Office of the
Deputy Prime Minister
Creating sustainable communities

Making the planning system accessible to everyone: Good-practice guidance on access to and charging for planning information

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Section 1
Introduction

1.1 Greater community involvement is central to the Government's reform of the planning system. The reforms include a commitment to:

- increasing public access to planning information; and

- making sure that charges for copies of planning documents do not disadvantage those trying to get involved in the planning process.

The Government's statement on community involvement in planning ('Community Involvement in Planning', the Government's Objectives 2004 (paragraph 3.28)) refers to preparing this guide as part of its commitment to improving access to planning information for everyone.

1.2 Local planning authorities should regularly evaluate their arrangements for access to information and charging. They should involve the community and other groups in this process to make sure that access to information and charging policies do not exclude anyone, but encourage the public to be more involved in the planning process.

1.3 Government policy is to:

- encourage free access to information by as wide a cross section of the community as possible; and

- make sure that any charges are reasonable.

The purpose of this guide is to work towards meeting these aims by providing practical advice. The guide also acknowledges that local authorities should be aware of the different user groups within their communities and their different requirements.

1.4 This good-practice guide uses the evidence collected during a research study of current practice and policy by local planning authorities ('Formulation of guidance on access to planning information and charging for copies of documents', 2004), which we asked Land Use Consultants to carry out. The study included a survey of 200 local planning authorities, stakeholder interviews and detailed case studies.

Who is this guide for?

1.5 This guide is intended to help and encourage local planning authorities (LPAs) to go beyond the minimum requirements for access to planning information, and for providing information at a reasonable cost to the customer. It will help in preparing statements of community involvement by providing practical examples of ways in which LPAs have increased access to planning information. However, the guide may also be of interest to other people who are interested in planning. At the back of the guide there is a glossary explaining the meaning of any technical terms we have used.

1.6 The contents of this guide should also apply to arrangements for access to information during development plan and planning application appeals and inquiries which are handled by the Planning Inspectorate (as well as the specific regulations which apply to appeals and inquiries).

1.7 The guide also provides information to communities on their rights to get access to planning information, and good-practice examples of access and charging.

1.8 This guide provides advice on four main areas.

- Communication

- Making planning documents accessible

- Physical access

- Charging

1.9 Section 6 deals with other matters, such as policies for access and charging.

1.10 Finally, section 7 provides details of useful contacts and reference points.

Legal and policy background

1.11 This guide is mainly aimed at LPAs. However, to make sure it is easy for everyone to follow, we give a brief summary of the legal arrangements for access and charging in this section.

1.12 Legal arrangements for access and charging for planning documents are part of a wider legal background relating to access to information more generally. We have explained the legal background below in terms of the rights of the public to information and the responsibilities of local planning authorities to provide that access. We also set out the arrangements for charging.

1.13 We also provide details of relevant government policy guidance. This encourages authorities to go further than the minimum requirements of legislation.

Responsibility to publicise plans

1.14 LPAs must publicise their proposals to review their development plans, draft plans and proposed changes, as set out in the Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) (England) Regulations 1999.

Responsibility to publicise planning and other applications

1.15 LPAs must publicise the planning and other applications they receive through press advertisements, site notices and neighbour notices (Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995).

1.16 Policy guidance is set out in Circular 15/92: 'Publicity for Planning Applications'. See section 7 of this guide for further good-practice guidance.

Right to see and have a copy of planning documents

1.17 Everyone has a right to see and have a copy of statutory planning documents such as the development plan and proposed changes, the planning register, and other public documents such as reports to committees and minutes of decisions.

Current legislation

1.18 Members of the public have the right to see documents relating to preparing, altering or replacing a statutory plan, the list of proposed amendments and printed copies of adopted or approved plans. The Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) (England) Regulations 1999 apply.

1.19 LPAs must also give the public access to committee agendas, reports, minutes and background papers. The public can see these free of charge five working days before a meeting. However, they may have to pay a reasonable charge to see background papers.

1.20 Members of the public have the right to ask for a copy of a planning document to inspect elsewhere, under the same legislation that says documents must be available for inspection. The copyright rules for planning documents are set out in the Copyright (Material Open to Public Inspection) (Making of Copies of Plans) Order 1989, as amended. Any copyright of material which is available for the public to see as a statutory right is not broken by making a copy so that someone can read the documents at a more convenient place and time.

1.21 LPAs must keep registers of planning applications, applications for a certificate of lawful use or development, simplified planning zone schemes and enforcement notices and stop notices. The Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995 applies. LPAs must give reasons for granting as well as refusing planning permission and must hold these on the planning register. The Planning Officers Society has published guidance for LPAs on this issue ('Reasons for the Grant of Planning Permission', 2003, website: www.planningofficers.org.uk).

1.22 Under the Local Government Act 2000, the public must be allowed access to important decisions. At the European level, Directive 90/313/EEL on Public Access to Environmental Information sets out rules for a basic level of access to environmental information across the European Union. This was adopted as UK law through the Environmental Information Regulations 1992 (as amended 1998). The regulations apply to environmental information (including planning information) which does not need to be made available under other legislation. As a result, they do not apply to the planning register.

1.23 Under the Environmental Information Regulations, environmental information must be released to the public if they ask for it unless an exception applies (for example, if the authority does not hold the information, or the request is unreasonable or too general). The regulations come with guidance, 'Freedom of Access to Information on the Environment – Guidance on the Implementation of the Environmental Information Regulations 1992 in Great Britain' (Department of the Environment, 1992).

1.24 **Government documents on access to information policy:**

Open Government: A Good Practice Note on Access to Information (ODPM, 1995) recommends that LPAs adopt a policy of wider access to information instead of limiting this to the agendas, reports and background papers required by Part VA of the Local Government Act 1972. The aim should be to include a more open policy of access to information.

1.25 The 2002 Policy Paper 'Access to Information in Local Government' (ODPM, 2002) says that documents should be made available five days before meetings.

1.26 LPAs should allow open access to case files on delegated applications as well as for those decisions made by a planning committee, so that all stakeholders have equal access to the information on which both committee and delegated decisions are based. This is described in more detail in 'Delivering Delegation' (Local Government Association for the ODPM, 2004), and is in line with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act.

Forthcoming legislation

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 comes into force on 1 January 2005, and creates an 'over-arching framework for access to all information' with a statutory right of access to all information that a local authority holds. It encourages local authorities to publish all material unless there is a statutory reason not to. Councils must maintain a publication scheme with details of what information is available and where people can find it.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 will come into force in summer 2004. The Town and Country Planning (Local Development) (England) Regulations 2004 set out the statutory requirements to publicise and provide access to information on preparing development plans.

Revised Environmental Information Regulations will replace the 1992 Regulations and enforce the European Directive on Public Access to Environmental Information (2003/4/EC). This makes sure that European legislation is in line with the Aarhus Convention. The new regulations will:

- set out the definition of environmental information, and organisations that will be affected;

- reduce the time limit for responses to requests for information;

- introduce a 'public interest test' (for refusals) in line with the Freedom of Information Act; and

- provide a stronger review process in the case of refusals to provide information.

