

eBook

Planning in London and the Home Counties

A guide for homeowners

by Scenario Architecture



Introduction

We have put together this guide to explain, in a simple way, how to put in an application for planning permission in London. It is aimed at people who want to make alterations to their homes that will require the consent of their local council. We have over 10 years experience of securing planning permissions and hope we can share some insights into the process, and the main points you will need to think about.

Whatever your project, an architect will help ensure it all goes smoothly. They will safely guide you through the various stages of what can be an overwhelming, confusing and complicated process. Your architect will also have an extensive list of contacts, such as consultants, they can put you in touch with when required.

Once you begin the design process and have the outlines of a scheme that you can imagine your family living in for years to come. You have now reached a crucial stage, without which your vision cannot be realised, it is time to obtain planning permission for your project.

Planning in the UK in general and in Greater London in particular is a tricky business. It is a complex maze of policies, standards and regulations that requires specialised and up to date knowledge and skills to successfully navigate.

“Consult with planners very early on in the design process”

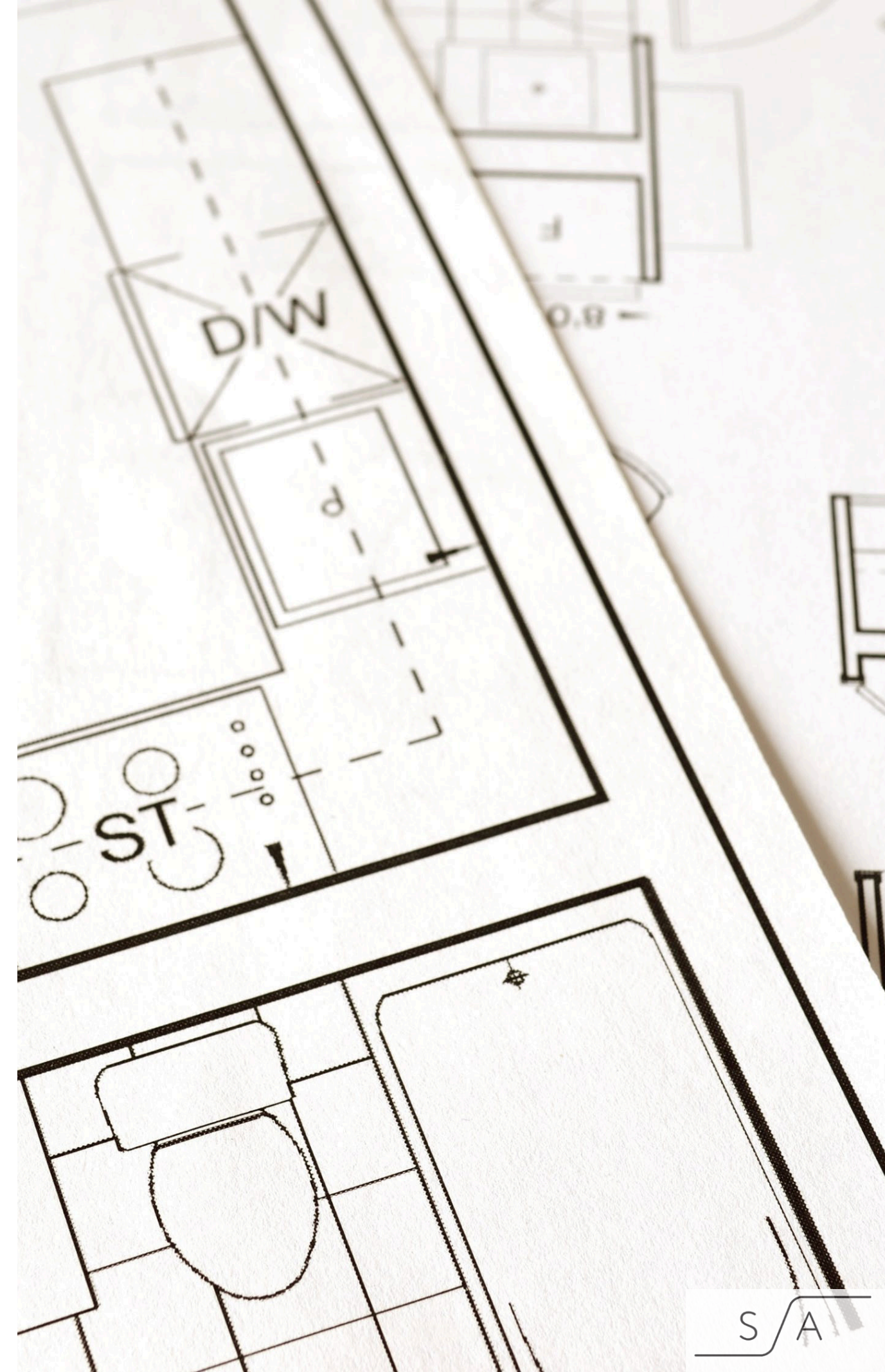
For this reason it is advisable to select an architect who has a proven track record of submitting successful planning applications.

