Making design policy work

How to deliver good design through your local development framework

cabe

Contents

Introduction

The government's latest round of planning reforms represents an opportunity for planners to help deliver the high-quality neighbourhoods and places that people expect and deserve. Local development frameworks (LDFs), which are replacing local and unitary development plans as part of the reforms, offer new planning tools to secure high-quality development, of the right type, in the right place, at the right time.

This publication aims to help local authorities and their partners develop LDF design policies. It is aspirational, whilst recognising that local authorities will have many other policy issues to consider alongside good design. It summarises a more detailed paper, *Spatial planning: by design*, by Professor Matthew Carmona of the Bartlett School of Planning at University College, London. This report can be found at www.cabe.gov.uk

CABE wants to stimulate thinking and inspire better practice in the next generation of planning documents. We hope that this publication will help planners to deliver this.

'CABE wants to stimulate thinking and inspire better practice in the next generation of planning documents'

Potential for design policies in the new regime

The ODPM's 2005 planning policy statement 1 (PPS1) calls for a considered, comprehensive and consistent approach to design policies, based on understanding the local area. Design is clearly not a subjective issue and decisions about it should be based on a clear policy framework with design principles and criteria agreed by both professionals and communities.

Local development frameworks can include design policies at different geographical scales relative to a variety of land use and service provision themes. LDF spatial design policies enable planning to help deliver high-quality buildings and places. Good planning is dependant on design, which cares about how places feel, function and relate to each other.

Government and industry alike have increasingly recognised the importance of design quality. Research that has monitored the evolution of design policies over more than a decade has seen this increased awareness result in four key roles for design within development plans[1]:

- to express the strategic spatial vision of the authority

- to set out the standard and quality of development the local authority requires and ensure that quality features centrally in all planning policy objectives

- as a basis for developing more extensive topic, area and site-specific guidance such as development frameworks, masterplans and design codes

- to control and maintain the quality of development.

Local development frameworks – the government's policy

In 2004, the ODPM published its planning policy statement 12 (PPS12), setting out how new local development frameworks should work. The statement says:

1.12 In preparing local development documents, local planning authorities must include policies on design and access in accordance with regulation 6(1)(a)(ii). Planning policy statement 1 [PPS1] makes clear that good design, including consideration of access issues is crucial to the delivery of sustainable development, not separate from it.

1.13 Well-designed development responds well to the local physical, social and economic context, being safe, clean, attractive and accessible for all users. Local development documents should therefore include policies that set out strategic design and access objectives in line with PPS1 and relevant good practice set out in *By design, safer places: the planning system and crime prevention* and *Planning and access for disabled people: a good practice guide*.

1.14 Local development documents relating to specific areas could usefully inform the implementation of strategic design policies by including design policies that relate to local conditions and objectives.

'Design is clearly not a subjective issue and decisions about it should be based on a clear policy framework'

1 *Design quality to design policy*, Carmona, Punter and Chapman, 2002, Thomas Telford

Moving from land use planning to spatial planning

Looking at the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, it is tempting to think that it is simply building on and refining the previous system of land use planning. That, however, would totally misunderstand both the scale and nature of the recent changes.

Although relatively successful in regulating the process of development, land use planning has more often than not failed to adequately balance this with securing environmental quality. Realisation of the cumulative damage being inflicted by day-to-day decision-making led to a review of the system and renewed emphasis on proactive holistic planning and the importance of good design.

The 2004 Act ushers in a radically different approach to planning – spatial planning – with the potential to deliver better-quality development at its heart. This is not to say that the old land use system could not also deliver good-quality development, but spatial planning offers a framework for best practice to become common practice.

PPS1 says: 'Spatial planning goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function.'[2].

PPS1 explains that local planning authorities should:

- set a clear vision for the future pattern of development

- focus on outcomes and proactive management of changing places

- integrate the wide range of activities relating to development and regeneration, and other relevant strategies and programmes.

Spatial planning aims to reconnect planning with physical outcomes, with achieving real changes on the ground, and with the importance of a clearly defined local vision. These factors are intimately linked to a concern for, and an engagement with, design.

'The 2004 Act ushers in a radically different approach to planning – spatial planning – with the potential to deliver better-quality development at its heart'

Linking up: Land use planning and highway work has come together in improvements to Kensington High Street, London (credit: Urban Exposure)

2 Para 30 PPS1 *Delivering sustainable development*, ODPM 2005

Good design policies:
five fundamental factors

In the recent past, there has been a tendency to view design as solely a visual concern – just about what things look like and what style they are. This fails to consider the important social or environmental dimension of design, such as the potential of a high-quality public realm to contribute to public health, a more inclusive environment, quality of life and the sustainability agenda. Such lessons suggest five fundamental design factors that should be reflected within LDFs.

5 fundamental factors for better design policies.

