

Harrow
Monitoring
Group
publication

Introduction to the UK Planning System

Planning Policy, Development Management and Decision-Making

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Foreword

The planning system plays a vital role in shaping the places where people live, work, and spend their leisure time. Planning decisions can have long-lasting effects on communities, the environment, local economies, and the quality of life of residents. It is therefore essential that planning decisions are made in a fair, transparent, and well-informed manner.

One significant aspect of the planning system is the determination of planning applications submitted to local authorities. However, planning extends far beyond individual applications. It also encompasses the preparation of planning policies and Local Plans, community engagement and consultation, development management, enforcement, infrastructure planning, environmental stewardship, and the long-term management of growth and change within communities.

Planning applications are normally prepared, assessed, and processed by professionally qualified planning officers who interpret and apply national, regional, and local planning policies, together with relevant legislation and technical guidance. Their reports provide the professional planning assessment upon which decisions are made. Elected councillors also play an important role, particularly when determining planning applications through Planning Committees. While councillors are not expected to be planning experts, they are expected to make decisions that are policy-led, evidence-based, impartial, and capable of being justified and defended if challenged through the appeals process.

A sound understanding of the planning framework and the principles that underpin decision-making is therefore essential. This guide has been prepared to provide a basic introduction to the planning system and to explain the principal elements of planning policy, development management, and decision-making. While it includes guidance relevant to Planning Committee members determining planning applications, it is also intended as a practical resource for trainers, newly elected members, community representatives, residents, and others interested in the planning process.

This guide has been produced by Harrow Monitoring Group as a community education and civic participation resource. As an organisation committed to equality, community engagement, and informed public participation, Harrow Monitoring Group recognises that planning decisions can have significant implications for local communities and future generations. The guide is intended to encourage greater understanding of the planning system and to support constructive engagement with planning issues by councillors, residents, community organisations, and other stakeholders. It may also assist members of the public in responding more effectively to planning consultations by improving understanding of planning policies, procedures, and material planning considerations.

The guide is structured to provide a broad introduction to the planning system before examining some of the key issues that arise within planning policy, development management, and the determination of planning applications. It outlines the planning policy framework, explains the principal components of development management, and introduces topics such as accessibility,

environmental considerations, planning obligations, community infrastructure, enforcement, and local planning policy. Examples drawn from Harrow's planning experience are included where they help illustrate wider planning principles and practice.

By understanding the policy context, recognising material planning considerations, and appreciating the importance of fairness, transparency, accountability, and public participation, readers will be better equipped to engage constructively with planning processes and contribute positively to the delivery of sustainable development and successful communities.

This guide reflects planning legislation, policy, and guidance in force at the time of publication. Readers should refer to the latest legislation, adopted planning policies, and official guidance when considering specific planning matters.

Husain Akhtar

Coordinator

Harrow Monitoring Group

*also, former Councillor and member of the Planning Committee, London Borough of Harrow,
and former Inspector of Schools , Ofsted*

1. Purpose of planning

The planning system regulates the development and use of land in the public interest. Its primary objective is to achieve sustainable development by balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being. Planning provides a framework for managing change, protecting valuable assets, delivering infrastructure, and creating sustainable communities.

Planning decisions are made in accordance with the statutory development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

2. Hierarchy of planning policy and decision making

Planning policy operates within a hierarchical framework.

National level

National planning policy is established by central government through legislation, regulations, and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). National policy provides guidance on housing delivery, economic growth, environmental protection, design quality, climate change, heritage conservation, and sustainable transport.

Regional and strategic level

In London, strategic planning policy is provided through the London Plan, prepared by the Mayor of London. Strategic policies address housing targets, transport infrastructure, economic development, environmental management, and metropolitan growth.

Local level

Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), such as the London Borough of Harrow, prepare local planning policies and determine planning applications. Local policies must be consistent with national and strategic planning objectives while addressing local circumstances and priorities.

