

## Episode 175

# From briefing to planning with Chris Parsons

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/175](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/175)

**Intro:** In this episode I chat to our architect Chris Parsons, from Parsons & Whittleby, about the journey from briefing through to planning stage. I started by asking him what he did first following our briefing session.

**Chris:** Following taking the brief from yourselves and trying to understand what it was you were looking for, the first stage really is very, very sketchy. Literally pencil sketches of some ideas, to just try to see how the whole brief comes together, bearing in mind all of the other constraints that we're trying to work with.

So we're looking for a simple form factor, for example. The site itself has got quite a lot of constraints in terms of where we can put the building and the orientation etc.

In our heads, we're working through how do we reconcile those constraints. We've got some opportunities, we've got some nice views and we want to capture all of those. And actually, we go quite quickly into some three-dimensional software called SketchUp, which enables us to pull some shapes about and try to find a form that works against all of those constraints and opportunities.

**Ben:** While you've mentioned SketchUp, is that what the building is designed in, in total? Or once you've got sketches, this is nice, then it goes on to another piece of software?

**Chris:** That's correct. We start designing in SketchUp because it is really easy to get some 3D forms out there quite quickly. You can position it in the real world, so we can have a look at shadows and how it works in terms of orientation.

And it's actually easy for a layperson to understand. The models that come out of SketchUp are really quite easy to get people to immediately comprehend what we're talking about.

We stay in SketchUp right the way through to planning. Some people perhaps would go to a more technical design earlier than planning but we actually will use SketchUp right the way through

the planning process. But you're quite right, once we've gone through that process, we need to take that into some software, which gives us the ability to demonstrate more technical detail.

Ben: The first sketches that we got back, we thought it was quite interesting that a lot of it was pretty much what we'd hoped for. We like the form and the aesthetic. There was a bit of jiggling around downstairs, thinking about layout and how we'd live in the kitchen and so forth, exactly what you'd expect.

So we fed back to John and that was all good, and then we moved on to the materials. That really surprised me, that you could have the sketches which don't really specify a material, yet as soon as you add material, it takes on a different identity.

I sound silly saying this.

Chris: I don't think you're silly at all. In those first sketches we sent you, we deliberately took materials off because materials can make a significant impact on how the building is going to look.

As I just mentioned, in the first instances we're trying to isolate the form. We actually had some ideas about materials in those first sketches. We quite liked the idea maybe of some dark boarding, brickwork – yet, when we put those on to our SketchUp model before we sent them to you, we felt it might be trying to get you to commit at a step too far.

So we deliberately took the materials off the sketch and sent you that, so we could just get to form.

What then happened, of course, is that you came back and we had a little bit of playing around with plans etc., exactly as we would expect to do, and then we started to add some materials. That proved for us, probably a slightly more challenging thing, because you could then see a little bit more about the impact of those materials.

We had a little bit of toing and froing, didn't we? About trying to find the right material balance for what we were trying to do.

Ben: Yes, we looked at brick and the barn aesthetic as well, black weatherboard, and felt that was a bit strong. I think Kay was after slightly lighter colours and so forth. So, that came back towards this rendered look.

But this was actually at the same time as we were trying to address height issues.

Maybe we should rewind a step. When we first looked at what we could build, were you just coming up with 'doesn't matter where it would be' or were you considering a lot of the constraints?

Chris: We were considering all of the constraints. I would like to say that's probably the essential skill of an architect, to be able to have all those constraints and opportunities in his head and still produce something that addresses ninety percent of them; we'll never get them all in the first tranche. And then you remodel to get to the last few and try to iron those out. So that was really something that was going on very early on.

One thing that we were also doing at the same time as doing that first sketch, that form without the materials, we started at that stage to send that through to the planners to see if we could get a response from them. It was actually a comment that came back from them about we'll need to be careful about height because of the relationship with the neighbour. You'd mentioned this as well so, that had come back from the planning side and then there was a discussion which came back from you as clients saying that you would like to look at perhaps breaking up the materials, using slightly different materials across the façade. For us, that meant breaking down the façade into different elements because we don't believe you can just put materials on without some justification, some background to it.

