



First Aid for Planning

Guide 1: What is planning?

Who is the guide for?

This guide is for anyone interested in how and why their neighbourhood changes. Planning is about designing new homes, protecting buildings you value, improving parks, making space for local food and dealing with climate change. Get it right and all our lives can be healthier, less polluted and more connected. But when we get it wrong planning can leave people feeling frustrated that their views have not been respected.

Planning can seem complicated, but it's your best chance to influence decisions that matter to you. You have a right to be involved and you should use it. This guide focusses on planning in London. It explains the basics of what planning can do for your community. You will need more detailed information to get involved in planning, which you find in our other guides. This guide covers:

- A definition of what planning is
- The main actors in planning
- Reasons to get involved
- How to find a community group

Who is Planning Aid for London?

Planning Aid for London provides free advice and training on town planning to people and community groups who cannot afford professional support. We help people understand and get involved in decisions about your neighbourhood: on topics such as housing development, regeneration and transport infrastructure, so they can have a say in the future of their neighbourhoods.

What is planning?

Planning is about shaping the changes in our communities so they benefit not just developers but the wider public. Examples of this include affordable housing, new parks, roads, bus lines, community centres, schools, surgeries,

shops and businesses. Planning also determines how land and buildings are used, and if you can do building work on your home (for example, by building an extension). Stopping climate change, improving our health, or creating jobs all involve the planning system. **Planning has an important impact on your life** and your community. You have the right to participate in the planning system.

How does planning work?

The English planning system is governed by legislation, national policy, regional and Local Plans. To anyone not familiar with planning, the system often seems complex and unclear. But a simple rule of thumb is that most big changes in an area will need planning permission before it can happen. Your Local Planning Authority (LPA), usually the council, decides on whether the application can be approved based on national policy and the Local Plan. The first thing most people know about planning is when they see a notice on a lamppost or look online. While you can object to planning applications, the smart approach is to get in early and have real say over your Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan. Time spent doing this can save you years of stress trying to fight planning applications. It's worth remembering that planning is partly about technical arguments but mostly about politics. It's local councillors who make final decisions. So if you're campaigning for more play space or for gardens to grow local food, you need to know a bit about planning so you can make the best case to your politicians.

The outcomes of planning do not always work for everyone: people can feel left out from decisions about what is built in their area, which is frustrating. The only way to change this is **by informing yourself and getting involved in planning**. Don't take no for an answer and don't be put off by jargon. Planning Aid for London is here to help communities to use the system to improve the quality of all our places.

Who does planning: the main actors

For most building or development work, an **application for planning permission** to the Local Planning Authority is needed. Your Local Planning Authority (LPA), usually the planning department of your council, manages most development within its area. The LPA also decides on planning applications for development; knowing who your LPA is and what they are doing can help you understand when decisions are made. If you are not sure who your council is, you can have a look here: www.gov.uk/find-local-council



And to check if your council is also your Local Planning Authority, check the Planning Portal: 1app.planningportal.co.uk/YourLpa/FindYourLpa

The planning officers at your council do most of the planning work in the borough. They will decide on the majority of **planning applications**. Larger and controversial planning applications are decided on by the **planning committee**. This group of appointed councillors will approve or refuse the application, based on the advice of planning officers, the applicant and third parties (including members of the public, you). Councillors are elected politicians: they should represent the views of their constituents, as well as the wider public interest, when they decide on an application. Councillors, especially when they sit on the planning committee, can help when you need further information; you can find and contact your councillor on <https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors>. Lobbying your councillor can also be a useful tactic. You can respond to planning applications to share your views on a proposal, but it is important you become involved at an earlier stage to have more influence over future development, which brings us to the Local Plan.

The Local Plan

The Local Plan should set out a **vision for your area and be prepared with local people and approved by councillors**. Every council in the London boroughs needs to have one that is up to date. The Local Plan consists of policy documents that shape future development, usually for a period of 15 years. The Local Plan informs whether planning applications will be approved or not. The decisions that planning officers and the planning committee make must consider the Local Plan. Getting involved in the development of a new Local Plan increases your chances of having a say in what changes in your area.