LPAs will continue to be able to charge a reasonable fee which should not be more than the actual costs of producing the material (that is, only photocopying, postage and staff time to find information) to provide environmental information when this is to be viewed off-site. They will not be able to charge for information to be viewed on-site (except for photocopying), so they may not make a charge for finding the information. They must also make a schedule of charges available. As under the current regime, exceptions apply when the information has commercial value (for example planning histories).

Arrangements for charging

1.27 LPAs are able to make a reasonable charge for copies of planning documents and photocopying. The charge should not be more than the actual costs of 'producing' the material. Also, LPAs should set charges at such a level that they do not prevent any part of the community from getting access to information.

Current legislation

1.28 By law, LPAs must provide copies of statutory documents at a reasonable cost. This is set out in section 100H(2) of the Local Government Act 1972, and in the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995.

1.29 LPAs must also provide, as soon as possible, copies of documents which are open for the public to see at a reasonable cost. This is set out in the Town and Country Planning (Development Plan) (England) Regulations 1999.

1.30 These powers to make reasonable charges for documents or copies of documents are extended by section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003, which allows Best Value authorities to charge for certain services (defined as those which the authority has the power to provide, but does not have to provide by law). LPAs must set the level of charges to pay for the cost of the service only.

1.31 Councils may also make a charge for providing information someone asks for under the Environmental Information Regulations, but this must be for a 'reasonable amount'.

1.32 All the current regulations governing charges say that LPAs can recover the costs of copying, postage and staff time if the information does not need to be held on the public register. If there is a requirement to hold something on the public register, LPAs should not charge for staff time.

1.33 Government policy on charging encourages LPAs to provide copies free or at a low charge. For example, the Planning Green Paper 2001 (paragraphs 5.61 to 5.63) said that planning documents should be available free (to borrow or download) and any charges should be reasonable.

Statements of community involvement

1.34 Under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004), each LPA must produce a statement of community involvement (SCI). This will set out how the LPA intends to achieve continuous community involvement in preparing development documents in their area. This will help them reach general agreement and reduce the need for a lengthy examination process. The SCI will set out how the LPA will meet minimum statutory requirements and go beyond these.

1.35 The aim is to make sure that all sections of the public are involved throughout the process of preparing local plan documents and supplementary planning documents. As well as parish and town councils (who LPAs must consult), this will include voluntary organisations, groups representing different racial, ethnic or religious groups, disabled people and business groups.

1.36 LPAs must meet the requirements of the Race Relation (Amendment) Act 2000 to promote racial equality. They must also follow the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, under which disabled people must not be discriminated against by receiving a lower standard of service. When preparing the SCI, LPAs must also involve the community in the same way as when preparing the development plan documents.

Section 2
Communication

2.1 This section sets out how LPAs communicate with local people on planning and planning-related matters. LPAs have a statutory duty to tell members of the public about activities that may affect them. These activities fall broadly into two categories – forward planning (preparing local development documents and other policy matters), and development control (telling people about planning applications).

Putting the community at the heart of communication

2.2 Understanding the needs of the community is essential for effective communication. LPAs should use information other council departments such as social services, health or education hold in order to identify groups who may need particular services. Once an LPA has identified a need, they should make communities aware of how to get access to a service (for example, translated, large-print and audio versions of documents).

2.3 LPA staff may also be an important resource to draw on (for example, they may be able to speak other languages).

Effective ways of telling people about development plans

2.4 LPAs use a wide range of techniques to make people aware of plans for their area, including road shows, public exhibitions and targeted meetings with local groups. Many LPAs also use websites, local press, TV and radio. However, our survey found that a third of people who responded were not aware of the measures used to publicise their council's local plan.

> **Leeds City Council** uses a network of community involvement teams (led by councillors) to get communities involved at the early stages. For the Unitary Development Plan (UDP), the council included a special section in their newsletter, delivered to all properties in the city.

> ### Involving young people in planning
>
> **Ipswich** Borough Council used a Lara Croft lookalike to involve younger people in their interactive local plan.
>
> **Chiltern** District Council involved young people in a budgeting exercise for a skateboard park.
>
> The London Borough of **Camden** has an outreach programme through community days, when children can have their say by building Lego towns and taking part in other activities. Children are giving their views to the development control team through rap, song and drama. Parents also come to the sessions.

> **Planning Aid** provides free, independent and professional advice and support on town planning to communities and people who cannot afford to pay fees to a planning consultant. It is independent of LPAs. It relies on a network of 500 volunteer planners to provide advice. Planning Aid is using its Grant Aid from us to increase its work in supporting the community to get involved in the planning system and to make sure there is a lasting network of support for those who need its services.
>
> See www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice for more details.

2.5   Involving groups who are hard to reach (for example, elderly people and teenagers) can be difficult and LPAs need to think creatively, based on the needs of their communities. LPAs should consider how Planning Aid may be able to help both with outreach work and to help people and groups to put their case. (Planning Aid Concordat, LGA 2003).

> **Wycombe** District Council held **pre-application workshops** with local people to shape the design process relating to proposals for a new supermarket.

2.6   Getting local people involved before a formal application is made can help improve the quality of applications by helping developers to understand community needs and views at the start.

Effective ways of telling people about planning applications

2.7   Again, LPAs are making more use of their websites and the local press to keep communities up to date with planning applications in their area. About 40% of LPAs use the internet for this purpose.

2.8   LPA letters to neighbours are the main way in which people find out about planning applications. However, LPAs need to make sure that letters are easy to understand and not intimidating by using plain English and community languages to explain their content and importance (see section 3 for further guidance).

2.9   LPAs should also consider using community languages on site notices where appropriate to explain where to find out more about a development proposal.

Involving people

2.10   This guide does not provide detailed advice on the right techniques for involving people in particular situations. It uses case studies to provide real-life examples of involvement. You can find sources of information in section 7.

Camden has made good progress in getting people from ethnic minorities involved in the planning process. Planning information is available in community languages.

The London Borough of **Camden** worked with local community groups to rewrite their letter to neighbours to be more personal and easier to understand. An extra page explains, in each community language, that the council wants to hear that person's views. The Language Line service is available to help achieve this (see the box in section 3). A parliamentary order has allowed the council to spend money they used to use for newspaper adverts on active community outreach work to better involve ethnic-minority groups. Working from a baseline of 3% of responses on planning matters coming from ethnic-minority groups, the council intended to increase this by a further 3% a year over a three-year period. They achieved their overall target of 9% of responses in the first year but intend to continue working towards the yearly target.

Section 3

Making planning documents accessible

3.1 This section covers the methods LPAs use to make planning documents more accessible. For the purposes of the survey, planning documents were defined as the development plan, design guidance, procedural or advice leaflets, and the planning register including:

- planning histories;

- planning applications and other material relating to the application;

- ongoing and past case files;

- delegated and committee reports;

- decision notices and section 106 agreements.

