A step-by-step guide to planning and preparing for a new school building
Getting quotes and managing the project
Planning permission and preparing the site
A new building checklist and further advice to ensure a smooth process for your project
Case study: A single-storey studio
Case study: Building an additional classroom
The number of primary school pupils is growing fast. The Department for Education (DfE) has predicted that there will be around 4.85 million children in England’s primary and nursery schools by 2020 and recent projections by the Greater London Authority show that the school-age population in the capital alone will jump by nearly 100,000 between now and 2017.

To accommodate the rise in pupil numbers, primary headteachers up and down the country are creating new buildings on their school sites. Some are keen to provide additional space for activities like art, music and dance, while others want rooms for libraries, group work and one-to-one SEN support.

Creating a new building, however, takes time, money and meticulous planning – from working out timescales and budgets to securing planning permission and preparing the site for construction work. Not only that, the cost of a new building varies hugely. A small, standalone teaching room for one-to-one work might cost in the region of £20,000 to £30,000, while a free-standing double classroom, with a central lobby, toilets and cloakroom will set your school back £120,000 to £130,000. Larger blocks and extensions to existing buildings will be considerably more.

Design must be taken into consideration as well – along with factors like classroom orientation, natural light and noise, temperature, use of space, storage facilities, toilet facilities, and environmental issues. All of these are believed to have an impact on children’s learning. Indeed, a study published by the University of Salford in 2013 revealed that the classroom environment in primary schools can affect a child’s academic progress over a year by as much as 25 per cent.

Planning your project
Once your school has the necessary funds in place (usually via grants, local authority funding and fundraising), decide on the type of building you want and the most suitable location. Think about the amount of space you require, the number of children the building must accommodate, the layout, basic utilities (such as electricity, water, sewage, telephone and data-cabling), and whether you want to extend an existing building or create a separate one.

“Talk to building contractors and planning experts to check that your idea is practical and feasible. Trees, steep gradients and power cables can all cause problems, so it is best to get expert advice as early as possible”

Some schools opt for traditional extensions to existing buildings. These generally take up less space but tend to be more expensive, take longer to build and involve a greater degree of disruption to school life. The alternative is to buy a freestanding building that has been prefabricated off-site and then delivered to the school. Some heads consult architects but others prefer to use building companies that offer their own bespoke designs. The Stable Company, for instance, is a York-based company that builds outdoor classrooms tailored to schools’ specific needs. It manufactures a range of buildings suitable for educational use, from a 60 square metre building suitable for 30 children to a 540 square metre self-contained pre-prep building.

“We build our classrooms off-site in flat pack
form so by the time we come to the school we have done a lot of the work,” explained Philip Goldstone, sales manager of The Stable Company.

“The buildings then have to be put together, a bit like Meccano. Our advantage is that schools get a building that is tailored to their requirements and looks good aesthetically. They are very robust and hard-wearing and take far less time to construct.”

Getting quotes from contractors
Choosing the right contractor for the job is key to the success of a building project. Meet a variety of contractors on-site to discuss your ideas, check their references, visit other buildings which they have worked on, and talk to heads who have used them.

If possible, write a preliminary design brief – perhaps a couple of pages about what you want the building to achieve, plus details like site access, materials, roof type (schools choose anything from cedar to green roofs covered with plants), windows and flooring. If the space will be used as an outdoor classroom, for instance, with children arriving in muddy boots, then you will need a non-slip floor.

Even more crucially, get at least three quotations for the work. Depending on the size of your school, the head, business manager or site manager will usually take charge of this. Remember to allow for contingencies and bear in mind that the cheapest building might not be the best option.

“Evaluate and assess what you are getting,” advised Mr Goldstone. “Comparing quotes isn’t easy but you need to be sure that your school is getting value for money. It is often a good idea to bring in one of the governors, particularly if they have building experience and understanding of the technicalities of a project.”

Managing the project
Work out how your school is going to manage the project. Specialist companies will be happy to manage the entire process but this will be more expensive and some schools opt to keep costs down by using a range of contractors. If you decide to employ several contractors you will need a project manager (preferably someone with previous experience of managing construction projects) to brief and co-ordinate contractors, manage health and safety, ensure that the project runs on time and to budget, and deal with any problems that arise.

“In every project there will be a few unknowns,” explained Gareth Barber, managing director of The Stable Company. “One of the biggest unknowns is when you start digging the ground on-site. Buildings must sit on something solid – so if you dig down and find shale and rubble at 1.5 metres the project can be quite complex.

