



The Future of Planning Committees

CPRE briefing – May 2025

The government's proposed changes to planning committees includes introducing a new scheme of mandatory delegation for planning committees. This would include setting a consistent set of rules, set in Whitehall, for what decisions should and shouldn't be delegated to officers.

The government suggest that planning committees are too often refusing beneficial housing development schemes with insufficient planning justification, leading to an unacceptable increase in costs and delays to schemes.

However, our findings show that:

- Most planning applications are decided by local authority planning officers operating under delegated authority from the council and this has increased over time – around 96% of applications in 2023-2024
- Most applications are approved - 86% of all applications in the 2023-2024.
- Just 2.7% of major cases and 1% of minor cases has seen a planning refusal by a local authority was overturned by the Planning Inspectorate at appeal.

Given that local planning authorities are already delegating over 90% of decisions to officers, CPRE therefore believes that the best solution is to take forward a scheme of delegation that:

- Allows most planning applications to be approved within a 13-week time limit as per government guidelines enabling beneficial schemes to be delivered rapidly.
- Makes it a local decision to scrutinise cases where there are local concerns, with our findings showing the value that planning committees can bring to local decision making.

In this document CPRE have highlighted case studies of planning applications that were approved by planning officers, but then overturned by planning committees for justifiable



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reasons, decisions that would have been approved with the government's proposed scheme of mandatory delegation.

We looked at three examples of delegation schemes in place in Bromsgrove, North Northamptonshire, and Shropshire.

CPRE believes the Shropshire scheme of delegation is the ideal model as it retains the discretion of the committee chair and chief planning officer to refer applications based on important planning policy reasons, and without setting arbitrary thresholds on size without reference to local concerns.

About CPRE

CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live. With a local CPRE in every county, we work with communities, businesses, and government, nationally and locally, to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive – today and for generations to come.

If you would like to find out more about CPRE's parliamentary work, or arrange a meeting, please contact CPRE's Public Affairs Team at externalaffairs@cpre.org.uk



The Future of Planning Committees

CPRE case study – May 2025

Introduction

The government is committed to a wide-ranging programme of planning reform to help achieve its wider mission of economic growth, and to significantly boost the rate of housebuilding to achieve 1.5 million new homes by 2029.

The programme includes a series of legislative changes being taken forward through the Planning & Infrastructure Bill. The underlying rationale for, and intended outcomes of, many of these changes have been trailed in a series of 'planning reform working papers. Prominent amongst these changes are proposals to change the role of local authority planning committees.

What is the problem?

Decisions on planning applications are a legal responsibility of local planning authorities, which for most types of application are district, borough or unitary councils. Local authorities often set a 'scheme of delegation' allowing for most applications to be decided by council officers under formal delegation from the council. Such schemes can vary significantly between local authorities in terms of how many applications are delegated.

Under the government's new plans a national scheme of delegation is proposed, setting consistent rules for when local authorities should refer applications to committees or officers. Secretary of State Angela Rayner has stated:

'It is vital that planning committees operate as effectively as possible. The Bill will enable the setting of a national scheme of delegation, which we want to use to target planning committees at the most significant schemes – allowing experienced planning officers to deal

with issues like reserved matters, as well as smaller proposals from SME developers that we want to see getting through the system faster.’¹

The Bill also contains powers to set a maximum size for planning committees, and for the mandatory training of committee members.

The government and others claim that planning committees prevent beneficial development from going ahead

The government justification for changing the role of planning committees is set out in the planning reform working paper². Their principal argument is that planning committees are too often refusing beneficial housing development schemes with insufficient planning justification, meaning that the costs and delays to such schemes unacceptably increase as a result.

CPRE agrees that planning committee members can and should benefit from a greater understanding of the system, and mandatory training would be helpful in this regard, alongside having lean committees with a specified membership size. However, we believe that the evidence presented by the government is a distortion of the true picture and unsupported by the weight of evidence as to how the local planning system works.

Planning committees decide only a small number of planning applications, but the public right to appear before them is now established, and most of their decisions are upheld

The vast majority of planning applications are decided by local authority planning officers operating under delegated authority from the council. In 2023-2024, government figures found that 96% of applications in England were delegated to officers, an increase from an average of around 70% in 2000-2001. 86% of all applications in the 2023-2024 were approved.

In the two years to the end of December 2023, 22,604 planning decisions for major development were made, with 649,301 decisions for smaller or ‘minor’ developments. In just

¹ [Letter from the Deputy Prime Minister to local authorities: Introduction of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#)
– 12th March 2025

² [Planning Reform Working Paper - Planning Committees](#)



2.7% of major cases and 1% of minor cases was a decision by a local authority to refuse planning permission was overturned by the Planning Inspectorate at appeal.

Consideration of applications before committee is therefore now the exception rather than the rule in most cases, but it is also the case that where it happens, members of the public will have the right to speak before the committee.

This right was only established in 1999 due in significant part to CPRE's work on the *Planning for People* campaign. CPRE called for an end to the then common practice of holding committee meetings privately and a general right 'for those who have made representations on a planning proposal, to be heard at the committee meeting where the issue is discussed and voted on'.