3. Sustainable community strategy

A Sustainable Community Strategy establishes a long-term vision for improving social, environmental, and economic conditions within a local authority area. The strategy promotes partnership working between local authorities, public bodies, businesses, and community organisations.

The strategy influences planning policies by identifying priorities relating to housing, transport, health, education, employment, community safety, and environmental quality.

4. Planning Policy Statements (PPS)

Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) were formerly issued by government to explain national planning policies and objectives.

Most PPS documents have now been replaced by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), although historic references may still appear in older planning documents and appeal decisions.

5. Core strategy

The Core Strategy was traditionally the principal Development Plan Document within the Local Development Framework. It established the long-term spatial vision for a local authority area.

The Core Strategy typically:

- Identifies strategic development locations.
- Establishes housing and employment targets.
- Directs infrastructure provision.
- Promotes sustainable development principles.
- Guides future planning decisions.

Nature of core strategies

Core Strategies are strategic rather than detailed planning documents. They establish broad development principles and spatial objectives rather than providing site-specific design guidance.

They form the foundation upon which more detailed planning documents are prepared.

Although many local authorities have now replaced Core Strategies with comprehensive Local Plans, an understanding of Core Strategies remains important when reviewing older planning documents, planning histories, and appeal decisions, many of which continue to refer to policies originating from former Core Strategy documents.

6. Strategic policies – an example from Harrow

Every Local Planning Authority adopts strategic policies reflecting its local circumstances and priorities. As an example, strategic policies in Harrow focus on:

- Housing delivery and affordable housing provision.
- Town centre regeneration.
- Economic development and employment opportunities.
- Sustainable transport and accessibility.

- Protection of open space and Green Belt land.
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- High-quality urban design.
- Community infrastructure provision.

These priorities illustrate the type of strategic issues commonly addressed through local planning policy.

7. Local Development Framework (LDF)

The Local Development Framework consists of a portfolio of planning policy documents prepared by a Local Planning Authority.

Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive planning policy framework for managing future development.

Key components include:

Development Plan Documents (DPDs)

Statutory planning documents subject to independent examination.

Examples include:

- Core Strategy.
- Site Allocations DPD.
- Development Management Policies DPD.

DPDs form part of the statutory development plan and carry full weight in planning decisions.

Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)

The SCI explains how the local authority will consult residents, businesses, statutory consultees, and stakeholders during plan preparation and planning application processes.

It promotes transparency and public participation.

Annual Monitoring Report (AMR)

The AMR assesses:

- Housing delivery performance.
- Employment land provision.
- Policy effectiveness.
- Sustainability objectives.
- Infrastructure delivery.

Monitoring enables authorities to review and adjust policies where necessary.

Local Development Scheme (LDS)

The LDS is the project management timetable for preparing planning policy documents.

It identifies:

- Documents to be produced.
- Key milestones.
- Consultation periods.
- Adoption dates.

Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)

SPDs provide detailed guidance supporting adopted planning policies.

Common topics include:

- Residential design.
- Sustainable construction.
- Affordable housing.
- Planning obligations.
- Shopfront design.

SPDs are material considerations in planning decisions but do not form part of the statutory development plan.

Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG)

SPGs were predecessors to SPDs and continue to have relevance where formally retained by local authorities.

The term 'Local Development Framework' was widely used under earlier planning legislation. In practice, many authorities now refer simply to their Local Plan and associated planning documents. Nevertheless, understanding the components of the former LDF remains useful in understanding how local planning policy has evolved.

8. Permitted development rights

Permitted Development Rights (PDRs) allow specified forms of development to proceed without the need for express planning permission.

Examples include:

- Small domestic extensions.

- Loft conversions.
- Certain changes of use.
- Telecommunications equipment.

Rights are granted through the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order.

Limitations may apply within Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, and through Article 4 Directions.

9. Development control and development management

Development Management is the process through which planning applications are assessed and determined.

