

The Best Laid Plans



As construction clients or developers, your first and biggest risk is planning permission. Until the moment you secure consent, all you have is potential. Your dreams and aspirations are in the hands of the local planning department.

The strategic importance of planning to you cannot be underestimated from simply being able to do what you aim to do at all, raising the value of the asset, being able to raise more funding and being able to make more of the opportunity than you initially expected.

Over the last 10 years we have achieved a 100% planning permission with new build, conservation areas and listed buildings and people ask us how.

1. Understanding planners

Planners have to judge applications on a case-by-case basis against complex legislation and policy. Unsurprisingly, their pre-application guidance is occasionally incorrect or not nuanced enough, stopping developments in their tracks. This is where good knowledge and robust argument can work in your favour.

2. Some consents are better than others

Of course, planning consent by itself is not enough. It needs to be the right kind of consent. The use-mix, massing, floor areas and heights achieved make critical differences to your key performance indicators such as GIA or the number of units you can build or how much footfall the building will attract.

There is little sense in securing planning permission for a 40-bed hotel if your business case requires twice that. By the same token, why settle for 80 small bedrooms when with balanced architectural savvy you can get more floor space and thus a higher return?

3. Reducing risk, boosting confidence

Hiring in experts makes the critical difference, especially if they've got an immaculate record of planning success. The risks can be radically reduced. More than that, you also get concrete added value.

A client came to us frustrated by his previous consultant who had failed to win planning support for two residential units in his redevelopment project. We secured permission for four in phase 1 and the pre-application for phase 2 has support for three more. The first flats have rented quickly and above market comparables.

At a larger scale, another client needed one extra floor in a [small tower block](#). In the pre-application, we received support for an additional four floors, with the possibility of adding more. Winning consent is about finding the sweet spot between planning policy, user need and client viability, and that requires an intimate understanding of your fundamental business or enterprise needs. From there it is a virtuous spiral of benefits. It unlocks value, giving you and your investors the confidence to proceed.

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4. Forensic expertise

Knowing the regulatory context inside out is important. A forensic, granular approach reaps the best rewards. If planners object, ask them respectfully to justify their reasons. Dig down into policy detail: there are generally counter-arguments. If not, objections can be overcome creatively with good design. Some objections are valid. Often connected to parking provision or traffic loads, identifying and prioritising these up front is time well spent.

5. Local is helpful

Local authorities have their own plans and guidance to complement national policy, and so local knowledge helps. They also say that if, like us, you can manage planning in central London, you can manage it anywhere.

6. Soft skills – with hard tactics

Being notoriously under-resourced, planning staff are often overworked. Show empathy and give them time. They might suggest going to appeal to buy them time. The appeal process does not advance your case, so be wary. It can nonetheless be worth asking your architect to commission a barrister's opinion to give you direction and tactical leverage.

7. Cultural heritage matters

Historic listed buildings are especially tricky cases, carrying onerous additional burdens for approval and criminal consequences if you make unauthorised changes. For example, previously when I was drafting the masterplan and spaceplan for the grade 1 listed British Museum, at Ian Ritchie Architects, many issues were subtle and complex to resolve.

At the Grade 2 listed [St Paul's Knightsbridge](#), we have successfully balanced the critical needs of the historic architecture with those of today's local community to help give the building and its users a sustainable future.

Critical success factors

So, what are the top tips for planning success? Aside from the obvious benefits of hiring in expertise, you need to adopt the right attitude:

The public good

Public good will help your case. Planning committees look for sustainable environmental, economic and social benefits of your project in place-making, creating jobs, adding public amenity, and equality of access. It's easy to think of this as a cost but handled cleverly by the right architect, it can work in your favour.

Enlightened self-interest

Transparency is worth it. Done right, neighbour, stakeholder, and community buy-in smooths the road ahead. More importantly, since the local community is likely to be your customers, promoters, visitors, purchasers or users once the project is in use, it adds value.

Work together

It pays to work with local planning officers. Make life easier for them and give them good information and relevant background and they will reward you with better advice and guidance. Planners want appropriate development, a point often lost on both parties especially when under pressure.

Build in time contingencies

Be prepared for delay or to bide your time. Allowing enough time to get the right kind of consent will have powerful positive effects on the success of your project long-term.

8. After planning

Planning consent is a major strategic milestone but still just the start of the journey. Due diligence and an understanding of the underlying rationale for decisions allows you to add value along the way.

9. Retain your closest ally

Your concept architects know the project's history and are often best placed to defend your vision through the building phase. Provided they live and breathe your project drivers, they will assure quality and curate optimal value through to completion and beyond. For more about what we do [click here](#).

If you have a project that needs planning permission or want to talk about developing value for your scheme, do give us a call.

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Paul Vick architects continues its 100% planning permission.
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Paul Vick architects have won
- Best Architecture Firm Global Excellence Awards 2017
- Most Innovative Architectural Firm West London 2016.

Paul Vick was a juror for the International Property Awards (UK and Europe) 2016 and 2017, a juror on the [World Architecture News Residential Future Projects Awards 2016](#) and has lectured on 'Value enhancement and inspiration' at Le Plan, Venice (2016 and 2014), Schrodgers (2014), NLA (2013). An excerpt has been published [by Magdalene College Cambridge](#).

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