1   Embed design concerns across the new LDF policy hierarchy and beyond to the community strategy

2   Treat design as a cross-cutting issue which infuses all other policy areas

3   Base design policies on an in-depth understanding of local context and the design process

4   Recognise that design is importance beyond the scale of individual sites and can help establish LDF objectives at different spatial levels

5   Ensure design policy addresses social and sustainable as well as visual and functional concerns.

1
Embed design concerns across the new LDF policy hierarchy and beyond to the community strategy

Community strategies sit at the centre of local policymaking. They should include broad environmental and design quality objectives and delivery targets including planning, highways, housing, economic development and urban and environmental management. Local development frameworks should be informed by, and help deliver, the community strategy. Planners should recognise the link between LDF design policies and community aspirations at the outset.
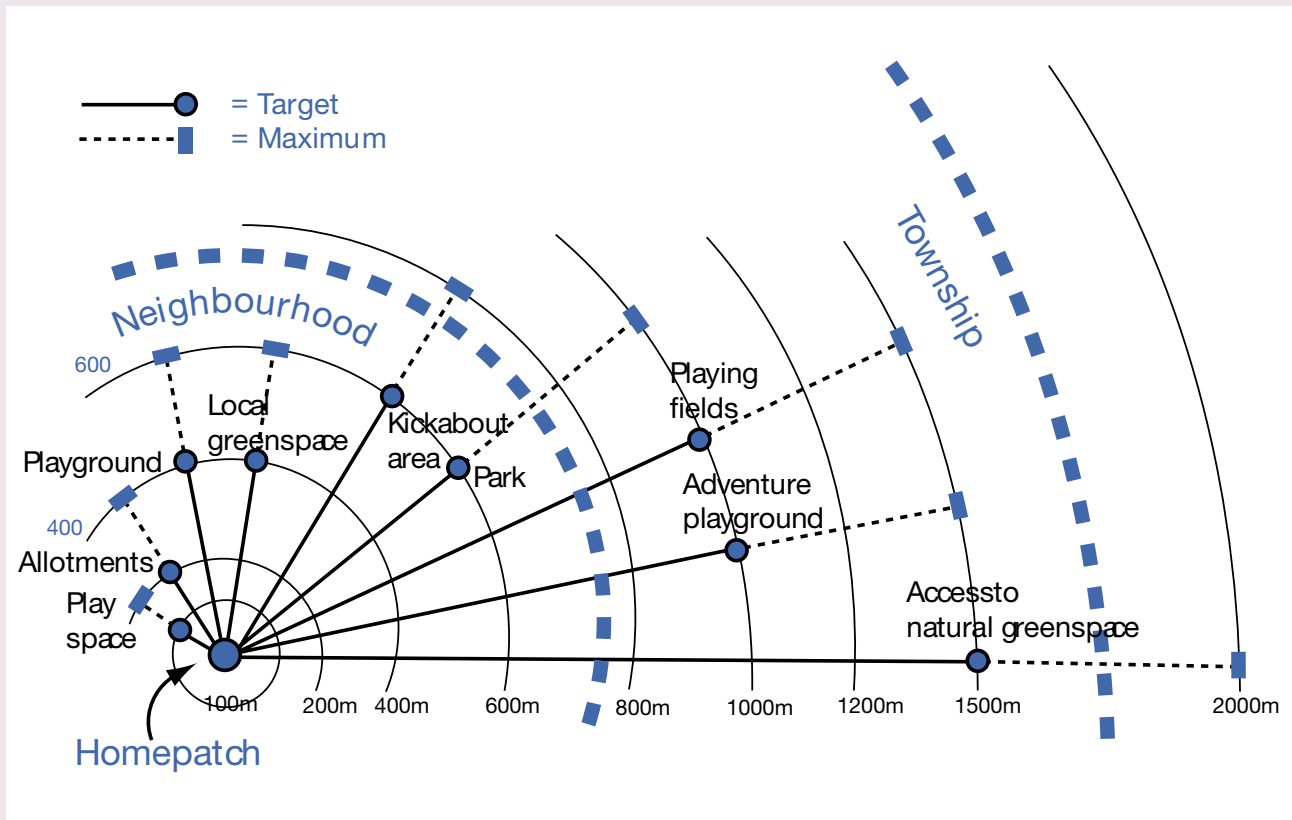
This requires a commitment to good design by the local authority as a whole, led by chief officers and councillors. Having a design champion at the highest level can help to embed quality issues throughout council activities. It can be particularly useful for that champion to have a role in the community strategy and in establishing the design aspirations within the LDF.

In recent years, those authorities that have been most successful in delivering better-designed environments have defined a strong and robust design agenda in their development plans, detailed through urban design strategies, frameworks and development briefs at sub-area and site-specific scales. The section starting page 12 suggests policy approaches for the different LDF documents which follow these successful models.

‘Having a design champion at the highest level can help to embed quality issues throughout council activities’

Spatial dimension: linking land use to community facilities – the spatial distribution of open space provision
Shaping neighbourhoods, Barton, Grant and Guise, 2003.

2
Treat design as a cross-cutting issue which infuses all other policy areas

Design objectives are needed across the range of land use and service delivery policies, from housing to leisure, transport to health. This leads to questions about how to deal with design. Should it be a stand-alone issue, or placed within each relevant policy theme? A bit of both can be the most useful strategy. Subject-specific design objectives can link with generic policies in a design chapter or dedicated document (see section 5). For example, affordable housing policies can promote equal quality across tenures based upon core design policies that establish the need for good-quality architectural and urban design.

