

1.1

URBAN DESIGN POLICY

1.1.1 Good planning is good urban design

1.1.2 Writing design policies

1.1.3 Achieving integration

1.1.4 Beyond policy

Well-conceived urban design policy is essential if the planning process is to raise design standards. Effective local authority action depends on strategic planning policy, local policy and urban design guidance, prepared and implemented by a strongly motivated and coordinated team of officers and members with the necessary resources and support. Long-term commitment to maintaining high standards depends on political support for urban design policy.

Urban design policy is concerned with more than just the architectural quality of development. It helps to shape the place as a whole, and all its economic, social and environmental impacts. To bring about fundamental change, urban design policy needs to define a vision which will be realised over a time span – sometimes as long as a generation – and achieved through a series of staged objectives focusing on short-term goals.

Coordination and collaborative working between local government departments (planning, transportation, property, etc) is a pre-requisite for successful urban design, which is intrinsically inter-disciplinary.

1.1.1 Good planning is good urban design

Incorporate design thinking into strategic policy

Planning, urban design and sustainable development are responses to the same challenge: how to make successful places in a responsible way, making the most of what the market can deliver.

It is now mandatory, as stated in Planning Policy Statement PPS1¹ and PPS3², for the planning process to incorporate urban design principles (relating to place-making and the physical form of development) at every level, from the strategic to the local.

PPS1 notes that: *‘Good design ensures attractive, usable, durable and adaptable places and is a key element in achieving sustainable development. Good design is indivisible from good planning.’*

Policy and scale

Design policies can relate to a range of scales. Table 1.1 sets out the types of urban design issues that are likely to be most important at each level of planning policy. Together these documents provide the means of implementing policy at every scale and in every sort of circumstance.

1.1.2 Writing design policies

Principles and structure

Urban design policy should be based on clear analysis of environmental, social and economic issues, and on the local authority’s considered view as to what qualities development should achieve.

Design policies should be clear, specific, measurable or testable, and technically feasible. Each policy should provide: first, a design objective and second, an explanation of how a solution might fulfil that objective.

An example of a clear specific policy is the following:

‘Development should incorporate the retention or provision of important routes and linkages which contribute to the permeability of an area. Development which results in the unacceptable loss of existing links will not be permitted.’

Design objective: permeability

Explanation of criteria for solution: *incorporate or retain and avoid loss of important routes and linkages.’*³

Policy document	Status	Purpose	Level of detail
Planning Policy Statements (PPS)	Statutory guidance	Establishes the link between spatial planning and urban design	
Regional spatial strategy Sub-regional strategy	Statutory document produced by the regional assembly (subject to sustainability audit)	Regional spatial coordination of development and regeneration. A spatial framework to inform the preparation of local development documents, local transport plans and regional and sub-regional strategies, and programmes that have a bearing on land-use activities	Strategic directions for growth or regeneration; relation to strategic transport; amount of housing and employment, location and physical conceptions of development (for example, city-region, new town or town extension), social and economic role of development
Development plan documents	Statutory documents produced by the local authority (subject to sustainability audit)	Local spatial coordination of development and regeneration: 'a long-term spatial vision working towards delivery of the community strategy, setting out its spatial aspects that relate to the development and use of land'	
Core strategy	Statutory documents produced by the local authority (subject to sustainability audit)	Design priorities, fundamental principles and non-development control design policies	Inclusion of design policies Coordination with local transport plans and strategies for the economy, housing, education, health, social inclusion, waste, biodiversity, recycling and environmental protection
Specific sites (proposals map)	Statutory documents produced by the local authority (subject to sustainability audit)	Policies setting out broad design principles for allocated sites	Identification of specific areas or sites for development and regeneration, urban design considerations and implications for the selection of specific sites (most importantly movement)
Area action plan (extended area, multiple sites or large single area of land)	Can combine different kinds of framework produced by or for the local authority (subject to sustainability audit)	Sets out physical visions, policies and objectives for specific areas and sites within the local development framework	May take the form of an area development framework, urban design framework, generic design code or masterplan, with or without design codes
SPD (covering anything from local authority area to individual sites)	Written policy or drawn framework on which is conferred legal status by adoption (may be subject to sustainability audit)	Expands policies set out in a development plan document or provides additional detail	May take the form of an area development framework, urban design framework, development brief, masterplan, design code or design guide