The process seeks to ensure that development:

- Complies with planning policy.
- Protects public amenity.
- Promotes sustainable development.
- Delivers high-quality design.

Material considerations commonly include:

- Design and appearance.
- Impact on neighbouring occupiers.
- Traffic and highway safety.
- Heritage impacts.
- Environmental effects.
- Planning history.

10. Enforcement of planning control

Planning enforcement addresses unauthorised development and breaches of planning conditions.

Enforcement powers include:

- Planning Contravention Notices.
- Enforcement Notices.
- Breach of Condition Notices.
- Stop Notices.
- Temporary Stop Notices.
- Injunctions.

Enforcement action is discretionary and should be proportionate to the planning harm caused.

11. Building regulations and building control

Building Regulations establish minimum technical standards for construction.

They address:

- Structural stability.
- Fire safety.
- Accessibility.
- Energy efficiency.
- Drainage.
- Ventilation.
- Sound insulation.

Building Regulations approval is separate from planning permission.

Building Control functions may be carried out by Local Authority Building Control departments or approved inspectors.

12. Stages of determining planning applications

Typical stages include:

Pre-Application stage

Early engagement between applicants and planning officers to identify key issues.

Submission and validation

Applications are checked for completeness and statutory requirements.

Consultation

Consultation may involve:

- Neighbour notification.
- Site notices.
- Press advertisements.
- Statutory consultees.

Assessment

Officers evaluate proposals against planning policies and material considerations.

Recommendation

A planning officer prepares a report recommending approval or refusal.

Decision

Determination may occur through delegated powers or Planning Committee consideration.

Post-Decision

Applicants may discharge conditions, amend schemes, appeal refusals, or implement approved development.

13. The 45-degree code

The 45-degree code is a residential design assessment tool used by many local authorities.

It seeks to safeguard:

- Daylight.
- Sunlight.
- Outlook.
- Residential amenity.

The assessment involves drawing a 45-degree line from neighbouring habitable room windows. Development that breaches the guideline may indicate unacceptable impact, although each proposal is assessed on its merits.

14. Planning obligations – section 106 agreements

Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 enables local authorities to secure planning obligations necessary to make development acceptable.

Obligations commonly secure:

- Affordable housing.
- Highway improvements.
- Public open space.
- Education contributions.
- Healthcare facilities.
- Employment and training initiatives.

Obligations must satisfy statutory tests of necessity, direct relevance, and proportionality.

15. Wheelchair accessibility considerations

Accessibility is an important component of sustainable development.

Key considerations include:

- Step-free access.
- Accessible parking bays.
- Lift provision.
- Wheelchair manoeuvring space.
- Adaptable housing layouts.
- Accessible sanitary facilities.

Relevant guidance includes Building Regulations Approved Document M and London Plan accessibility standards.

16. Considering the needs of diverse communities

Planning has an important role in supporting inclusive communities and ensuring access to appropriate social, cultural, educational, religious, and community facilities.

Historically, some local planning authorities adopted specific policies addressing the needs of ethnic minority communities.

Example: Harrow UDP Saved Policy C11 ("Ethnic Communities") recognised the needs of Harrow's diverse communities and sought to facilitate the provision of appropriate community, cultural, educational, religious, and support facilities.

Modern planning policy tends to address these objectives through broader policies relating to equality, community facilities, accessibility, health and wellbeing, social infrastructure, and inclusive development.

This approach also avoids the impression that C11 remains an active policy.

17. PPG2 – green belts

PPG2 historically provided national policy guidance on Green Belts.

The principal purposes of Green Belt designation are:

1. To check unrestricted urban sprawl.
2. To prevent neighbouring towns merging.
3. To safeguard the countryside from encroachment.
4. To preserve the setting of historic towns.
5. To encourage urban regeneration.

Although replaced by the NPPF, these principles remain central to Green Belt policy.

18. BREEAM

BREEAM (Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method) is the UK's leading environmental assessment methodology for buildings.