In 1990 only about one in seven local authorities allowed the public to speak at planning committees. In 1999, it was estimated that half of local authorities did so. Following *Planning for People*, remaining local authorities have changed their practices with all local authorities surveyed now allowed speaking rights.

Why is local scrutiny by planning committees important?

CPRE have collected local committee decision examples using our local network to identify cases where a planning committee has played a particularly important role in holding a developer to account or reinforcing undertakings made at the local plan stage.

Many of these examples show that, in upholding committee decisions, Inspectors frequently recognised the valuable local knowledge and planning reasons presented by the committee. Crucially, in all these examples, no full costs were awarded against the council at appeal, indicating that the Inspector did not consider the committee's refusal to be unreasonable.

In multiple cases, the appeal decisions demonstrate that inspectors explicitly addressed the council committee members' reasons for refusal. Often, references to local character, traffic impacts, and cumulative harm in sensitive landscapes feature prominently. These show that committees' stances went beyond pure policy calculation and into local observational knowledge, which inspectors found to be material.

A recurring theme in these examples is that had the proposed national scheme of delegation been in effect, many of these cases would likely have been approved at officer level, meaning that local committees would never even have had the opportunity to refuse, and important local issues would not have been aired. Three key case studies are provided below.

Case Study 1: APP/E2340/W/23/3330350 (Land at Green Meadow, Trawden, Lancashire BB8 8PJ)

Key Issue: Heritage Harm

In this appeal, the proposal sought planning permission for five detached dwellings on a site within the Trawden Forest Conservation Area (TFCA) in Pendle. Planning officers had recommended approval, concluding that the design of the dwellings would be acceptable despite the site's location in a designated heritage setting. However, the planning committee refused permission, citing harm to the character and appearance of the TFCA and questioning the scheme's compatibility with local plan policies—particularly the requirement to preserve or enhance the Conservation Area.

The Inspector specifically noted that while officers had found the design acceptable, the committee's contrary conclusion fell squarely within the scope of local decision-making. The Inspector highlighted that the committee was entitled to take a more cautious approach, mindful of the Conservation Area's finely balanced policy considerations.

No costs were awarded against the local authority, with the Inspector confirming that the committee's refusal was neither unreasonable nor unjustified. This example underscores how local committees can reflect site-specific considerations—especially where impacts on a Conservation Area are in the balance—and defend that position successfully at appeal.

Why This Matters Under the Proposed Reforms: The committee's focus on local heritage factors proved decisive, validating the principle that where heritage concerns are delicately balanced, committee oversight remains indispensable. Under a stricter national delegation process, this application—viewed in isolation as broadly policy-compliant—might well have bypassed committee review, resulting in approval contrary to local heritage safeguards.

Case Study 2: APP/L3245/W/21/3269206 (Former Council Offices at Westgate, Bridgnorth, Shropshire WV16 5AA)

Key Issue: Highway Safety

Here, the proposed development comprised the demolition of disused offices and construction of thirty new homes on a brownfield site close to Bridgnorth town centre. Contrary to the planning officer's recommendation, the committee refused permission, expressing concerns about the layout creating an unacceptable highway safety risk.

On appeal, the Inspector upheld the committee's refusal, agreeing that the scheme would generate hazardous vehicle movements near a main junction. In refusing the appellants application for costs, the Inspector stated the following:

"Decisions regarding many planning matters rely on planning judgement. Notwithstanding the discussions the appellant had engaged in with Officers and the supporting information submitted with the planning application, I consider members of the committee exercised their planning judgement, which they are entitled to do, supported by appropriate reasoning and justification.

The application was subsequently resubmitted, and planning permission granted, but with the highway's issues raised by the committee addressed in the permitted proposal with an improved road access arrangement.

Why This Matters Under the Proposed Reforms: If a stricter national delegation model from the Planning Reform Working Paper had been in place, this application might have been approved at officer level, overriding the committee's more cautious view about highway safety. Instead, as the Inspector's decision illustrates, committees' detailed familiarity with local traffic patterns and site constraints can be crucial. They function as a protective, democratically accountable check—and the successful defence of this refusal on appeal reaffirms that legitimate, locally informed planning judgement remains paramount.

Case Study 3: APP/M2840/W/21/3287516 (Land East of Addington Road, Irthlingborough, North Northamptonshire NN9 5UR)

Key Issue: Design

In this appeal, the applicant sought planning permission for fifty-four dwellings on a parcel of land close to the Irthlingborough Conservation Area, with a Grade II listed building (Manor House) and a Non-Designated Heritage Asset (Manor Mews) nearby. In an earlier application for this site, planning officers had recommended approval, but the planning committee refused permission, forcing the applicant to come back with a revised scheme. That revised proposal contained improvements addressing local heritage concerns—particularly regarding impacts on the setting of Manor House and Manor Mews.

Despite officer support for the improved application, the committee again refused permission. Whilst this appeal was subsequently allowed, the cost application was refused, as the Inspector was satisfied that Committee Members properly assessed this matter objectively on the basis of the evidence provided to them.

