UK Planning Permission

NATIONAL PLANNING CONSULTANCY · UK-WIDE

FREE STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

Change of Use Planning Applications

A UK guide · England focus, with notes for Wales, Scotland & NI

Use classes, Class E, permitted changes of use and Class MA prior approval, when you need full planning permission, Article 4 directions, documents, fees, timescales, enforcement and retrospective applications, explained in plain English.



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About this guide

Turning a shop into a café, an office into flats, a house into a business or a barn into a home can all be a "change of use" in planning law. Some changes need no application, some need only a prior approval, and some need full planning permission. This guide explains how to tell which, and what to do next. The main text covers **England**; key differences elsewhere in the UK are on page 11.

Important: please read

This guide is general information about the planning system. It is not legal advice and not advice about any particular property. Legislation, fees and local policies change, and every site is different. Always check with your local planning authority (and, where relevant, a qualified professional) before starting work, buying property or submitting an application. Figures and rules are correct at the time of writing, November 2026. Where this guide summarises legislation, the official text takes precedence.

Planning a change of use?

Tell us the address, the current use and what you want to use it for. We will tell you which route applies and what the council is likely to need.

Ask about my property → ukplanningpermission.co.uk/contact

Or call 020 3951 1896 · info@ukplanningpermission.co.uk

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STEP 1 · THE BASICS

What counts as a change of use?

Planning permission is needed for "development", and development includes any **material change in the use** of buildings or land (Town and Country Planning Act 1990, section 55). Whether a change is "material" is a question of fact and degree.

1

What is the lawful use now?

Start with the **lawful** use, not just what is happening today. Check the planning history, any permission's description and conditions, and how long the current use has gone on.

2

Which class is the new use?

The **Use Classes Order 1987** groups similar uses. Moving between uses in the **same class** is not development, so no permission is needed (page 4).

3

Is there a PD right?

If the classes differ, Part 3 of the **GPDO 2015** may still allow the change as permitted development, sometimes subject to prior approval (pages 5–6).

Useful definitions

Term	What it means
Use class	A category of similar uses in the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, as substantially amended in England from 1 September 2020.
Sui generis	"Of its own kind": a use that sits in no class, such as a pub, hot food takeaway or large HMO. Any change to or from a sui generis use normally needs permission unless a PD right applies.
Permitted development (PD)	Planning permission granted nationally by the GPDO, so no application is needed, subject to limits and conditions.
Prior approval	A light-touch application where the council looks only at listed matters, not the principle.
Article 4 direction	A council direction that removes specified PD rights in a defined area, so an application is needed.
Mixed use	Two or more primary uses together, such as a shop with a flat above. Usually sui generis unless the GPDO says otherwise.

Building work is separate

A change of use permission or PD right covers the use. External works such as new shopfronts, windows or extensions may need their own planning permission, and conversion works will need Building Regulations approval.

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STEP 2 · ENGLAND

The use classes in England

Class	Name	Examples
B2	General industrial	Industrial processes other than those within Class E(g)
B8	Storage or distribution	Warehouses, distribution centres, open-air storage
C1	Hotels	Hotels, boarding and guest houses (no significant care)
C2 / C2A	Residential institutions / secure	Care homes, hospitals, nursing homes, boarding schools / prisons, secure units
C3	Dwellinghouses	Family homes; up to six people living as one household (with or without care)
C4	Small houses in multiple occupation	3 to 6 unrelated people sharing basic amenities
E	Commercial, business and service	(a) shops; (b) cafés and restaurants; (c) financial, professional and other services; (d) indoor sport, recreation, fitness; (e) medical or health services; (f) crèches, day nurseries; (g) offices, research and development, light industry
F1	Learning and non-residential institutions	Schools and education, galleries, museums, libraries, public halls, places of worship, law courts
F2	Local community	Small shops selling essential goods (up to 280 m² with no similar shop within 1,000 m), community halls, outdoor sport areas, swimming pools, skating rinks
Sui generis	No class	Pubs and bars, hot food takeaways, betting offices, pay day loan shops, cinemas, concert halls, bingo halls, dance halls, live music venues, nightclubs, casinos, theatres, launderettes, amusement arcades, petrol stations, car showrooms, taxi businesses, scrapyards, hostels, large HMOs

Class E flexibility

Because shops, cafés, offices, gyms, clinics, nurseries and light industry are all in Class E, changing between them is generally **not development** in England. A building can also be in more than one Class E use at once. But check for planning **conditions** that restrict the use: many permissions granted since 2020 limit the use to a particular part of Class E.

Source: Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (S.I. 1987/764), article 3 and Schedules 1 and 2, as amended (including S.I. 2020/757), legislation.gov.uk.

