published, so that the local community has an opportunity to comment on them; otherwise, the grant may be unlawful.

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The London Forum – www.londonforum.org.uk

The London Forum represents the views and interests of over 100 amenity and civic societies in London and their members on issues that are important for those who live and work in London. The Forum's main focus is on Planning, Development Management, Heritage, Transport, Environment, Waterways and Open Spaces.

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