There are fewer differences in the attitude taken by the councils across various London boroughs than you might think. Having said this, it is crucial not to underestimate the importance of architects with local knowledge and a familiarity with council-specific preferences, tendencies and preferred methods of communication.

The good news is that there is a tried and tested approach to the planning process, that if properly understood and applied will significantly reduce risk and increase your chances of securing planning permission.

We have developed this methodology over a decade of extensive work across Greater London and the Home Counties, securing planning permission for our clients and maintaining an outstanding track record.

Talk to us about your project



Approach

“Key to success is to work with, and not against, the planning process”

Once you have an architect we cannot overemphasise the importance of consulting with the planners early on in the design process. It is very important to respect the planners and to consider them an integral part of your project team, rather than as the enemy to be avoided whenever possible, in the hope that they will go away.

Your approach and the attitude you and your architect bring to the whole process will strongly affect what you will get out of it. The key to success is to work with, and not against, the planning process.

It is important to present clear and concise information that describes your innovative design. Having a distinctly modern design is one thing but to pass planning, the design must fulfil several aspects, including planning and conservation. Successful integration of your design in its local context must be carefully considered and well presented.

The key qualities of our approach are listed below:

- **Collaboration** – we aim to start a dialogue with planners in the pre-planning stage, prior to submitting a full planning application. Our experience shows that when properly consulted on a proposal, most case officers are open to professional negotiation. This negotiation significantly increases the chance of success.
- **Strategy** – we create a thorough profile of your project, including planning history, local context, precedents and challenging aspects of the scheme. When called for, we split applications into sections. We may also introduce minor alterations to a scheme following discussions with local planning officers. These gestures help prevent one single contentious element from jeopardising approval of a scheme in its entirety.
- **Professionalism** – the clarity and overall quality of a submission have a tremendous effect on success rate.



4 steps to gaining Planning Permission

Step 1

Have your architects design a beautiful, considerate yet bold scheme that they can back up with clear logic in terms of design, usability and sustainability while also maintaining careful adherence to planning and conservation guidelines.

Step 3

Once you receive the written advice show a willingness to take on board their comments. Making the changes the council would like to see at this stage while maintaining the integrity of the design is likely to result in a scheme that will be granted. In our experience it is best to secure a permission that acts as a baseline. Additional changes and variations can be added later through additional applications.

Step 2

Make sure that your architect prepares an extensive pre-planning document covering much more than just the plans. With your architect, pull together a comprehensive and balanced document discussing the whole site, within its current and historical context. Include all the relevant implications of the new design intervention.

Step 4

Rather than simply submitting a planning application and sitting back to wait for the council's written decision to arrive, ask your architect to start early discussions with the council planners. Make them feel part of your team. Ask your architect to speak to them about your aspirations, time frames and any other important considerations.

