

Neighbourhood Planning

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Design in Neighbourhood Planning

A toolkit for neighbourhood
planners

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
What is good design?.....	3
Well-designed places should:.....	4
Be functional.....	4
Support a mix of uses and tenures	5
Be adaptable and resilient.....	5
Have a distinctive character.....	6
Be attractive.....	7
Encourage ease of movement	8
Design tools and activities.....	9
Placecheck	10
Building for life	11
Integrating into the neighbourhood	11
Creating a place	12
Street and home.....	12
Design workshops and talks.....	13
Embedding good design in your neighbourhood plan	14
Gathering baseline information	14
Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire: preparing your own character assessment	15
Tarset and Greystead, Northumberland: Assessing sensitive landscapes.....	15
Using design tools to engage the wider community.....	16
Skelton and Brotton, North Yorkshire: using the engagement process to address opposing views.....	16
Defining the vision for your neighbourhood.....	16
East Leake, Nottinghamshire: preparing your own vision statement	16
Defining design principles that can guide future development.....	17
Heathfield Park, Wolverhampton: using drawings to communicate design principles.....	17
Design codes	17
Bembridge, Isle of Wight	17

Introduction

A neighbourhood plan gives a community power to influence future changes to an area. Understanding how your place works will inform your vision within the plan, which will describe and illustrate the principles guiding future development. Design has an important part to play in helping to inform the vision statement and translating ideas about how your place works into visual proposals explaining where changes may happen, how places might function better and what they might look like.

This briefing note describes the role of good design within a neighbourhood plan, setting out some tools and activities for assessing the qualities and character of a place and guiding the development of design policies within the neighbourhood plan. A neighbourhood plan can provide clarity for developers on what is expected in an area. It is an opportunity to clearly articulate design principles that will ensure buildings and places reflect local identity, create a sense of pride and work well for people's needs now and into the future.

The tools and activities described in this paper can be used without the help of a design professional. However; commissioning an impartial expert such as an architect or urban designer, to help run a design workshop, or to prepare some diagrams or visualisations, for example, can be invaluable, not only to communicate ideas clearly but to help your community reach consensus on issues around design. This will help to ensure that the design principles and policies are appropriate for your area.

What is good design?

When we talk about good design in relation to buildings and spaces, we mean solutions that put people first by addressing the way the building or space functions – thinking about what it is used for and how it is used; ensuring it is designed to last and valued by those who use it.

In times where money is tight, it is easy to think that good design is an optional extra and that getting the job done on time and to budget is enough. However, it is precisely when working with limited resources that good design comes into its own by helping to add value, reducing long-term costs and improving quality of life.

Good design principles apply to places as well as buildings and spaces.

Well-designed places should:

Be functional

Gun Wharf, Plymouth: Functional attractive public space. An attractive public space that has been carefully designed to encourage a range of uses in the same space – for sitting, informal socialising, play and formal events without prescriptively designating areas for each. Also it is a clearly identifiable feature that aids wayfinding.



Photo Credit: Brian Quinn @ Design Council Cabe

Support a mix of uses and tenures

St Mary of Eton, Hackney Wick, London: A mixed use development incorporating housing around the existing St Mary of Eton Mission, a new community hall and the restoration of the main church.

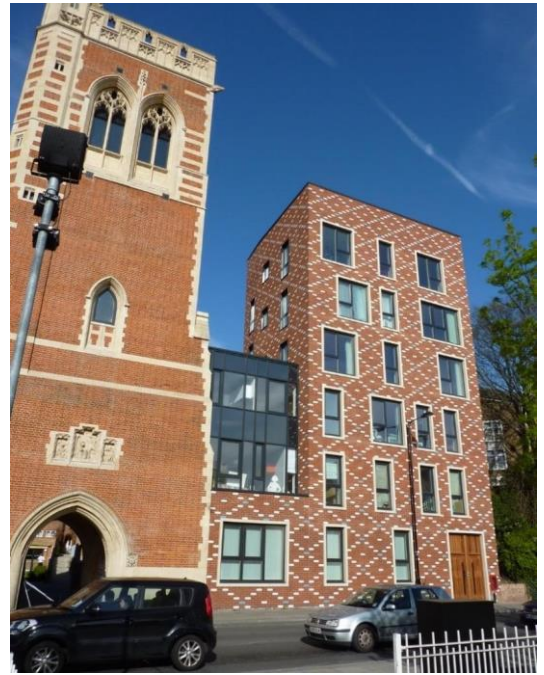


Photo Credit: Brian Quinn @ Design Council Cabe

Be adaptable and resilient

Incredible Edible Project, Todmorden: Community led town wide food growing and self-sufficiency project while creating attractive public realm improvements.