3.2 Planning involves explaining relationships between the physical environment, land use and economic and social issues, using text, maps, plans and diagrams. Anyone who has difficulty reading these documents because they have eyesight difficulties or language difficulties, or who are simply not able to read, will have difficulties reading and understanding planning documents. Technical language and jargon are further barriers to access.

3.3 Using certain language in reports can cause confusion to the public. For example, the use of 'will' rather than 'would' could be interpreted to mean that a decision has already been made on a proposed development, when in fact the report is making a recommendation only.

3.4 Our study revealed that more and more LPAs are assessing the content and presentation of planning documents to overcome these difficulties. Using plain English goes a long way to improving access to information for all communities. Councils should make sure all planning documents are prepared to meet the requirements needed to gain Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark.

How to write in **plain English**.

- Keep words and sentences short.

- Be concise.

- Use active verbs and positive everyday language.

- Use 'you' and 'we'.

- Choose words that are appropriate to the reader.

- Use instructions and lists.

- Imagine you are talking to the reader.

- Be friendly and sincere.

See www.plainenglish.co.uk for free guides and information on training and applying for the Crystal Mark.

3.5 LPAs should also consider using alternative formats to meet the needs of local people. When considering charges for alternative formats, planning authorities should be careful not to further exclude disabled and other groups.

3.6 Alternative formats may include:

- large print;

- Braille;

- community languages in the appropriate dialect;

- audio tape and CD-ROM; and

- 'text to speech' software.

Producing leaflets in community languages and indicating this on the main English-language version of those leaflets is a good way to improve access to information for ethnic minority communities.

3.7   Many LPAs have signed up to the Language Line phone interpreting service or use a local service for translating documents.

> **Language Line** is a 24-hour phone interpreting service with instant access to interpreters who are able to work in over 100 languages. It is used in hospitals, local authorities and police forces in the UK.
>
> See www.languageline.co.uk for more details.
>
> The **Royal National Institute for the Blind's (RNIB)** 'See It Right' award shows that a website has been designed for disabled people to use. The RNIB's Web Access Centre provides the tools and resources to plan, build and test accessible websites. See www.rnib.org.uk/webaccesscentre for more details.
>
> **BOBBY** is free downloadable software developed by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (www.cast.org). BOBBY analyses websites to see how accessible they are for disabled people and how compatible they are with web browsers. It graphically marks up sites with suggestions of how to improve accessibility. (See www.watchfire.com for more details.)
>
> **Screen-reading software** uses speech synthesisers and the computer's sound card to read information from the screen aloud. It can also provide Braille displays, and is available in many different languages. Local authorities should make sure their websites are compatible with this type of software and ideally should install it on their websites. It must also be loaded on the receiving PC. Examples include JAWS (see www.sightandsound.co.uk for more information).

3.8   Regular contact with local disabled people's groups can help identify the needs of local disabled people. This includes document formats and the types of software that should be available in the planning reception or on the council's website.

> **Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council** has several members of the planning and development control team who are fluent in **community languages**. Language classes in Urdu are available to staff and reception staff are encouraged to take part. The council also provides the weekly list of planning applications in reception in **Braille** and **large print**.

Where planning documents can be viewed

3.9   As well as providing access to planning documents at the main planning reception or one-stop shop, LPAs should use other public access points to make sure that local communities can get involved in planning. Although more than half of the LPAs we surveyed make documents available in local libraries, libraries should be used far more widely so that documents are available outside normal office hours. LPAs also use local town or parish council offices and area offices, and a small number use community centres. LPAs should also consider using other types of building – some already display planning information in post offices and supermarkets, and we encourage this as a good way of bringing plans and proposals to the attention of a wider audience.

> **Birmingham City Council** uses a network of over 20 libraries and 40 neighbourhood offices, evenly distributed across the city, to provide out-of-hours local access to planning documents (including planning applications). Staff are trained in map reading and are in contact with the Planning Direct call centre by phone.

E-planning

3.10   Planning services are leading the way towards the Government's target of making all services available electronically by 2005. Providing information electronically is essential for increasing access to many users, replacing the need to visit planning offices in many cases.

3.11   Recent research by Hedra for PARSOL (see section 7 for more details) has found that providing access to carefully structured basic information can often make the biggest difference to providing electronic planning services effectively. This could include the planning register, including details of decisions, committee agendas and minutes and committee and delegated reports. Policy information should include the development plan documents, supplementary planning documents and design guidance. The text of development plan documents should be able to be downloaded, and LPAs should consider providing the proposals map online as this is the first, and often most useful, point of reference for many people.

3.12   When the development plan text is available to download from the council's website but the proposals map is not, the proposals map should be made available as a separate paper copy.

3.13   Websites should also include information on how to get copies of documents and their prices (as appropriate), and opening times of offices and other places at which planning information is available.

3.14   Providing an e-planning service is one of the indicators in the new Best Value Performance Indicator, 'Quality of Service Checklist'. This is because the Government believes that the internet and information and communications technology (ICT) is improving access to and the presentation of planning information. LPAs should not wait for customers to demand a facility before installing better ICT. If an LPA is already using a high level of ICT, this generates public interest and encourages them to use the service.

3.15   There are compulsory guidelines for UK government websites which LPAs should be aware of, as well as good-practice advice on making web content accessible (visit www.e-envoy.gov.uk and www.w3.org). We provide more advice on e-planning through the Planning Portal and PARSOL research projects (see section 7 of this guide).

3.16   However, LPAs should also be aware of the 'digital divide' – many members of the community do not know how to use a computer or do not have access to a computer or to the internet (or both). As well as providing computer terminals in reception, LPAs should also make information available in another way to make sure that the digital divide does not exclude people from the process (for example, paper copies).

