



EXPLAINER

Planning in England

This explainer has been written by the [Town and Country Planning Association](#) and is intended to give an overview of the planning system in England. The explainer provides a simple overview and entry level explanations of the current system.

WHAT IS PLANNING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Across the country, people's lives are being cut short because we don't all have the same opportunities to live healthy, active lives. Access to good-quality homes, education and safe spaces in which to play, be active and socialise all determine how long and how well we are likely to live – they are the building blocks of a healthy society.

Planning shapes many of these building blocks, often referred to as the wider determinants of health, and an understanding of the planning system and how it works is important for Active Partnerships seeking to advocate for and support active environments.

The [Plain English guide to the planning system](#) states that:

Planning ensures that the right development happens in the right place at the right time, benefitting communities and the economy. It plays a critical role in identifying what development is needed and where, what areas need to be protected or enhanced and in assessing whether proposed development is suitable.

Fundamentally, the English planning system aims to manage how land and buildings are used to ensure that all development occurs in the public interest. It is about making decisions that balance the sometimes competing needs of the environment, society and the economy.



Throughout this explainer, words in **bold** are defined in the glossary below.

PLANNING FOR ACTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Planning is essential for supporting physical activity and creating **active environments** in England. By integrating opportunities for physical activity into the design of neighbourhoods, towns and cities, through parks, cycle paths, sports facilities and pedestrian friendly streets, planning can support public health, reduce inequalities and promote well-being. Planning also plays a role in protecting existing activity spaces and facilities, and ensures new developments contribute to the provision of sports and leisure infrastructure.

Through national policies like the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** and the work of organisations such as Sport England and Active Travel England, planning plays a vital role in encouraging active lifestyles and making physical activity an easy, enjoyable and routine part of everyday life.

ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Government departments and agencies

In the English planning system national stakeholders play a crucial role in shaping the context within which local planning decisions are made. These stakeholders include government departments, **statutory consultees** and national politicians who collectively influence planning policy, oversee major developments and ensure that national interests are upheld.

At the heart of national planning governance is the **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)**. MHCLG set out national planning policy and guidance, such as the **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** and **Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)** and provide strategic oversight of the planning system. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government holds significant powers, including the ability to take control of decision making on planning applications - known as "call in" - and will often make final decisions on controversial or nationally significant development proposals. The **Planning Inspectorate (PINS)**, an executive agency of the government, are responsible for handling planning appeals, examining Local Plans to check they are fit for purpose and overseeing decisions on **nationally significant infrastructure projects**.

Several statutory bodies also play a key role in ensuring that planning decisions align with national environmental, heritage and infrastructure priorities. The Environment Agency provide guidance on environmental protection and flood risk; Historic England advise on the impact of development on heritage assets; Natural England focus on conserving biodiversity and protected areas; and National Highways manage impacts on the strategic road network.

All of these stakeholders influence the planning system at the national level.

Local authorities

At the local level a wide range of stakeholders are involved, each contributing to how development is proposed, assessed and delivered. District, borough, unitary and metropolitan councils are **Local planning authorities (LPAs)**, with responsibilities for preparing local planning policy, including **Local Plans**, determining planning applications and enforcing when planning laws are broken. Regional authorities and County Councils can also have some planning powers for example over waste or minerals planning. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of the current key local government structures in England.

Within authorities, local councillors and elected members play a key role in decision making by sitting on planning committees, voting on planning decisions and representing the interests of their constituents.