Table 1.1 Urban design content of planning policy documents

005

Integrating urban design in local planning policy Sheffield City Council

The City of Sheffield is currently undergoing a period of major development and regeneration. Recognising the opportunities that this offers in terms of achieving high-quality urban design, the City Council has put in place measures to embed design in the local planning process.

In 2004 Sheffield City Council launched the Sheffield City Centre Urban Design Compendium which identifies urban design principles for the city, as well as detailed area-specific guidance for the different quarters. It informs policies in the Sheffield Development Framework as well as the new City Centre Design Guide, a supplementary planning document. The Compendium is also taken into account as a consideration when determining

planning applications and provides those preparing applications with design guidance.

Sheffield City Council also set up an Urban Design Review Panel in line with national guidance from CABI. The purpose of the Panel is to review major pre-application development schemes and ensure early engagement with architects and developers. A wide range of expert advisors drawn from the fields of urban design, architecture, sustainable planning and development make up the Panel, representing both the public and private sectors. The Panel is chaired independently from the Council and its advice is used as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.



Sheffield City Council's commitment to quality has led to an integrated approach to design that is supporting the delivery of high-quality projects such as Sheaf Square, which have helped rejuvenate the city centre.

Categories and content

The key aspects of urban design as set out in the original Compendium have proved to be a useful framework to structure policies and guides. The likely categories and content of a typical set of design policies could therefore reflect:

- **Appreciating the context** (local character and distinctiveness, and heritage)
- **Creating the urban structure** (neighbourhood structure, land use, landscape, biodiversity, green infrastructure and surface water drainage)
- **Making the connections** (connection, movement and transport)
- **Detailing the place** (public realm and open space, access and adaptability)
- **Implementation and delivery** (management and governance)

As regional and spatial strategies will be increasingly required to respond to climate change, policy also needs to address issues of energy, resources and utilities.

Ensuring policies are effective 005

CABE has identified five ways of making design policies effective³. These relate to all types of policy-making by a local authority in the new structure of spatial planning:

- Embed design concerns, in all aspects of the local development framework's policy hierarchy and beyond to the community strategy.
- Treat design as a cross-cutting issue that infuses all other policy areas.
- Base policies on a deep understanding of local context and the design process.
- Use design policy at different geographical scales, from individual sites to large areas, to help achieve the local development framework's objectives.
- Ensure that design policy relates to social issues and the effective use of resources, as well as visual and functional matters.

1.1.3 Achieving integration 006

Urban design is concerned with how places work, and it is essential that design policies are developed with consideration of the full spectrum of issues involved in shaping and managing a place. We need to consider how urban design can help support policies on environmental sustainability, crime and safety, health and education.

Partnerships and teams

Probably the most effective means of integrating the various aspects of urban design into planning policy is to establish inter- and multi-disciplinary spatial planning teams or partnerships to produce policy documents. This avoids a narrow, single-issue approach, with different authorities, agencies and departments pursuing separate and uncoordinated programmes and initiatives. Policy can be more consistent, more transparent and more accessible to community involvement.

With such a coordinated, inter-disciplinary approach, design issues will become integral to the decision-making process.

This approach will be most effective where there is high-level support and commitment to design quality. Clear leadership and coordination will be required to ensure that teams work cooperatively.

Regional coordination

Local authorities should work with neighbouring authorities to ensure that they have common aspirations. Where coordination is not possible, developers can be encouraged to work in areas with high standards if the process for obtaining planning approvals is effective and transparent.

Consideration should also be given to how local policies can support and deliver policies and initiatives at regional and sub-regional levels.