Assessment categories include:

- Energy.
- Water.
- Materials.
- Waste.
- Transport.
- Pollution.
- Ecology.
- Health and Wellbeing.
- Management.

Ratings range from Pass to Outstanding and are frequently required by planning policies for major developments.

19. Flood risk assessment (FRA)

A Flood Risk Assessment evaluates flood risk associated with a proposed development.

An FRA may assess:

- River flooding.
- Surface water flooding.
- Groundwater flooding.
- Sewer flooding.
- Reservoir failure.

The assessment should demonstrate:

- Site suitability.
- Risk mitigation measures.
- Sustainable drainage solutions.
- Compliance with national and local flood risk policies.

Flood Risk Assessments are generally required for development within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and for certain major developments.

20. Local Plans

The Local Plan is the principal planning policy document prepared by a Local Planning Authority. It establishes the long-term vision and framework for development and is used in determining planning applications.

Local Plans commonly address:

- Housing.
- Employment.
- Town centres.
- Transport.
- Community infrastructure.
- Climate change.
- Environmental protection.
- Design and place-making.
- Health and wellbeing.

Example: Harrow Local Plan 2021–2041

The Harrow Local Plan illustrates how a modern Local Plan may address a wide range of interconnected planning issues. These include housing delivery and affordable housing, economic growth and town centre regeneration, community facilities and social infrastructure, health and health inequalities, climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity enhancement, sustainable transport, accessibility and inclusive design, environmental protection, and the protection of local character and suburban identity. The Plan also seeks to support sustainable communities by integrating land-use planning with infrastructure provision, public services, environmental objectives, and community wellbeing.

Professional practice note

For planning officers, architects, developers, and other planning professionals, the significance of the Local Plan is that community, health, equality, accessibility, and environmental considerations are increasingly embedded throughout the planning process rather than treated as separate specialist topics. They should be considered alongside housing, transport, design, infrastructure, and economic objectives when preparing, assessing, or determining development proposals. Modern planning practice increasingly focuses on delivering sustainable and inclusive places that contribute positively to the long-term wellbeing of communities.

21. Planning policy scrutiny

The planning system involves both plan-making and decision-making. While much public attention focuses on planning applications, local authorities also prepare and adopt planning policies and strategies that guide future development.

These may include Local Plans, Waste Plans, Area Action Plans, Supplementary Planning Documents, and supporting evidence studies. Such documents often address complex issues including housing, transport, environmental protection, infrastructure, climate change, health, and economic development.

Elected councillors play an important role in reviewing and scrutinising these policies before they are adopted. This helps ensure that planning policies are evidence-based, reflect local priorities, and have been informed by appropriate consultation and public engagement.

The preparation and scrutiny of planning policy are therefore an important part of the planning system, since adopted policies will influence planning decisions for many years.

22. Key considerations for planning committee members determining applications

Although planning officers are professionally qualified and provide recommendations based on planning policy and technical assessments, elected councillors on Planning Committees must make the final decision and exercise independent judgement. The following key principles can assist members when determining planning applications:

a. Determine applications in accordance with the development plan

Planning decisions should be made in accordance with the adopted Development Plan (Local Plan, London Plan, and national policy) unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Personal opinions should not override planning policy.

b. Focus on material planning considerations

Members should base decisions on relevant planning matters such as:

- Design and appearance.
- Impact on neighbouring amenity.
- Highway safety and parking.
- Environmental effects.
- Heritage considerations.
- Sustainability and accessibility.