Self-service computer terminals are an excellent way of allowing fast and efficient access to planning information, and free up staff time. However, local planning authorities should be aware of the need to provide for those who are unable to use a computer for whatever reason.
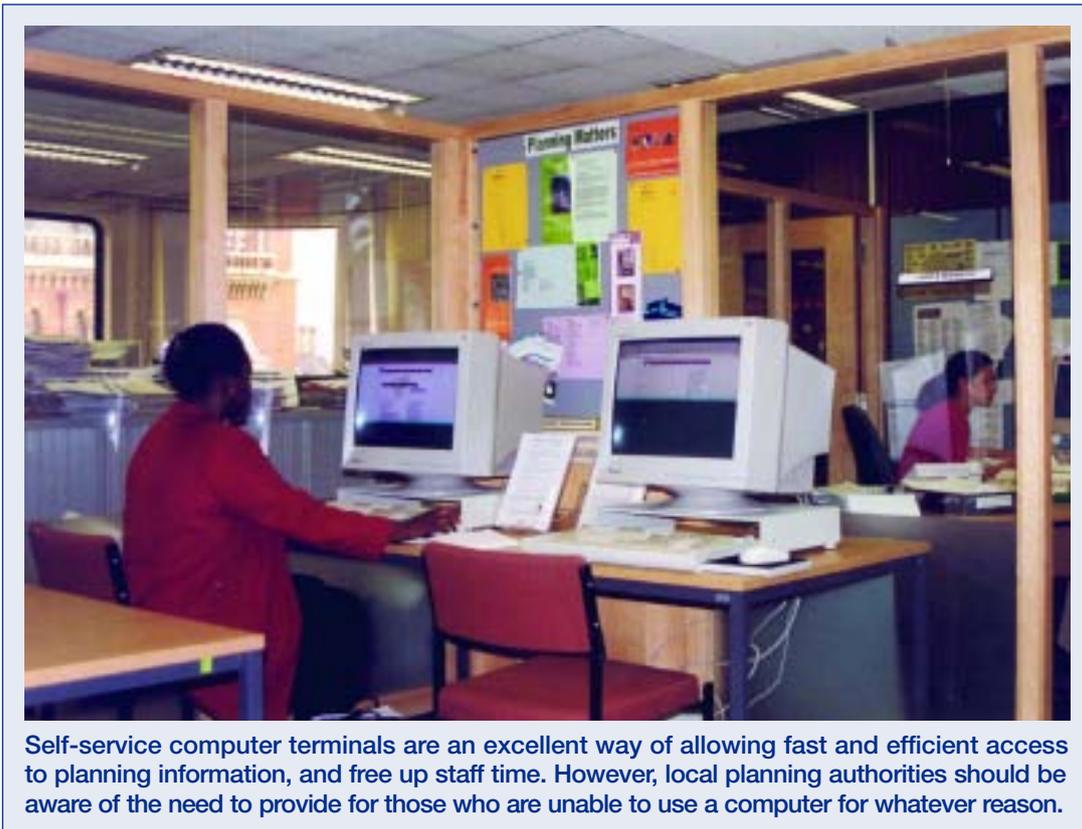
3.17 Providing free electronic information on the internet can be cost-effective by reducing the amount of staff time spent on dealing with requests for information, printing and distribution. Many LPAs have already been able to use staff resources for other things as a result.

Facilities in the planning reception or one-stop shop

3.18 LPAs should make sure that planning receptions and one-stop shops are clearly signposted and welcoming. Customers should be able to understand immediately where to go for the information or help they need. Receptions with a member of staff on duty at all times make for a more user-friendly service than a 'hole in the wall'-style reception where customers must ring a bell for attention.

A welcoming reception area, as in Sevenoaks, where a water cooler and children's toys are provided.

A well-staffed reception area with information readily available avoids confusion and helps customers understand where to go for the help they need.

3.19 LPAs should tailor arrangements to see planning documents so that the public can find information for themselves (for example, to research a planning history, or check information on constraints). This means that staff time can be used to help those who need help the most, including people without access to a computer or the internet, or the skills needed to use them.

3.20 A good reception service will provide information effectively and involve the public in an environment where they feel comfortable. This should help to avoid repeat visits.

3.21 LPAs should regularly review their reception facilities and consider providing at least:

- tables at a convenient height for wheelchair users;

- computers linked to the council's website, a system for tracking applications, and a geographical information system (GIS);

- microfiche terminals;

- accessible meeting rooms;

- a self-service photocopier (see also section 5 of this guide);

- toilets (including facilities for disabled people and parents with young children); and

- a play area or toys for children (or both).
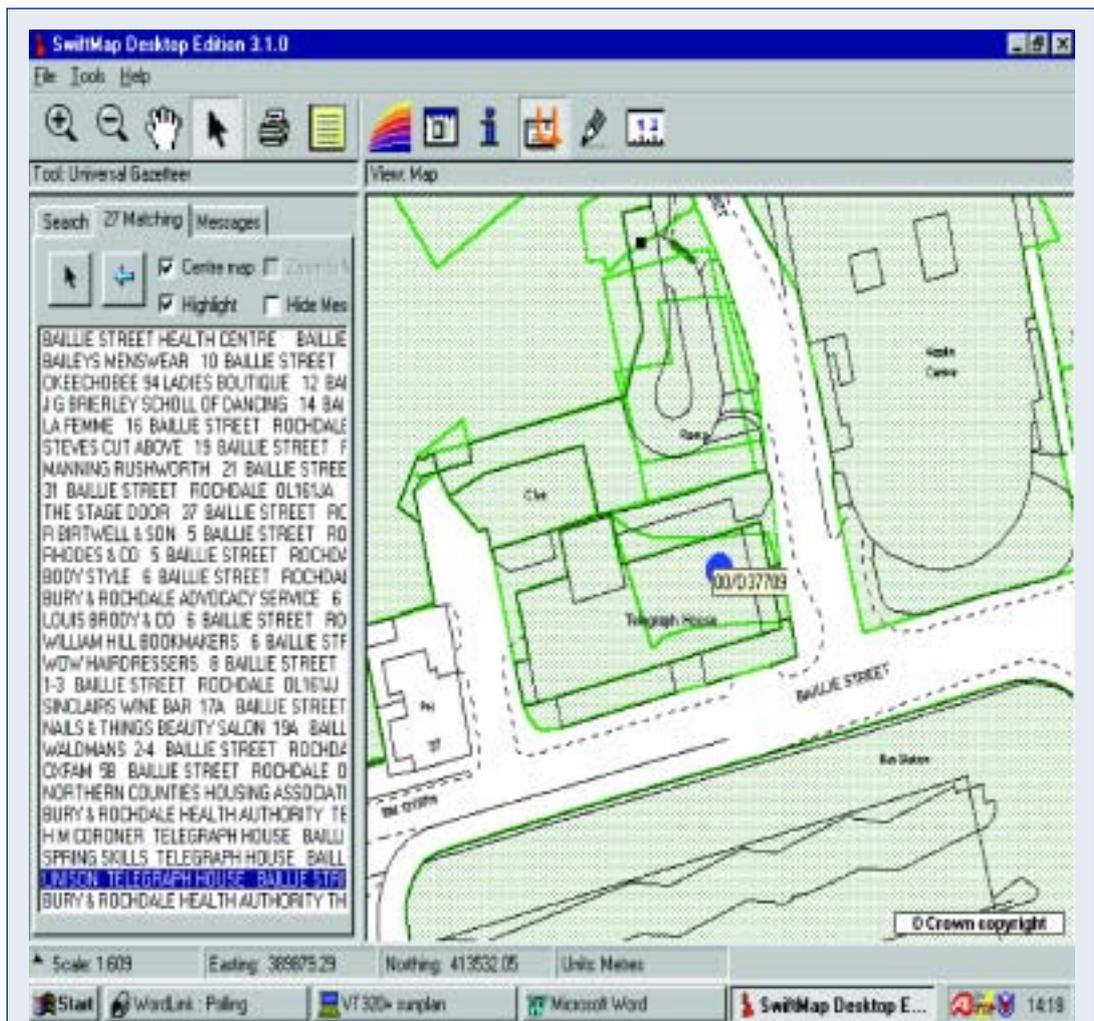
Rochdale's GIS (Geographical Information System) system links all planning and building control information, including information on constraints such as tree preservation orders (TPOs), conservation areas and listed buildings. It is also linked to the system for tracking planning applications currently available on the intranet and this will soon be publicly available so that customers may click on a location and find out about constraints, relevant planning applications, the case officer and relevant development plan policies.