[Talk to us about your project](#)



More in depth advice

Applying for planning permission shouldn't be a daunting endeavour. Following the methods we outline in this document should greatly increase your chances of success.

1. Use the pre-application service

Once you have an initial scheme designed for your project which you are happy to proceed with, it is often wise to obtain pre-planning advice. The pre-application process is not a mandatory process and adds both time and cost to a process.

Our projects are first submitted to pre-planning whenever they involve something out of the ordinary in terms of design or scale. If you are planning something unusual, we strongly advise you to seek pre-application advice.

During the pre-application, the officers assess your proposed scheme, point out any potential issues, and list all the required reports that will need to be submitted for the planning application to be valid, registered and properly assessed before they can come to a decision.

Using the pre-application process also means the planning officer is more like another consultant helping to shape the project in this way the officers feel more inclined to help, and more invested in your project.

2. Behave collaboratively

Our experience shows that planning officers respond best when they feel consulted and collaborated with. We find that when we truly listen to their often helpful and valid feedback for the projects, they tend to collaborate well with us and demonstrate increased flexibility.

In theory the council have eight weeks to consider your application, in practice they are constantly overloaded. They are understaffed and stressed and they tend to deal with new planning applications just before the decision deadline. So they don't have enough time to assess everything thoroughly,

They will only look at your application in the last few days of the consideration period. If this is the first time that they come across a scheme that they were never consulted about, our chances of securing permission for you in a single attempt is significantly compromised. If something is unfamiliar or looks controversial in planning terms, the officers are sometimes quick to refuse permission.

Standard practice is for the council to consider the full planning application as submitted and then issue a yes or no decision. Case officers are not required or even encouraged to enter a discussion with us or accept resubmission of minor changes to the proposed scheme during the consideration period.



“If a neighbour has tried to get permission many times unsuccessfully, find out the reasons why and try to avoid making the same mistakes.”

Our established working relationships and long-standing experience working across Greater London and the Home Counties often enables us to have a meaningful discussion and even introduce minor tweaks to the submitted scheme within the consideration period and prevent the application from being rejected. The chance of this strategy to deliver the desired results increases significantly with projects which were initially submitted for pre-planning advice.

3. Learn from others mistakes

Always check the planning history for your site and in your area. Following general research about an area and council, you (or your architect) must research the uniqueness of the site in question and identify site-specific issues and restrictions. Council planners sometimes consider only the adjoining buildings but sometimes the whole street or even views from other streets onto your site.

Similar schemes in the nearby area will provide all the necessary context and invaluable information toward the validity of your scheme. If a neighbour has tried to get permission many times, unsuccessfully, find out the reasons why and try to avoid making the same mistakes. Then reference and point out differences in your scheme and how you have addressed any past and previous concerns or objections.

4. Do enough but not too much

Make sure what you propose actually makes sense and does not hurt anyone or the character of the area – even if your scheme is larger than normal. Don't try to hide things hoping they will not be picked up.

Don't go overboard with extensions just because you can (full-width L-shaped dormer windows, for example), the whole site might start to feel overdeveloped, leading to extra difficulty in bringing planning officers on board. risk it.

Once the base scheme is approved you can always submit another application trying to build on your success and maximise the development potential of the site.



5. If in doubt, go 3D

We design everything in 3D, even the smallest extensions. This way we can quickly demonstrate to planning officers that our scheme does not harm its surroundings. Our model could be producing very quick views from the neighbouring windows, or sunlight studies. For larger planning applications, we take the 3D model when meeting with the planning officers. We walk through the 3D model with them and address any concerns they might have. It allows the planning officer to properly visualise what we are proposing rather than relying on 2D drawings.

A 3D model also allows us to quickly show the existing scheme alongside the proposed scheme, so that the officers can assess the impact of our proposed alterations.