'Partnership work between service providers will be vital to the success of spatial planning'

This approach can apply to both the traditional land use policy subjects used by development control, and to the new policy areas needing to be covered under the spatial planning agenda. Issues as diverse as open space management, road adoption, parking control, traffic calming, social infrastructure, educational provision, health provision, transport and travel, recycling, waste, cleansing, and public realm management will all have design implications. Providing policy on the design and quality expectations for these and other policy areas will help co-ordinate investment in the public realm with planning gain expectations, enhancement works and public and private infrastructure investment decisions used as delivery mechanisms.

Partnership work between service providers will be vital to the success of spatial planning. As PPS1 says, good design is the responsibility of all, not just those writing LDFs.

Understanding the place: this map showing historical development in Bristol helped inform policies for the future of the city (credit: 20/20 Architects).

3
Base policies on an in-depth understanding of local context and the design process
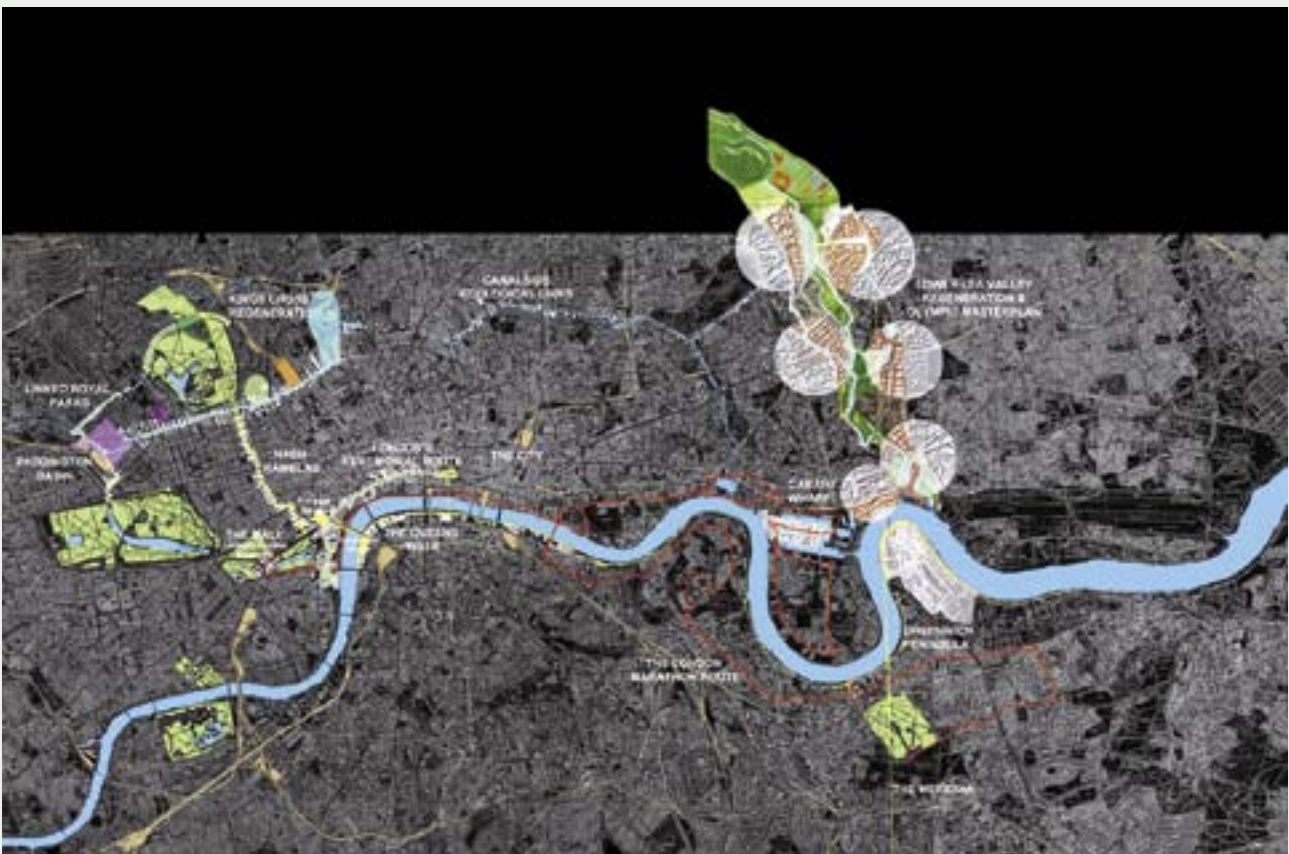
Design is a creative process that requires an understanding of local context, public views and aspirations to inform proposals. Such a process is as relevant to policy writing as it is to designing a development proposal and PPS1[3] says that local authorities should prepare design policies based on an understanding and evaluation of an area's defining characteristics and needs. This means that policies should be tailored to the character, pressures and opportunities presented by the area they cover, and should not simply reiterate national policy or uncritically replicate policies from elsewhere.

LDF policies should promote a robust design process, ensuring that developments are designed for the place just as the policies have been written for the area. To encourage this, they might call for appropriately skilled designers to be involved in the development process, and clearly establish the information requirements of the local authority for different types and sizes of proposals.