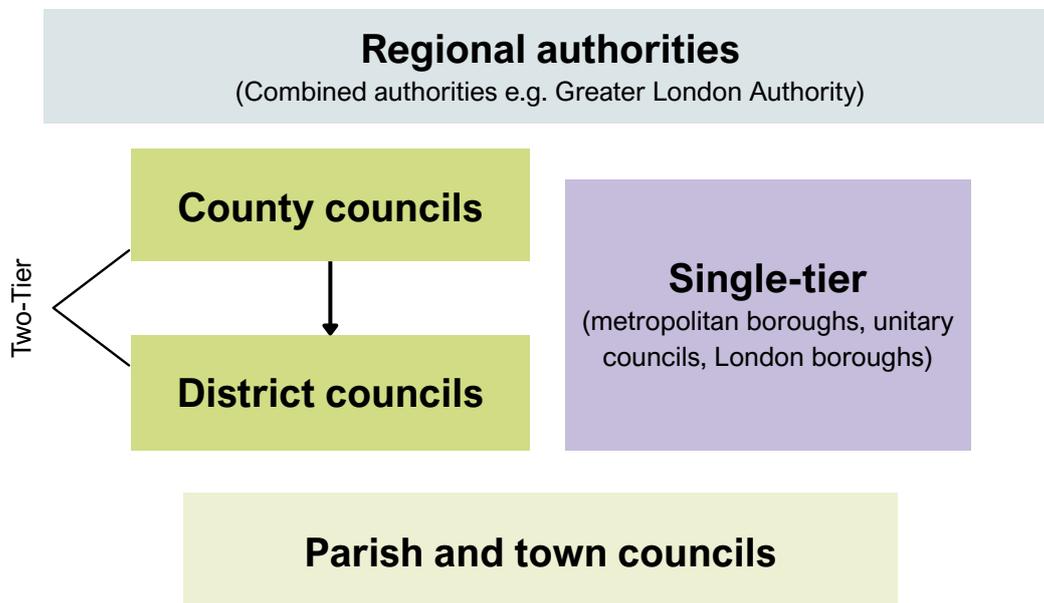


Figure 1: Local government structure in England

Parish and town councils act as statutory consultees on planning applications and have the power to prepare **Neighbourhood Plans** under the Localism Act 2011. Neighbourhood Plans include planning policy and enable local communities to influence development in their area. In addition, local residents and community groups are vital participants in the planning process. They can engage in consultations and submit representations on applications to influence local decision-making.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

National planning policy and Local Plans essentially set the rules for what gets built and where. Local policy must generally follow what national policy says. **Building Regulations** are also an important parallel system in managing the built environment, although their influence over health and wellbeing is limited (see Figure 2).

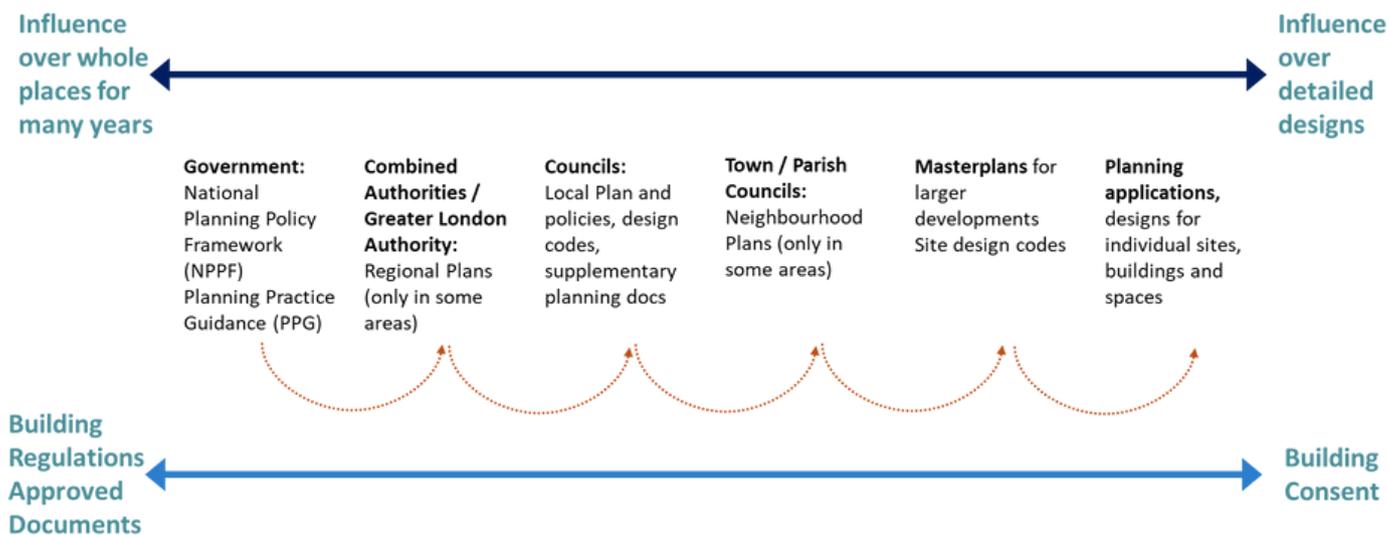


Figure 2: National and local planning policies in England

The policy and guidance that control and influence places is created at different levels of government and impacts at different scales of place, from the whole country to a planning application site.

