Who Decides Planning Applications?

From **31 October 2026**, new national rules changed how most local planning authorities in England decide which planning applications are handled by planning officers and which can be considered by a planning committee.

The change is called the **National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions**. It creates a more consistent framework across England, replacing many local rules that currently determine when an application goes to committee.

The most important point for residents is simple: **you can still comment on planning applications, and relevant planning objections still have to be considered.**

What type of application can be called to Planning Committee

This guide explains the planning committee changes, who decides planning applications from 31 October 2026, how the new referral process works, and what residents should look for when commenting on development near them.

Who decides planning applications now?

Planning applications are decided by the local planning authority. In many councils, most applications are already decided by professional planning officers under powers delegated to them, while a smaller number are decided by elected councillors at a planning committee.

Until now, councils have had significant freedom to set their own schemes of delegation. A local constitution might allow a ward councillor to call any type of application in to Planning Committee.

That local variation is what the new national scheme is designed to reduce.

The **government's statutory guidance on the National Scheme of Delegation** says the aim is to give greater clarity and consistency about the role of planning committees, with committees focusing on proposals where local democratic oversight is most important.

What changed on 31 October 2026?

The new system divides specified planning functions into two main groups.

Schedule 1: applications that must be decided by officers

Applications in Schedule 1 must normally be delegated to planning officers for a decision.

Government guidance says this includes categories such as:

- householder development;
- minor commercial development;
- minor residential development, generally one to nine homes on a site smaller than 0.5 hectares;
- many applications to discharge planning conditions;
- many prior approval applications under permitted development rights;
- permission in principle;
- non-material amendments;

- certificates of lawfulness;
- some reserved matters applications that are not connected to a large outline permission.

There are detailed definitions and exceptions, so the category of an individual application should always be checked against the regulations and the council's published arrangements.

Own-interest applications, where the council, a member or an officer has an interest, have separate provisions designed to support transparency.

Schedule 2: officer decision is the starting point, but committee referral can be possible

Schedule 2 includes applications such as:

- planning applications that are not householder, minor commercial or minor residential applications;
- applications connected with some listed building consent matters;
- some applications to vary conditions;
- retrospective applications under section 73A;
- reserved matters connected to a large outline planning permission;
- listed building consent applications;
- advertisement consent applications;
- applications for consent under tree preservation orders.

The key point is that **Schedule 2 does not mean automatic committee consideration**.

Government guidance says the overriding presumption is still that Schedule 2 applications are decided by officers. A case can be referred to committee only where the national gateway is satisfied and the nominated planning officer and nominated planning committee member agree that it should be referred.

What is the new planning committee gateway test?

For a Schedule 2 application to be referred to committee under the national scheme, at least one of two statutory criteria must be met:

1. the application raises an **economic, social or environmental issue of significance to the local area**; or
2. the application raises a **significant planning matter**, having regard to the development plan and other material considerations.

Even where one of those criteria is met, committee referral is not automatic. The council's nominated officer and nominated committee member must agree to the referral.

The government guidance says referral should be exceptional, with officer determination as the starting point.

It also says councils do not have to put every Schedule 2 application through the referral gateway. Councils can decide through their constitutions which Schedule 2 or own-interest applications need to be considered for possible referral.

Do planning objections still matter?

Yes.

The new rules change **who makes the final decision**, not whether residents can comment.

Planning officers must still consider relevant representations made during consultation. If you object to an application because of issues such as overlooking, loss of privacy, design, traffic, noise, heritage impact or another material planning consideration, those points can still form part of the planning assessment.

Can a councillor still call in a planning application?

A ward councillor can still raise concerns, make representations and represent residents.

What changes is that ward councillor's can call in any schedule 2 application that is considered to satisfy one of the two gateway tests within 21 days of the application appearing on the councils weekly list. The ward Councillor will then be given the opportunity to support the reason for the call in at the monthly gateway test setting out why the believe the application proposal raises a significant local or planning issue. This will then be considered by the Nominated Officer and Nominated Member as to weather or not the application passes the gateway test.