“Creating a new building is a major decision for schools and a major spend – so it needs careful consideration and planning. Schools need to be happy with the company they appoint and confident that they will guide them through the project and do a good job.”

Planning permission
Many schools have limited space, so the site for your new building may be predetermined. But if there are a number of possible locations, talk to building contractors and planning experts at the outset to check that your idea is practical and feasible. Trees, steep gradients and power cables can all cause problems, so it is best to get expert advice as early as possible.

Most school extensions and new school buildings need planning permission before work can start on-site. Obtaining planning permission from your local council can take from eight to 12 weeks (depending on the complexity of the building) so allow plenty of time. If your school is a listed building or within a conservation area you may need listed building consent and/or conservation
area consent, and if you want to build on a playing field you must submit an application to change its use (under section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998).

Preparation of the site
Many heads try to minimise disruption by ensuring that building takes place during the holidays, but this is not always possible. Safety is key at all times and contractors must have a designated, fenced-off working zone right from the start. Make sure that deliveries are scheduled for times when disruption will be kept to a minimum (i.e. not during school drop-off and collection times).

Once again, if you are using a single contractor to run the project they will generally take charge of checking that site access is safe and appropriate, groundwork has been done (including laying utility cables and building the footings), and health and safety regulations are observed. Building control regulations must also be fulfilled. Whereas planning permission considers the building’s location and appearance, building control looks at the ability of its structure to do its job properly, along with aspects like fire safety, insulation and access.

If your school is managing the project you will have to appoint a health and safety co-ordinator and if a project runs on-site for more than 30 days then CDM (construction, design and management) 2007 regulations require that the Health and Safety Executive is notified in writing before construction work starts. It may be worth appointing a CDM co-ordinator to advise on health and safety issues during the design and planning phases of the construction work.

Completion and handover
When the building is complete, check that you are happy with the result. During the “snagging” period (the process of identifying unsatisfactory or outstanding work), walk round the building with your contractor and ensure that everything works – from the heating and lighting to the windows, doors, water supply and toilets.

Once staff and children start using the new space the odd issue might arise so don’t be afraid to get your building contractor back to sort it out. Make sure they give you an operations and maintenance manual detailing every aspect of the building and all the relevant warranties.

After that it is time to make the new building your own. “Every new building is just a shell when we leave,” said Mr Barber. “It’s great when schools send us pictures of the buildings actually being used and we can see how they’ve been decorated and made personal. That’s what it is all about.”

Checklist for new buildings

1. Write a basic design brief, including the space you require, its purpose, the basic utilities needed, layout, whether it will be an extension or new-build, and your budget.
2. Get at least three quotations from contractors. Take references, look at their previous work and meet them on-site to discuss the project.
3. Decide who is going to manage the project – the contractor or the school.
4. Find out if you need planning permission. If so, allow eight to 12 weeks for the planning process.
5. Ahead of on-site construction, check that designated working zones are in place, disruption is kept to a minimum, essential groundwork is done, and that building work will comply with building regulations (this is known as building control).
6. When the building is complete, check it over, obtain building control sign-off from the local council, and get an operations and maintenance manual from the contractor.

- For Department for Education guidance on school building and design, visit: http://bit.ly/1jRwwLW
Case study: Amesbury CE Primary School
With views across the school field, a Lord of the Rings-style entrance and a sleeping “mud maid” sculpture on the grass, the new classroom at Amesbury Primary School is everything headteacher Yvonne Harris hoped it would be.

Numbers at the 300-pupil school in Amesbury, Wiltshire – just down the road from Stonehenge – have risen in recent years, largely because it is on the edge of Salisbury Plain and there are large numbers of military families in the community.

The catchment area is very mixed, and keen to ensure that her school provides plenty of art and music, Ms Harris hit on the idea of creating an art studio where children can draw, paint and sculpt. Supported by the school’s governors, she secured an eco grant, along with funding from the PTA, and set about researching the project. She spotted an advertisement for The Stable Company in Headteacher Update and got a quotation for the building work from them and from several other firms. In the end the school chose The Stable Company, largely because they offered to organise planning consent, which the others did not.

From start to finish the project took 12 weeks and the new building was ready before sports day in July 2013 (part of the school field had been fenced off during the construction process). The single-storey studio cost £61,000 and Ms Harris and her team reckon it was worth every penny.