Why This Matters Under the Proposed Reforms: Notably, this revised scheme incorporated design and layout improvements that were not part of the original application. Had the committee initially accepted the officers' recommendation for that first (and less sympathetic) design, it is unlikely these subsequent enhancements would have materialised. The applicant would have had no incentive to rework the scheme to produce the stronger, more heritage-friendly proposal that the Inspector ultimately allowed. This highlights how committee-level decision-making, despite going against officer advice, can prompt developers to improve proposals, providing a democratic “check” which delivers a final scheme more sympathetic to local character.

Conclusion and implications of the case studies

Planning committees frequently serve as a sounding board for local communities, bridging the gap between planning officers' professional analysis and the lived reality experienced by local residents. Elected councillors can bring local nuance to the decision. Where that local nuance highlights a valid material consideration, and that in turn convinces a planning inspector on appeal, it is a powerful confirmation of how essential the democratic element is.

A crucial overarching point in most of these decisions—where planning committees went against officer recommendations—would likely have been approved at delegated level with these proposed reforms. A national scheme of delegation that compels officers to determine certain categories of application (for instance, any site allocated in a development plan, or

any deemed “compliant” with plan policy) would eliminate the committees’ capacity to weigh subtle local factors.

How a national scheme of delegation should work

Local planning authorities are already delegating over 90% of decisions to officers, and the public increasingly expects to have a right to be heard before their elected representatives on the most controversial cases. CPRE therefore believes that the best solution is to take forward a scheme of delegation that achieves best practice in terms of the government’s objectives of delegating most decisions, allowing most planning applications to be approved within a 13-week time limit, but which makes it a local decision to scrutinise cases where there are local concerns.

Local CPRE representatives have drawn attention to three specific examples which we recommend the government should draw on for any national scheme of delegation.

Bromsgrove

Delegation rate (year ending September 2024): 98%

Planning application approval rate (year ending September 2024): 86%

Major developments refused and refusal overturned at appeal (24 months to December 2023): 3 (7.7% of all major decisions, 3 other major appeal decisions were refusals)

Percentage of applications decided within 13 weeks or as agreed with applicant (24 months to December 2023): 81.2% (government target minimum 60%)

Key points of delegation scheme³

All applications are decided under delegated powers unless they are:

- for 10 or more houses
- for 1000 square metres or more of floor space
- call ins by councillors for the area covering the application site
- by the local authority applying to itself
- referrals by the chief planning officer

³ [Bromsgrove Council – Scheme of Delegations](#)

North Northamptonshire

Delegation rate (year ending September 2024): 98%

Planning application approval rate (year ending September 2024): 82% (lower than national average)

Major developments refused and refusal overturned at appeal (24 months to December 2023): 5 (2.7% of all major decisions; 13 major appeal decisions)

Percentage of applications decided within 13 weeks or as agreed with applicant (24 months to December 2023): 82.7%

Key points of delegation scheme⁴

All applications are decided under delegated powers unless they are:

- Referred by the chief planner, which in turn would be based on the chief planner's judgement of a range of specified factors including whether the application raises novel issues of national or local planning policy, the officer recommendation is finely balanced, or there is a clear departure from the local plan
- Objected to by the relevant parish council and officers are unable to resolve the objection

Shropshire

Delegation rate (year ending September 2024): 97%

Planning application approval rate (year ending September 2024): 87%

Percentage of applications decided within 13 weeks or as agreed with applicant: 82.4%

Major developments that were both refused, and the refusal was overturned at appeal (24 months to December 2023): 3 (1.4% of all major decisions, 3 other major appeal decisions were refusals)

Key points of delegation scheme⁵

All planning applications are decided under delegated powers unless they are:

- Made by the local authority applying to itself
- Certain kinds of large scale developments with significant environmental effects (or 'Schedule 1' developments)
- Complex or major applications referred up by the chief planner in consultation with the planning committee chair or vice chair
- Referrals by local members or parish councils, but requiring agreement by the Chief Planner and committee chair that the referral is based on relevant ('material') planning reasons

What is the solution?

CPRE recommends wider use of the Shropshire scheme of delegation as it retains the discretion of the committee chair and chief planning officer to refer applications based on important planning policy reasons, and without setting arbitrary thresholds on size without reference to local concerns. The recent performance of Shropshire and the other two councils considered, shows that planning committees can operate to a scheme based on local discretion, and the local authority can still deliver government targets around speed and quality of decision making.

CPRE is supportive of mandatory training for councillors, and we see no adverse impact of setting limits to the overall size of planning committees provided there are sufficient trained councillors to carry out the scrutiny function of the committee effectively.

Should there still be any cases where planning committee members are refusing schemes for irrelevant reasons on sites allocated in plans, then the government should revise its call in and appeal recovery policies to allow for the Secretary of State to decide such cases through a fast track process, making clear that costs will normally be awarded against the local authority if the Secretary of State in turn fails to find any relevant grounds for refusal.

⁴ [North Northamptonshire Council - Officer Scheme of Delegation](#)

⁵ [Shropshire Council – Scheme of Delegation of Functions to Officers](#)