That's when we started to think about can we use different elements to a) reduce height and prevent overshadowing and overlooking for the neighbour, and b) to address your concerns about the mass of the building all in one material.

Ben: I think in some ways we might have taken you off down a path that wasn't entirely necessary, but it's learning for us too, that those materials for example, couldn't be done like that. I didn't know that before. So, that's interesting that that's an architectural point there.

Then we developed a couple of different things going on in the building on that latest iteration where it was a step down, which to be honest was always what I imagined we might end up having. Then also, something going on at the back of the building was another way of doing this. Maybe you can just describe those two approaches?

We can include these in the show notes of again, how we were looking at the design evolving.

Chris: Following the idea of different materials and breaking it down into different elements, we realised that we could probably start to use a larger element at one end of the site and break it down into smaller elements down towards the garage. That would address some of the issues we had about overshadowing of the neighbour and it also gave us the opportunity to introduce different materials.

However, at the same time, it started to introduce a degree of complexity that we probably didn't want to do and that I think subsequently, we probably found out that you didn't want to do either.

You're probably quite right; we were probably chasing something that neither of us really wanted. It's quite interesting because it caused us quite a lot of head scratching in the office, with John coming up with some ideas and me coming up with some ideas as to how we could break these elements down, introduce different materials and address those issues.

It wasn't until we then probably came back to you with various suggestions, and we eventually decided to have a meeting, that we actually brought all of that stuff back together and sort of got to a reasonable resolution.

Ben: What we worked through in that session was trying to bring back a simpler form but still we had some issues that we needed to make sure that the amenity for the neighbours was not reduced.

Maybe let's start with what do we need to protect for the neighbour?

Chris: Well, it's always important, I think, when designing a building, that you appreciate and understand the amenity for the neighbour. There's no such thing really as a right to a view and there's not much in terms of a right to light. However, the planners aren't going to approve something that seriously impacts on the amenity and the enjoyment of the neighbour. So it's important to always develop a scheme that doesn't have an adverse impact on the neighbours and the surrounding area.

We were very keen to try to keep the roof lower than we had shown on the original sketch and one of the tricks, one of the things that we did, was to break the roof line across the back, which enabled us to pull the ridge down and put a small catslide element across the lesser status rooms at the back. That reduced the ridge height. Then we could reposition the house slightly further away than the earlier consent, and again that reduced the amount of

overshadowing and kept the same view of the sky, which is another element we look at for the neighbour.

So I think once we'd done that, we realised we could get back to a simple form again, and then we could explore how that worked in terms of materials.

Ben: This brings us up to getting quite satisfied with, I felt I knew why the building was looking like it's looking. I liked the materials.

We didn't talk too much about construction type. Is that because it's not really relevant at this stage?

Chris: It's not really relevant at this stage, I think. In planning terms, we're looking at the form, the scale, the mass. That's the first thing, as we've already discussed. Then we start to apply the appropriate materials.

Now, materials need to be decided upon along the lines of what's the appropriate material for the setting, for the location, because we don't want it to look alien in its setting. So it's a question of understanding what are the local vernacular in terms of materials. It's also a question of understanding what you as a client like, what type of material you like. There are issues around maintenance and longevity.

All of those things really are the next steps. Let's work out what finishes we're going to apply to the outside. But we believe in honesty in architecture, so if we're going to have a masonry finish, bricks for example, or in this case, render, we really want it to be honestly applied.

For myself then, the next decision is how we're going to build it; what construction should we use. There's always the initial discussion, should it be timber frame or masonry. That's probably where we start with lots of our stuff. For me, I actually quite like masonry. I like the thermal mass that it provides.

You wanted a rendered finish and actually, it's quite interesting that Kay picked up on wanting this soft lime rendered finish. To do that properly, I felt that it would be easiest and most cost-effective, to apply that to a masonry external skin.

We've done cavity wall construction passivhauses before, so from all of those things, probably, it's led us now to thinking we're going to build this as a masonry cavity wall building.

