

# Extension tension

Short-staffed councils are still sluggish on planning decisions post lockdown



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You've heard the one about [Covid delays to building work](#), but the same joke is on you when it comes to planning your own home improvement. It now takes 41 per cent longer before your project can start on site than it did before the pandemic.

Delays triggered by lockdowns have become even more pronounced this year. In 2019 the average home extension took 185 days — about six months — to go through site surveys, design, planning and building regulations approval. Last year

this jumped to 238 days. Now it stands at 262 days, or almost nine months, according to Resi, Britain's largest residential architectural service. The design platform analysed 1,165 rear extensions, loft conversions and garden room additions where it had provided a full pre-build services.

Anthony Doran had to wait 245 days before he got planning permission last month for a garden studio at the west London terrace where he lives with his fiancée, Nicole, and their blended family of three daughters,

Jojo, 17, Elodie, 15, and Lulu, 11. "We just heard nothing for months and months . . . and in the end I laid two formal complaints. They sort of hide away in their ivory tower and you're stumped," he says. With a kitchen extension already under way, Doran had hoped to save costs on groundworks by building the garden gym and motorcycle garage at the same time. "All the kit was on site. Now we have to get all that stuff back in." They also lost money on soaring construction costs, renting a temporary home elsewhere and storing their belongings for longer. "We look forward with trepidation to the bill we will receive."

Why the delays? Planning decisions are taking longer. The government requires councils to decide applications within eight weeks, but only about half of projects now meet this deadline. Between July and December 2019 62 per cent of 186,137 non-major planning applications received in England were decided within the time frame. This dropped to 57 per cent in the first half of 2020, and then down further to 53 per cent in the same period this year, government planning data shows.

That's not all. The eight-week clock only starts ticking once a council "validates" an application. This is taking longer, too, but official data leaves that out. "In my 15 years as an architect I've never seen so many requests and

pushback from planning departments at this stage, with many asking for extra photographs and documentation,” says Nick Stockley, the design director at Resi. “If they can delay the application being validated, they save more time and still claim to have reached a decision in eight weeks — even though some aren’t actually able to meet this target any more.”

Alexandra Cockle experienced this when she applied in May to upgrade windows on her 17th-century detached house in Surrey, which she shares with her husband, Dave, 40, and their daughters, Harper, six, and Evan, three. “It took nine weeks just to validate. A day before the eight-week deadline the council extended the deadline by four weeks, saying they needed to consult ‘other’ neighbours. I don’t have any neighbours, but they found the nearest house a mile away to consult with. So in total it’s taken 21 weeks to get council sign-off.” They expect to finally fit the windows shortly before Christmas.

“I feel quite sorry for the councils,” Cockle says. “They’ve been cut to the bone for years and now they have a surge in applications after lockdown. If you want to build back better, like Boris says, we have to start with the basics and get the planning right.”

Although the economy has reopened, some councils have still not resumed pre-application meetings, in which homeowners can have informal discussions with planners before they submit designs.

Wei Xu, 56, and her husband, Sueharu Hamaue, 67, applied seven months ago for consent to build a simple one-storey rear extension to their three-bedroom newbuild house in Cheshire. “We’re still waiting. There’s been nothing at all from the council. They’re short of staff but it’s been such a long time. It’s just really stressful and frustrating.”

The Local Government Association says councils decided 88 per cent of the 666,500 non-major applications made in the year to March within the agreed time, if those with agreed

extensions, planning performance agreements and environmental impact assessments are included.

David Renard, its planning spokesman, says: “Councils have worked hard to ensure the planning system has been able to continue functioning as normally as possible during the pandemic, although in some places this may have meant having to withdraw non-statutory services, for example pre-application discussions.” He says planning departments need greater resources. “This is why we are calling for councils to be able to set their own planning fees, with taxpayers currently having to subsidise the costs of planning applications by around £180 million a year.”