1.1.4 Beyond policy

To be effective, policies need adequate resources, skills and support. There are a number of ways, in addition to planning policy, in which city, regional and local authorities can improve the chances of improving standards of urban design at a more strategic level.

Training and education

A basic understanding of the principles of urban design is essential for everyone involved in policy making and development control. This will complement the detailed urban design expertise that is also required, providing a wide range of people with the confidence to engage in discussions relating to urban design issues.

Training in the principles of urban design is an effective use of resources. It should be provided for all new members. The training should cover the basics of urban design and ensure all members understand the scope of their role and how they can influence good urban design. SEEDA have produced a guide⁵ which provides further details on how this can be achieved.

006

Raising design awareness

Essex Design Initiative

The Essex Design Initiative (EDI) is a high profile campaign launched by Essex County Council. The EDI provides design guidance on how to plan, build and maintain sustainable urban developments. It helps policy-makers and practitioners successfully accommodate housing growth and improve the public realm in an environmentally responsible way.

Integrating expertise from urban design, landscape design, conservation and public art, the EDI offers:

- The Essex Design Guide: Urban Place Supplement (UPS), a supplementary planning document set to influence the quality of higher-density developments
- Cross-disciplinary events to promote collaborative working

- A professional development programme including best practice study tours
- Design review services
- Online resources at www.the-edi.co.uk
- The Essex Design Champions Network

The success of the EDI can be attributed to the Council's longstanding expertise in urban design, as exemplified by the internationally renowned Essex Design Guide. The UPS is a demanding document that builds on this achievement for urban areas. As Councillor Jeremy Lucas, Essex Design Champion, states 'Never has a concern for the sustainability of our actions been better understood. The UPS enables local authorities and the development industry to work together.'



Essex Design Initiative (EDI) has helped support policy-makers and improve the design and delivery of new developments within the area.

007

Running a regional design panel

South East Regional Design Panel

Since its inception in 2002, the South East Regional Design Panel (SERDP) has delivered tangible benefits in terms of time saved during the planning process and improved design quality, successfully overcoming initial reluctance of developers to use the Panel.

Local authorities with their own advisory panels are also using SERDP due to increased development pressures. A regional panel brings additional benefit. SERDP has helped overcome local conflicts of interest by giving independent views based on its understanding of the region's performance.

Funded by the South East England Development Agency, SERDP champions design excellence and sustainability in the region. Made up of 33 design and development professionals, it provides a free design review service to public and private organisations. Projects are submitted to the panel on a voluntary basis. It is managed by Kent Architecture Centre, an independent company that also provides, amongst other things, specialist advice, and training to local authorities.

SERDP complements the CABE Design Review.

The review process includes a site visit and meeting to consider the application and a subsequent write-up. SERDP works at three stages of the development process:

- **Early:** Encourages consultation with the planning authority prior to the formal planning process and provides advice on initial briefs.
- **Mid-term:** Comments on design work at early stages; from assessments of initial concepts through to a 'health check' prior to planning submission.
- **Late:** Assesses design quality of planning applications. Occasionally it also gives evidence at Public Inquiries.

'It's not about being argumentative, but about making the system work better.' Barry Shaw, Chief Executive of Kent Architecture Centre, on South East Regional Development Panel's approach towards developers.



In addition to providing design advice the South East Regional Design Panel raises design awareness through initiatives such as 'Shaping Places', an educational programme aimed at helping 14-year old pupils to understand the process of housing development.

008

Setting the standard

Building for Life

Made up of 20 criteria the Building for Life standard provides a framework for assessing the quality of new housing and neighbourhoods and ensuring they are sustainable, attractive and fit for purpose. This national standard is led by CABI and the Home Builders Federation in association with English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation, Design for Homes and the Civic Trust.

The standard was originally launched as an award to promote design excellence and best practice in the house building industry. The award is given to new housing projects that demonstrate commitment to high design standards, good place making and sustainable development.

