



Accessing planning data: a guide

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WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT FOR?

We wrote this brief guide to planning data to accompany our guide to nature auditing, called 'How to audit a new build housing development'. It is intended to help you get the information you need to do the audit, and to gain a basic understanding of the planning system.



ACCESSING PLANNING DATA

It says something about the state of planning data that getting the information you need to hold developers to account is actually the hardest part of the audit.

Planning data is hard to access because it is not presented in a clear, user-friendly and logical fashion. Different Local Planning Authorities use different online systems and present data in different ways. We cannot cover all possible permutations in this guide, but we hope to provide you with some key guiding principles that will enable you to find the documents you need.

Do not be surprised if you cannot find an important document on the council planning portal - you may have to contact your Local Planning Authority and ask them to send it to you.

Where is planning data stored?

It is seen as good practice for Local Planning Authorities to put all of the official documents associated with a planning application onto **local planning portals** that are accessible to the public. Your local authority will have one, probably on the council's website.

This is supposed to enable democratic overview by the wider community: you have a democratic right to a say over the future of the places where you live, work and spend your leisure time.

UNDERSTANDING THE PLANNING PROCESS

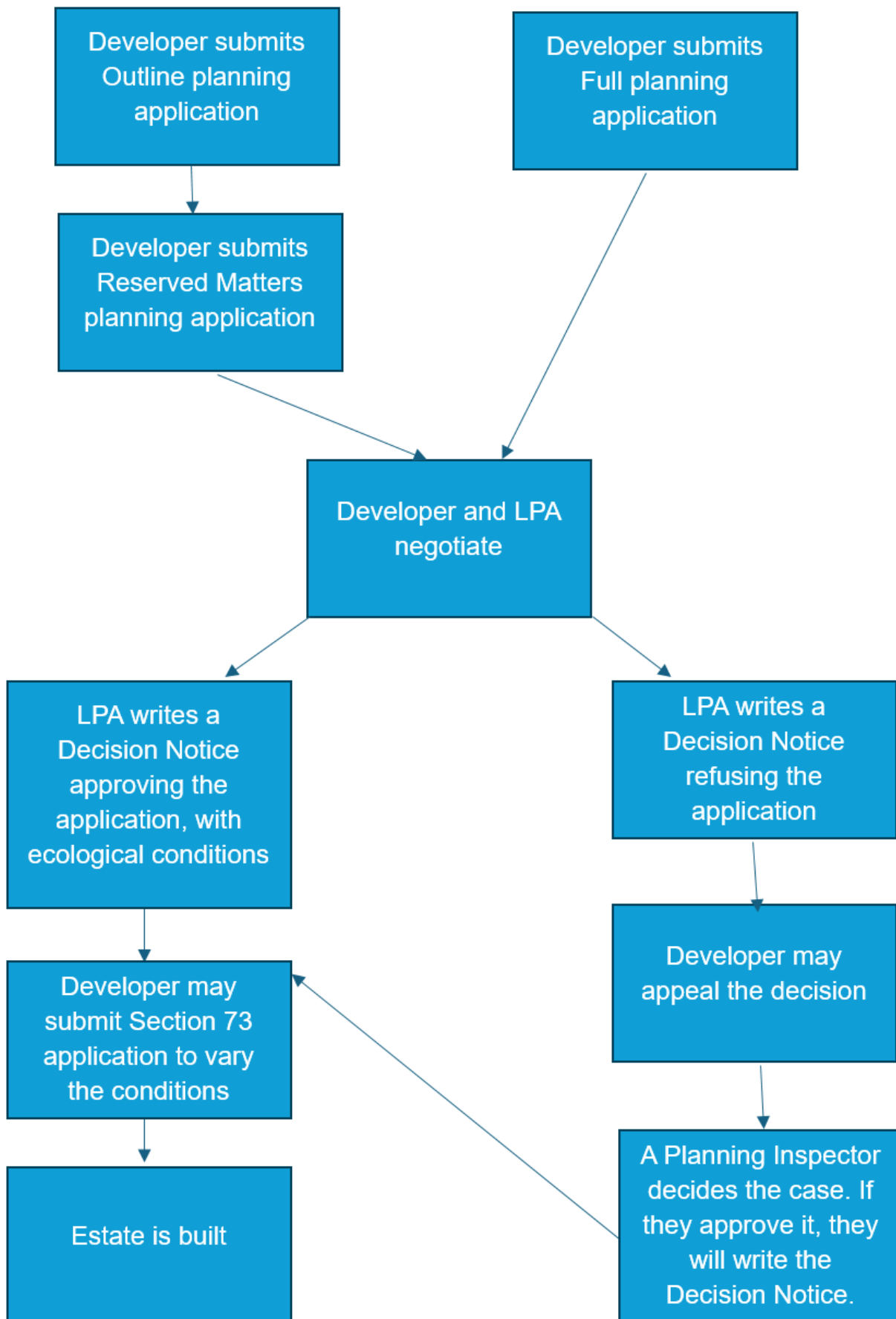
For the audit, it is very important to download the right version of key documents. It can be easy to make a mistake and get the wrong plans. If this happens, all of your hard work will be in vain! So it's worth spending some time making sure you get the correct information.

Housing developments will often have hundreds of documents associated with them. This guide will help you identify which ones you need to look at. Before we start, however, it is helpful to know a little bit about how the planning system works, as this can assist you in finding the right data.

