



# What to do if you have a complaint about the way your planning application has been handled

We provide a free, independent and impartial service for dealing with complaints about public services in Scotland. You may feel that an organisation has provided a poor service, delivered a service badly or failed to provide a service. If this has caused you hardship or injustice, we may be able to look into your complaint. We can normally only deal with complaints if you have already gone through the complaints procedure of the organisation that provided the service.

This leaflet tells you what you can do if you have a complaint about how your planning application has been handled. It also explains what we can and cannot do.

We strongly recommend that you read our leaflet along with the Scottish Government's 'Guide to the Planning System in Scotland'. The guide explains the particular words and terms used in planning, and provides helpful background information. There's information about where to get this on page four.

## Information about planning

A planning authority is the organisation that can approve or turn down a planning application. In most cases, this is the local council. National Park authorities also have planning powers.

Planning laws in Scotland changed in 2009. This means that some practices have changed, for example:

- Planning officers, rather than a committee of the planning authority, now deal with a larger proportion of applications
- A new local review body of the authority deals with appeals against decisions made by planning officers on 'local development' applications (such as alterations to an individual house)
- If you are making a larger application (for example, to build 50 or more houses) you will need to consult with the local community beforehand
- The planning authority are now responsible for telling neighbours that a planning application has been made.

**You can't appeal against planning decisions through us. The next section tells you how you can appeal. We explain what we can do later in this leaflet.**

## What can I do if I'm unhappy with a planning decision?

If you're unhappy with the decision that the planning authority made on your application, you can appeal.

- If your application was a 'local development' planning application and a planning officer made the original decision, you may ask a committee of the planning authority to review that.
- If a committee made the original decision, or if a planning officer made the decision on a planning application other than one for a 'local development', you have the right to appeal to Scottish Ministers. The Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA) deal with appeals for them.

You must keep to the timescales for appealing. These are given in the initial acknowledgement of your application and in the decision notice.

**We cannot get involved because you have missed a deadline.**

### What can I do if I'm unhappy with the way my application has been handled?

If you are unhappy with how the application was handled, rather than with the decision that was made, you should first report the problem to the planning authority. They will consider your concerns and they should try to deal with them.

#### I reported the problem and am still unhappy. How do I complain?

You should normally complain to the planning authority if they have still not dealt with the matter after you reported it. This doesn't just mean telling staff about the problem. It means making a formal complaint telling the authority that they have not sorted it out. You should approach them direct and ask for details of their complaints procedure.

Please remember that planning authorities often have more than one stage in their complaints procedure. We usually expect you to have gone through all the stages before we will look at your complaint. This gives the authority the chance to try to put things right. If you're still unhappy after going through their complaints procedure, or if the time they're taking to look into your complaint is unreasonable, you can complain to us.

You also have to see the planning process through to completion before complaining to us that something has gone wrong in it. We can't look at complaints about something that *may* happen.

**You should normally make your complaint to us within twelve months of realising that you think the planning authority have done something wrong.**

### What we can look into

We can look into how planning authorities administer planning applications. They must make sure they keep to the Planning Acts and other legal regulations and take all relevant issues into account when they consider an application.

We can look at how they handled applications for new developments, and for changes in the way land and existing buildings are developed and used. We can also look at how they handled

applications that cover listed buildings, control of advertisements and enforcement action. We can consider whether a planning authority's actions under these procedures were appropriate.

By law, planning authorities have to prepare development plans as a guide to future development. They must use these and Scottish Government planning policy documents to make their decisions. Planning authorities, however, make decisions on a wide range of planning matters, not all of which are clearly covered by a development plan. They have the right to decide on all of these as they see fit. This is called 'exercising their discretion'. We cannot usually get involved in an authority's exercise of this discretion, and we cannot change their decision.

We can look at whether officers or a committee from a planning authority followed the right procedures when they made their decision. However, it's for the authority to judge how important each relevant point of the case is when they're making their decision. To do this they should follow their development plan, unless other factors that are 'material' to planning say otherwise. You can get more information about this in the 'Built Environment' area of the Scottish Government website at [www.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.scotland.gov.uk).

Here are some examples of the main areas we may be able to look into:

- an incorrect procedure in processing an application
- incorrect or misleading information in a committee report
- not following a correct procedure when making a decision on an application, such as:
  - not taking the relevant development plan into account
  - not taking a 'material' planning consideration into account
  - a local review body not taking relevant information into account when making a decision
  - serving legal notices (such as enforcement notices, modification notices and building preservation notices) without following the proper procedure
- handling the complaint poorly or inappropriately

### However you should note that we:

- have no power to change the decision of a planning authority or appeal organisation (only action in the Court of Session can legally reject a decision and force the planning authority to reconsider)
- cannot question a planning authority's decision if there is no evidence that something has gone wrong in the process
- cannot deal with the behaviour of individual councillors in planning matters, as this is usually a matter for the Public Standards Commissioner (their contact details are on page four)
- cannot look at complaints if you have taken, or are taking, legal action about them
- cannot deal with appeals against decisions, deemed refusals (where a planning decision hasn't been made within the normal time limit), serving legal notices and so on. Other organisations handle these (see 'What can I do if I'm unhappy with a planning decision?' on page one).