'Local authorities should prepare design policies based on an understanding and evaluation of an area's defining characteristics and needs'

City-level spatial design: plans for the Lower Lee Valley look beyond their boundaries to understand how places work together (credit: Terry Farrell and Partners).

3 Para 36, PPS1, *Delivering sustainable development*, ODPM 2005

4
Use design policy at different geographical scales from individual sites to large areas to help deliver LDF objectives
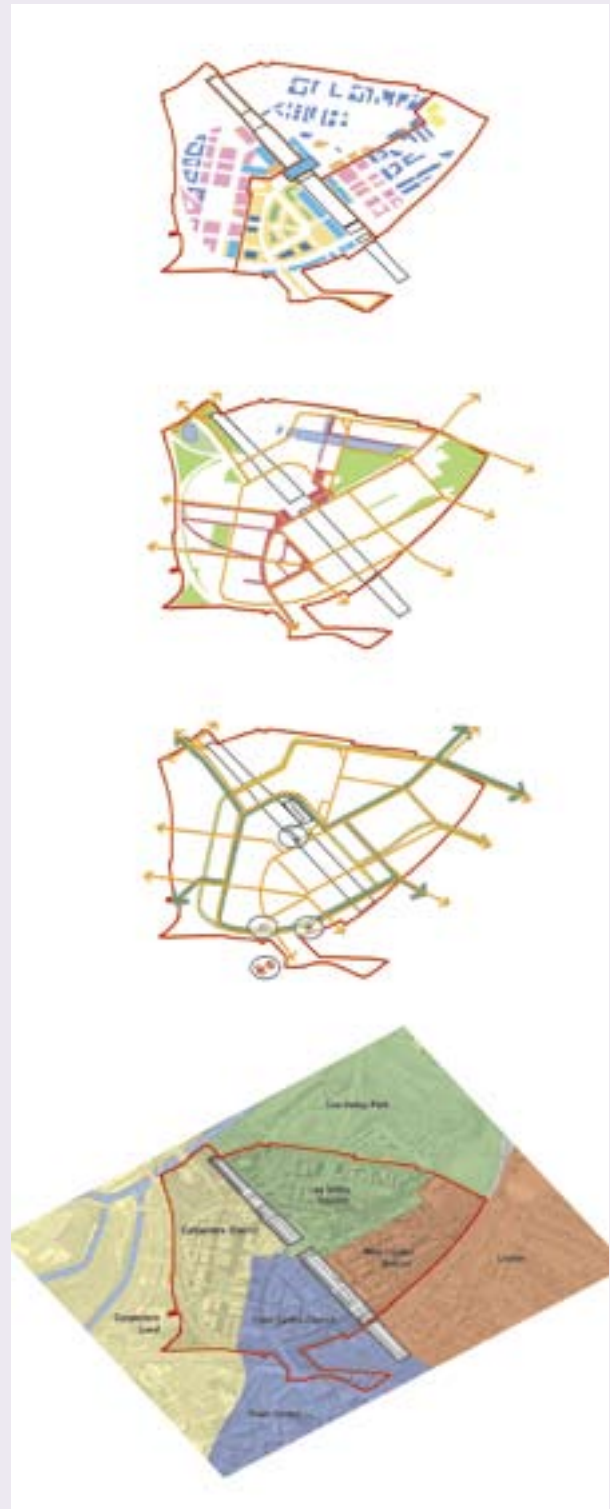
The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 envisages a proactive, even visionary, planning process, utilising a range of policy tools that work from strategic to local spatial scales. The traditional view of design as solely a site-based concern is no longer appropriate, and planners should give the role of design in shaping overall urban form and the pattern of urban development much more attention. This already happens within good masterplans[4], which may be the basis for new area action plans. Large-scale land use plans can set out future urban patterns and define the nature and location of major infrastructure investment. This should provide a framework for private and public investment decisions, and a mechanism for the conservation of key natural and built resources. It could be particularly useful for LDFs to articulate a spatial vision at an authority-wide scale, embracing individual districts and neighbourhoods.

How neighbourhoods connect, their core functions, movement patterns, and the character of social and economic changes are all relevant larger-scale design issues. The LDF proposals map or key diagram could be used to illustrate such issues, including growth, infrastructure, open space and conservation patterns.

Design at larger spatial levels should be linked to the more detailed, area-specific policies in area action plans and local supplementary planning documents (SPDs).

'The traditional view of design as solely a site-based concern is no longer appropriate'

Sliced up: the layers of the Stratford City illustrative masterplan, London (Masterplanners: Arup Associates, Fletcher Priest Architects West 8).

4 Further advice is available in *Creating successful masterplans: a guide for clients*, (CABE), 2004

5
Ensure design policy addresses social and sustainable as well as visual and functional concerns

There is a growing recognition that design is also about the way neighbourhoods function as social environments and how they affect people's lives. Health is a good example of this. Good quality places can work well, look good and support a viable local economy, but they can also encourage healthy lifestyles with walking, cycling, and physical leisure pursuits that help prevent obesity and weight problems in the population as a whole. Although this approach should help create more responsive and responsible planning, it should not overshadow the equal need to secure good architectural and landscape design for individual buildings and spaces. Similarly, inclusive access is a vital part of achieving social equality and should be required through design policies. This raises a challenge for LDFs: to ensure that social and environmental dimensions are being considered alongside visual and functional concerns, and that the synergies between good design and sustainable development are considered.