Planning applications for residential housing estates follow two possible routes:

1. A two-stage process, in which the developer first submits an Outline application with basic details (such as the location of the site and how it will be accessed), followed by a Reserved Matters application with the remaining details such as landscaping plans. Many, though not all, documents relevant to your audit will be in the reserved matters application.
2. A Full planning application, which contains all the information.





GETTING STARTED

Finding your Local Council's planning portal

Your local council (or more formally the 'Local Planning Authority) will have a planning portal containing information about planning applications. If you do not know which local planning authority your development lies in, you can check [here](#).

How do I find the development I want to audit?

You can search by address or postcode, but with new developments there often isn't a specific address on the planning application. This is because sometimes the parcel of land is a green field without a name. It is best to use the **map function** on the portal to search for the site (remember to ensure that your search is set sufficiently far in the past to capture the planning application: there can be a delay of several years between an application being submitted and the commencement of construction).

Why are there several planning applications for the same development?!

It is quite likely that there will be several planning applications for your site, each with a separate number on the system. This can be for a variety of reasons, most commonly because:

- there are separate applications for the Outline and Reserved Matters stages, with separate numbers.

- each condition of a planning application has to be signed off or ‘discharged’ by the Local Planning Authority. Sometimes these condition discharges are listed separately, and sometimes they are bundled together into groups. Note that the discharge process does not actually check whether the developer has complied with the condition on the ground - it is a desk-based exercise in most cases! This is why we need to do this audit.

There are other reasons for multiple applications, so keep this in mind when you search for the relevant documents.

How to find the ‘parent’ permission

We need to start by finding the first or ‘parent’ planning permission for a site. This will be either an Outline permission or a Full planning permission. It will not be a Reserved Matters application, since that is always a second stage (see Figure 1).

When you search for a particular site, you will probably pull up a lot of permissions from later in the process. Many will refer back to the ‘parent’ permission. For example:

“Application to approve details in relation to condition number 12. Affordable Housing relating to planning permission **13/04204/RG3**”.

This is an application to discharge a condition, but it gives you the name of the ‘parent’ planning permission: 13/04204/RG3.

Use the ‘parent’ permission number to search on the planning portal for your application.

If you are struggling, look for the latest version of a planning application. It will often contain an ‘Officer’s Report’. This sometimes has a ‘site history’ section, which explains the sequence of applications and (hopefully) gives the reference numbers for each. This can help to untangle a complex site where there are lots of different permissions.

What to do when the 'parent' permission is an outline not a full application

If the parent permission is an Outline permission, then you will need to find the subsequent 'Reserved Matters' application (the reference number often has the suffix 'REM' or 'RM').

You can usually find this by searching for the Outline permission reference number and looking at the related applications.



WHAT ARE THE KEY DOCUMENTS I NEED TO FIND?

The main documents you will need to audit an estate are:

- The Decision Notice for the planning application
- The soft landscaping plans
- The Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) or Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan (HMMP)
- Biodiversity Net Gain calculations (for more recent sites)
- SuDS (Sustainable urban Drainage System) plans if this is a wildlife-friendly feature on your local development.

Be aware that there may be several versions of each of these. This is because they are often subject to a process of negotiation and correction. The documents may also be scattered across different parts of the portal.

Finding the Decision Notice

Each planning application should have a **Decision Notice**. If the application has been approved, this will set out the **planning conditions: the things that the developer is required to do before, during, and after construction**. The developer signs up to fulfil these requirements as a condition of getting planning permission. The Decision Notice should be filed under an obvious title, like 'Decision' or 'Decision Notice'.

The decision notice will contain a list of conditions. Make a note of all the condition numbers that relate to ecology.

If your parent application was an Outline permission, then there will be two decision notices: one for the Outline permission and another for the Reserved Matters permission. The latter will contain the planning conditions you need.

FINDING WHAT DEVELOPERS HAVE COMMITTED TO INSTALLING

Full planning applications

With Full planning applications, most of the documents you need should have been submitted in one application. Be aware that things such as landscaping plans might be contained in multiple files for different parts of the site. (For large developments there can be 10 or more parts to the landscaping plans, and you will need all of them).

If there are multiple versions of documents produced at different times, then you will need to check that you are **using the versions that have been approved**. You will know which ones are correct because they are referenced by number in the planning conditions.

So do pay close attention to the Decision Notice - this should indicate the number or date of the document on the portal that has actually been approved.

Reserved Matters applications

For more complex applications, including Reserved Matters applications, detailed documentation, including landscaping plans, might be filed separately in the planning portal with its own reference number.

You will need to look for:

1. The Reserved Matters application(s) that references this 'parent' application - this should contain documents on the more detailed ecological elements such as landscaping plans or LEMPs.

2. The condition numbers on the Decision Notice that are relevant to ecology. In many cases, the documents that are submitted to sign off the planning condition are filed separately (often with the prefix/suffix 'CON' or 'COND'). Check the portal for the relevant condition numbers and look in the separate folders for these. (They are normally linked to the 'parent' planning application in the portal, though you might have to do some searching to find them).

Check decision notices to ensure that you are using the approved versions of documents (see above).

What if I can't find the documents I need?

If you find that documents simply aren't available, you may have to write to the council or even use an Environmental Information or Freedom of Information request to obtain them.

An Environmental Information Request is a special process to get information from a public body. You can make it in writing (via email, or by letter) though some councils have an online request form. Search online for your council's name and 'Environmental Information Request' to find the best route for you.

Once your LPA receives your message, they have 20 working days to respond.

If you struggle to get the documents you need, it is a sign that the data is not being kept in an adequate state in your Local Planning Authority. You may wish to complain about this when you send in your request.

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