Regional Plans only apply to some areas, such as in London and Greater Manchester, and outline strategic, regional level priorities, often involving multiple councils/local authorities.

Local Plans, Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) and Design Codes are created by local authorities and apply to development in their area, or to a specific site in their area.

Planning applications, for individual projects, small or large, should comply with the policies set out in the Local Plan. Planning law makes clear that all decisions on planning applications should be made in line with the Local Plan and other local policy unless there are other strong reasons or ‘material considerations’ that indicate otherwise. Every application is assessed by the council’s planning officers and where appropriate a decision is issued by them or will be taken by the council’s planning committee.

Making a planning decision is always a balance of considerations and at times competing demands. Legal, policy and guidance considerations all hold different ‘weight’ in decision making, but ultimately the system is plan-led which means Local plans are fundamental for achieving healthy, active environments.



Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)

Whilst not included in Figure 2, it is important to note that Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are large-scale developments in England that go beyond the scope of normal local planning procedures and are instead governed by a special consent regime, managed by the Planning Inspectorate.

Plan-making is the process of preparing, testing through public consultation and ultimately adopting a Local Plan. By law every LPA must produce a Local Plan for its area. It should contain a series of maps and policies setting out what can be built and where, based on assessments of local need (for example local housing needs) and in response to local priorities (for example if a Council has declared a Climate Emergency).

The stages of making a Local Plan are set out in Figure 3. Local Plans typically cover a 15 to 20-year period, but every five years they must be reviewed. Creating a Local Plan often takes several years to complete and requires considerable resource and skill.

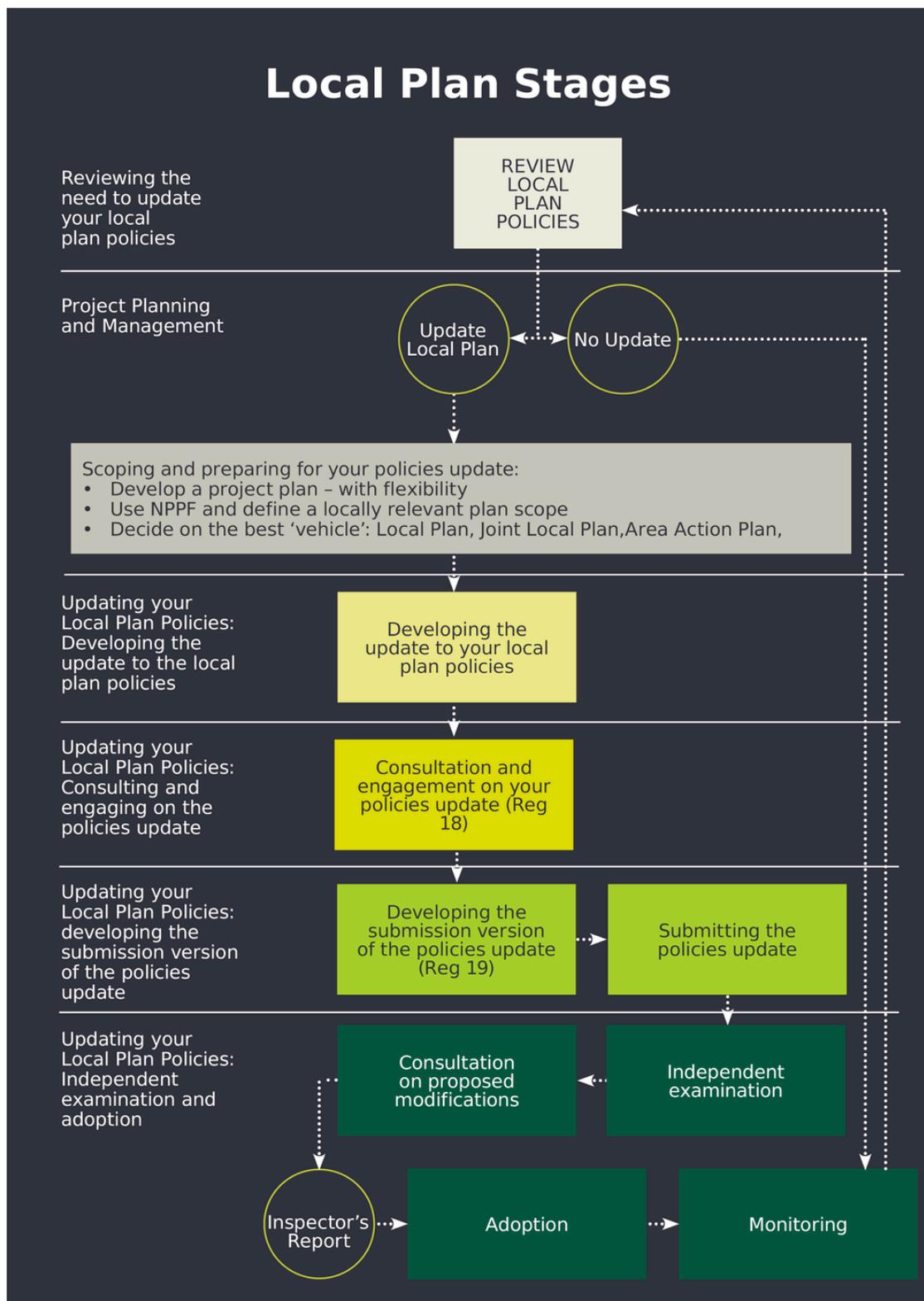
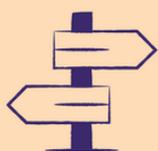