Good design is about making places that are functional, durable, viable, good for people to use, and that reflect the importance of local character and distinctiveness. These factors support social, economic and environmental sustainability objectives. More detailed design considerations such as building orientation; building form and materials influence resource sustainability. Other factors such as the vitality and safety of the public realm, and the functional aspects of density, land-use mixes, and movement patterns are also of importance to sustainability.
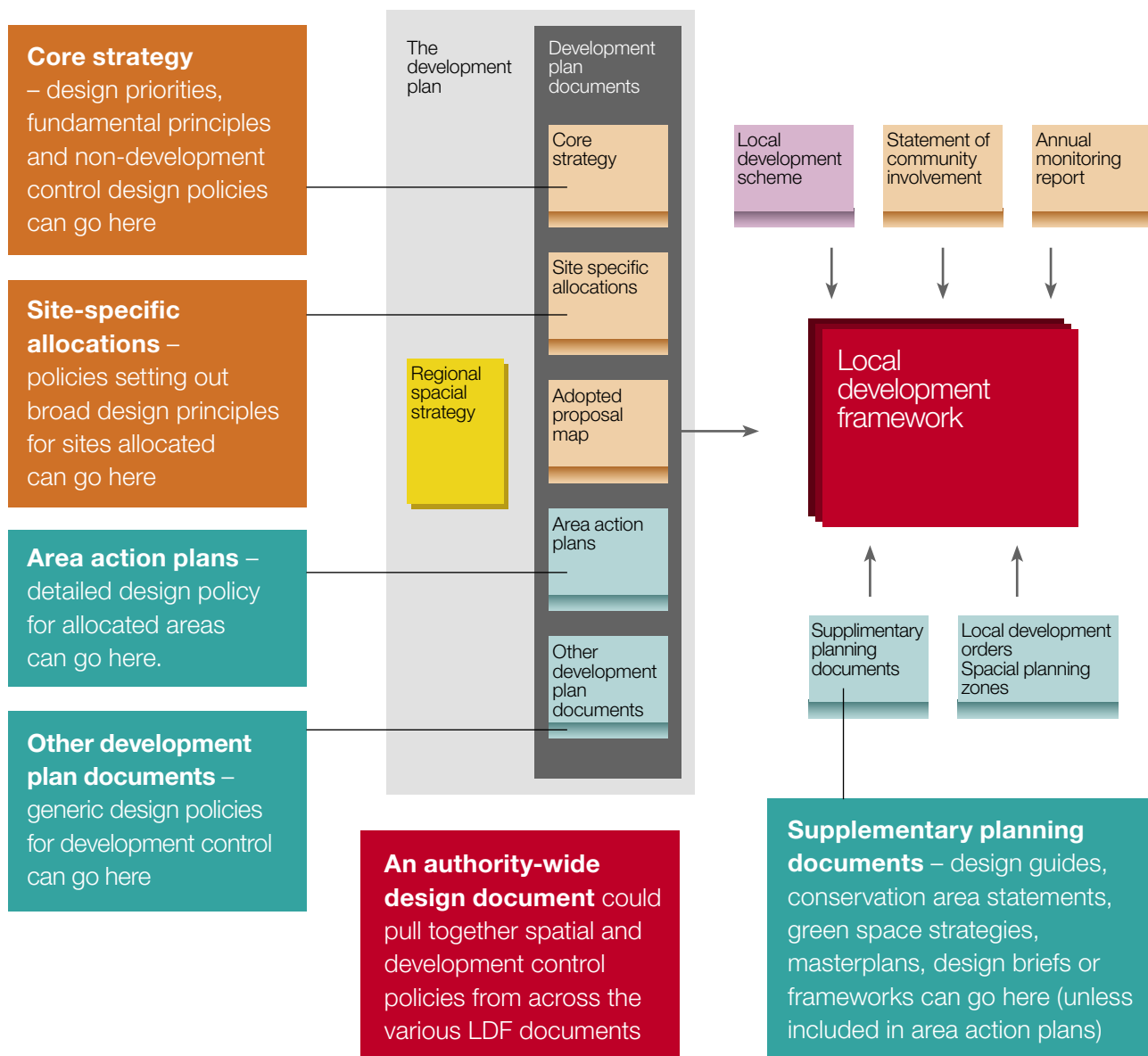
'Good design is about making places that are functional, durable, viable, good for people to use, and that reflect the importance of local character and distinctiveness'

Where design fits in to the jigsaw

Fitting in: where design policies might go in a local development framework

Required **Optional** **Project Plan**

Core strategy – design priorities, fundamental principles and non-development control design policies can go here

Site-specific allocations – policies setting out broad design principles for sites allocated can go here

Area action plans – detailed design policy for allocated areas can go here.