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STEP 3 · PERMITTED CHANGES OF USE (ENGLAND)

Changes that need no planning application

Part 3 of Schedule 2 to the GPDO 2015 allows some changes between classes without a planning application. Many need **prior approval**, and each has detailed conditions and exclusions. The main ones:

Class	Change allowed	Key points
A	Betting office, pay day loan shop, casino or hot food takeaway to Class E	Subject to the limits and conditions in the class; check before relying on it.
G	Class E (or betting office / pay day loan shop) to a mixed use with up to 2 flats	Prior approval (contamination, flooding, noise, natural light, waste storage). No flats on a ground floor with a display window.
L	C3 house to C4 small HMO, and back	Not where it creates two or more separate homes. Often removed by Article 4 directions.
M	Launderette, betting office, pay day loan shop or hot food takeaway to homes	Max 150 m² changing use; prior approval.
MA	Class E to homes (C3)	Prior approval; see page 6.
N	Amusement arcades and casinos to homes	Prior approval.
Q	Agricultural buildings to homes	Up to 10 homes and 1,000 m² in total, max 150 m² each; limited building works and rear extensions; prior approval.
R	Agricultural buildings to a flexible commercial use	Size limits and prior approval for larger schemes.
T	Class E, hotels and some institutions to state-funded schools	Prior approval.

RULES THAT APPLY TO EVERY PD CONVERSION TO HOMES

New homes created under PD must have a gross internal floor area of at least **37 m²** and meet the **nationally described space standard** (GPDO article 3(9A)). Prior approval also checks for adequate natural light in all habitable rooms where the class requires it.

PD rights can be switched off

PD rights do not apply where a planning condition removes them, where an **Article 4 direction** is in force, or (for many classes) on listed buildings, in conservation areas, National Parks, AONBs and other protected land. Always check before relying on PD.

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STEP 4 · PRIOR APPROVAL IN DETAIL

Class MA: commercial, business and service to homes

Class MA lets a building in Class E use become one or more homes (C3) without a planning application, provided you obtain prior approval first.

Eligibility (summary)

- ✓ The building must have been in Class E use (or the equivalent pre-2020 classes) for a continuous period of at least **2 years** before the application.
- ✓ There is no longer a floorspace cap or vacancy requirement.
- ✓ Not allowed on a listed building or its curtilage, a scheduled monument, a SSSI, safety hazard or military explosives area.
- ✓ Not allowed in an AONB/National Landscape, National Park, the Broads or a World Heritage Site.
- ✓ Agricultural tenancies need landlord and tenant consent.
- ✓ Homes must meet the space standard and 37 m² minimum.

What the council considers

- ☐ Transport impacts, especially safe site access
- ☐ Contamination risks
- ☐ Flooding risks
- ☐ Noise from commercial premises on future residents
- ☐ In conservation areas: the effect of losing ground-floor commercial use
- ☐ Natural light in all habitable rooms
- ☐ Effect on residents of nearby industrial or storage uses
- ☐ Loss of a registered nursery or health centre
- ☐ Fire safety, for buildings meeting the fire risk condition

1. **Prepare** floor plans showing each home's dimensions and floor area, elevations, a site plan and evidence of the 2-year Class E use; a flood risk assessment and fire statement where required.
2. **Apply** to the council with the fee: **£260 per home** (**£323 per home** from 8 December 2026).
3. **Wait for the decision.** Do not start until prior approval is given, or **56 days** pass without a decision. The council publicises the application and may consult bodies such as highways, the Environment Agency or the Building Safety Regulator.
4. **Complete within 3 years** of the prior approval date.

Source: GPDO 2015, Schedule 2, Part 3, Class MA and paragraph W, legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/596; fee tables, gov.uk.

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STEP 5 · FULL PLANNING

When you need full planning permission

You will need a full planning application for a change of use where:

- ✕ The new use is in a different class and no PD right covers it.
- ✕ The change is to or from a **sui generis** use (for example a shop to a hot food takeaway, a house to a large HMO, a pub to anything else).
- ✕ A PD right exists but the proposal breaks a limit or exclusion.
- ✕ An **Article 4 direction** removes the PD right.
- ✕ A **planning condition** restricts the use.
- ✕ The building is listed, or in a protected area where the PD right does not apply.
- ✕ Prior approval was refused and you want the council to consider the wider merits.
- ✕ Subdividing one house into two or more homes (this is a material change of use).

Article 4 directions

An Article 4 direction (article 4 of the GPDO) lets a council remove specific PD rights in a defined area, for example the C3 to C4 HMO change in student areas, or Class MA in town centres. Where one applies you must submit a planning application instead. There is no longer a fee exemption for these applications, so the normal fee is payable.

- ✓ Check the council's website or local plan pages for a list and map of directions.
- ✓ Directions can apply to a whole borough, a few streets or individual buildings.
- ✓ Councils often give advance notice (commonly 12 months) before a direction takes effect.