Issues such as loss of property value, private disputes, competition between businesses, or personal characteristics of applicants are generally not material planning considerations.

c. Give appropriate weight to professional advice

Planning officers, highway engineers, environmental health officers, conservation officers, and other specialists provide professional assessments. Members may depart from officer recommendations but should have clear and defensible planning reasons for doing so.

d. Consider the public interest rather than individual interests

Planning is concerned with the wider public interest. Members should balance the benefits and impacts of development on the community as a whole rather than focusing solely on the interests of individual supporters or objectors.

e. Avoid predetermination and bias

Committee members should approach each application with an open mind. While members may have preliminary views, they should listen to all evidence presented before reaching a decision. Decisions must be fair, impartial, and capable of withstanding scrutiny.

f. Be able to defend the decision at appeal

Any decision to approve or refuse an application should be supported by clear planning reasons linked to adopted policies and material considerations. Poorly reasoned decisions may be overturned on appeal and can expose the Council to awards of costs where unreasonable behaviour is found.

g. Practical decision-making test

When considering any representation from an applicant, supporter, objector, or fellow committee member, councillors may find it helpful to ask:

- What planning policy is relevant to this issue?
- Is this a material planning consideration?
- What evidence supports the point being made?
- What weight should reasonably be given to it?
- Could this reason be clearly explained and defended at appeal?

If a reason cannot be linked to planning policy or a recognised material planning consideration, it is unlikely to be a sound basis for determining the application.

Using these questions can help ensure that decisions remain focused on planning merits rather than personal opinions or matters that fall outside the planning system.

23 . Contemporary developments in planning decision-making

The planning system continues to evolve in response to government policy objectives aimed at accelerating housing delivery, infrastructure provision, environmental improvement, and economic growth. Recent reforms have strengthened the emphasis on plan-making, strategic planning, digital technologies, environmental outcomes, and more efficient decision-making processes. Greater reliance is being placed on adopted development plans, strategic planning

frameworks, and the delegation of planning decisions to professionally qualified officers where proposals accord with approved policies.

One significant recent reform in England is the introduction of a National Scheme of Delegation through powers contained in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 and subsequent regulations. The scheme is intended to create greater consistency across local planning authorities regarding which planning applications are determined by planning officers and which are referred to Planning Committees. Under the new arrangements, certain categories of applications must be determined by officers, while others may be referred to committee only where specified criteria are met. The reforms are due to take effect from 31 October 2026.

Supporters of the reforms argue that planning committees should focus on applications of greater strategic, economic, environmental, or community significance, while routine and technical applications can be determined more efficiently by professionally qualified officers. The Government has stated that the purpose of the reforms is to improve consistency, certainty, and efficiency within the planning system.

Critics have expressed concerns that increasing officer delegation may reduce the role of elected councillors in planning decisions and may diminish opportunities for local democratic scrutiny. Some commentators and planning organisations have questioned whether the reforms strike the correct balance between efficiency and local accountability. These debates reflect a longstanding tension within the planning system between professional decision-making, democratic oversight, and the need to deliver development in a timely manner.

Despite these changes, elected members continue to play an important role in shaping planning policy, scrutinising planning strategies, representing community interests, and determining those applications that require committee consideration. For councillors, planning professionals, and community organisations, the reforms highlight the continuing importance of understanding how planning decisions are made and the relationship between national policy objectives, professional planning advice, and local democratic accountability.

Conclusion

The planning system is both a technical and democratic process. It encompasses the preparation of planning policy, the scrutiny of plans and strategies, community participation, development management, and the determination of planning applications.

For Planning Committee members, the challenge is not to become planning professionals, but to understand the framework within which planning decisions are made. A working knowledge of planning policy, material considerations, community impacts, and procedural requirements enables members to engage constructively with officer recommendations, public representations, and committee debates.

The topics outlined in this introduction illustrate the breadth of issues that may arise in the determination of planning applications, from strategic policy and sustainable development to design quality, accessibility, environmental protection, health, and community wellbeing. No single application will involve every consideration, but every application requires careful judgement, balanced assessment, and a clear understanding of the planning context.

Good planning decisions are founded on openness, consistency, and reasoned judgement. Whether approving or refusing an application, members should be able to explain how their decision relates to adopted policies and material planning considerations. Decisions reached on this basis are more likely to command public confidence, withstand scrutiny, and contribute positively to the long-term development of the borough.

