

Pre-application advice for town and country planning

A commitment to good practice agreed by the National Planning Forum for the attention of householders and developers considering development and possibly applying for planning permission. Also for adoption by local planning authorities as part of the development management process.

This Good Practice Note has been prepared by the National Planning Forum (NPF). The aim of this Note is to ensure that any prospective applicant, from individual householder to major property developer, receives both the best possible service and advice from the planning authority and also knows what may be expected of them prior to submission of their application for planning permission. This is consistent with the front-loading approach, a key element in the government's recent planning reforms, in which all parties are encouraged to discuss proposals at the earliest stage and which is designed to speed up the formal planning process. This is of considerable benefit to all parties.

A good council is one that welcomes early pre-application discussions as a means of improving the quality of development and avoids delays during the formal application process. A good developer will also recognise the value of doing 'homework' in advance which may avoid wasting time and money later.

The essential task is to achieve what is best for the community at large. Negotiations to achieve good quality developments take time and that is why pre-application discussions are so valuable, to ensure all parties are aware of constraints and requirements.

The government's Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) states *"local planning authorities and applicants should take a positive attitude towards early engagement in pre-application discussions so that formal applications can be dealt with in a more certain and speedy manner, and the quality of decisions can be better assured"*

It is highly likely that those applications that are in conformity with the development plan documents and that benefit from pre-application discussions and also take on board the comments and issues

raised by the council will progress faster. It will, for example, allow local planning authorities to project plan the process allocating resources and setting up meetings to facilitate a rolling start. A good council should be able to reciprocate early discussions by offering a timetable for dealing with the application. This will be assisted by more widespread use of eplanning by which applicants will be able to track the progress of their submission from registration to decision.

Pre-application advice: good practice for householders and developers

You should:

Write to or email the local planning authority at the earliest opportunity seeking guidance or make an appointment with planning officers, well in advance of submitting a planning application. For a major or complex development this is vital to enable the council to project plan the process.

Undertake some initial research by checking on the council website and visiting the local library to see what planning guidance is available. Councils must follow their own development plan documents which may include traffic and transport requirements of the Highway Authority supported by supplementary planning documents covering, for example, guidance on design which may all be relevant material considerations. You should find out as much as you can about these documents in advance.

Consider carefully who may be affected by the proposals, how you might achieve what you want with the least impact on others and then sound out the views of neighbours (or the wider community if appropriate) in advance.

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Recognise that pre-application advice from an officer will not bind the council to making a particular decision and remember that a decision can only emerge after the submission and determination of a formal application.

Recognise that the more information that is provided the more substantial a response can be offered both by the council and those who may believe they are affected.

Remember that planning considerations change over time and that therefore advice can change and consents will have an expiry date.

Not expect to be able to turn up at the planning office on the off-chance and expect to receive full chapter and verse on a vague proposal.

Consider seeking professional help from the outset to draw up and present the plans.

For major proposals, developers should contact statutory consultees from the outset. This allows consultees to formulate a considered response and should avoid future delays.

And where detailed advice is required: Send or bring to a meeting a proposed design or layout. Where possible this should include some sketches to show how the proposal would appear in relation to its setting (e.g. surrounding buildings) and preferably some photographs of the existing situation. The sketches will demonstrate the proposal in context with nearby buildings, roads, trees and other features.

Submit other more specialist information for more complex proposals, for example, the outline of scoping study for an environmental impact assessment for a mineral or waste proposal, or the brief for a traffic assessment for a medium or large-scale proposal. For change of use, intelligence on the scale and intensity of the new use, traffic movements and proximity and availability of public transport could be key issues.

When submitting an application, indicate that there have been pre-application discussions or enquiries and name the officer with whom discussions or correspondence have taken place.

Involving councillors

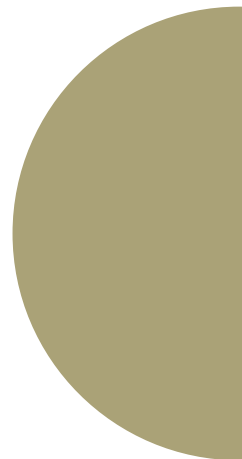
Councillors represent communities and are there to help. You can contact a councillor to notify them about your proposal from the outset and there is advantage to both officers and councillors in having an early presentation of your draft plans. Some councillors will be members of the planning committee and will be strictly constrained in what they can do or say (the LGA has recently produced a note which offers guidance in this area). Nevertheless it is a courtesy to inform local councillors well in advance rather than for them to read about future plans first in their local newspaper.

Charges

Local planning authorities have the discretion to make a specific charge to offset their costs in offering pre-application advice on major proposals. The authority will be able to advise when you first contact them and provide you with the further details of the service you can expect for the charge.

Pre-application advice: good practice for local planning authorities

A good local planning authority will:
Advertise widely the value and availability of early pre-application advice at council offices, on websites, at community centres and in general publicity which can be easily understood by all sections of the community.
Respond to written requests for advice on straightforward proposals within 10 working days.



Offer a one stop shop for planning advice in an accessible location and at reasonable times and seek to have a basic service for householders on a drop-in basis and by appointment on at least one early evening per week or at a weekend.

Offer a confidential meeting room, on prior request.

Make available all plans, documents and Ordnance Survey extracts at reasonable charges, and have a photocopier available for use in the public area where possible.

Field an officer who is familiar with the area and, when an appointment has been made over a week ahead, someone with knowledge of the site history. The officer should be of a seniority and level of experience appropriate to the proposal being considered.

Appoint a case officer at the earliest possible time so that prospective applicants can have the comfort of continuity throughout the process. Ensure that all advice and information given is sound and consistent, based upon the development plan and other material considerations, for the avoidance of doubt. If there is any uncertainty on any topic this should be clarified in a written communication within five working days, even if it is to say that uncertainty still exists about the acceptability of the proposal.

Consider a site meeting where requested or considered necessary and seek to offer this within ten working days.

Offer advice on the need for building regulation approval and other issues relating to listed buildings, traffic and highways, trees and other matters where appropriate as a one stop shop. Direct the prospective applicant to other agencies or organisations that may have an interest in the proposal or may be statutory consultees.

Maintain a record on file of what was discussed and agreed at the meeting which can be made available to all parties in the future both for the

avoidance of doubt and to ensure consistency if there are multiple enquiries.

Indicate whether the decision on any application would normally be taken by councillors or by officers under delegated powers.

Seek to ensure maximum consistency between views given at the pre-application stage and the officer's recommendation on a formal application.

Respect commercial confidentiality.

NB. There is further guidance for local planning authorities in Best Value Indicator 205.





The National Planning Forum is the largest cross-sectoral forum in England focusing on town and country planning.

The NPF has a membership drawn from:

- Not for profit and voluntary organisations
- Local government
- Government departments
- Government agencies
- Government regional offices
- Trade associations
- Professional institutes
- Regional development agencies

The work of the Forum includes the preparation of and agreement to Good Practice Notes to promote better outcomes for everyone seeking to develop or change the use of land or buildings in England.

For further information please visit our website at natplanforum.org.uk or contact the Secretary at secretary@natplanforum.org.uk

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LGA code F/322

Designed and printed by the LGA