Photo Credit: Incredible Edible Todmorden

Have a distinctive character

Great Bow Yard, Langport: A small development of 12 homes on a brownfield site. The strong architecture and landscape design both provide an attractive place to live and provide functional environmental benefits for residents.



Photo credit: Richard Mullane

Be attractive

Parkside, Matlock: A carefully inserted block of new build apartments behind the high street in Matlock. It has responded to the existing unused hotel (which forms part of the development) while using contemporary architecture.



Photo Credit: Julia Wallace @ Design Council Cabe

Encourage ease of movement

Junction 3, Bristol: A new mixed used development of housing, library and small commercial premises. This has significantly enhanced the quality and feeling of safety throughout the day for an underpass route across the M32 between Easton and St Pauls. It is now very well used by local people and longer distance commuters.



Photo Credit: Brian Quinn @ Design Council Cabe

Design tools and activities

When trying to understand a building or a place, visual material is an essential means of communication that stays in our memories for longer and can elicit opinion and discussion more readily than text on its own. This is why design can be a very useful tool to engage your community in a discussion about your area, a building or space. Walking around your neighbourhood, looking at photographs and visiting other places are some activities that can help to prompt debate about what your area is like now and what it could be like in the future.

The following list gives some examples of freely available tools and low cost activities that you can use to assess the qualities and character of your area and to inform your vision statement, design principles and design policies that might form part of your neighbourhood plan.

Placecheck

Placecheck has been devised as a simple method for understanding an area that anyone can use without the need of a design professional. It involves walking around an area in a group, discussing what you like and don't like, and what is important and what isn't working, and taking the first steps to decide what can be improved.

Placecheck can be a useful method of gathering evidence about your area to form an evidence base of what it is like now. In combination with some desk-based research, it could form the basis of a simple character assessment. The following steps suggest how you could use this tool as part of your neighbourhood planning process:

- **Publicise the opportunity to take part**
Contact your Parish, Neighbourhood Forum or wider community – the walkabout could be an excellent opportunity to draw on people's local knowledge and to encourage early involvement in the neighbourhood planning process.
- **Plan ahead to make the most of the walkabout**
In advance, prepare questions to ask (are you going to use the three simple questions about likes, dislikes and what needs improvement, or do you need more detailed questions suggested on the Placecheck website?). Plan out your route – a street, a neighbourhood or just a particular site? Take cameras and maps.
- **Gather plenty of data on the walkabout**
Take photographs, annotate maps and take notes.
Record what you see
- Agree how you will present the material. Are there some common issues emerging that could form the basis of policies in your neighbourhood plan? What are your conclusions?

Building for life

This tool is very useful for a more in depth analysis of the design of neighbourhoods, streets and homes, particularly useful if there are problems with design that your group want to pin point and address. [Building for Life 12 \(BfL12\)](#) is a standard tool for assessing the quality of homes and neighbourhoods using principles of good urban design. There are 12 questions overall and a traffic light system is used to score each question. The questions are divided into three chapters with four questions under each chapter, starting with the wider neighbourhood then focusing on the street and homes:

Integrating into the neighbourhood

1. Connections

Does the scheme integrate into its surroundings by reinforcing existing connections and creating new ones, while also respecting existing buildings and land uses around the development site?

2. Facilities and services

Does the development provide (or is it close to) community facilities, such as shops, schools, workplaces, parks, play areas, pubs or cafes?

3. Public transport

Does the scheme have good access to public transport to help reduce car dependency?

4. Meeting local housing requirements

Does the development have a mix of housing types and tenures that suit local requirements?

Creating a place

- Character

Does the scheme create a place with a locally inspired or otherwise distinctive character?

- Working with the site and its context

Does the scheme take advantage of existing topography, landscape features (including water courses), wildlife habitats, existing buildings, site orientation and microclimates?

- Creating well designed streets and spaces

Are buildings designed and positioned with landscaping to define and enhance streets and spaces and are buildings designed to turn street corners well?

- Easy to find your way around

Is the scheme designed to make it easy to find your way around?

Street and home

1. Streets for all

Are streets designed in a way that encourage low vehicle speeds and allow them to function as social spaces?

2. Car parking

Is resident and visitor parking sufficient and well integrated so that it does not dominate the street?

3. Public and private spaces

Will public and private spaces be clearly defined and designed to be attractive, well managed and safe?

4. External storage and amenity space

Is there adequate external storage space for bins and recycling as well as vehicles and cycles?

