

Guidance

Design: process and tools

Provides advice on the key points to take into account on design.

From: **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

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This replaces the previous guidance on Design - see [previous version](https://webarhive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20190903180754/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/design) (<https://webarhive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20190903180754/https://www.gov.uk/guidance/design>).

Planning for well-designed places

How are well-designed places achieved through the planning system?

Well-designed places can be achieved by taking a proactive and collaborative approach at all stages of the planning process, from policy and plan formulation through to the determination of planning applications and the post approval stage. This guidance explains the processes and tools that can be used through the planning system and how to engage local communities effectively.

To be read alongside this guidance, the [National Design Guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>) sets out the characteristics of well-designed places and demonstrates what good design means in practice.

As set out in [paragraph 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places#note52) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places#note52>), development that is not well designed should be refused, especially where it fails to reflect local design policies and government guidance on design, taking into account any local design guidance and supplementary planning documents such as design guides and codes. Conversely, significant weight should be given to: a) development which reflects local design policies and government guidance on design, taking into account any local design guidance and supplementary planning documents such as design guides and codes; and/or b) outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability, or help raise the standard of design more generally in an area, so long as they fit in with the overall form and layout of their surroundings.

Good design is set out in the National Design Guide under the following 10 characteristics:

- context
- identity
- built form
- movement
- nature
- public spaces
- uses
- homes and buildings
- resources
- lifespan

The National Design Guide can be used by all those involved in shaping places including in plan-making and decision making.

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How can plans support well-designed places?

Planning policies can set out the design outcomes that development should pursue as well as the tools and processes that are expected to be used to embed good design. Appropriate policies can be included within:

- a plan's vision, objectives, and overarching strategic policies
- non-strategic policies in local or neighbourhood plans
- supplementary planning documents, such as local design guides, masterplans or design codes, which provide further detail on specific design matters

Local planning authorities are expected to effectively [engage their local community](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places) when developing design policies, as set out in [paragraph 129, 132 and 133 of the Framework \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places).

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What role can a plan's vision, objectives and strategic policies play?

A plan's vision and objectives can be used to set out the types of place(s) which the plan aims to achieve, how this will contribute to the sustainable development of the area and how this translates into the expectations for development and investment, including design.

Where a plan contains strategic policies, they can be used to set out these design expectations at a broad level – for example in relation to the future character and role of town centres, areas requiring regeneration or suburban areas facing more incremental change. Strategic policies can also be used to set key design requirements for strategic site allocations and explain how future masterplanning and design work is expected to be taken forward for these sites.

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What role can non-strategic policies play?

[Non-strategic policies \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-making\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-making) can be used to establish more local and/or detailed design principles for an area, including design requirements for site specific allocations. They can be prepared by local planning authorities or [neighbourhood planning groups \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2), and are most effective when based on appropriate evidence of the defining characteristics of the area, such as its historic, landscape and townscape character.

Non-strategic policies are important for providing a clear indication of the types of development that will be allowed in an area, especially where they provide a hook for more detailed [local design guides](#), [masterplans](#) or [codes](#). They can also set out how other design tools are expected to be used in appropriate circumstances, such as design review.

Area Action Plans are a particular form of local plan which planning authorities can use to provide a policy framework for areas subject to (or needing) significant change, such as town centres, regeneration areas and major employment zones. They may incorporate or be accompanied by a strong design vision and principles in the form of a [masterplan](#) for the area.

[Neighbourhood plan-making \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning--2) is one of the key ways in which local character and design objectives can be understood and set out, and with the benefit of being a community-led process. The [Neighbourhood Planning Design Toolkit \(https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/good-design-neighbourhood-planning/\)](https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/good-design-neighbourhood-planning/) provides advice on using neighbourhood plans to best effect.

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What are local design guides?

Local design guides are prepared by local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning groups to set out the general design principles and standards that development proposals should follow in the area, building on policies in the development plan. They are an important way of communicating local design expectations and requirements, and are one of the visual tools that the National Planning Policy Framework expects authorities or neighbourhood planning groups to prepare and use.

Local design guides should be informed by the 10 important characteristics of good places set out in the [National Design Guide \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide), and need to be shaped by a clear understanding of the local area's qualities and

opportunities. Good local design guides are concise, positive documents which are accessible and use tools such as illustrations and checklists to highlight key design issues and possible solutions. They are most effective when used alongside other relevant design tools to assess the design quality of proposed schemes. To be given as much weight as possible in the decision-making process, local design guides need to be adopted as [supplementary planning documents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/767/part/5/made) (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2012/767/part/5/made>) or appended to a neighbourhood plan.