The Local Plan needs to conform to the **London Plan**. This is the regional plan for London, which the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority prepare. Every Mayor of London will produce a London Plan. The plan identifies Opportunity Areas, to designate where significant development will have to take place to meet London's housing needs and economic growth.

The Local Plan should also follow national policy and planning legislation, which is set down by government. You can read more about where to find these documents in [Guide 2: Finding out what is happening in your area](#).



Why would I get involved?

When past decisions by your council have not been in your interest or have ignored your views, you can feel discouraged to get involved in planning. But remember, planning officers and the planning committee balance different private and public interests when they make decisions. They should consider the interests of community groups, residents and small businesses when they decide on planning application or Local Plan: the public interest. If you understand the basics of planning, ask the right questions and can make a convincing case to the council, you can have an influence over planning decisions. But if you do not make your voice heard, decisions will certainly not take into account what you want for your area.

There are many issues that might affect your neighbourhood that you want to change, over which planning has a say. The planning process is then an opportunity for you to have an influence over these matters. Some examples of what planning can do are:

- Define the design of new buildings
- Set the number of new homes build in your neighbourhood
- Protect a park from development
- Regulate extensions of homes
- Protect trees from development
- Give further protections to locally listed buildings

But there are also many issues that planning does not have an influence over, because they are not within the scope of the planning system. Examples of these are roads and traffic management, the maintenance of parks or the listing of historic buildings. Even though they might seem planning issues, you (or the council) will not be able to change these through planning.

The national government continues to strip away local planning powers by extending permitted development rights legislation. This legislation gives forms of development defined in national legislation automatic planning permission: you have no opportunity to object to this and your council is unable to stop it. The conversion of office blocks into housing is an example of this: planning has no influence over this.



What you can do

There are different ways you can have your say and get involved in planning. The five main ways to do so are:

- Respond to planning applications in your neighbourhood
- Report breaches of planning law and regulations to your council
- Give your views on the consultations for the Local Plan
- Develop your own Neighbourhood Plan or community plan
- Develop your own campaign

In our other guides, we explain how you can make use of your rights and participate in planning decisions.

Join a community group

It is often easier to get involved in planning together with neighbours or as part of a group. You can always join an existing group in your area, who might be involved in planning already. Groups to look out for are:

- Local history and heritage groups (www.londonhistorians.org)
- Local community groups (justplace-london.blogspot.com)
- A neighbourhood forum (www.neighbourhoodplanners.london)
- Local amenity societies (www.londonforum.org.uk/boroughlist.php)
- Tenant or resident associations (www.londontenants.org)

If there is no group interested in planning active in your area, you can set up your own together with your neighbours. We might be able to help with this.

Further reading

We have published the following guide, which you can find on our website:

[Guide 2: Finding out what is happening in your area](#)

Other organisations have published helpful resources:

Friends of the Earth, Guide to community rights, environment and planning laws series.

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/system-change/guide-community-rights-environment-and-planning-laws>



Friends of the Earth, The English planning system: An overview

<https://cdn.friendsoftheearth.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/English%20Planning%20System%20an%20overview%20FoE.pdf>

Friends of the Earth, How-to: Running local campaigns guides

https://campaigning.friendsoftheearth.uk/resources?_ga=2.179486500.143575968.1609936271-906712487.1609936271

Planning Portal, About the planning system

https://www.planningportal.co.uk/info/200127/planning/102/about_the_planning_system

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Plain English guide to the planning system

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plain-english-guide-to-the-planning-system>

Tony Burton, video on Local Plans and the planning system

<http://www.merton.tv/2020/12/christmas-day-lecture-local-plans-by-tony-burton-25-december-2020/>

Need further help?

Find more information on our [website](#) or contact us at:

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