

Streetlights on a new-build development

Ownership, adoption, lighting design and what residents should expect while the estate is still being completed

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General advice

The short answer: streetlights on a new development may be intended for adoption by the highway authority or may remain privately managed through an estate charge. Some permanent lighting can still be awaiting connection, testing or completion when early residents move in. That does not automatically mean the development is defective, but occupied routes must be managed safely and the approved permanent lighting scheme must ultimately be delivered in accordance with the relevant planning permission, highway agreement and technical approvals.

CheckSure's Homeowner Knowledge Base draws on practical experience of building, inspecting and resolving defects in new homes. Our aim is to explain what homeowners should reasonably expect, what may require further investigation and what steps they can take next.

Streetlights do not all have the same owner

The column outside a home may look like any other public streetlight, but appearance does not prove ownership. Lighting within a road intended for adoption may eventually pass to the highway or lighting authority. Until the adoption process is complete, the developer or landowner will normally remain responsible for the installation, electricity and maintenance.

Other lighting may be designed to remain private. Examples include columns on private roads, wall-mounted fittings, illuminated bollards, low-level lights in parking courts and lighting along paths or communal landscaping. Responsibility may sit with a freeholder, residents' management company or appointed managing agent and be funded through estate or service charges.

The three common responsibility arrangements

The organisation that installed a streetlight is not necessarily the organisation maintaining it today. Use plot or column details and confirm current ownership before reporting an outage or damage.

Lighting status	Who normally deals with it?	What to check
On an adopted highway	The highway or lighting authority, sometimes through a service contractor.	Confirm the column is inside the adopted boundary and use the authority's fault-reporting route.
Awaiting adoption	The developer or landowner normally remains responsible until the required certificate.	Ask whether the approved installation is complete, energised, tested and included in the Section 38 works.
Private or estate-managed	The freeholder, residents' company or managing agent under the property documents.	Check the estate specification, electricity and maintenance budget, reserves, response standards and reporting contact.

A development can contain all three arrangements. A publicly adoptable street may lead into a private parking court, while a nearby footpath or play area has separate management. The adoption plan, approved lighting drawings and property documents are more reliable than the position or style of the fittings.

How street lighting is designed

A professional lighting design is more than a row of columns placed at equal intervals. The designer considers the type and use of the road or path, vehicle and pedestrian movement, conflict areas, junctions, crossings, parking, obstructions, mounting height, lantern output, beam distribution and the surrounding environment. The objective is appropriate visibility and uniformity without unnecessary glare, spill or energy use.

Highway authorities commonly refer to the current road-lighting standards, including BS 5489 and BS EN 13201, together with their own specifications. A scheme intended for adoption will normally need the authority's technical approval and may require calculations, drawings, electrical information, equipment schedules, test certification and as-built records. Private schemes may be controlled through planning approval, estate specifications and electrical requirements even though the council will not maintain them.

What does “lux level” mean?

Lux is a measure of illuminance: broadly, how much light reaches a surface. It is useful, but a single lux reading does not decide whether an entire street is properly lit. Designers also consider how evenly light is distributed, glare, the lighting class, colour and the way people see objects and changes in level. A bright pool directly beneath one lantern can coexist with an unhelpfully dark gap nearby.

There is no one universal minimum lux level that every new-build road, pavement and parking area must achieve. The correct criteria depend on the approved design and the classification and use of each area. This is why a homeowner's phone app or spot reading cannot replace a professional lighting calculation or the authority's assessment.

Planning permission also considers where light should not go

Lighting can improve access and visibility, but too much or badly directed light can create glare, shine into bedrooms, affect the character of an area and disturb wildlife. National planning guidance asks decision-makers to consider where light shines, when it shines, how much is provided and the possible ecological effects. Local policies can be particularly strict near dark landscapes, protected habitats, woodland, water or known bat routes.

The approved scheme may therefore use shielded lanterns, warmer-coloured light, lower columns, dimming, part-night operation, restricted bollards or deliberately dark corridors. A darker area is not automatically evidence that a light is missing. The relevant question is whether the installed arrangement matches the approved design and provides the intended safe route without unacceptable spill.

Why might some lights be incomplete when homes are occupied?

Large developments are completed in phases. Permanent columns may depend on underground ducts, electricity supplies, finished kerb lines, final road levels, approved equipment, commissioning or connection to a central control system. A later phase may also require the lighting layout to continue beyond the occupied street. As with final road surfacing, some finishing work may sensibly be sequenced after the heaviest construction activity.

Temporary lighting or a partially commissioned permanent scheme may be used during this period. The fact that every proposed column is not yet installed does not by itself prove non-compliance: the planning condition or highway agreement may allow phased delivery. Equally, “the estate is unfinished” is not a complete answer where an occupied route has a foreseeable safety problem. The developer should assess the actual route and provide suitable controls until the permanent arrangement is ready.



Figure 1. Streetlights may be installed in phases, so residents should distinguish incomplete works from a light that has failed.

What should residents reasonably expect?

- A suitable route to occupied homes that can be used without avoidable lighting-related danger, taking account of vehicles, pedestrians, steps, crossings and changes in level.
- Temporary arrangements where permanent lighting is not yet available, if the risk assessment and approved phasing require them.
- Columns, access covers, cabinets, cables and incomplete bases to be guarded or made safe rather than left as hazards.
- Faults in developer-controlled lights to be investigated and repaired within a reasonable period proportionate to the risk.
- The permanent installation to follow the approved layout and specification, subject to formally approved changes.
- Lighting intended for adoption to be operational, tested, recorded and accepted to the highway authority's requirements before final adoption.
- Clear information about who currently owns, powers and maintains private and adoption-pending lights.