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What are masterplans?

Masterplans set the vision and implementation strategy for a development. They are distinct from local design guides by focusing on site specific proposals such as the scale and layout of development, mix of uses, transport and green infrastructure. Depending on the level of detail, the masterplan may indicate the intended arrangement of buildings, streets and the public realm. More specific parameters for the site's development may be set out in a [design code](#), which can accompany the overall masterplan.

A range of other plans and technical reports may be needed alongside a masterplan, to provide supporting evidence and set out related proposals, such as a local character study, landscape assessment, transport assessment and proposals for securing biodiversity net gain. An implementation strategy could also be included, especially where development is expected to be brought forward in a number of phases.

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How can masterplans be used most effectively?

Masterplans are most likely to be produced by local authorities or developers. For local authorities, they can help to clarify design expectations early in the planning process, set a clear vision for the site, inform infrastructure and viability assessments and identify requirements for developer contributions or other investment. Developers may produce a masterplan to help evolve their own vision for a site, assess options, engage the local planning authority and community in pre-application discussions and support an outline planning application.

Whoever prepares them, masterplans can benefit from a collaborative approach between the local planning authority, site promoters and local

communities so that aspirations and constraints are understood early on. Masterplans produced by local planning authorities may be adopted as supplementary planning documents to give them weight in decisions on applications. Masterplans often apply to schemes that are developed over a long time period and so may need to be subject to regular review and be flexible to adapt to changing circumstances.

Care should be taken to ensure that masterplans are viable and well understood by all involved and that graphic representations of what the development will look like do not mislead the public by showing inaccurate details or significant elements not yet decided upon.

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What are design codes?

Design codes are a set of illustrated design requirements that provide specific, detailed parameters for the physical development of a site or area. The graphic and written components of the code should build upon a design vision, such as a masterplan or other design and development framework for a site or area. Their content should also be informed by the 10 characteristics of good places set out in the [National Design Guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide>), and the [National Model Design Code](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code>).

Design codes can be commissioned or prepared by either the local planning authority or developer, but are best prepared in partnership to secure agreed design outcomes and maintain viability, particularly across complex sites and phased and multi-developer schemes. They can also be prepared for smaller sites, including self-build or custom build projects, where codes can be used to maintain a degree of certainty whilst allowing for design freedom. On large sites it can be important to allow for the code to be reviewed as development proceeds, so that lessons from its initial implementation can be addressed, provided that any changes do not subvert the overall design vision or weaken the quality of development.

Design codes can be applied to all development types including residential, commercial, mixed use, open space, landscape or public realm requirements. They can be adopted as a supplementary planning document, or appended to a Neighbourhood Plan, Community Right to Build Order or Neighbourhood Development order.

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Making decisions about design

How can pre-application discussions be used to achieve well-designed places?

[Pre-application discussions \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/before-submitting-an-application#the-value-of-pre-application-engagement\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/before-submitting-an-application#the-value-of-pre-application-engagement) are an opportunity for prospective applicants and the local planning authority to discuss the intended approach to a site and how design policies and guidance need to be applied. Giving authorities the opportunity to inform and influence the design of a proposed development early in the design process is more efficient than trying to implement suggested revisions at a later stage, particularly if this relates to a major proposal.

In providing pre-application advice, the local planning authority may draw upon its own appropriately skilled and experienced staff, external consultants or [design review panels](#).

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How is design considered in outline planning applications?

Applications for outline planning permission seek to establish whether the scale and nature of a proposed development would be acceptable before fully detailed proposals are put forward. However, design is often considered at this stage in order to assist community engagement, inform an environmental impact assessment or design and access statement (where required) and provide a framework for the preparation and submission of reserved matters proposals.

In some instances, it may be appropriate as part of the outline application to prepare and agree a [design code](#) to guide subsequent reserved matters applications. Design quality cannot be achieved through an outline planning application alone. Outline planning applications allow fewer details about the proposal to be submitted than a full planning application, but can include design principles where these are fundamental to decision making.

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What is the role of parameter plans in achieving well-designed places?

Parameter plans can include information on the proposed land use, building heights, areas of potential built development, structure of landscape and

green infrastructure, access and movement and other key structuring and placemaking components. They can be prepared to inform an environmental impact assessment, where one is required to accompany an outline application.

Parameter plans can provide elements of the framework within which more detailed design proposals are generated, but they are not a substitute for a clear design vision and masterplan, and need to be used in a way that does not inhibit the evolution of detailed proposals. For example, setting maximum parameters for aspects such as building heights can still allow flexibility in determining the detailed design of a scheme.

