

Air conditioning as a planning issue

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1. There is great excitement in the planning press in relation to the planning concerns affecting air conditioning units installed on the outside of existing buildings.
2. It is sadly reported that enforcement actions are becoming more common against such air con units.
3. It seems that some authorities are net zero obsessed. In Camden, for instance, there is what is termed a 'cooling hierarchy' in its local plan which discourages the use of air conditioning because of concerns that it increases 'demand for energy' and makes 'the micro-climate hotter'. Camden's policy is that 'active cooling' should only be allowed when all other means of 'passive cooling' have been exhausted.
4. For those fortunate enough not to live in a front-line net zero planning authority but who want to ensure that their children sleep more easily at night, external air con units are only problematic in planning terms if they are large enough to materially affect a building's external appearance in which case there is a significant risk that your neighbour will report you and an enforcement officer will visit your home and tell you either not to worry or, more likely, will encourage you to apply for a retrospective planning permission. If you ignore this, enforcement will be considered if officers consider it 'expedient' for the authority to act in this way.
5. Obviously, enforcement officers should have better things to do with their time in the hot weather but if the building is located in a conservation area and/or where the white box/boxes is/are disproportionate in size to the building and/or where there are local plan policies containing 'broader sustainability goals' and/or where noise and neighbouring living conditions might create obstacles, air con impacts arising from visually intrusive air con boxes on the front or sides of existing buildings will be considered more carefully by officers.

6. As always consult a planning officer (if you can find one) and read into your local plan. Whether the recent exhortation from the MHCLG to planning authorities 'to take a common-sense approach' to air conditioning will make any difference remains to be seen. Ironically, the installation of an air source heat pump on an existing building is a Class G permitted development right.

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