Leeds reception area has plenty of layout tables which are at a convenient height for wheelchair users.

Viewing documents

3.22 All planning information should be available to view without an appointment as far as possible. This should at least include access to:

- the adopted development plan and local development framework and local development documents, including proposals maps and documents relating to preparing and amending plans;

- supplementary planning guidance and new supplementary development plan documents, including design guidance;

- conservation area statements;

- the planning register, including application plans and drawings, applications for certificates of lawful use or development, simplified planning zones, and enforcement and stop notices;

- section 106 agreements;

- forward plans, committee agendas, reports and background papers, decisions and minutes (including records of executive decisions);

- Article 4 directions removing rights of permitted development;

- ongoing applications; and

- past applications.

> **Restormel** Borough Council used money from the Planning Delivery Grant to put into practice an **Online Open File Policy** for all planning applications in January 2004. All documents are scanned and available to view online. Computers to view information are available at the planning front desk and in the meeting room used by the duty planning officer.

3.23   If instant access is not practical, LPAs should at least clearly advertise in reception, on notice letters, on site notices and on the council website how much notice someone needs to give to see information.

3.24   LPAs should consider introducing an overnight loan system so that customers can see planning documents when and where they want, without having to buy a copy or pay for photocopying charges. This service should be available from both the planning reception and one-stop shop, and from local libraries or area offices.

Access to case files and officer reports

3.25   An open file policy is the best way to help people keep up to date on how planning applications are progressing, whether they are to be decided by officers as a delegated application or by a committee. It also reduces the belief that planning decisions are made without the opportunity for people to have their say, talk to the planning case officer or speak to their local council member.

3.26   The LPA should clearly advertise its scheme of delegation so that all those with an interest in an application understand how and within what timescale a decision will be made.

3.27   There are clear requirements to make reports on applications that a committee will decide on publicly available five days before the meeting. Although there are no equivalent requirements for making delegated reports available before the decision is made, the 'Delivering Delegation' guide (ODPM) suggests that files on delegated applications should be 'just as available for public inspection' as files on an application going to a committee.

3.28   If necessary, LPAs should review their arrangements for providing access to the case files for delegated applications before decisions are made.

Speaking to a planning officer

3.29   A duty officer system is a good way to make sure that members of the public can get advice and information on planning matters. If customers must make an appointment to speak with a specific member of staff (for example, the case officer for a particular application or the officer dealing with policy matters for the town centre), LPAs must also clearly advertise this in reception, in notice letters, on site notices and on the council website.

3.30   Access to a planning officer for general enquiries (whether by an appointment or a duty officer) should be available during office hours, including over lunchtime.

Although an appointment may be necessary to see a case officer, it should be possible to speak to a planning officer with general enquiries at any time during office hours.

3.31 LPAs should encourage people applying for planning permission (applicants) and people objecting to an application (objectors) to meet case officers to express their views. This will help the planning process to be open and help meet the requirements of human rights legislation.

Section 4
Physical access

4.1 Being able to visit a planning department is still an important facility despite more and more people having access to the internet to see plans and other documents. It is unlikely that the ability to talk face to face with planning staff will ever be fully replaced by other kinds of communication. As a result, it is important that council offices are fully accessible to all members of the community.

4.2 This section deals with issues which relate to all council services, not only planning.

4.3 Good public transport is important to make sure that people who do not have a car can get to council offices. Also, councils should encourage people to use other kinds of sustainable transport by providing appropriate facilities such as cycle parking and convenient and direct pedestrian routes. They should publicise how visitors can get to their offices and to other sites where planning information is available, including whether these kinds of transport are accessible for disabled people (for example, the local bus service).

> As part of their move to new premises in Ipswich town centre, **Suffolk County Council** are introducing a **Green Travel Plan**. The new building is a few minutes' walk from the train station, and within a town centre Park and Ride scheme. The council will limit paid parking to encourage people to use public transport along with a bus shuttle service to the building.

4.4 Rural councils are more likely to have difficulties in this area and should make sure that other arrangements are in place so that people who are not able to visit the office can still get access to the planning information they need. This may include:

- making more planning information available online;

- providing copies of planning documents in local libraries (including mobile libraries serving remote rural areas) and with parish councils; and

- advertising these services to local communities.

> **Broadland District Council** runs a **mobile information centre** which visits 11 parishes in the district each week. As well as providing local access to a range of council services, the bus carries a copy of the local plan and copies of current planning applications relating to those parishes visited and neighbouring ones, allowing people to see the documents without having to travel to the main council offices.

4.5   Parking for disabled customers should be available on site or close to the building.

4.6   The building will need both flat or sloping ramped access and automatic doors to make sure people with mobility difficulties can get into the building. You can find more advice in 'Planning and Access for Disabled People' (ODPM, 2003), and Part M of the Building Regulations.

Flat or sloping or ramped access and automatic doors are necessary to allow access for disabled people.

The offices of **Babergh** District Council are fully accessible to disabled people, with parking in front of the building, flat access, and automatic doors and lifts. The reception area and committee rooms also have hearing loops.

4.7   Facilities within the planning reception or one-stop shop should also be designed so that everyone can have access, and include:

- an accessible reception desk;

- a hearing loop;

- lifts;

- automatic doors; and

- a computer with access to the internet and software that can make information more accessible (for example, large font sizes).

A lowered reception desk improves access for wheelchair users.

Staff trained in sign language are available to help customers at the **London Borough of Camden** and **Leeds City Council**.

Newcastle City Council has a modern reception in a recently completed building. It includes:

- an accessible reception desk;

- hearing loops in each meeting room;

- touch-screen computers;

- videophones in meeting rooms which connect customers to the British Sign Language interpreting line;

- a machine for customer tickets that is low enough for people in wheelchairs to use;

- a phone to call other departments with extra-large push buttons; and

- hearing loops in accessible committee meeting rooms.

4.8 Involving the local access group when developing new facilities or council buildings will help to make sure that councils can meet the needs of the local community. If no access group has been set up, the LPA should set one up.

> **Access groups** are informal independent consumer groups, usually made up of disabled people, who work with councils and other service providers on a range of matters relating to inclusive access, including:
>
> • making comments on planning proposals; and
>
> • providing advice on how councils can make services more inclusive.
>
> *Planning and Access for Disabled People (ODPM, 2003).*

Section 5
Charging

5.1 The Government recognises that LPAs work with extremely tight budgets. In recent years there has also been a drive to recover costs, to keep the cost of planning services down as far as possible through Best Value Performance Indicator BV107. This has been replaced by a quality-based indicator.