Ben: Knowing the texture that Kay likes, and I like, is that really represented by the material that the render is put on top of?

Chris: The thing about render that we have learnt, is that we can do render, we can do these very thin polymer modified renders straight on top of insulation. We've done a lot of passivhauses like that.

One of the things we've begun to understand is that they tend to promote mould growth rather quicker than we would like. There are technical reasons for that, which I won't go into now, but as a consequence, I'm not now a great fan of using a thin polymer modified render on external wall insulation. Also, you wanted that soft lime texture which you don't get with these renders.

So again, it needed for me, something fairly solid to put it on to. So, for me, put it on to a block. The whole external skin then has a thermal mass of its own, it reduces this night sky radiation and reduces the potential for this mould growth.

Ben: Are we likely to get some? You've talked to us about washing. Or is that not so likely now?

Chris: You're going to get some. All renders have a tendency to retain a little bit of moisture, particularly on the north side of buildings where the sun doesn't dry it out. And that staying on the surface might encourage some mould growth.

So you're going to have to do a little bit of cleaning. With a lime render, where we're probably going to treat it with a lime wash or silica based paint of some sort, that will want redecorating on a periodic basis as well.

Actually, probably the redecoration is going to be all you need to do because that will keep it clean in itself.

Ben: That's probably straying a little bit off where we were. We were coming up to planning. Then we had this issue that we were thinking we could get further towards the green belt and where the green belt actually went.

How did you clarify where that green belt line went?

Chris: We always knew that a large part of your site was in the green belt and I think we realised, as we were starting to prepare, we'd got through the main design process and now we're trying to prepare a planning application. So I'm thinking like a planner. What are they going to ask me? What do I need to demonstrate within all of the documents we're going to submit?

It occurred to me that actually, in order to help the planners make sure that we weren't straying into the green belt, it would be a really good idea to mark on the plans the precise limit of the green belt. That proved slightly harder to get hold of than I anticipated, but I did eventually manage to get a copy of the green belt area, which we then just copied on to our drawings, so that I could see where it ran. Because actually, we had been slightly confused because there is a boundary that's been moved on the neighbouring property.

So once we'd positioned that green belt properly, we decided that we would definitely not stray into the green belt, even though some of the earlier consents have slightly done so. We just felt that politically, it's going to be a whole lot easier if we don't go into the green belt, which, as you know, politically at the moment, are pretty interesting.

So we thought we'd stay right outside but we'd come right up to the edge of it, because we want this compromise to get the house as far away from the neighbour as we can and give you as much private garden at that side as we can, but at the same time, not cause planning problems by straying into that green belt.

Ben: You've got your mindset of what do the planners need to be looking for. Is there anything else that you were keen to submit?

Chris: Yes. We did quite a lot of work in terms of a shadow study. One of the beauties of SketchUp is we've got this 3D model which we can position in the real world. So we can set a date, we can set a time, we can turn on the sun, we can see where the shadows go.

We always do that at the equinox period. The spring and autumn equinoxes are about the same, so we can demonstrate where shadows are likely to fall. We did that and we could demonstrate that there was no overshadowing of the neighbour.

The other thing we did was we developed a cross-section which actually showed the existing consent – all three previous consents on the site – and what we were now proposing, and we were able to compare each with each so that we could demonstrate that there's no significant overshadowing to the neighbour.

Ben: We're also not submitting a new application because we've got full planning permission. So what are we doing?

Chris: What we're proposing to do is to submit what's called a Section 73 application, which is simply to vary the approved drawings for the existing consent.

There's a tactical reason for doing that. We are building very close to the green belt. I don't want to introduce into that planning process the principle of can we or can we not have a house in this location. That has already been established in your previous consent. So what I'm proposing to do is ask the planners if I can simply substitute the drawings of the previous consent for the drawings that we are now proposing.

That doesn't bring into play the whole principle of can we have a dwelling there. It simply allows the planning officer to determine 'is this dwelling that I'm now presented with, accepting in planning terms?' Rather than revisit the whole policy issue of 'can I have a house there?'

Ben: Is this quite common?