Other development plan documents – generic design policies for development control can go here

The development plan

Development plan documents

Core strategy

Site specific allocations

Regional spacial strategy

Adopted proposal map

Area action plans

Other development plan documents

Local development scheme

Statement of community involvement

Annual monitoring report

Local development framework

Supplementary planning documents

Local development orders Spacial planning zones

An authority-wide design document could pull together spatial and development control policies from across the various LDF documents

Supplementary planning documents – design guides, conservation area statements, green space strategies, masterplans, design briefs or frameworks can go here (unless included in area action plans)

Design policies should feature across the range of development plan documents (DPDs) in the LDF, including in the core strategy, site-specific allocations, area action plans and potentially in a DPD dedicated to design itself. They could also go into supplementary planning documents (SPDs). The exact structure of each LDF, and the position of design policies within them, will vary according to local circumstances, so we are not advocating any single model.

Local development framework documents will require more detailed and specific content as they move from the core strategy towards SPDs. This should not mean repeating policy, but developing and applying key principles to the objectives of each policy document. In this way, design policy can be embedded across the range of potential LDF documents.

Core strategy

This allows for an initial interpretation of the vision set out in the community strategy and a broad assessment of the areas characteristics. The fundamentals of design policy should be set out here, for example the need to follow a robust design process, basing proposals on a clear understanding of context, and the contribution of better design to achieving sustainable development objectives. This should not repeat national policy. Instead, each authority should use the core strategy to identify their own design priorities, and to lay these out in a manner that is succinct and capable of development in the other DPDs.

Core policies may encompass, but extend beyond, land use planning, whilst the adopted proposals map and key diagram could help to articulate and locate core policies and proposals. Core policies should ensure that the quality of development is prioritised throughout the authority and not just in those places for which more detailed guidance has been prepared.

Site-specific allocations and area action plans

Spatial planning focuses on areas most likely to change. These may be sites identified in one or more DPDs, or in an area action plan, and will often be areas with an especially sensitive character or a role in regeneration. Relevant design policies for areas should build upon the fundamentals established in the core strategy.

Planning policy statement 12 (PPS12) explains that site-specific allocations may incorporate policies setting out the broad design principles for the land allocated, while area action plans should identify the distribution of local uses, and their layout and design implications. More detailed design requirements of the type typically found in a development brief or masterplan can feature in related SPDs (see below). Policy in these types of DPDs does not simply echo that in the core strategy. It should be specific to the proposals and contexts under consideration. Area action plans provide an opportunity to articulate a clear two or preferably three-dimensional vision for the area.

Seaside vision: three-dimensional pictures and two-dimensional plans to help explain the council's vision for Blackpool waterfront (credit: Jerde Partnership / EDAW)

Other development plan documents

The core strategy should be succinct and the detail needed to articulate authority-wide design concerns will not be appropriate here. Similarly, area-specific policies may go in to a site-specific allocation or area action plan, but the generic design policies for the whole of the authority will also need the full weight of development plan status in a DPD.

PPS12 endorses a limited suite of generic development control policies, either as part of the core strategy, or as a separate development plan document. It suggests that these are arranged by topic such as protecting residential amenity or accessibility, and not by land uses. High-quality development and good design will be important to many such topics, but can also be dealt with as a topic in its own right in the form of a comprehensive statement of design objectives and associated delivery mechanisms. Relevant policies could include criteria for sustainable design and construction, inclusive access or crime prevention, or objectives on more specialised issues such as tall buildings or waterfront development. Planners should consider the full agenda established in the next section of this publication.

Some authorities have found that pulling both land use and non-land use design policies into such an authority-wide design document has allowed for less policy repetition, better synergy across land use and spatial issues, easier implementation and higher-quality development. For example, general design policies on inclusive access or local distinctiveness can be linked to process policies on open space, highways and public realm management. Policy on the use of design competitions or design statements can be provided alongside associated area-specific policies such as on the use of design codes to guide the implementation of large development schemes.

Care is needed to ensure that an authority-wide design document adds value and does not prevent the LDF from being easy and efficient to use. Such a document would also have to sit at the right level in the LDF hierarchy. Generic development control policies would require development plan status and so would need to be in a DPD, but other policies may not. Alternatively, the link between land use and spatial design policies could be made within the core strategy itself, which could incorporate an authority-wide design section. The best approach is likely to depend on local circumstances and objectives.
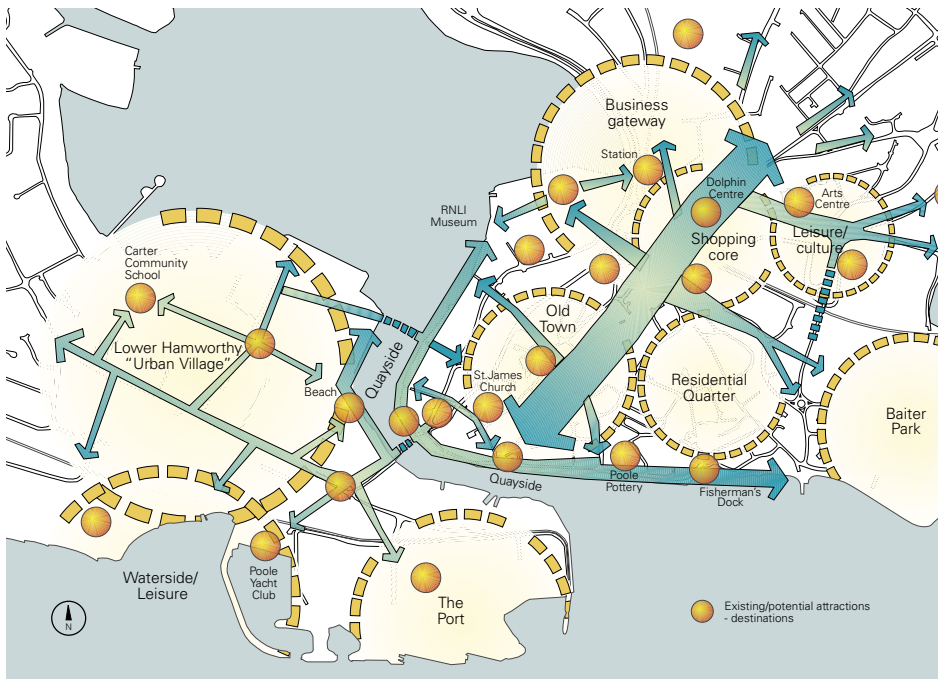
Supplementary planning documents