5.2 Charging for planning documents can exclude members of the community from getting access to the information they need to comment on a proposal that may affect them. Concern over excessive charging was one of the reasons for the research this guidance is based on.

5.3 Charging in this guidance relates to the prices of development plans, copying rates for other planning documents and charges for staff time (for example, to research a planning matter for a customer). The research found that LPAs' charges vary considerably, and that customers and staff do not always understand why charges are made.

5.4 LPAs have wide powers to charge for documents and copies, and for other services. However, we encourage them to make information available free of charge, and they must make sure that any charges are reasonable. They should consider the effect that charging for documents and copies in particular will have on the ability of the local community to get the information they need.

5.5 Throughout this guide we highlight the range of charges that LPAs make. We encourage LPAs to consider their charges in relation to those made by other local authorities, bearing in mind the need to make sure that information is provided for free or for a reasonable charge.

Development plans

5.6 Charges for copies of development plans vary considerably between £10 and £100. Although a small number of LPAs offer free paper copies of their development plan, this will not be economical for most authorities. A more realistic approach would be for LPAs to make the plan available for people to download for free from their website, and to offer reduced rates where appropriate. **Table 5.1** below sets out the development plan charges recorded in our survey.

Table 5.1 **Charges for development plans**			
	District	**Unitary**	**County**
Highest	£100	£65	£75
Lowest	£10	£10	£25
Average	£42.50	£38.40	£50
Number of LPAs	93	44	2

5.7 Some LPAs charge reduced rates for students, elderly people, unemployed people and local residents. If an LPA decides to make a charge for paper copies of the development plan, they should consider whether any groups within their community should be able to get access to copies for free, or for a low charge or reduced rate.

Proposals maps

Birmingham City Council charges £5 for a separate paper copy of the Unitary Development Plan proposals map.

Planning histories

5.8 Planning histories of sites have commercial value and are put together by firms providing services to the property industry. LPAs provide planning history searches as part of their land charges service or within the planning service (or both). Planning histories are also of interest to people and groups putting forward or commenting on planning applications.

5.9 Most LPAs currently charge to provide planning history information (to cover copying or staff time costs, or both), recognising the market value of that information to estate agents, others buying or selling properties, and developers. The range of charges we found in our survey is set out below. **Table 5.2** provides information on set charges and **Table 5.3** on hourly rates for staff.

Table 5.2 **Set charges for planning history**		
	District	**Unitary**
Highest	£50	£50
Lowest	£2.50	£1.50
Average	£17.64	£22.09
Number of LPAs	14	18

Table 5.3 **Charges an hour for planning history**		
	District	**Unitary**
Highest	£49.50	£57.50
Lowest	£15.00	£10.00
Average	£31.70	£31.70
Number of LPAs	8	25

5.10 We expect a reasonable charge for a planning history to be below the average we found in our survey. Also, LPAs should consider not charging a fee if customers can research histories themselves without the need for significant staff help (either electronically or using plotting sheets, microfiche, paper files and so on), and so they should make sure the facilities are in place for them to do so.

Committee reports

5.11 Only a quarter of the LPAs we surveyed provide free copies of committee reports and usually only for 'live' cases (that is, before a decision has been made).

5.12 Of the rest, most charge their standard photocopying rate, while around 15% charge a standard fee (ranging from £1.50 to £16 for each report).

5.13 LPAs should provide committee reports at no charge for cases still to be decided to anyone who asks. If an LPA feels that it should charge, it should keep this as low as possible (for example, based on a low standard rate for A4 copying).

Decision notices

5.14 Although decision notices are automatically sent to the applicant, they are useful to other people, including parish councils, people the LPA has to consult by law, and those commenting on a proposal.

5.15 Most LPAs charge a set fee for decision notices, ranging from £1.50 to £34. Others use their standard photocopying rate.

5.16 It is important to be able to effectively monitor how planning permissions (and other decisions) are put into practice, and the effect of consultation responses by people LPAs have to consult by law and other interested groups and people. As a result, LPAs should make copies of decision notices available at no or a low cost, either using the standard photocopying charge or a low fixed fee for each decision notice. The survey found fixed charges for decision notices ranged between £1.50 and £34. If an LPA charges a fixed fee for each decision notice, it should set this at the lower end of this range.

Design guidance

5.17 The importance of design guidance in raising the quality of applications is well recognised. LPAs will need to consider the target audience for design guidance if they decide to charge for it, and when setting the level of that charge. Ideally, they should make guidance available free of charge.

Copying A4 documents

5.18 The most common approaches we found in our survey were to charge a fixed price for each page, or to charge more for the first page and then a standard fee for each page after that.

Table 5.4 **Fixed charges for A4 copies (for each page)**			
	District	**Unitary**	**County**
Highest	£4	£2	£1.50
Lowest	£0.10	£0.05	£0.05
Average	£0.62	£0.42	£0.41
Number of LPAs	68	38	5

5.19 Where possible, LPAs should provide copies at no charge (seven LPAs in our survey make no charge). However, if an LPA charges, a 'reasonable' charge would be similar to commercial rates at photocopying shops, that is, 10p for each sheet of A4. This also reflects the lease charge on most photocopier machines. If LPAs charge an extra administrative fee (for example, to cover any staff time), they should clearly explain this and keep the fee as low as possible (see 'Working out charges' below).

Free or low-cost and convenient photocopying

Of the 200 LPAs surveyed, seven offer either free photocopying or free copying of the first few pages (in a range of three to 10 pages). Of those making a charge, 20 charge up to 10p for each sheet.

Leeds City Council has a photocopier in its reception. It charges 10p for both A4 and A3 copies, with prices ranging up to £2.50 for an A0 copy. It introduced this pricing structure in response to customer complaints about previous high fees.

Copying A4 plans

5.20 A surprising 28 of the 200 LPAs we surveyed did not provide copies of maps and plans, which are an essential part of understanding planning applications.

5.21 We remind LPAs that the person who developed the plans owns the copyright. However, LPAs may copy those plans which the public has a right to see (for example, in connection with a planning application, or preparing the development plan) so people can read them when and where they prefer (see below).

> Any **copyright** of material which is available for the public to see is not broken by making a copy so that someone can see them at a more convenient place and time (the Copyright (Material Open to Public Inspection) (Making of Copies of Plans) Order 1989 as amended).

Copying larger plans

5.22 Many planning applications come with large plans (for example, A1 or A0). LPAs should arrange for copies to be made available, either for free, or at as low a charge as possible (this may include asking for extra copies from applicants as necessary), so that the public or other interested people can examine the proposals fully. The plans should be available for inspection at no charge for visitors to planning departments.

Working out charges

5.23 As part of making the planning process more open, the ability to explain the basis of charges for documents and copies is seen as a part of good customer service. However, our survey found that few LPA staff were able to explain how charges are set, and in some cases were not sure of the fees charged for certain documents (for example, 20% of people who responded did not know the price of committee reports).

5.24 LPAs could put this right by providing a simple explanation of how they work out charges for documents and copies (for example, whether it covers the cost of copying or printing, or includes staff time). Front-line staff should know what the charges are and understand the explanations for those charges.