Figure 3: Local Plan stages, taken from [PAS Local Plan Route Mapper and Toolkit 2025](#)

Local Plans, planning policy and decisions must be based on robust evidence and justified. A significant part of developing a Local Plan is gathering an evidence base for the policies and approaches the local authority wishes to take.

Public consultation opportunities are built into the preparation stages of a Local Plan, known as Reg 18 and Reg 19 (see Figure 3) but the opportunities to make changes and influence policy reduce as the plan progresses to examination by the Planning Inspectorate.



For more information on creating healthy Local Plans see the TCPA's [Planning for healthy places - a guide on embedding health in Local Plans and planning policy in England](#)

WHY POLICY MATTERS FOR ACTIVITY

Planning plays a critical role in shaping environments that support and encourage physical activity. Planning policy can mandate that development proposals use and consider the principles of **Active Design** and create active environments. Where Local Plans and policy do not mention or consider active environments and design features that support physical activity it can be extremely difficult to introduce this as an influence on development, planning applications or as a reason to refuse consent for an application. In our plan-led planning system, getting policies in place that support physical activity is crucial.

It is also worth remembering that designing places that can help people be more active is positive for a wide range of current planning and societal priorities including reducing costs to the health system, lowering carbon emissions, improving air quality and improving economic productivity.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

There are ways to engage with the planning system to promote active environments and Active Design.

Building knowledge, confidence and capacity is key.

Developing relationships with planners in the local authority and responding to consultations on Local Plans or other local planning policy documents, particularly in the early stages of process, is also important.

Commenting on planning applications and engaging with developers can also influence the outcomes of development.

When responding to consultations or commenting on planning applications it is important to justify comments, demonstrate how they link to national and Local Plan policy and guidance, and where possible, provide evidence from your work or by highlighting data like [Sport England's Active Lives](#).