PPS12 advises that SPDs 'may cover a range of issues, both thematic and site specific, which may expand policy or provide further detail to policies in a development plan document... supplementary planning documents may take the form of design guides, area development briefs, masterplan or issue-based documents'.

It may be advisable to include design guides on very detailed or largely advisory subjects such as shop-front design or domestic extensions within this category. Design and development guidance that needs to be speedily prepared and which may go quickly out of date, for example development briefs should also be included.

Design objectives for particular areas or large sites may need to go into more detail than appropriate for a DPD, although masterplans, design briefs, design frameworks, or design codes adopted as SPD should usefully build upon policies in the core strategy and DPDs and help deliver their objectives.

Great care is needed in deciding what information should go into SPDs. These documents cannot set out new policy and will not carry the full weight of DPD, but they can be a material consideration within planning decisions, especially where they have been prepared with the involvement of the local community. If it is felt that the information they contain needs more weight – that planning decisions should have to adhere to them – then a DPD should be used. Much of the design agenda established in the next section of this publication will fall into this latter category.

Statements of community involvement

Although not a policy document as such, proper community involvement on design issues will be vital. Design quality can have a real effect on community's perception of schemes. Pictures, plans, maps, models, diagrams and even cartoons showing design ideas, when used positively to assist community involvement, can help people visualise issues in a way policies and plans cannot. Good design can act as the means to test and reconcile both spatial policies and stakeholder interests and early community involvement can help ensure design quality. There are several design-based consultation tools available, including placecheck, planning for real, inquiry by design and village design statements. More information is available in *By design*.

Piecing it together: LDFs should support a design process where everyone can have their say (from CABE's *Creating successful masterplans* client guide)

Design objectives that policies should cover

The following list can be used as an *aide-memoire*, rather than as a definitive list of appropriate content. It represents good practice as recommended by CABE. Objectives are not grouped by land uses such as housing or retail, but as themes that apply across policy areas, and across the range of policy documents in the new LDF hierarchy. Objectives that address sustainability are deliberately distributed across the different categories, although some authorities may wish to pull design for sustainability into a theme on its own. The objectives given below are consistent with national design policy, whilst many of the criteria they highlight are discussed in more length in *By design*.

Policies and supporting text on the design process should:

- require understanding of the local physical, social, economic, environmental and policy context for development
- explain how the authority will use design codes, development briefs and other types of detailed design guidance
- promote the use of skilled designers
- identify the design information requirements expected from applicants (for example within design and access statements)
- promote pre-application processes to inform the design process.

Policies on local character and distinctiveness should:

- aim to enhance the unique characteristics of all places, identifying possible improvements for those of poor or mediocre quality
- set parameters for areas that require specific attention such as conservation areas, urban fringe, town centres, or waterways
- relate to particular local types or scales of development focusing on any design issues they raise
- inform the management of both local and strategic views.

Policies on urban form and scale should:

- seek appropriate development scales that respond to a range of local factors
- set parameters for the assessment of the building 'envelope' (height, width, massing and depth) and the ratio between building and open spaces (which together represent density) for particular localities. In some cases, specific tall building policies may be required
- ensure appropriate consideration of the size and enclosure of public spaces, continuity of the building line and urban grid, road layout and block and plot sizes
- provide for the assessment of sunlight, daylight, and the microclimate within and surrounding any development
- optimise energy and other resource use and performance through building shape, orientation, servicing, detailing and materials.

Policies on the public realm and open space should:

- encourage legible, comfortable, stimulating and safe streets and public spaces
- encourage active frontages at ground level to public spaces where feasible and appropriate for the land use and type of area, and consider how spaces can be creatively used
- incorporate public perceptions about what is important in the identity and quality of public spaces
- embrace designing-out-crime principles including defensible space, natural surveillance, visibility, lighting, and other security measures
- recognise the importance of parking and servicing but work to ensure they do not undermine other design objectives
- recognise the importance of good quality open space to the long-term creation of successful, popular and viable sustainable communities
- support the adoption of open space strategies (ideally as SPD)
- explain how land use and spatial policies come together to implement the open space strategy and provide good-quality, well-maintained spaces for all.