Advertising charges

5.25 If LPAs charge for documents or copies, they should display a clear list of prices in the planning reception or one-stop shop, on the council website and in all places where documents are available to copy or buy.

Methods of payment

5.26 Being able to pay for a document over the phone or the internet can speed up service delivery and access to information. Given the time limits on consultation periods and targets for making decisions on applications, getting hold of information quickly is important for all people taking part in the planning process. Around 40% of the 200 LPAs we sampled accept credit or debit-card payments by phone, but most rely on receiving cheques before sending out documents. This can cause delays.

5.27 As a result, LPAs should move towards providing faster payment methods or, if these are not practical, having a facility to invoice customers. All council services should consider doing this, and consider accepting payments over the internet.

Section 6
Other matters

Council policies on access to planning information and charging for copies

6.1 Only a quarter of the LPAs we surveyed were able to refer to a written policy on access to planning information or charging (or both). Over a third of people who responded did not know if their LPA had a policy on these matters.

6.2 As we have already suggested, LPAs should adopt a clear policy on access to planning information and on charging for copies. They should clearly display this at their one-stop shops or planning reception and advertise it on their website. Indeed, under the Environmental Information Regulations and the Freedom of Information Act (which comes into force from 1 January 2005), LPAs must publish a schedule of fees they will charge for documents, copying and any services they charge for. It will be good practice for LPAs to put this requirement into practice before the changes in legislation. They should also do this as part of the publication scheme they need to produce under the Freedom of Information Act.

6.3 It would be helpful to set out the legal requirements and responsibilities of the LPA, along with the ways in which the LPA is going beyond that legal minimum. This should be in the format of a customer-friendly document written in plain English (rather than a whole series of documents, which may lead to confusion).

Customer satisfaction surveys

6.4 Around 40% of the LPAs we surveyed monitor customer satisfaction levels on access and charging for planning information. Those that do not should consider including questions on access to information and charging issues in their regular customer satisfaction surveys.

> **Purbeck District Council** has produced a document which clearly sets out all the fees the Development and Building Control Section charges for services and providing information.

> **Mansfield District Council** has a document ('Access to Information Procedure Rules') that sets out the council's policy on access to planning information and describes the rights of the public to see such information.

> **Birmingham City Council** monitors customer satisfaction using two 'Development Control User Forums', which meet every three months. The planning service also contributed to the national customer satisfaction survey which takes place every three years, and was supported by another survey in 2002/2003.

Section 7
Further sources of information

Getting involved

7.1   You can find more advice in the following documents.

- 'Draft PPS1: Creating Sustainable Communities' and 'Community Involvement in Planning: The Government's Objectives' (ODPM, 2004)

- 'Draft PPS11: Regional Planning' (ODPM, 2003)

- 'Draft PPS12: Local Development Frameworks' (ODPM, 2003)

7.2   You can find practical examples in the following documents.

- 'Delivering Excellence in Planning: a compendium of good practice' (Local Government Association, 2004)

- 'Participatory Planning for Sustainable Communities: International experience in mediation, negotiation and engagement in making plans' (ODPM, 2003)

- 'Creating Local Development Frameworks' (ODPM)

7.3   You can find guidance on making buildings accessible and involving access groups, including useful contacts such as the Disability Rights Commission, Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) Access Advisory Committee, and the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, in 'Planning and Access for Disabled People' (ODPM, 2003).

7.4   We have also asked Heriot-Watt University to carry out research on diversity (people's different backgrounds and circumstances) and planning, which will result in publishing a good-practice guide for local planning authorities. It will explain how to relate planning to diversity issues to make sure that the wider community is better served by the planning system. The guide will provide examples of consultation procedures which local planning authorities have used successfully while preparing their development plans and at the planning application stage. The guide will also refer to the statement of community involvement, and the statutory duties of local authorities (for example, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000).

7.5   The Local Government Association and the Royal Town Planning Institute published the 'Planning Aid Concordat' in March 2004. It sets out their joint commitment to Planning Aid and encourages LPAs to take practical action to support and share in this commitment. It provides information on the role of Planning Aid, and the benefits to LPAs and promotes ways to raise awareness of the service.

7.6   English Partnerships and the Prince's Foundation are at the forefront of involving communities in pre-application workshops through the 'Enquiry by Design' process. This aims to sort out conflicts early in the planning process, to the benefit of all stakeholders. You can find more details at www.englishpartnerships.co.uk.

Access to information

7.7   The Planning Officers Society and Local Government Association have published guidance on improving access to information. This is included in the following documents.

- 'Moving towards excellence in planning – first edition' (Planning Officers Society, 2004). This is made up of a series of 'excellence matrices' which show how LPAs can move towards providing an excellent service and what this means. It includes sections on access to information and involving people, and a helpful list of ways to make sure services take into account people's needs and provide information effectively (covering formats, media, e-planning, reviews and design).

- 'Delivering Excellence in Planning: a compendium of good practice' (Local Government Association, 2004) provides a number of practical examples, including details of Bristol City Council's user-friendly reception.

- 'Delivering Delegation' (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and Local Government Association, 2004) uses the experience of a wide range of planning stakeholders to identify the main areas that should be covered by a framework for delegating decisions on applications.

Information on e-planning

7.8   The planning portal and Planning and Regulatory Services Online (PARSOL) project have supported research into information communications technology (ICT), including Pendleton and Associates and MORI studies on using ICT and the internet.

7.9   Also, Hedra has carried out a review of best practice in local authorities, government departments and those agencies involved in delivering planning and regulatory services who use ICT. The study provides best-practice guidance on electronic guidance, information, communication, consultation, contact, one-stop shops, remote facilities, and managing information projects. The study was carried out between September and December 2003, and is currently being reported.

7.10   KPMG is developing service delivery standards for planning (both development control and forward planning) and tool kits for putting them into practice. These outputs should be available in 2004.

Section 8

Glossary

Article 4 directions A power that allows LPAs to remove permitted development rights that would otherwise apply. As a result, planning permission is needed for these activities.

Best Value A framework by which local authorities assess the performance of the services they are responsible for, using a series of performance indicators to make sure that their management and business practices deliver better and more public services. This aims to:

- balance providing quality services against costs;
- achieve sustainable development;
- be accountable and open by involving the local community;
- make sure there are equal opportunities; and
- continuously improve the outcomes of services provided.

Best Value authority An authority that is part of the Best Value system. All district, county and unitary planning authorities are Best Value authorities.

Best Value performance indicator A measure we set which local authorities use to assess how well they are providing good-value services to their communities.

Case officer The planning officer appointed to deal with a particular planning application.

Committee application A planning application that a committee of elected councillors will decide on. It is generally a larger, more controversial application. You can find details of committees in reports, agendas and minutes.

Conservation area An area protected under the Planning Acts, in order to protect its architectural and historic character and townscape.

Constraints Policies that aim to control or prevent development in certain areas, (for example tree preservation orders, conservation areas and listed buildings).