What the council assesses

The council decides the application in line with the **development plan** unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Typical issues are: the loss of the existing use (for example shops, pubs or employment space), effect on the vitality of town centres, noise, odour and hours of operation, living conditions for future occupiers, parking and highways, waste storage, heritage and flood risk.

Not sure whether it is PD or full planning?

We review the lawful use, planning history and Article 4 directions for your property, and recommend the quickest route.

Check my change of use → ukplanningpermission.co.uk/contact

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STEP 6 · APPLYING

Making a change of use application

1. **Establish the lawful use.** Gather the planning history, leases, business rates records or other evidence. If the current use is long-established but unauthorised, consider a certificate of lawfulness for the existing use first.
2. **Confirm the route**: no application, PD with prior approval, a lawful development certificate (proposed) for certainty, or full planning permission.
3. **Consider pre-application advice** from the council for anything sensitive, such as the loss of a shop, pub or employment space.
4. **Prepare the documents.** National requirements: application form, **location plan** with the site edged red, **site plan**, the right **ownership certificate**, and the fee. Then the council's local list, which for a change of use often includes existing and proposed floor plans and elevations, a planning statement, marketing evidence (where losing a protected use), noise or odour reports, waste and cycle storage details, parking information and a flood risk assessment.
5. **Submit** through the Planning Portal or the council's own system, and pay the fee.
6. **Validation and consultation.** Once valid, the council publicises the application (site notice, neighbour letters or press notice) and consults bodies such as highways and environmental health. The public usually has at least 21 days to comment.
7. **Decision.** The council should decide a standard application within **8 weeks** (13 weeks for major development), unless an extension is agreed in writing.
8. **Conditions.** Permissions often restrict hours, the exact use within a class, or require details such as extraction equipment. Discharge any pre-commencement conditions before starting.

> **Tip: describe the use precisely**
>
> Say exactly what you want: "change of use from shop (Class E(a)) to hot food takeaway (sui generis) with rear extraction flue". Precise descriptions avoid invalid applications and arguments later about what was approved.

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COSTS AND TIME

Fees and timescales (England)

Application	1 Apr – 7 Dec 2026	From 8 Dec 2026
Material change of use of a building or land (general)	**£610**	**£732**
Change of use to homes (fewer than 10), per home	£610	£700
Change of use of one house to two or more, per additional home (fewer than 10)	£610	£700
Prior approval: Class MA (Class E to homes), per home	£260	£323
Prior approval: Classes M, N, Q (to homes)	£249 (£536 with building works)	£310 (£667 with building works)
Lawful development certificate: existing use	Same as full fee	Same as full fee
Lawful development certificate: proposed use	Half the full fee	Half the full fee
Discharge of conditions (non-householder, per request)	£309	£435
Removal or variation of a condition (non-major, non-householder)	£608	£608

Sources: MHCLG, *Planning fees: annual indexation from 1 April 2026* and *Fees for planning applications in England from 8 December 2026*, gov.uk. Applications made before 8 December 2026 pay the fee in force when made. Larger schemes have higher, sliding-scale fees. Correct at the time of writing, November 2026; use the Planning Portal fee calculator before you apply. The Planning Portal adds a service charge for online submissions.

Timescales

Stage	Time
Public comments	At least 21 days
Standard decision	8 weeks
Major development	13 weeks
Class MA prior approval	56 days
Begin a planning permission	Normally within 3 years

Budget for more than the fee

- Measured survey and drawings
- Planning statement or consultant fees
- Specialist reports (noise, odour, flood, transport)
- Building Regulations and fire safety
- Licences (e.g. premises, HMO or food registration)
- Community Infrastructure Levy, where new homes or floorspace are created

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IF THINGS GO WRONG

Enforcement, retrospective applications and appeals

Enforcement

Changing use without the permission you need is a breach of planning control. The council can investigate, issue a planning contravention notice, an enforcement warning notice or an enforcement notice, and in some cases a stop notice. Ignoring an enforcement notice once it takes effect is a criminal offence.

Time limits (England)

For breaches occurring on or after **25 April 2024**, the council generally has **10 years** to take enforcement action against any breach. Before that date, a change of use to a single dwellinghouse had a 4-year limit, and that earlier limit still applies to breaches that began before 25 April 2024.

Certificates for existing uses

If a use has continued long enough to be immune from enforcement, you can apply for a **certificate of lawfulness of existing use or development** (section 191). You must prove it on the balance of probabilities, with evidence such as tenancy agreements, bills, council tax or business rates records and statutory declarations.

Retrospective applications

You can apply for permission for a use that has already started (section 73A of the 1990 Act). It is judged on its planning merits like any other application, but carries risk: if refused, the council may take enforcement action.