Policies on mixed use and tenure should:
- support the mixing of uses across a neighbourhood, not just on individual sites, to create more sustainable living and movement patterns, and more vital and viable places
- encourage the mixing of tenures and designs that imperceptivity integrate a variety of tenure types
- ensure adequate private amenity space with a minimum of overlooking, and public open spaces suitably equipped for recreation.

Policies on connection, movement and inclusive access should:
- ensure movement opportunities are welcoming, understandable and easy to use
- ensure all people, including those with disabilities, can easily and comfortably move through and into developments, allowing freedom of choice for all and everyone to equally participate in the uses places are put to
- promote walking and cycling by ensuring adequate space, networks and facilities
- ensure that road layouts prioritise safe, easy and direct pedestrian movement and the creation of a network of attractive, well-connected public spaces
- aim to establish both visual and functional relationships between the different parts of a development and between the development and its wider setting
- call for inclusive access to be considered from the start of the design process, not dealt with as an afterthought
- support designs that do not separate people with particular needs, or highlight special arrangements made for them.

Policies on landscape and biodiversity should:
- ensure that key landscape features on particular sites are protected and that development is best sited to take advantage of, and maintain, landscape qualities and character
- ensure landscape as a natural fully functioning system as well as visual resource is seen as a central pillar of sustainability policies
- ensure the best natural features and bio-diversity are protected with minimum damage to the natural processes of the site.

Policies on architecture should:
- support the delivery of high-quality architecture that respects its context, without unduly restricting architectural styles
- recognise the contribution that high-quality architecture can make to the quality of the urban and rural environment
- recognise that the assessment of architectural quality is an objective, not subjective process, and ensure fundamental issues such as how the scheme relates to its context and expresses its proposed use through its design philosophy, structure, materials, proportions, visual order, functioning and detailing are assessed.

Policies on historic environment conservation should:
- be well integrated with design-based policies, incorporating urban design as well as architectural concerns
- make clear that the key consideration at all times should be context, and the contribution proposals make to preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of valued historic environments
- recognise the importance of the contribution that established land uses make to the character of conservation areas or other historic assets
- recognise that appropriate contemporary design can positively enhance the character and quality of conservation areas whilst discouraging the general use of façadist or replica solutions
- consider using area action plans to manage change in historic environments
- ensure policies hinge around the concept of the 'optimum viable use' for historic assets such as listed buildings, consistent with their historic character, stressing the presumption against demolition, and the need to ensure that design interventions have regard to stated characteristics
- emphasise the importance of the setting of listed buildings and other historic assets.

Glossary of terms

Area action plan – Document used to provide the planning framework for areas where significant change or conservation is needed. A key feature will be the focus on implementation.

Core strategy – Sets out the key elements of the planning framework for the area. It should include a spatial vision and strategic objectives for the area.

Design code – A document, usually with detailed drawings or diagrams, setting out with some precision the design and planning principles that will apply to development in a particular place.

Design guidance – A generic term for documents providing guidance on how development can be done in accordance with the planning and design policies of a local authority or other organisation. Guidance often refers to a specific type of development such as shops or household extensions.

Development brief – A document providing guidance on how a specific site of significant size or sensitivity should be developed in line with the relevant planning and design policies. It will usually contain some indicative, but flexible, vision of future development form. 'Planning brief' and 'design brief' are terms that are also used.

Development plan documents – Parts of the LDF which form the development plan – not including for example, supplementary planning documents or the statement of community involvement. DPDs are subject to more rigorous community involvement and inquiry procedures than other parts of the LDF, and as such receive greater weight in the planning process.

Design champion – A person responsible for ensuring that a particular organisation – a local authority, for example – promotes high standards of design throughout its work.

Generic development control policies – The LDF should contain a limited suite of policies which set out the criteria against which planning applications for the development and use of land and buildings. Such policies will ensure that development accords with the spatial vision and objectives set out in the core strategy.

Local development document – The parts of the development plan that are prepared by the local planning authority (ie not part of the regional spatial strategy).

Local development framework – The document which sets out, in the form of a portfolio, the local development documents which collectively deliver the spatial planning strategy for the local planning authority's area.

Placecheck – A type of urban design audit advocated by professional design body the Urban Design Alliance. A local collaborative alliance or partnership uses checklists to investigate how a place could be improved.

Planning for real – A participation technique, pioneered by participation agency the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation, that involves residents and other stakeholders making a model of their area and using it to help them determine priorities for the future.

Site-specific allocation – Where land is allocated for specific uses (including mixed uses), this should be made in one or more development plan documents. The identification of sites should be founded on a robust and credible assessment of the suitability, availability and accessibility of land for particular uses.

Statement of community involvement – Sets out the standards to be achieved by the local authority in involving the community in the preparation, alteration and continuing review of all development documents and planning applications.

Supplementary planning document – Document forming part of the LDF but which does not form part of the development plan due to lower requirements in community involvement and inspection, and as such carry less weight.

Unitary development plan – Old-style land use development plan drafted by single-tier authorities. In a two-tier arrangement would be structure plan and local plan.

Village design statement – An advisory document, usually produced by a village community, showing how development can be done in harmony with the village and its setting.

Source: *Councillors' guide to urban design*, CABE, 2003; Planning policy statement 12 (ODPM).