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Building Local Support



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George Bernard Shaw said: “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) paragraphs 39-46 provide the national planning policy basis for encouraging the use of pre-application discussions with local planning authorities. However, on most projects nowadays, developers need to weigh up whether or not to canvass the project with their neighbours or local community organisations.

This is often seen as an inconvenience and unnecessary delay to obtaining planning permission – but this is not always the case and in some cases needs to be seen as an important step in ensuring the planning permission is granted as swiftly and as certainly as possible.

In a recent project for clients in Wamil Court, Mildenhall, Suffolk, we obtained planning permission for the change of use of a 35-bed care home (Class C2 Use) to 30 self-contained flats (Class C3 Use). Neighbour and other consultations beyond the local planning authority were pivotal to our success.

Why consult?

This may seem a trite question, but it is important to understand this point. Firstly, you want to avoid key objections or a certain number of objections that can take the application to a Planning Committee. Once it goes to a Committee, the decision can be seen as more controversial, it gets more ‘political’ and the risks of refusal increase. This also adds to delay and cost.

If Ward Councillors or a certain number of members of the public object to an application then, under the Council’s internal administrative rules (known as the ‘Council Constitution’) this can automatically cause the application to be referred to the Planning Committee.

Secondly, so many objections from members of the public are entirely avoidable. In my experience, people often object (a) because they feel upset at not being asked in



the first place or alienated by the planning process or (b) because they did not understand the scheme, could not understand the drawings or have misunderstood technical matters such as highways and parking, light impact or noise. Local residents often also comment on non-planning matters such as the impact on the value of their own home or fears over construction activity. Catching these early in the right way can allay their fears completely, obtain their support or at least dull the force of their concerns.

Thirdly, and particularly important is the reputational aspect. In this case in particular, my clients want to create a development that is cohesive to community spirit and helps to bring people together. By engaging with the community openly and early, it reduces suspicion of them and their motives, avoids the label of being just another ‘faceless and divisive’ developer, and is consistent with their values and development ethos.

Where do I start?

In every case it makes sense to start with a Pre-app with the officers anyway for the following reasons:

You can pitch your case and presentation more robustly knowing that officers support the scheme, at least in all major respects.

Officers will be able to give an insight as to the complex nature of some Councillor memberships – e.g. some Councillors sit on Parish Councils or other boards as well as

serving as District or Borough Councillors, and some may have particular influence (e.g. Portfolio Member for Planning or Deputy Leader or Mayor).

Timetabling can be clarified early, such as when Planning Committee dates are, when the local Parish Council meets, who to speak to where and by what date if seeking to arrange with others an opportunity to present to their members.

In the case of some schemes, depending on budget and complexity, a specialist PR company might be engaged to lead on this aspect. In this case, we took the lead (unusually for us) but were very ably assisted by our client.

Parish or Town Council?

As we finished our pre-app with officers at the District Council, the officers advised that the local Town Council (Mildenhall High Town Council) will want to invite us for a presentation about the scheme to their Members.

We contacted the Clerk of the Town Council, who will usually be the ‘point man’ for the Town Council, and helps to coordinate the presentation format, logistics and will give an insight as to who the Members are. This is usually dependent on their meeting calendar, so you need to be ready to fit in with this.

When presenting to Members at this level, some pointers that we came away with from the meetings included:

BE ORGANISED and get there 30 minutes early to allow for set-up and to calm the nerves!

PUNCHY AND CONCISE – make your Powerpoint presentation about 15-20 minutes max.

TAKEAWAYS FOR MEMBERS – a 2-3 page summary of the scheme with CGIs is always helpful.

BUILD CONFIDENCE IN THE TEAM – who are you, your experience, your values, keep it 'short and sweet'.

LEAD WITH OBJECTIVES – ensure that these are aligned to the known priorities of the Town/Parish Council (consult either their website, Local Neighbourhood Plan documents, or through earlier dialogue with individual local Councillors, Town Clerk or the LPA).

LIST THE PUBLIC BENEFITS – make these clear and concise.

TIMELINE – set out planning timetable and expected construction period.

Following-up with the Town Clerk is also important. This is because there will frequently be a debate on the presentation they have just seen but it will be in your absence after you have left the room. Members sometimes do not vote at this early 'initial presentation' stage on whether or not to support the scheme – normally they will not vote until the formal application has been submitted. However, ALWAYS contact the Clerk after to get a sense of the 'pulse of the Members' and their general positivity about the proposals.

Lastly, when circulating information to Councillors on schemes in non-metropolitan areas, copy in relevant County Councillors as well. There are certain functions that fall within County remit, such as Highways. Keeping them on board and up to speed avoids 'political' involvement in Highways and County matters in the

application. This was also critical in our case as the client was acquiring the site from the County Council. The planning case officer at the LPA will advise you who this is and when to copy them in.

Public exhibitions

After you have canvassed with Council and Parish/Local Councillors you need to usually hold at least a couple of public presentations. Here are some top tips on this stage:

TWO PRESENTATIONS – normally hold one during the day and one in the evening, roughly 3-4 hours in each case.

LEAFLET DROP & PUBLIC NOTICES – again, canvass with the Town Clerk how widely, in their experience, around the town addresses should be canvassed. Ask to put up notices in local cafes and shops notifying people of the public exhibitions.

TELL THE 'STORY' – we went with four main exhibition banners: who we are, what is the site (downsides), what we are proposing (upsides/vision/CGIs), and next steps/timescale.

COMMENTS SHEETS – you should try to get attendees to complete (or you complete for them) a comments sheet, so that this can be summarised in the planning submission.

KEEP YOUR COOL – some come along to these events 'spoiling for an argument'. Show empathy and try to explain the scheme but do not try to argue with them or change their minds – it will be a "thanks for the feedback" moment!

TEA AND BISCUITS – some come along because they like the chocolate bourbons and a natter! Indulge them and they will sing your praises (hopefully) to all their neighbours.

These days, the process of public engagement is more complicated and often more restricted due to COVID restrictions. Older residents may be shielding and will not

want to attend a public event. More care and advance consultation with the local Council is needed to find the best way of reaching out to these people and more 1-2-1 consultation may be required, especially with the neighbours that live closest to the scheme.

Timing and outcome

There were approximately six weeks in our case from receiving the pre-app response to holding the final public exhibition. This included time in preparing for and presenting to the Town Council and preparing for and circulating the pre-exhibition leaflets and notices to residents and local businesses.

In our case, the timescale was particularly compressed by the date for the General Election and the onset of Christmas holidays. We wanted to try and avoid the pre-Christmas period after 16 December 2019.

So was it worth it?

On reflection the answer in this case was a resounding YES! Undoubtedly, we had LPA support for our proposals, but a lot of local residents probably would have objected had we not done this, as they might have felt alienated by the process or otherwise misunderstood the scheme. On a human level, simply meeting with my clients and having a friendly chat allayed the fears of some. In the end, we only had 1 or 2 local objections, but otherwise the scheme was fully supported:

- Fewer local objections
- Full support of the Town Council
- Quicker decision than if it had gone to Planning Committee
- Development management will be less disrupted by continuing future complaints
- Developer's reputation enhanced in the local community

The best consultation should always be honest, open and genuine and all developers should seek to engage with the public in a way that is true to their vision and their values. People will see through it very easily if there is only intended to be an 'illusion' of communication. If your scheme is sound, complies with policy and is intended to deliver a high-quality scheme that everyone involved can be proud of, then there should be nothing to fear from looking to the local community. 



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