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What is the role of Design and Access Statements in achieving well-designed places?

[Design and Access Statements \(DAS\) \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/making-an-application#Design-and-Access-Statement\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/making-an-application#Design-and-Access-Statement) set out the narrative for the design approach and design rationale for the scheme. They demonstrate how the local character of an area has been taken into account and how design principles will be applied to achieve high quality design. They set out concisely how the proposal is a suitable response to the site and its setting, taking account of baseline information.

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How can conditions be used to ensure design quality at the pre-consent stage?

During the decision-making stage, where limited design documentation has been prepared as part of the outline planning application, a local planning authority can consider using [conditions \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/use-of-planning-conditions\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/use-of-planning-conditions) to ensure that fundamentally important principles are respected in detailed design and to set out if there are further detailed design requirements to make a scheme acceptable. Conditions on design can be identified at the [outline planning application stage](#) allowing for the details to be submitted for [later determination](#) as part of a reserved matters application.

Detailed design issues that are central to the acceptability of a scheme are, however, most effective when set out at the application stage. [Pre-application advice \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/before-submitting-an-application#the-value-of-pre-application-engagement\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/before-submitting-an-application#the-value-of-pre-application-engagement) is encouraged and can be

used as a stage for applicants and local planning authorities to discuss the use of planning conditions in relation to design quality.

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How can planning committees be effectively engaged on design?

It is important that training and support for planning committee members equips them to understand what the relevant design policies and guidance are seeking to achieve, so that they can assess proposals effectively and champion good design outcomes. This can include identifying key information and methods that will help councillors in their role, as well as keeping them up to date on design issues as part of pre-application discussions and the consideration of live planning applications.

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How can local planning authorities ensure the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion?

The design process continues after the granting of permission, and it is important that design quality is not diminished as a permission is implemented. In some cases, local planning authorities may wish to encourage design details to be agreed as part of the initial permission, so that important elements are not deferred for later consideration. It can also be important to ensure that applications to discharge conditions or amend approved schemes do not undermine development quality.

Local planning authorities can consider a strategy to maintain the original design intent and quality of significant schemes, such as by encouraging the retention of key design consultants from the planning application team and using design review at appropriate intervals. Site inspections to verify compliance with approved plans and conditions are important.

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Tools for assessing and improving design quality

What tools are available to help assess and improve the design of development?

There are a range of tools available to guide the design of developments to ensure that the final product is of good quality. As set out in [paragraph 133 of the Framework \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places#note51\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/12-achieving-well-designed-places#note51), these tools and processes are of most benefit when applied early in the evolution of schemes to prompt discussions and refine options. They can be used to involve relevant stakeholders, including built environment and non-built environment professionals, decision makers and the local community.

Available tools include (but are not limited to):

- [National Design Guide \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-design-guide)
- [National Model Design Code \(https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code)
- Local design guides and codes
- Design review
- Assessment frameworks

These tools can be used by:

- local planning authorities and neighbourhood planning groups, who may wish to include the use of specific tools in their plan policies as a means of promoting good design, to [effectively engage communities](#) and make robust and well-informed decisions on applications; and
- developers to help evolve and assess the design aspects of proposals, and for the purposes of community engagement.

Paragraph: 016 Reference ID: 26-016-20191001

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What is design review and how can it be used appropriately?

Design review is an independent assessment of development proposals by a panel of multidisciplinary professionals and experts, which can inform and improve design quality in new development. It is not intended to replace advice from statutory consultees and advisory bodies, or be a substitute for local authority design skills or community engagement.

Effective design review is proportionate and can be used for both large and small-scale development, so long as the projects are significant enough to warrant the investment needed for a review. The number and expertise of

panel members required can be guided by the complexity of the scheme and the sensitivity of the site and its surroundings.

An effective design review:

- follows clear criteria for the appraisal of schemes, agreed by the panel, and ensuring they work for the benefit of the public and reflect relevant local and national design objectives;
- sets clear, meaningful terms of reference to ensure a transparent, objective, robust and defensible process that demonstrates benefit to the public;
- is representative, diverse and inclusive, drawing upon a range of built environment and other professional expertise. Continuity of panel members is important to provide consistency in approach for each scheme reviewed, including agreed procedures to feedback to applicants;
- considers the wider site-specific and policy context, such as relevant socio-economic issues, as well as the physical characteristics of the site and its setting. Site visits are important in providing panel members with awareness of context and local characteristics;
- is written up and communicated in a transparent and accessible way to be understood by a wide range of stakeholders; and
- includes mechanisms to represent the views of local communities and other stakeholders.