Decision notices An official notice sent to an applicant telling them the outcome of their application for planning permission, listed building consent and so on.

Delegated application	A planning application that a planning officer given certain powers by elected councillors decides on. This aims to speed up the decision-making process without harming the quality of those decisions or accountability.
Design guidance	Guidance which advises applicants and planning officers on issues of good design (for example, relating to town centres, shopfronts and materials). It may be adopted as supplementary planning guidance.
Development	Development is defined under the Town and Country Planning Act (1990) as carrying out building, engineering, mining or any other operation in, on, over or under land, or changing the use of any building or other land. Most types of development need planning permission before they can be carried out.
Development control	The process where a local planning authority decides whether a planning application meets the requirements of planning policy, particularly as set out in development plans.
Development plan	A document that sets out in writing or in maps and diagrams (or both) a local planning authority's policies and proposals for developing and using land and buildings in the authority's area (for example, unitary development plan, local plan, structure plan). Under the new system, the development plan will be made up of development plan documents and the regional spatial strategy for the area.
E-planning	E-government is the Government's commitment to make all central and local government services available online by the end of 2005. e-planning relates to providing planning services online.
Forward planning	The part of a planning department dealing with strategic planning, policy and development plans.
Geographical information systems (GIS)	A computer package for collecting, managing, analysing, and displaying information as digital maps and information about places.
Hearing loop	Equipment to help people with hearing difficulties. It works with a person's hearing aid and is often used in reception areas.
Listed building	A building or other structure of special architectural or historic interest included on a statutory list and given a grade (I, II* or II).

Local development documents (LDDs)	Under the new planning system, LDDs will include the following.

- Development plan documents (DPDs) will be prepared by the relevant plan-making authority. They will be planning documents dealing with the use of land and will be examined independently. There will be a right for people who give statements to ask for a change to be heard at an independent examination.
- Supplementary planning documents (SPDs) will cover a wide range of issues on which the plan-making authority wants to provide policy guidance to support the policies and proposals in development plan documents. They will not form part of the development plan or be examined independently.
- Statement of community involvement (see the definition).

Local development frameworks (LDFs)	The range of local development documents which will provide the framework for delivering the planning strategy for an area under the new planning system.
Local planning authority	The local authority or council that has the legal power to carry out planning functions. This is normally the local borough or district council, but in National Parks and some other areas there is a different arrangement.
One-stop shop	A reception area which serves as a 'first point of call' for the public for a number of local authority services (for example, planning, building control, environmental and environmental health services).
PARSOL	'Planning and Regulatory Services Online' (PARSOL) is an e-government project which is developing a range of guidelines, standards, systems, and tool kits and so on to help local authorities develop effective and open online planning and regulatory systems.
Planning appeal	The process where an applicant can challenge a decision against an application by giving a written statement, an informal hearing or formal inquiry proceedings. Appeals can also be made against:

- the failure of the planning authority to issue a decision;
- conditions attached to a permission; and
- an enforcement notice.

Planning application	A formal application to the local planning authority for planning permission.
Planning application tracking system	A computer-based system for viewing and following the progress of planning applications.

Planning history	The history of planning applications and developments on a site.
Planning inquiry	A public hearing to allow: • members of the public to make statements on a development plan; or • members of the public to make statements on a planning application which has gone to appeal.
Planning permission	Formal approval by the local planning authority, often with conditions, allowing a proposed development to go ahead. Full permissions are usually valid for five years. Outline permission is where permission is granted in principle as long as certain 'reserved matters' relating to the detail of the application are approved in future. Outline permissions are valid for three years.
Planning portal	A government-supported website which provides a range of information on the planning system, from whether planning permission is needed for a certain type of development to local development plans and the latest planning news.
Planning register	A compulsory part of a local planning authority (both live (current) and historic (past) registers are available). The planning register includes application plans and drawings, committee agendas, reports, minutes and background papers.
Proposals map	A compulsory part of a local plan showing the location of proposals in the plan on an Ordnance Survey map.
Public interest test	LPAs may withhold information if there are reasons, relating to the public interest, that override public interest in documents that have been asked for. In these circumstances, LPAs may refuse to make information available to the public although they must explain clearly why this has been done.
RADAR	Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR). An organisation and registered charity working to promote change for disabled people by helping them achieve their rights and expectations, and by influencing the way that disabled people are viewed as members of society.
Section 106 agreement	A binding agreement between a council and a developer for planning permission and for matters linked to the proposed development (for example, providing affordable housing).
Site notice	A notice put up at the site of a planning application to tell the public about the application and how they can put their views forward.
Stakeholder	An organisation or person with an interest in a planning proposal or issue.

Statement of community involvement	A document all local planning authorities will produce under the new planning system. It sets out their policy for involving the community in preparing and developing local development documents and in significant development control and planning decisions.
Statutory	Something that has to be carried out by law (statute), usually through an Act of Parliament.
Statutory planning documents	Planning documents that have to be prepared by law.
Structure plan	A statutory plan, generally at county level, setting out the main strategic planning policies in land which provide the framework for more detailed policies in local plans (see 'local development frameworks' for details of the new system).
Supplementary planning guidance and documents	Further advice issued by a local planning authority, expanding on its statutory policies.
Sustainable development	Economic development that achieves better standards of living both now and for future generations while protecting and improving the environment now and for the future.
Sustainable transport	Transport that meets people's needs while protecting and improving the environment now and for the future.
The Planning Inspectorate	The organisation dealing with processing planning and enforcement appeals and holding inquiries into local development plans, as well as other planning-related casework.
Tree preservation order (TPO)	An order made by a local planning authority that makes it an offence to cut, top, lop, uproot or deliberately damage or destroy a tree without that authority's permission.

Sources for the glossary

Glossary of planning terms on the planning portal website:
www.planningportal.gov.uk/wps/portal?PpAction=select_document&select_document_id=1018892037172&lpaCode=null&section=HOME
Accessed: 10 May 2004

Glossary of planning terms on North Somerset District Council's website:
www.nsomerset.gov.uk/living/planning/permission/glossary+of+planning+terms.asp#beta
Accessed: 10 May 2004

PARSOL website:
http://www.parsol.gov.uk/index.html
Accessed: 10 May 2004

Draft Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks, ODPM, October 2003. Annex A: Definitions and Illustrative Material
Accessed: 10 May 2004

What is best value? Scottish Executive's website.
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/about/FCSD/LG-PERF4/00014838/Home.aspx
Accessed: 10 May 2004

Mapping the Net: Some ideas from cartography and geography. Martin Dodge, University College London (UCL):
www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/martin/isma-viz/tsld010.htm
Accessed: 10 May 2004

Greater community involvement is central to Government reform of the planning system. Part of this involves increasing public access to planning documents and making sure that any fees charged are reasonable and do not prevent people accessing the planning system. *Making the Planning System Accessible to Everyone* provides local planning authorities with good practice guidance and examples on ways to increase access to planning information and guidance on reasonable charging for information.