

Navigating the politics of planning By David Pugh Facultas Associates

What is all too often the biggest barrier to a school's successful development?

Beyond the challenges of fundraising, the local planning system frequently brings development plans to a screeching halt or, at the very least, can result in significant delay. Such delays are deeply frustrating and can prove to be costly as a school seeks to develop its facilities on time and on budget.

A major element of a school's strategic objectives is securing enhancements to its physical assets: buildings, infrastructure and sporting facilities.

Any changes to a school's learning environment almost always requires full planning consent. Crucially, the principal decision-maker for granting such approval is the Local Planning Authority (LPA), of which there are 326 in England alone.

These authorities are principally the borough, district or unitary councils, all of which are led by local politicians. Every deliberation about development proposals is part of a wider social and political decision-making process. The effect of this is that a school's ability to improve its assets is at the discretion of individuals whose principal focus is being answerable to their community, dealing with local political circumstances and getting re-elected. This is where the experience of the Facultas team is invaluable.

Any school wishing to secure consent for changes to its learning environment must convince an LPA that its plans are worthy of support. This means aligning with a range of national and local planning policies on which professional planners can advise. Crucially, it also means engaging with and persuading a group of councillors, both locally in the ward or district where the school is located, the Planning Committee, in order to persuade them that the proposals should be supported.

Securing a positive planning decision, particularly in a timely manner, can be extremely challenging. Many schools are the focus of a local community, which in itself can provide opportunities for both positive involvement and negative objections. The frequent and major challenges of traffic and parking requirements for example can create vehement opposition to a new development from local residents and business owners. In turn, this can have a significant and damaging impact on the willingness of councillors to approve new planning applications.

So, what can be done? The answer is that, with careful engagement, quite a lot.

Planning requires planning and early stakeholder engagement. A school needs to undertake early research to establish whether its plans for development would gain local support or face local opposition and, subsequently, resistance from the LPA. Even if such opposition is not immediately evident, it can easily emerge once the development plans are unveiled. The strategic communication and engagement offered by

Facultas Associates aims to inform and shape local public opinion resulting in the efficient delivery of our clients' plans.

At Facultas Associates, our collective experience in advising schools and other clients on development projects tells us that meticulous planning and social engagement is the key to success. A planning application should be seen as a highly significant social and political campaign: to bring communities and politicians together and ultimately, win votes.

We draw on our extensive experience in local politics, planning and the governance of education to help schools navigate the politics of planning. This includes looking at the nuances and the internal politics of individual councils as well as how planning decisions are influenced and determined. This knowledge then feeds into an overall strategy that helps secure local support, which can then be used to maximise the prospects of securing planning consent.

Of course, nothing in planning is guaranteed, but by reducing the risks and the potential for costly delay, Facultas Associates can play a vital role in helping a school move forwards to a brighter, even more exciting future.

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 a number of years.