Design review is most effective when applied at the earliest stage of design development. It can be followed up at further stages as projects evolve, including pre-application and are implemented, referencing and building upon recommendations made in previous design reviews.

Recommendations from design review panels can be used to help support decisions on applications, so development proposals need to show how they have considered and addressed them.

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What are assessment frameworks and how can they be used appropriately?

Assessment frameworks are a set of criteria against which a design can be assessed. They can cover a range of issues that are important for securing well-designed places (such as Building for Life 12) or may focus on particular considerations such as climate change or health.

Local planning authorities and developers may wish to use assessment frameworks to inform the design and evaluation of proposals, and support

discussions with local communities and other interests about the creation of good places. Frameworks are effective when the issues within them are considered in relation to the particular context and character of a local area. Authorities may wish to refer to the use of specific frameworks in their policies or supplementary planning guidance that are most relevant to the vision for their area, although it is important to ensure that they are used in a proportionate way and do not conflict with national or local planning policy.

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Effective community engagement on design

How can local communities be effectively engaged in the design of their area?

Communities can effectively shape both design policies and development through a collaborative process of meaningful participation. Early engagement and linking engagement activities to key stages of design decision-making and plan-making can empower people to inform the vision, design policies and the design of schemes.

Engagement activities offer an opportunity to work collaboratively with communities to shape better places for local people. They consider how to embed empowerment, capacity building and employability opportunities for local people and organisations throughout the design process.

It is important that local planning authorities or applicants demonstrate how all views are listened to and considered. Local planning authorities are encouraged to achieve this through representations in a published consultation statement. Where clear parameters are set it makes it clear to communities what scope there is for them to influence the design policies or scheme being developed.

Local planning authorities and applicants are encouraged to proactively engage an inclusive, diverse and representative sample of the community, so that their views can be taken in to account in relation to design. It is also important to consider maximising the opportunity for local communities to participate, such as working with established organisations or groups within the community and holding events at a time and location that are accessible. Language and presentation of design information is most effective when clear and straightforward.

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What tools can be used to effectively engage local communities in the design process?

There is a range of tools that can be used to effectively engage local communities throughout the plan-making and planning application process, including:

- design workshops
- community panels or forums
- exhibitions
- digital methods

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How can design workshops be used to effectively engage local communities?

Design workshops with members of the local community can take many forms, and are often most effective when interactive and creative, to explore the challenges and opportunities of a site or area and explore how design can help improve the quality of that place for local people and organisations.

Design workshops can be used by local planning authorities to understand the views of local communities on design policies in local plans, and both local authorities and applicants in relation to masterplans and design elements of specific development sites. Independent facilitators may be appointed, when working with stakeholder groups, to offer design capacity building and help build a shared understanding through the design process.

Site visits and walking audits can be used to help map local spaces, issues and aspirations, and can play a useful role in contextualising and informing proposals.

Design workshops are most effectively used early in the planning process, to inform a vision or masterplan. Charrettes are a specific type of interactive design workshop that can be used to generate a shared understanding of the opportunities and constraints of a site between members of the community, other stakeholders including council members, parish councils and external consultees and an inter-disciplinary team of built environment professionals including local authority officers that leads to the development of options.

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How can community panels or forums be used to effectively engage local communities?

Community panels or forums can be set up by local planning authorities or third sector organisations, such as civic societies, to represent the views of local communities by scrutinising plans, policies or applications.

They can be made up of residents, local councillors and other members of the community and public service agencies. They are most effective when membership is diverse and inclusive, representing the whole community. For planning applications, site visits can be undertaken to understand the context of schemes.

Insights from community panels or forums can help support local planning authorities' decisions on planning applications, inform design review, and be used as evidence during the examination of plans and policies.

Community panels and forums, if diverse and inclusive, can play an important role in supporting dialogue between project teams and the wider community.

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How can digital methods be used to effectively engage local communities in the design process?

In addition to traditional verbal and written methods, local planning authorities and applicants can consider using digital methods to effectively engage communities in the design process. Digital models of proposed development schemes and their surroundings can help to visualise concepts and impacts, including the wider effects of development such as implications for daylight and sunlight. [Social media \(https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-media-playbook\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-media-playbook) can be helpful in reaching people who may find it difficult to attend events and can be effective in targeting particular groups, such as online design and gaming platforms that can be used to help engage younger audiences in exploring spatial design.

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