Appeals

You can appeal to the Planning Inspectorate if permission or prior approval is refused, granted with conditions you object to, or not decided in time. For applications made on or after 1 April 2026:

- **Most planning refusals:** within **6 months** of the decision.
- **Minor commercial applications:** within **12 weeks**.
- Shorter limits apply if an enforcement notice has been served on the same development.
- Enforcement notice appeals must be made **before** the notice takes effect.

> **Tip**
>
> If you receive a letter from the planning enforcement team, take advice straight away. Early, constructive engagement often leads to a negotiated solution.

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AROUND THE UK

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Use classes and permitted changes of use are devolved and differ significantly. **England's Class E and Class MA do not exist in the other nations.**

WALES

Wales still uses the older use classes (A1 shops, A2 financial and professional services, A3 food and drink, B1 business, D1 non-residential institutions, D2 assembly and leisure and so on). Class C3 is limited to sole or main residences, with new **Class C5** (second homes) and **Class C6** (short-term lets); councils can use Article 4 directions to require permission to move between C3, C5 and C6. Permitted changes are set by the GPDO 1995 as amended in Wales (for example A3 to A1 or A2, and C4 to C3). Welsh fees differ from England's.

SCOTLAND

Uses are classified under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Scotland) Order 1997, which uses numbered classes, with permitted changes in the Scottish GPDO 1992. Applications are made through ePlanning Scotland. Scotland also has separate short-term let control areas.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Uses are classified under the Planning (Use Classes) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015, with permitted changes in the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015, Part 4. The 11 councils decide applications, mostly through the NI Planning Portal; appeals go to the Planning Appeals Commission.

Check the right legislation

Online articles about "Class E" or "Class MA" apply to England only. If your property is in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, check your council's guidance or ask us.

Property outside England?

We can explain the use classes and permitted changes that apply in your nation and council area.

Ask a planning consultant → ukplanningpermission.co.uk/contact

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AVOID THE PITFALLS

Common mistakes, FAQs and checklist

Common mistakes

- ✕ Assuming the current use is lawful without checking.
- ✕ Missing a condition that limits the use within Class E.
- ✕ Relying on PD where an Article 4 direction applies.
- ✕ Starting before prior approval is given or the 56 days pass.
- ✕ Forgetting that external works need their own consent.
- ✕ Units below the space standard under PD.
- ✕ Ignoring licensing, Building Regulations and fire safety.

Can I change a shop to an office without permission?

In England, usually yes: both are in Class E, unless a condition restricts the use.

Can I change a shop to a takeaway?

Hot food takeaways are sui generis, so this normally needs full planning permission.

Do I need permission to run a business from home?

Not if the house remains mainly a home and the business is ancillary. Permission is needed if the character of the use changes (for example customers, staff, noise or deliveries).

YOUR CHECKLIST

- ☐ I know the lawful use and its use class.
- ☐ I know the class of the proposed use.
- ☐ I have checked conditions and Article 4 directions.
- ☐ I have checked whether a PD right applies, and its limits.
- ☐ I know whether prior approval is needed.
- ☐ I have the drawings, plans and reports needed.
- ☐ I have budgeted for the fee and reports.
- ☐ I have considered Building Regulations, licensing and fire safety.

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SOURCES

Sources and disclaimer

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Official sources (checked November 2026)

- Town and Country Planning Act 1990, sections 55, 73A, 171B, 191 and 192. legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/8
- Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (S.I. 1987/764), as amended, including the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020/757). legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1987/764
- Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (S.I. 2015/596), articles 3(9A) and 4 and Schedule 2, Part 3 (Classes A, G, L, M, MA, N, Q, R, T and paragraph W). legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/596
- MHCLG, *Planning fees: annual indexation from 1 April 2026*; *Fees for planning applications in England from 8 December 2026*. gov.uk
- Planning Practice Guidance: When is permission required? (including Article 4 directions); Making an application; Lawful development certificates; Enforcement and post-permission matters. gov.uk
- Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, section 115 and S.I. 2024/452 (enforcement time limits from 25 April 2024).
- Planning Inspectorate, *Planning appeals: procedural guide for appeals relating to applications dated on or after 1 April 2026*. gov.uk
- Planning Portal: Change of use; fee calculator. planningportal.co.uk
- Welsh Government: Planning permission: use classes (change of use); changes of use not requiring planning permission. gov.wales
- Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Scotland) Order 1997; gov.scot planning guidance; ePlanning Scotland.
- Planning (Use Classes) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015; Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015; nidirect.

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Ready to talk about your property?

From quick feasibility checks to prior approvals, planning applications, lawful development certificates and appeals, we help owners, landlords, investors and businesses across the UK.

Make an enquiry → ukplanningpermission.co.uk/contact

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