The new building has four outside walls, doors opening on to the school field and a pitched cedar shingle roof. The inside consists of a single classroom with a cupboard and sink, white walls and a laminate floor. The Amesbury staff chose “really good insulation” and worked with the designers to work out where the floor-to-ceiling windows should be placed – so the building wouldn’t be too cold in winter or like a greenhouse in summer.

Since the school took delivery of the building – known as The Studio – it has initially been used as a year 6 classroom rather than an art room.

“We were short of a classroom this year so we are using it for our year 6s,” said Ms Harris. “But it is a versatile, multi-purpose space and the idea is that eventually the tables will go and we will use it as an art studio, with easels so that the children can draw the landscape.”

Building projects can sometimes be stressful for schools but this one ran like clockwork. The construction team arrived at 6:45am each morning, worked until 10pm some nights, fenced off the site to comply with health and safety regulations, and donated leftover wood for the school to build a treehouse. “They also made sure that deliveries to the site didn’t arrive during the crucial drop-off and collection times at school,” said Ms Harris. “But even so, the children could still enjoy watching the building take shape.”

Ms Harris advises schools embarking on building projects to seek recommendations from other schools about building companies. Indeed, since The Studio was completed, other primary heads have visited Amesbury to take a look at The Studio.

“If we were doing it again I think we would also invite someone in to discuss the building process with the children,” said Ms Harris. “It’s important to let children be part of a project like this, discuss what the building should look like and what it needs to have. The finished building is the answer to all our prayers. It has been part of our vision for the school for three years and looks fabulous. Everyone walks round the corner and goes ‘wow’ when they see it.”
Case study: Digby CE School

Staff at Digby CE School had two aims when they decided to build a new classroom in the grounds. First, although the school in rural Lincolnshire only has 92 pupils, numbers are growing and they need more room. Second, the school was keen to improve the year group mix by having four classrooms instead of three. Before the new building, the school had three classes of mixed-year groups – reception and year 1, years 2 and 3, and years 4, 5 and 6.

Their building project has meant that the year groups can be reconfigured, so reception children now have their own class and year 5 and 6 pupils have moved into a brand new classroom.

“It means that reception children can now be taught on their own, which gives the children an excellent start to their school life,” explained school business manager Karen Flatters. “We no longer have a class with three year groups and we have been able to narrow the span of ability in the class and therefore improve standards even further.”

Known as Class 4, the new 77 square metre classroom is made of redwood pine, with a pitched cedar roof. It has a classroom, large storage cupboard (specifically requested by the teachers), disabled toilet and cloakroom.

Best of all, it has floor-to-ceiling windows and a double bi-fold door along the front that opens on to a paved patio. In summer, pupils will be able to use their classroom as a theatre, with the door open and the audience on the grass below.

The school began researching the project in October 2012. Ms Flatters and one of the governors visited a variety of other schools which had completed similar projects. They talked to building companies, got three quotes and eventually opted for The Stable Company.

“We also commissioned contractors to complete the plumbing, the groundwork supplying services from the main building, the building footings and a soak away,” explained Ms Flatters.

The building itself cost £58,000, but with extensive groundwork, security fencing, electronic gate releases, intruder alarms, data cabling, CCTV and additional equipment, the total outlay was close to £100,000. The school borrowed £50,000 from the local authority and used most of its remaining devolved capital expenditure. The PTA raised £1,500 for IT equipment and the governors raised £800 with a hog roast.

The project progressed smoothly but there were issues that had to be resolved before building could start. “As the new classroom is set within our field we needed consent from the secretary of state to change the use of playing field land, prior to planning permission being submitted,” said Ms Flatters. “This application also needed the signed authorisation of the local authority in support of our decision to site the classroom on the land. We also needed to take 60 metres of ducting underground to supply the building with electricity, sewage, water, data cabling, intruder and CCTV cabling.”

The builders arrived on-site in July 2013 and completed the classroom in just over three weeks, ready for the start of the autumn term.

“It has been a huge success,” said Ms Flatters. “The whole project has been very enjoyable and fulfilling and the children love their new classroom – the windows, the space, the air conditioning, what they call ‘the sliding doors’, and the peace and quiet. I would happily do something like this again.”

This Guide To... has been produced by Headteacher Update with support from The Stable Company. The Stable Company offers a range of outdoor classrooms tailored to suit each school’s individual needs and built to the highest standards. For more information, visit www.thestablecompany.com