And we can't have a member of staff sacked or disciplined.

If you appeal to the Scottish Government's Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA), it's not normally appropriate for us to be involved at the same time. After the DPEA have decided an appeal, we may be able to look at a complaint (that they were not able to consider) about how the planning authority delivered the service. It's also possible for us to look at a complaint that the DPEA didn't act properly or didn't deliver a service properly. But it's important for you to remember that we can't question a decision the DPEA made unless we have evidence that something has gone wrong in the way they took it; and that we can't change their decision.

We understand that this can be complicated so please call us if you want to ask whether your complaint is one that we're likely to be able to look at. A complaints reviewer is always available to talk to you when the office is open. Our opening hours and contact details are at the end of this leaflet.

### How we put things right

If we find that something's gone wrong, then as well as putting things right for you we want to try and stop the same thing happening to someone else. That's why some of our decisions and reports also have recommendations. These may include recommending that the planning authority apologise or change their procedures. We may ask them to return the situation to what it would have been if they'd acted correctly in the first place. We will look carefully to see what happened and how you have been affected. Our complaints reviewer will check that the authority carry out our recommendations.

We also make some of our investigations public. We do this to share what we have learnt from complaints and to help improve how public services are delivered in Scotland.

### How to complain to SPSO

- Write to us and tell us what happened. It's best to use our complaint form if possible. You can find this on our website at [www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk) where you can fill it in online or print it off to complete. Or phone our freephone helpline number **0800 377 7330** and we will send you one.
- Tell us what went wrong, and what you would like to happen to get things put right.
- Send us copies of the main paperwork about your complaint. Please make sure you include the final response you received from the organisation after you complained. It also helps if you send us your original letter of complaint to them.

## Can someone else make a complaint for me?

Yes, if you give them written permission. Phone us on **0800 377 7330** and ask for a consent form. You can get help from your local Citizens Advice Bureau, where an adviser can help you fill in a complaint form or complain for you. Your Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), councillor, Member of Parliament (MP), or a friend or relative may also be able to help.

## More help and advice

### Scottish Government

The 'Built Environment' section of the Scottish Government website contains helpful planning information. They provide a useful 'Guide to the Planning System' at **[www.gov.scot/publications/guide-planning-system-scotland](http://www.gov.scot/publications/guide-planning-system-scotland)**

Website: **<https://www.gov.scot/>**

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### Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA)

Telephone: **0300 244 6668**

Website: **[www.dpea.scotland.gov.uk](http://www.dpea.scotland.gov.uk)**

### Planning Aid for Scotland

Planning Aid for Scotland is a voluntary organisation that can provide free and independent advice, information, support and training on planning and environmental issues to members of the public and community organisations. They do not, however, make representations to planning authorities about individual cases. Telephone: **0131 220 9730**

Email: **[office@pas.org.uk](mailto:office@pas.org.uk)**

Website: **[www.pas.org.uk](http://www.pas.org.uk)**

### Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland (RTPI)

RTPI is the professional organisation of town planners. Its members are local authority planners and private consultancy planners. If you need a consultant to make representations for you, they can advise you about finding one.

Website: **<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/find-your-rtpi>**

### Ethical Standards Commissioner

The Ethical Standards Commissioner is responsible for investigating complaints about councillors, members of devolved public bodies and members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) who are alleged to have contravened their code of conduct.

Telephone: **0300 011 0550**

Email: **[info@ethicalstandards.org.uk](mailto:info@ethicalstandards.org.uk)**

Website: **[www.ethicalstandards.org.uk](http://www.ethicalstandards.org.uk)**

### Law Society of Scotland

You may also wish to seek advice about whether there is a legal route for your concerns.

The Law Society of Scotland may be able to help you find a solicitor.

Telephone: **0131 226 7411**

Website: **[www.lawscot.org.uk](http://www.lawscot.org.uk)**

We can give you this leaflet in other languages and formats (such as large print or Braille) if you ask.

### Contacting us

If you're not sure whether we can look at your complaint, please contact us. You can also call us if you're not sure whether you have gone through the complaints procedure of the organisation you are unhappy with. If appropriate, we'll guide you through that.

We're happy to talk to you. One of our complaints reviewers is always available to discuss your complaint with you.

You can contact us by phone, in writing or by visiting our office. Visits are by appointment only and can be arranged by calling the number below.

Our address is: **SPSO  
Bridgeside House 99  
McDonald Road  
Edinburgh  
EH7 4NS**

A Freepost envelope can be supplied if this is required

Opening hours: **Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday 9am – 5pm, Tuesday 10am – 5pm**

Freephone: **0800 377 7330**

Website: **[www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk)**

*Calls to and from SPSO phone lines may be recorded to check the quality of our service and help us do our job to help you. More details are in the privacy notice: [www.spsso.org.uk/privacy-notice](http://www.spsso.org.uk/privacy-notice). Please ask if you want to confirm if a call is or is not being recorded or if you would like to know what options may be available to you if you do not wish to be recorded.*

