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How to help planners approve your scheme

In the first of a series on working with the planning system, Hana Loftus spells out what architects need to deliver to help planners say yes



Places, planning
& community



Conservation
& heritage

What do planners really want from us? This is a frequent cry from architects who feel they've come up with the perfect scheme only to find it mired in a process that seems to go round in circles. When planning feels like a Sisyphean struggle, and determination periods end up many multiples of the eight or twelve weeks set out in legislation, what can architects do to increase their chances of, if not success, at least a swift and clear outcome?

Planning today is a highly adversarial branch of public law. The level of challenge is phenomenal – it's simply not possible any more for a planner to just like a proposal; they need to be sure it won't fall foul of a judicial review, that it won't set a precedent that will have every rogue developer in the area rubbing their hands in glee, and that it won't land them in hot water with their elected councillors, local activists or social media. It's an unenviable task – weighing up the views of innumerable other officers and external consultees behind the scenes and second-guessing local politics, all while struggling under ever greater workloads.

The best way to help your proposal succeed is to make life as easy as possible for your case officer. Believe it or not, they actually want to grant you consent. It helps the council's performance statistics, reduces the number of appeals they have to resource (and pay for out of their meagre budgets) and gets them kudos with their superiors for being

efficient and capable. But too often they are faced with a pile of documents and drawings that aren't easy to relate to the policies they will be assessed against, and are full of gaps and inconsistencies.

A Local Plan isn't a gorgeous coffee table book or a pretty Instagram feed but still, it's surprising how few architects have read the planning policies their schemes will be assessed against. The many layers of the decision-making framework – the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the neighbourhood plan, the supplementary planning documents, the conservation area appraisal that's a PDF of a photocopy of a print-out from around 1985 – all have their weight. Read them, and set out clearly how your proposal conforms, supplying piles of neatly ordered and incontrovertible evidence addressing all the relevant policies. Think of it like going to court for the prosecution. When architects zero in on design, ignoring the other policies that need to be satisfied, they don't make it easy for planners to say yes.

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But planning isn't just about policy compliance, it's also about politics. A planning officer's worst nightmare is that a scheme they recommend for approval is refused at planning committee. (Arguably, that's a good outcome for applicants as it's a fair bet the proposal will succeed at appeal.) To avoid this, officers will often take a very cautionary approach if local voices oppose a proposal – unless there are public benefits that unambiguously outweigh the harms. They don't want local councillors clogging up their inbox; complaints being lodged; under-employed busybodies deciding to 'take on the council'. Help your planner by ensuring they won't have brickbats coming for their head. Depending on your situation, this can be through meaningful local consultation – exhaustively documented – or a bottle of wine for the neighbours and a promise to keep quiet about the unauthorised loft conversion they had done last year.

If this all sounds like a disproportionate amount of work to justify the tasteful house extension you've designed, you would be right. And the level of planning challenge and scrutiny rises exponentially with the wealth of the area. Depressingly, planning runs more smoothly in low-income areas where residents just don't have the capacity to object effectively and where you're unlikely to be in an area of heritage or landscape protection.

If you feel that planning is ever more capricious, unpredictable, bureaucratic and frustrating, then it's likely your case officer does too. So give them the information they need in the form they need it and try to make their job a little easier. If you want to change the system, respond to policy consultations at national level and get involved with plan-making at the local scale. Few architects engage in that part of the planning process but upstream is where the real power lies. ●

Hana Loftus is co-director of HAT Projects and a chartered planner. Until recently she was engagement and communications lead at the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service.