Incomplete, faulty or simply designed differently?

A missing lantern, exposed electrical component, leaning column, repeatedly unlit section or unprotected excavation is different from a scheme that intentionally uses fewer fittings or lower output. Modern LED optics can direct light more precisely than older lanterns, so brightness at bedroom windows is not a reliable measure of performance on the road. Similarly, low-level bollards may illuminate a parking or pedestrian area without making the wider sky appear bright.

Before alleging that a light has been omitted, compare the installed work with the approved lighting plan and check whether that phase has reached its required completion stage. If the concern is immediate safety, report the hazard first. ownership and technical compliance can be clarified afterwards.

Lighting bollards and private parking areas

Bollards and low-level fittings are common around private parking courts, apartment entrances and paths. They can define a route while limiting glare and visual clutter, but they are also vulnerable to vehicle impact and damage. Residents should report loose covers, exposed wiring, unstable fittings, water ingress, sharp damaged sections and lights obscured by planting.

Because these assets are often outside the adopted highway, the council's street-lighting team may not repair them. The management company's maintenance plan should identify inspections, lamp or LED-unit replacement, electrical testing, energy costs and eventual renewal. A reserve fund may be relevant where the estate will retain a substantial private lighting network.

Questions to ask before exchange or completion

- Which streetlights, illuminated signs and bollards will be adopted, and which will remain private?
- Can the approved external-lighting plan and any later revisions be provided or identified on the planning portal?
- Is the lighting included in a Section 38 agreement, and what certification remains before adoption?
- Will all routes serving occupied homes have permanent lighting at completion, or is an approved temporary or phased arrangement planned?
- Who receives fault reports before adoption, and who deals with an urgent electrical or physical hazard?
- For private lighting, who pays for electricity, maintenance, inspection and replacement through the estate charge?
- Are dimming, part-night lighting, warm-colour requirements or dark ecological corridors part of the approved design?
- Could a proposed column or bollard affect a driveway, parking bay, window, tree canopy or access route?

How to report a problem

Record the exact location, column or bollard number if shown, date, time and nature of the problem. Explain whether the light is completely out, intermittent, damaged, shining into a home or leaving a particular hazard difficult to see. Photographs taken safely at dusk and after dark can help, but do not touch a damaged fitting, open a cover or approach exposed cables.

For an adopted light, use the highway or lighting authority's reporting system. For an unadopted or private light, contact the developer, estate manager or responsible freeholder. Planning enforcement may be relevant where the completed installation materially departs from an enforceable approved scheme or condition. An exposed electrical conductor, collision-damaged column or other immediate danger should be treated as an emergency and reported through the appropriate urgent route.

Can a snagging inspection assess street lighting?

A snagging inspection may record a plot-specific issue such as an unsafe unfinished base, damaged bollard, obstructed path light or obvious access concern within the agreed scope. It is not normally a lighting-design verification, electrical inspection of the estate network or audit of planning and Section 38 compliance. Those tasks require approved drawings, calculations, test records and the relevant specialist or authority.

Where the inspection occurs in daylight, the operation of dusk-controlled lights may not be apparent. A separate evening observation can be useful if the route is a concern, provided it is carried out safely and without entering restricted construction areas.

Common misunderstandings

“Every streetlight belongs to the council”

Lighting may be private, adopted later or retained under an estate-management arrangement.

“All permanent lighting must be finished before any occupation”

Phased development can involve temporary or incomplete arrangements, but safe access and approved planning outcomes still matter.

“Brighter lighting is always safer”

Lighting design balances visibility, uniformity, glare, ecology, neighbouring amenity and energy use.

Frequently asked questions

Why is the light outside my house not very bright?

The lantern may be designed to put light onto the highway rather than into nearby windows. Check the road and path performance, not just the brightness seen from inside the home. Report a genuine dark conflict point or fault with its precise location.

Can I ask for a column to be moved?

You can raise the concern, particularly before installation, but a move may alter the lighting calculation, underground services, planning approval and adoption design. It is not usually a simple customer-choice item.

Does the council maintain every light visible from the road?

No. Private roads, parking courts, communal areas and adoption-pending streets may contain lights maintained by someone else. Confirm the asset and boundary before reporting it.

Must every part of an estate be brightly lit?

No. Appropriate lighting is not the same as maximum lighting. The design should balance the intended task with glare, energy, residential amenity, landscape and ecological effects. Some approved areas may intentionally remain dark.

Key takeaways

- Streetlights may be adopted, awaiting adoption or permanently private—even on the same development.
- The developer normally remains responsible for adoption-pending lighting until the required handover certificate.
- Lux is only one part of lighting performance; uniformity, glare, direction and the approved lighting class also matter.
- Planning balances safe, useful lighting against spill, dark skies, residential amenity and wildlife.
- Phased completion can be legitimate, but occupied routes still need suitable temporary or permanent controls.
- Lighting bollards and parking-court fittings may be funded and maintained through estate charges.
- Use the approved plan and adoption boundary to identify a missing item or the correct party for a fault report.

EXPLORE FURTHER Explore the CheckSure Homeowner Knowledge Base for related guidance on buying, inspecting and looking after a new home. Please visit checksure.co.uk/knowledge-base/

Sources & References

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<https://www.nhqb.org.uk/the-code/>

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