Does every planning application now bypass committee?

No.

That would be an inaccurate reading of the reform.

Planning committees will continue to decide applications where the national rules allow referral and the referral process is satisfied. Functions that are outside Schedule 1 and Schedule 2 can also continue to be allocated locally through the council's constitution.

The government says the objective is for committees to focus on key proposals rather than routine or technical decisions.

The scheme also contains special provisions for own-interest applications, where transparency and propriety may make committee consideration appropriate.

What happens if the planning application was submitted before 31 October 2026 ?

The important date is the date of the **decision**, not necessarily the date the application was submitted.

Government statutory guidance says local planning authorities must comply with the regulations from 31 October 2026. Councils have also been advising that applications submitted before that date can be affected if they remain undecided when the new rules take effect.

What is not changing?

Several important parts of the planning process remain in place.

You can still comment on planning applications

Residents, neighbours, community groups and parish or town councils can continue to make representations where consultation applies.

Material planning considerations still matter

The decision still has to be made on planning grounds. The development plan and other material considerations remain central to the assessment.

Planning officers still have to assess the evidence

An officer decision is not an automatic approval. Officers can approve, refuse or impose conditions where the legal and planning framework allows.

Planning committees are not being abolished

Committees remain part of the planning system. The new rules change which cases they can consider and create a more standard national route for referral.

Local council information still matters

Councils still need to publish their own arrangements, amend their constitutions where necessary and explain how the referral process will operate locally.

How transparent will committee referrals be?

The statutory guidance says councils should keep a record of cases considered for referral, the outcome and the reasons for the decision. It says this information should be reported regularly to the planning committee and made available on the council's website.

For residents, this should provide a useful new place to look when a significant application is decided by officers rather than committee.

If your council publishes a referral or gateway record, check:

- whether the application was considered for referral;
- which gateway criterion was considered;
- whether referral was agreed or rejected;
- the reasons given for that decision.

What should residents do differently after 31 October 2026?

The strongest approach is to focus less on trying to trigger a committee hearing and more on the planning issues the decision maker must assess.

When you find an application near you:

1. **Check the application type.** Find out whether it appears to fall into Schedule 1, Schedule 2 or another category.
2. **Read the latest plans and documents.** Make sure your comments address the current proposal.
3. **Comment on material planning issues.** Explain the specific impact and point to evidence where possible.
4. **Do not rely on objection numbers.** A large number of objections does not automatically require committee consideration.
5. **Contact your councillor if appropriate.** Councillors can still represent local concerns, even though an individual call-in no longer guarantees committee referral.

6. **Look for the council's gateway or referral record.** This can show whether a Schedule 2 case was considered for committee and why.
7. **Check the officer report or committee papers.** These explain how the planning issues and representations were assessed.

Why is the government changing planning committees?

The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 gave the Secretary of State powers to create the national scheme. The government's stated aim is to create greater consistency and certainty across England and allow planning committees to focus on more complex or significant development.

The **Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 explanatory notes** say the reform is intended to speed up decision making while retaining local democratic oversight for cases where it is required.

The detailed rules are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Discharge of Local Planning Authority Functions) (England) Regulations 2026, supported by **statutory guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**.

Primary sources

- **Planning Committees and the National Scheme of Delegation of Planning Functions: statutory guidance**
- **Planning committee reform: statutory consultation and government response**
- **Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 explanatory notes**

Sources and references

1. **government's statutory guidance on the National Scheme of Delegation**gov.uk
2. **Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 explanatory notes**legislation.gov.uk
3. **statutory guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**gov.uk
4. **Planning committee reform: statutory consultation and government response**gov.uk

This guide is general information about how the system works in England, not legal advice. Rules and time limits can change and can differ case by case; check the council's own pages or take advice before relying on it.