



Version 1.0, Feb 2008

An Introduction to the Planning System

Why should we worry about planning?

Planning is about how we plan for, and make decisions about, the future of our cities, towns and countryside. A formal way of making these decisions has emerged over the last two hundred years.

The planning system is needed to control development in your area. Your local council, as your planning authority, is responsible for deciding whether a development - anything from an extension on a house to a new shopping centre - should go ahead.

The planning system

The planning system plays an important role in helping protect the environment in our towns and cities and in the countryside. In England and Wales, a 'plan-led system' outlines what can be built and where. The Department for 'Communities and Local Government' sets out national planning policy, but the main responsibility rests with local planning authorities. Each local planning authority must produce a Local Development Framework which outlines how planning will be managed in your area. One of the most important ways in which any VCS group can help in shaping their environment is to be actively involved when this Framework is prepared and updated.

The most useful starting point for information is the government-run '**Planning Portal**' (www.planningportal.gov.uk). This is the UK Government's online service for planning and building regulations resource for England and Wales. You can use it to learn about planning and building regulations, apply for planning permission, find out about development near you, appeal against a decision and research government policy. It has a lot of well-explained technical advisory material and provides answers to frequently asked questions, a useful glossary and some useful links, <http://eaclink.info/?FTQFX>. It also contains a useful visual guide to Local Development Frameworks.

The plan-led system

The planning system in England and Wales follows a plan-led system. This involves preparing plans that set out what can be built and where. The plan-led system was updated by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act in December 2004. This introduced a new "two-tiered" plan system to manage how development takes place in towns and the countryside, made up of

- **Regional Spatial Strategies** – prepared by the Regional Planning Body (in London, the spatial development strategy prepared by the Mayor of London). These set out a broad planning strategy for how a region should look in 15 - 20 years time or possibly

longer and set out things such as how many homes are needed to meet the future needs of people in the region, or whether the region needs a new major shopping centre or an airport.

- **Local Development Frameworks** – a set of local development documents prepared by district councils (not parish or town councils), unitary authorities or national park authorities that outline the spatial planning strategy for the local area and sets out how your local area may change over the next few years.

Together the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Local Development Framework will determine how planning the planning system will help to shape your area and community.

Getting help and advice.

Planning is a specialist issue and you do not want to give the wrong advice! If you get asked for help on a difficult issue, get the help of **Planning Aid**, www.planningaid.rtpi.org.uk. They provide free, independent and professional town planning advice and support to communities and individuals who cannot afford to pay planning consultant fees. It complements the work of local planning authorities, but is wholly independent of them.

Planning Aid engages communities positively in the planning process, to help them manage changes to their neighbourhood areas. It can help community groups to: understand and use the planning system; participate in preparing plans; prepare their own plans for the future of their community; comment on planning applications; apply for planning permission or appeal against refusal of permission and represent themselves at public inquiries.

Planning Aid helps to meet one of the key aims of the government's planning reform agenda, which is to place community engagement at the heart of the planning system.

Friends of the Earth, www.foe.co.uk/resource/local/planning, also provide a useful planning information resource.