Schemes are assessed against four key categories: character; roads, parking and pedestrianisation; design and construction; and environment and community. Each

category has five questions. Projects scoring over 14 points receive the silver standard and those scoring over 16 receive the gold standard.

The clear guidance and breadth of issues covered has led to the criteria being used as a benchmark of design quality on three levels; as an award, as an assessment tool (as used in CABI's Housing Audits) and as a predictive tool to assess the quality of development proposals (as used by English Partnerships).

English Partnerships introduced Building for Life as a quality standard in September 2005. All design proposals must demonstrate that their designs will meet the silver standard. CABI recommend that this approach be adopted by every local authority as a mechanism to raise the quality of proposals that are brought to planning committees and to enforce these standards once planning permission has been secured.



Building for Life winners (clockwise from top left) Angell Town, Chapel, Butts Green and Charter Quays demonstrate how schemes that address all four key assessment categories can deliver successful places which are sustainable, attractive and fit for purpose.

Training should also be made available to a wide range of officers across a council. This will help those working in other departments to understand how they can support good design.

Training may be specially arranged in-house, through attendance at summer schools or urban design conferences, or through discussion groups. When outside design review panels are brought in, members can become involved to learn from the process. Organising study visits to schemes that demonstrate best practice, such as Building for Life award winners, can also inspire people and help them understand urban design issues. Such visits can provide invaluable points of reference when reviewing policy and planning applications.

Design champions

A design champion can provide important support for a particular project or across the board. Design champions are increasingly being appointed by both public sector and commercial organisations, to demonstrate their commitment to raising design quality.

It is essential to find a person with both the skills and perseverance required. The champion could be a political member or officer, someone co-opted from the local area, or an expert who can bring an outside perspective. The personal energy and commitment of such individuals can be a great help in raising awareness of urban design issues, and gathering and sustaining support for longer-term urban design projects. Executive support for the creation of the role is vital if the champion is to have an appropriate remit. Design champions can also be supported at a regional level through networking events that share best practice.

Design review panels 007

Design review panels can provide an additional check and positive incentive for improving the quality of urban design. They should be staffed by acknowledged, independent experts from a range of backgrounds. Panels can operate at a local, regional or national level. They should be run in a consistent manner, handling all projects equally fairly. Examples include CABI's Design Review Panel and panels run by regional architecture centres.

Local authorities should advise potential planning applicants early on if it is intended to use an external design review panel. They should make it clear the purpose of the review and how the recommendations will be used in the planning process. A design review should be undertaken in the knowledge that design changes may be requested. Time will be required to undertake this prior to submitting a planning application. A good scheme, underpinned by a clear rationale for the design decisions made, will benefit from a positive review when submitted for planning approval.

Initiatives and awards 008

In many places higher standards of urban design have been successfully promoted through awards and other design initiatives. Putting effort and resources into these sends a clear signal to the development industry and the wider public that design matters. The Essex Design Initiative, for example, runs workshops, sponsors courses and issues publications. National award schemes such as the Housing Design Awards and Building for Life Standards have brought media attention to design issues. Increasing numbers of local authorities also run design awards.

Awards should set benchmarks in quality which can help raise standards throughout the area. Award-winning schemes should be celebrated, not just as exceptions, but as evidence of what is possible in that place and used as benchmarks.

KEY MESSAGES FOR SECTION 1.1

1. **Well-conceived urban design policy is essential if the planning process is to raise design standards.**
2. **Urban design is intrinsically inter-disciplinary. It requires coordination and collaborative working between local government departments.**
3. **Urban design policies will be more effective if they are backed by efforts to promote a wider understanding of urban design principles and the benefits of urban design.**

REFERENCES

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3. Bristol City Council Bristol Local Plan Proposed Alterations 2003. Policy B3, page 116. B5, page 118
4. Making Design Policy Work: How to deliver good design through your local development framework. 2005. CABI
5. Making Places: Working together for effective delivery. 2007. SEEDA