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Planning for Planning:

Securing council consent when you need it

For many schools, a host of elegant and quaintly named buildings are a distinct element of their school life experience. But in the fast-moving 21st century – where cutting-edge technology is an intrinsic part of a child’s education – this sense of tradition and history must be balanced with the need every school has to maximise its “offer” and attract pupils in an increasingly competitive educational market place.

The journey to develop additional resources can be far from smooth. In many instances, individual schools (or their charitable trusts) own extensive, sometimes overly so, grounds which offer space for the construction of new facilities. However, the ability to bring forward such development is almost always dependent on winning the support of local councillors.

These elected representatives – holding public office for four years at a time – are regularly called upon to make difficult and sometimes contentious decisions about local planning applications. Although they receive advice (and recommendations) from planning officers, the final decision to grant consent will boil down to whether enough of these councillors are convinced to support the proposals.

Consequently, every deliberation about development plans is part of a political decision-making process – meaning a school’s ability to improve its physical assets is ultimately at the discretion of individuals whose principal focus lies in being answerable to their community (particularly when re-election looms), and to local political circumstances.

As a former council leader, I have seen first-hand what happens when major development proposals unexpectedly fail to secure the backing of councillors. An applicant is left with a hefty bill – as any detailed application will require very serious professional and technical input – and nothing to show for it.

For an education institution, the consequences can be even more serious. A failure to secure planning consent within anticipated timescales can leave a school unable to deliver its required additional facilities, dashing parental expectations and causing further uncertainty at a critical point in the academic year.

Since leaving frontline politics, I have advised a diverse range of developers – including many in the non-commercial sector such as schools, churches and charities – to help them navigate through the politics of planning in a timely manner.

Through Facultas Associates – a public affairs agency specialising in the education sector – I work with many independent and state schools to co-



ordinate their pre-application consultation and stakeholder engagement on development proposals. This input has helped secure some notable successes, including a recent and high-profile decision by a local planning committee to grant consent, despite an officer recommendation for refusal. Crucially, such outcomes have been achieved through understanding and mitigating risk, and as a result, reducing cost.

Such outcomes are only possible when those voting on the committee are sufficiently persuaded that the



proposals in front of them are acceptable. Decisions require alignment with planning policies, but it is also necessary to demonstrate the wider benefits of such proposals – and how any potential concerns (such as traffic and design), have been addressed, to the extent of minimising (or avoiding) local objections.

Experience shows nothing should be left to chance when seeking to secure planning consent. If there is any possibility of development proposals being contentious (or being perceived as such), early engagement with key

decision-makers and influencers is essential. Schools frequently sit at the heart of local communities and it's essential local residents and businesses are constructively involved so they can become advocates, not agitators.

The need for this is particularly acute with any proposals for new boarding facilities. We have seen, at a local level, residents railing against a school's boarding house plans, and their vocal opposition being instrumental in the refusal of the initial application. Experience shows us that local concern can also result in unnecessarily onerous

conditions being placed on applications that are granted consent – such as only temporary permission for flood lights for external sports facilities.

Whilst it is not always possible to get every neighbour on side, it will clearly improve the prospects of convincing councillors to support the proposals (with sensible planning conditions that align with the school's needs) if residents (i.e. their voters), are not agitating against; and ideally are enthused in support.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for this activity. Each project requires a bespoke approach tailored to the particulars of the proposed development, local circumstances and nuances. A carefully crafted engagement strategy – starting as early as possible – can make all the difference.

David Pugh is the Planning & Development Director at Facultas Associates – www.facultas.co – a public affairs consultancy working with ambitious schools to secure planning approval for the best possible learning environment. He is a former local authority leader and councillor, overseeing changes which involved consulting with local communities and securing planning consent for extensions to existing schools, new builds and utilising capital receipts from surplus school sites. He has successfully worked on a wide range of development projects over the years. Facultas Associates can be contacted at info@facultas.co