Chris: It's become more so, because there have been some changes in legislation which actually requires planning departments now to list the drawings that they've approved. That makes it slightly easier to approach it, down this route, by simply seeking to change the approved drawings rather than to revisit the whole policy.

It depends whether or not we would use it because sometimes there might be something that's quite significantly different about this application from the previous one, such that it's not really appropriate to go down that route.

Ben: We obviously don't want to speculate at this stage, but what would the timescales be like for a decision? And could it be a grey decision? Can they say 'yes, you can have this but ...'?

Chris: No, they can't really do that.

First of all, the timescale question, it's an eight-week period. The planners are required to make a decision within eight weeks from the date of validation. We're not yet validated and some local authorities can take a few weeks to do that, others just a few days. But once there is a valid application made, the planners are supposed to make that decision within eight weeks.

Most planning authorities get about ninety to ninety-five percent of decisions through in that period of time. Sometimes, if it needs to go to a committee, then that cycle might be extended. But they can only do so with our permission. And the reason for that is that we have the option, if they can't make a decision within eight weeks, to appeal to the Secretary of State against non-determination. Not a process I'd recommend because it'd probably take six months to

get through it. So we would be giving them a bit of extra time if they ask for it.

But we should have a decision in around the eight to ten-week period.

Ben: It sounds like it'll be yes or no. If it's a no, can we try all over again or are we not allowed to try this route? How would that work?

Chris: You asked the question will it be a grey decision. It's not really a grey decision. It will either be a yes or a no, but it might be a yes with conditions, and some of those conditions we might not be ever so happy about. So there is a grey area in there somewhere.

But to deal specifically with your question, if they decide to refuse it, they must refuse it on planning grounds. We would need to look at what those planning grounds are and we would advise you on the best way to proceed.

Now, sometimes it may be that we can simply amend this design, change it to satisfy what the planners' concerns were, and we can resubmit. We can resubmit that application and generally within twelve months for the same type of application, there's not a planning fee to pay. So resubmission is probably the best thing to do if we've had a refusal.

If we think there's really nowhere to go, then there is the appeal route. You can appeal to the Secretary of State. But it's a six to nine-month process. So it's something we really want to try to avoid.

But in truth, if we're doing our job properly, we will stay in contact with that planning officer, particularly in the last three or four weeks of the eight-week period, and we'll be speaking to him. If he's got an objection, something that's troubling him, we will either try to amend it there and then or, if we don't have time, we have the ability to withdraw that application, make the changes and resubmit it.

So we stay in touch and we nurse the whole thing through the process.

Ben: And then, just finally maybe, looking at what would be the next steps after this. I don't want to go too far ahead but what should we be preparing ourselves for next?

Chris: The next steps are to start developing technical design. We've already done a PHPP model – I should have mentioned that earlier.

Ben: So, what did you do that on? Is that just on the spreadsheet, PHPP?

Chris: Yes. So, a straightforward PHPP model, making some assumptions because we haven't finalised which windows we're going to use or which MVHR we might be using. But we'll make some basic assumptions and run it through to make sure that this can be a passivhaus. And we've done that.

We'll always try to get the primary space heating demand down to thirteen kilowatt hours at this stage, give myself a little bit in the back pocket, because you know the limit is fifteen. And that's what we've done.

So I've submitted the verification sheet to the planners so that I can support the argument that this is going to be a passivhaus.

From there, we can start to do the technical design. Now, I would normally recommend that we wait until we're through the planning process. Because if something should go wrong with that planning process, you don't want to have paid our fees for doing all the technical design.

But the next step really is as we get towards the end of the planning process, we can start to assess should we get started on getting some of the technical design done. And that's when we will decide exactly how we're building it, we'll want to know what windows we're putting in there, we'll be coming back to you to ask for lots more information about what type of doors do you want, what type of ironmongery, skirtings and things like that, so that we can start to produce a tender package to get out to the market for pricing purposes.

Ben: Chris, once again, it was fun to chat. Thank you for reviewing all of that and allowing me to put my finger on a few bits of that process that I don't think I've talked about.

Chris: It's been a pleasure.