The beauty of BfL12 is that whilst it is typically used to assess the quality of schemes that aren't yet built, it can be used to guide a discussion around the quality of an existing neighbourhood or recently completed housing developments, addressing urban design challenges that might otherwise be difficult to discuss without the help of a design professional.

Work with the Parish, Neighbourhood Forum or wider community to use BfL12 to assess existing residential schemes and understand what works and what doesn't in urban design terms. The outcome of the exercise could help identify key issues that might inform policies for your neighbourhood plan. The following steps outline how you could use BfL12 to assess existing neighbourhoods:

1. Do you understand the 12 BfL criteria?

Ensure the group has reviewed the criteria, discuss any areas that may be unclear before you visit the scheme. Clear guidance on each criterion can be found on the Design Council website at:

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources/guide/building-life-12-third-edition>

2. Evaluate the scheme

Walk around the area generally first and then in detail, noting comments against each of the 12 criteria.

3. Assessing the scheme

In groups, assess the scheme. Try to reach consensus discussing the criteria that are successful. Identify the areas that are scoring well and that you would like to see repeated in future developments. These could be referred to in your Neighbourhood Plan's design policies. Also discuss the 'reds' and 'ambers' and why these criteria are failing. These weaknesses can also inform future design policies in providing evidence for design failures you don't want to see repeated.

Design workshops and talks

The support of a design professional to run a design workshop looking at particular challenges in your area, or to give a presentation on creating design criteria, for example, can be an efficient way of bringing in design expertise to support your planning process if you have a tight budget.

- Approach your local architecture centre or local design practices
- Talk to your local authority – can they make any recommendations?
- Do you have an architecture school nearby that might be interested in involving students to support your work?

Learning from study tours and case studies

Visiting other places to see examples of what has worked well is invaluable. It can be an opportunity to meet those involved in a project and learn from their experiences. Study tours are an opportunity to talk to planning officers about the role that planning policies had on driving good design and to experience first-hand the impacts that good design can have on a place.

Case studies are another learning tool that can also be useful reference material in your neighbourhood plan – giving examples of good practice to support your vision statement or design principles.

CABE has over [400 case studies archived on their website](#).

Embedding good design in your neighbourhood plan

The following section draws on six case studies of neighbourhood plans to demonstrate how your plan can use different design-led approaches to preparing baseline information, engaging communities in assessing design, defining a vision and setting out design principles or design codes to influence the quality of developments proposed in your plan area.

Gathering baseline information

Having the right evidence to support the policies in your plan is important so that the plan is relevant, realistic and addresses local issues. Many communities deciding to prepare neighbourhood plans seek to protect historic buildings and landmarks from poor development. Landscape features – topography or historic woodland, for example, or even particular views, can be important to the identity of a place. However, it is important not to ignore developments that have been built in the last century but to record their character and relationship to the surrounding landscape too.

Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire: preparing your own character assessment

The steering group for Higham Ferrers neighbourhood plan worked with Planning Aid to undertake their own character assessment for the town. The townscape has a rich heritage dating back to the 11th century but also a number of housing developments built around the edge of the town over the last 70 years. Residents were concerned about recent developments damaging the town's historic identity. The character assessment was the first step to ensuring the neighbourhood plan could direct future development proposals to enhance, rather than detract from the town's historic character. Planning Aid ran a workshop with the neighbourhood plan steering group and reviewed the completed character assessment. The steering group carried out all the fieldwork themselves: defining character areas, (ensure they were broad and not specific); then, using photographs, Google street view and local knowledge, described individual building features. The success of the character assessment is that it looks at the layout and impacts of new developments as well as historic buildings, summarising what works and doesn't work to inform the design policy in the neighbourhood plan. The neighbourhood plan design policy requires development to have regard to the character assessment in relation to "height, scale, spacing, layout, orientation, design and materials of buildings" in order to achieve high quality design.

<http://www.highamferrersneighbourhoodplan.org.uk/Character-Assessment.aspx>

Tarset and Greystead, Northumberland: Assessing sensitive landscapes

The dramatic skies, tranquillity and surrounding rural landscape of the Northumberland National Park were unique natural characteristics of the area. The local community was concerned these qualities were being detrimentally affected by inappropriate new development. They wanted baseline information to support policies that prioritised good design so that better development could be secured in the parish.

The group recognised the need for specialist expertise to carry out a landscape assessment, and commissioned a firm of local architects to prepare a landscape and design assessment. The significant feature of this document is the analysis of existing development character types with the landscape – looking at the relationship of scale and height of clusters of buildings in relation to the surrounding topography. This provides the basis for the study to conclude where new development could be located and how it could shape and enhance the existing sensitive balance of buildings and landscape.

