

## What do Councillors REALLY look for?

By Duncan Enright – Associate, The Community Communications Partnership

I shared previously suggestions from developers and other CCP clients, and our CCP politicians, for some new year resolutions for councillors on planning committees. It is only fair that our councillors also suggest some priorities for the development community in 2025!

First, talk to councillors early. Speak in language they understand – better still, get someone who speaks “councillor” to engage them. From seeking a local plan allocation to finalising reserved matters, the earlier you can engage local members, the better. There are different interests to manage here. Councillors representing the patch where you have an interest will have a strong eye on local opinion – after all, at some point they will be asking their residents to vote for them again! Council Cabinet Members and Leaders will be looking through the lens of their portfolio – transport, local plan, housing, economic development and so on. Political groups may be considering whether to launch campaigns relevant to their residents. At the moment, for example, Labour councillors will be acutely aware of the shortage of social housing, and Green councillors might be looking for evidence of movement towards net zero.

Second, remember that infrastructure is key to whether a scheme might work and get support, and it weighs heavily on the minds of local politicians. High on the lists will be health, schools, arts and libraries and community facilities. Don’t just take the word of planning officers, data and policy though; nothing delights a local councillor more than being asked which pet schemes their residents would like to see.

Traffic and transport issues need early attention – and even if they are not strictly part of the development, mitigation of extra journeys need to be addressed early. Most councils will be looking for ways to encourage use of public transport, or offer walking and cycling options.

The direction of travel (sic) is away from analysing traffic generation and responding with car capacity (“predict and provide”) towards innovative interventions to reduce the need for private car journeys, for example promoting “mobility hubs” with reliable public transport links and very good active travel measures to reduce the need for old-style tarmac solutions (sometimes this is called “decide and provide”).

Finally, and thanks to a councillor who is head of planning committee for this, engage the local community early and positively – alongside the councillors. Listen to requests, though don’t be afraid to say “no”, as long as you can say why not. Apart from anything, people will be more favourable towards a project if they feel they have been involved at the start, and listened to. At The CCP we have engaged local primary schools in generating ideas for green spaces before a brick has been laid – and seen better developments as well as stronger positive engagement throughout a long project. In a recent renewable energy application, it helped that the nearby footpath network was proposed to be improved – substantially as a result of engaging residents and listening to their stories about boggy trails. The planning committee supported the application overwhelmingly.