This guide is intended to provide a foundation for that understanding. It should be read alongside formal member training, officer advice, current planning policies, and relevant legislation. Together, these resources can help ensure that planning decisions are informed, transparent, and responsive to both local needs and the wider public interest.

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Appendix

Material and non-material planning considerations

Introduction

When determining planning applications, Planning Committee members must base their decisions on planning merits. The planning system distinguishes between material planning considerations, which may legitimately influence a decision, and non-material considerations, which generally should not.

The weight given to any material consideration will depend upon the circumstances of each case.

1. Material planning considerations

Material considerations are matters that relate to the use and development of land and are relevant to the planning decision.

Common examples include:

Design and appearance

- Scale, height and massing.
- Layout and siting.
- Architectural design.
- Visual impact on the street scene.
- Impact on local character.

Residential amenity

- Loss of privacy.
- Overlooking.
- Overshadowing.
- Loss of daylight or sunlight.
- Sense of enclosure.
- Noise and disturbance.

Highways and transportation

- Traffic generation.
- Highway safety.
- Access arrangements.
- Parking provision.
- Servicing and deliveries.
- Pedestrian and cycle access.

Environmental considerations

- Air quality.
- Noise pollution.
- Land contamination.
- Flood risk.
- Drainage.
- Climate change impacts.

Heritage and conservation

- Listed buildings.
- Conservation Areas.
- Archaeological assets.
- Historic character.

Ecology and biodiversity

- Protected species.
- Trees and landscaping.
- Habitat protection.
- Biodiversity enhancement.

Community infrastructure

- Schools.
- Healthcare facilities.
- Community facilities.
- Open space.
- Recreation facilities.

Planning policy compliance

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- London Plan.
- Local Plan policies.
- Supplementary Planning Documents.

Accessibility and inclusion

- Wheelchair accessibility.
- Inclusive design.
- Access for people with disabilities.
- Compliance with accessibility standards.

Planning history

- Previous permissions.
- Appeal decisions.
- Existing lawful uses.
- Compliance with planning conditions.

Public benefits

- Affordable housing.
- Employment opportunities.
- Regeneration benefits.
- Infrastructure improvements.
- Environmental enhancements.

2. Non-material planning considerations

The following matters are generally not material planning considerations and should not influence the determination of a planning application.

Property values

- Potential increase or decrease in house prices.
- Financial impact on neighbouring property owners.

Private legal matters

- Restrictive covenants.
- Boundary disputes.
- Rights of way (unless affecting planning issues).
- Ownership disputes.

Personal circumstances

Except in exceptional cases where planning policy specifically allows consideration:

- Personal preferences.
- Lifestyle choices.
- Identity of the applicant.
- Personal popularity or unpopularity.

Competition between businesses

- Loss of trade.
- Commercial competition.
- Protection of existing businesses from competition.

Political or personal opinions

- Personal political opinions.
- General opposition to government policy.
- Views unrelated to land-use planning.

Construction inconvenience

Temporary disruption during construction is generally not a reason to refuse permission where it can be adequately managed through conditions or other controls.

Conduct of the applicant

The character, reputation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, political affiliation, or personal background of an applicant is not normally relevant to the planning merits of a proposal.

3. Matters requiring particular care

Some issues may be raised frequently by objectors and supporters but require careful consideration before weight is given to them.

Loss of view

There is generally no legal right to retain a private view. However, the impact of a development on outlook and residential amenity may be material.

Fear of crime

Perceived fear alone is unlikely to justify refusal. However, genuine design and community safety considerations may be relevant.

Effect on local services

Concerns about pressure on schools, healthcare facilities, roads, and community infrastructure may be material if supported by evidence.

Precedent

Each planning application must be considered on its own merits. However, previous decisions and appeal outcomes may be relevant considerations.