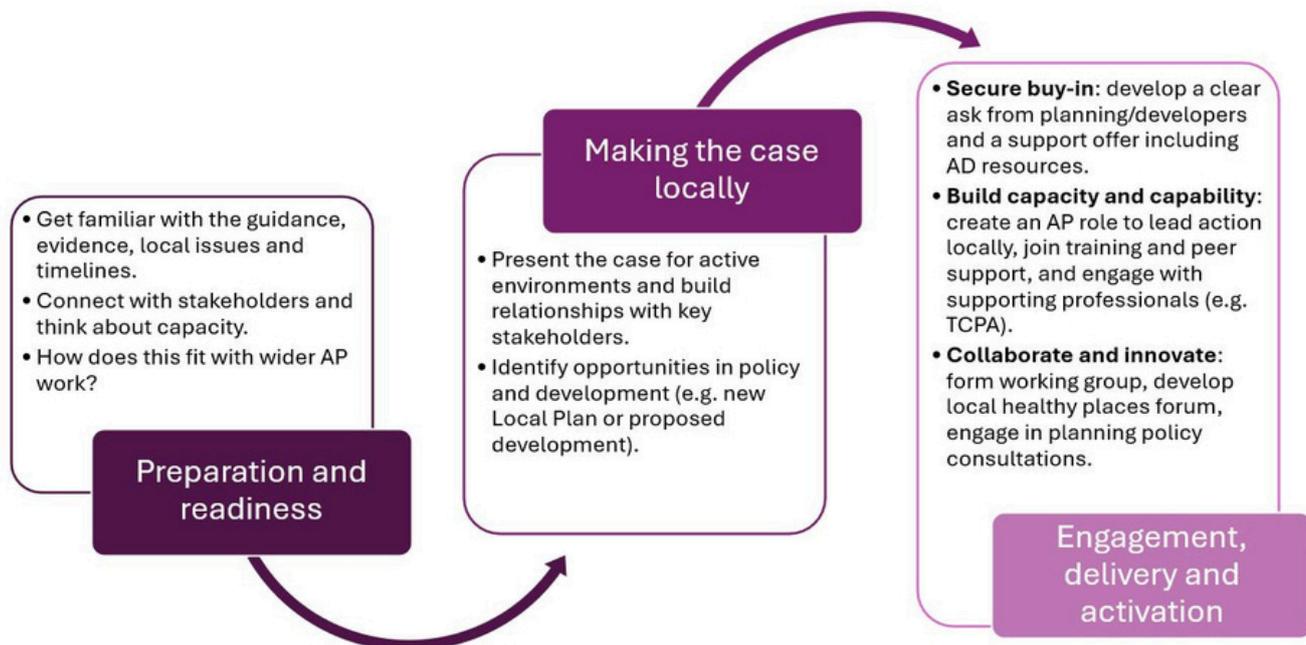


Figure 4: Mechanisms for involvement

FINAL NOTES

The planning system in England is a complicated mix of law, policy and guidance. It is also a system that has been undergoing reform by governments of all types for decades.

Current planning reform in England is set to bring significant changes to how places are planned and developed. A stronger role for strategic planning is being introduced. By 2029, all areas in England are expected to have Spatial Development Strategies, led by mayors or larger unitary local authorities. These strategies will guide long-term growth (over 30 years), including where new housing, infrastructure and green spaces should go. They will not replace Local Plans but will strongly influence them, especially by setting regional housing targets and tackling issues that cross council boundaries. For local authorities, strengthening relationships with neighbouring authorities and cross-boundary cooperation will become central under the new system.

During this period of uncertainty and whilst waiting for the planning reforms to be fully implemented, it is not important to understand every nuance of what is happening but it is important that we continue to advocate for, and take every opportunity to embed, improved health and activity levels as key objectives of the planning system.

GLOSSARY

Term	Plain English meaning
Active Design	Active Design, by Sport England, sets out 10 principles for the design of places to create 'active environments'.
Active environments	Places and spaces designed and built to encourage and facilitate physical activity.
Building Regulations	A set of rules and standards that govern the design and construction of buildings to ensure they are safe and energy-efficient.
Design Code	A design code is a set of design requirements for a site or area. It is made up of rules that are clear, specific and unambiguous.
Local Plan	The council's rulebook that says what can be built, where, and how places should develop over the next 10-15 years.
Local planning authority (LPA)	The local council responsible for planning decisions.
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)	The ministry responsible for housing, communities, and local government in England.
National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)	Government's national planning rules that guide decisions across England. Local Plans must follow these rules.
Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)	Large-scale developments in categories like energy, transport, water, waste, and waste water, defined by the Planning Act 2008.
Neighbourhood Plan	A plan made by local communities to have more say over how their neighbourhood develops.
Planning application	A formal request to build something new or change how land or buildings are used.

Term	Plain English meaning
Planning Inspectorate (PINS)	National body that checks if Local Plans are sound and can handle appeals when people challenge planning decisions.
Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)	The PPG adds further detail and context to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and it is intended that the two should be read together.
Regional Plan	A high-level framework for planning across a broader area than a single city or town, setting strategic spatial planning goals for areas such as housing, environment, and economy.
Spatial Development Strategies	A newer term for a strategic regional plan, prepared by a Combined Authority or elected Mayor to cover housing, infrastructure, and economic growth over a defined region for at least 15 years.
Statutory consultee	A statutory consultee refers to a person or organisation that must be consulted by law in specific circumstances, particularly in the context of planning applications.
Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)	SPDs build upon and provide more detailed advice or guidance on policies in an adopted Local Plan.



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