6. Make friends not enemies

Planning officers are not on the opposite side. We try to think of planning officers as contributing to our scheme, and not as the enemy. An architect should always have an excellent understanding of Local Development Frameworks and the policies involved. It is best to echo interpretations of the council's policies back to them. Do not wait for the officers to provide their own interpretation, which can often negatively impact on your scheme and may well be based upon erroneous assumptions.



7. Don't be put off

Don't be too discouraged by negative responses. Planning officers can dislike a design, but if your proposal complies with all policies, then it should be accepted regardless of personal taste.

Remember what the planning officers say isn't always what they mean, so try to interpret negative comments. We have had planning officers tell us a scheme was too big and to push back the rear wall by 3m - although it was already sitting comfortably within the site and complied with all policies. They just 'felt' it was too big. So we pushed the wall back only 1m, tweaked some materials and dimensions to re-adjust proportions and we ended up with an acceptable outcome and little loss of floor space.

8. Keep on it

Don't wait for deadlines to pass. Around 2-4 weeks before the decision date, as the consultation period expires, call the planning officers and ask if they have any concerns. Try to help them fully understand your scheme by providing additional visuals and diagrams addressing potential issues. Similarly, check if any objections have been posted online. And if they have, and are valid, try to address them.



Timescales

The standard consideration period for a residential project is eight weeks, this is the official time frame for your local council to carry out consultation with the neighbours and reach a decision. We recommend allowing for a minimum of ten weeks from submission to decision as in practice the process always takes slightly longer for the following reasons:

The decision period clock only starts ticking once the application is validated by the Council, this requires them to check that the forms are completed correctly and that the submission contains all the necessary drawings, statements and reports. Providing there are no issues the validation date should be set back to the day after the application was received.

Although required by law to provide a decision within the statutory eight weeks period, it is not uncommon for councils to miss the deadline of the consideration period, normally only by a few days but sometimes longer. While there are some effective measures to apply pressure, which we do not hesitate to use when appropriate, it is generally beneficial to the project to bear with the council a little longer.

In some cases the council may ask us as your agent for an extension of time, this may be requested for internal reasons or as an acceptable result of a professional discussion that we are conducting with them about certain aspects of the application that they are not convinced by.



Heritage Issues

“We managed to demonstrate to the planners how our innovative design can tackle and alleviate all of their justified concerns”

If your property is listed and/or in a conservation area you will be subject to additional restrictions. It is often assumed that planners are very strict with regards to both conservation and design. When somewhere is designated as a conservation area, it means that conservation issues will be relevant to all planning discussions, conservation officers are fairly meticulous in adhering to the guidelines set out in Conservation Area appraisals. However, at the same time, there is often a generally positive attitude towards design in London and the Home Counties.

Our own experiences of working with planners has shown that they can be persuaded by good design. They can even favour innovative and thoughtful contemporary design over standard, boring attempts to imitate the old - or even to seamlessly blend with it. As long as proposed schemes are considerate and respectful of local conservation issues, we have found planning and conservation officers can be flexible and open to discussion about any well thought out proposal presented to them.

There are two main approaches to take with listed buildings and buildings within conservation areas. The first is to create something new, yet make it look old in order to blend in with existing properties. The second is to design distinctly contemporary interventions, maintaining an extremely clear distinction between what is old and what is new. We have found the general tendency in the UK, and London in particular, is towards the second approach, which is great news in our opinion.

To reiterate, having an architect who knows the quirks and preferred systems of local planning teams will save time and help you avoid aggravating them unnecessarily. Sometimes putting forward details of your scheme in a different – and unique – way can make all the difference to the final outcome.

[Talk to us about your project](#)



Conclusion

As you might have guessed by now, at Scenario Architecture we have a strong belief in the collaborative approach, honed through years of working on successful planning applications. Why not talk to us about your project?

[Book a call](#)

Useful links and resources

The national planning portal can be found [here](#)

They have guides to some common projects [here](#)

As well as an interactive house to help you understand your project [here](#)

The Land Registry can be found [here](#)

Historic England hold a register of all listed buildings [here](#)