<http://www.tarset.co.uk/community/submission-draft.cfm>

Using design tools to engage the wider community

Neighbourhood plans are community-led, so engaging a cross-section of your community in your proposals early on will ensure your plan meets the needs of the community and gains their support. Methods of engagement are as important as the issues you want to discuss – engagement should be open and flexible to encourage participation and feedback. Tools such as Building for Life or Placecheck are simple to use and offer an opportunity to build consensus and for people to engage in the neighbourhood planning process early on. For further ideas on different methods to engage communities, read *The Community Planning Handbook* by Nick Wates, an excellent practical ‘how-to’ guide. Locality have also produced a [Community consultation toolkit](#), providing helpful tips on how to deliver effective engagement and how to get people involved in the neighbourhood plan making process.

Skelton and Brotton, North Yorkshire: using the engagement process to address opposing views

These two seemingly different areas in the same Parish (one a cluster of four villages wanting to strengthen its town centre, the other a small village concerned about the future of its village centre from development in neighbouring settlements) wanted to prepare a single neighbourhood plan; however, they had opposing views on priorities, opportunities and threats from future development. Working with Design Council Cobe early on in the neighbourhood planning process, the communities from the different settlements were able to reach consensus about issues of threat and opportunity across the Parish. The group organised walkabouts in the two settlements and used Placecheck as a tool to discuss what they liked and didn’t like about their places and what they wanted to see improved. This broad engagement process involved children, for example, in Brotton, the Brownies carried out their own photographic version of Placecheck, photographing what they liked and didn’t like in the village. This information helped shape the policy themes and guidance for future development in the final neighbourhood plan.

Defining the vision for your neighbourhood

A vision is an expression of what a place will be like in the future. The vision focuses on what everyone wants to see happen. It describes in words, images and diagrams:

- the kind of place people want
- physical, economic and social aspirations for the area
- how much change may be needed, of what type and over what time
- realistic outcomes for development
- The vision can use examples of good practice from other places to illustrate your aspirations but should always be specific to the place rather than making general statements that could apply to anywhere.

East Leake, Nottinghamshire: preparing your own vision statement

The village published a draft vision before preparing their neighbourhood plan policies, to summarise their aspirations and solicit the views of a wide number of stakeholders, not just residents but local businesses, schools and churches. The document succinctly describes six themes, (with accompanying photographs), that have shaped the village and their role in continuing to influence future changes. The themes focus on creating a place that functions well.

Defining design principles that can guide future development

Design principles are statements that are intended to guide the design of future development. They are specific criteria that sit beneath the vision, defining what success looks like and helping everyone to understand expectations for what needs to be delivered. Whilst design principles might be prepared as a standalone document, to have any weight, they should be referred to in the design policies in the neighbourhood plan.

Some examples of broad design principles are:

- proximity to affordable, good quality shops
- access to safe streets, parks and public spaces
- sharing the benefits of the natural environment – rivers, woods, open sky and views
- building on history and identity, through linking with the past and seeking common threads between peoples as well as cultural distinctiveness.

Heathfield Park, Wolverhampton: using drawings to communicate design principles

This area suffers from the impacts of post-industrial decline with low employment and high incidences of crime and anti-social behaviour. The community wanted to use design policies in the neighbourhood plan to change perceptions of the town and ensure future developments created safer public spaces and reduced the likelihood of crime. The neighbourhood forum worked with the Prince's Foundation who helped them to identify areas in the town that needed improvement and visualise how design principles could lead to future changes such as improving pedestrian connections and creating public spaces that are overlooked by new development.

Design codes

A design code is a type of design guidance but detailed and written as a set of instructions or rules. A design code can be useful where there are a number of stakeholders involved in long-term development or to prescribe very detailed requirements particularly when dealing with historic buildings.

Design codes are technical documents and require the expertise of an experienced design professional if you choose to adopt this route. A code secures design quality early on in a development but decisions about what rules are fixed and what is flexible needs to be made early on. Preparing a good design code is about finding a balance between technical specificity and a succinct description of what is required. Some of the best, most effective codes are very short.

Bembridge, Isle of Wight

Bembridge is a small coastal village with many protected landscape features and listed buildings. The community wanted to ensure the Neighbourhood Plan policies protected the village and surrounding countryside from large-scale development and supported small scale sustainable growth that did not restrict innovative design. Besides requiring new development to reflect existing character, policies in the plan are specific about acceptable scale of development and plot size, for example, new residential developments should not exceed 12 dwellings and sites should be no more than 0.5 hectares.

<https://www.iwight.com/azservices/documents/2777-Proposed-Bembridge-Neighbourhood-Plan-Document.pdf>

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