

Design South East

Fixing our broken housing market

Our response to the
Government's white paper

May 2017

d:se



Fixing our broken housing market

Design South East supports the Government's objective to boost the supply of new, high-quality homes across the country. However, although we welcome the attention on design management tools like design coding and the acknowledgment of the role of communities, we think the White Paper should be give more attention to the need for design management and particularly the use of design workshops and charrettes to help balance the needs of local communities, local authorities and housebuilders, and the use of design review to help to deliver the quality of place that communities need if they are to thrive.

The NPPF recognises that good design is indivisible from good planning, and every effort should be made to ensure that design quality is at the heart of how we bring new development forward. We strongly urge that the role of design is strengthened as a reason for objecting to poor quality new housing, and that where statutory plans are weak in this regard, then the national standards set out in the NPPF and the accompanying guidance on design are referenced. We should not encourage a situation where Local Planning Authorities are restricted in resisting poor quality design solely because they have weaknesses within their planning frameworks, and should instead support them in assessing design and in engaging with developers to avoid this kind of issue.

The need for design standards

We support the use of widely accepted design standards, such as Building for Life, in shaping and assessing basic design principles and suggest incentivising the development industry to use these kinds of approaches. Building for Life in particular is useful to ensure the basic aspects of design are given due consideration and are being taken up by industry leaders by using BfL as a marketing tool for their developments. Government should find ways to ensure that all stakeholders adopt Building for Life in some way or other, and use it to encourage competition and innovation across the delivery sector. Design Review also has a role to play here, and we recommend that advice is given to Local Planning Authorities on how and when to use Design Review to speed up delivery and solve design problems.

Properly planned and integrated new housing areas, with high quality design and sustainable layouts allow people to live better. Well-designed places help to deliver the other strategic aims of the planning system and as such any Development Plan should evidence the role of design in implementing the wider policies it contains. Sustainable communities thrive when different people mix, meet and support each other. Supporting this within the various policies produced by Local Planning Authorities will maximise the benefits of generating communities, and this needs to include design quality as a key component.

Sustainability through making great places

Presumption in favour of sustainable development is supported, but only so long as design and layout are recognised as key components of sustainability. Segregated and separate housing estates often deliver the worst of all worlds; insular places that lack the scale and population to support good on-site facilities and services and that also have low levels of integration with existing communities. This can create a sense of 'us and them'. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without an understanding of the key spatial qualities required to make places perform well, both socially and economically.

A proactive approach to the allocation and disposal of land by Local Planning Authorities is welcomed, as this would enable LPA's to become leading exponents of best practice in their area, demonstrating the level of quality and sustainability that is expected across all sites. To make this work, the process should be transparent and should include scrutiny from external design and sustainability experts. A potential approach could be to require a Design Review to be part of the planning process, where any application granted on LPA land has to be subject to external appraisal. This kind of safeguard would give confidence to the public and other parties that quality was not being sacrificed in order to meet delivery targets.

There is considerable scope within this proposal to inject architectural quality and to open up sites for smaller builders. This is encouraged, as a diverse delivery model is more robust and less constrained by the kinds of issues that larger developers sometimes face, especially relating to larger sites. A consideration to forward-funding LPA sites might speed up delivery, so that sites could be parcelled off as 'oven-ready' for smaller developers that otherwise cannot afford to put in the infrastructure needed early in the delivery of a site.

Regeneration and improving quality of life

Regeneration of poor quality areas is critical for improving lives. Many estates suffer from poor quality design, especially in terms of their layout and spatial configuration. Regenerating these would be beneficial both to residents and to the wider settlement they are part of. Often poorly designed estates are car dependant, hot spots for crime and have other social issues. A series of case studies or longitudinal studies would be useful to demonstrate the more successful examples of good quality estate regeneration, and these should be made available to Local Planning Authorities so that they can embed best practice into their projects. Robust consultation with residents is critical, and they should have a meaningful say in how their place changes in the future.

Limited levels of development in the countryside is welcomed, and we feel such developments should be exemplary, offsetting the loss of the rural environment by delivering places that are of wider benefits to the whole area. Sites considered for designation as exception sites should only be promoted if they can demonstrate high standards of design quality and spatial configuration, and this should be tested through external scrutiny by a Design Review Panel. Innovative and sustainable rural development could be a useful addition to the housing stock in the UK, and could help to inject more choice into the housing market.

Garden towns and villages

The new garden town and village proposals are an opportunity to create innovative, high quality sustainable settlements that act as quality demonstrators for all development across the UK. To achieve this, Local Planning Authorities need to be supported through the sharing of best practice and through having access to a pool of national experts who can assist in planning and promoting this kind of place. A network for Local Planning Authorities to come together to share their experience and methods would be beneficial in speeding up the delivery of these new settlements. Also valuable would be the input of a Design Review panel, which would help to give designers and developers a better understanding of the design quality expected of their proposals. This would front-load the design quality discussions, speeding up delivery and helping to assure residents and LPAs of what to expect.

Will the levels of demand for new housing, green belt land is coming under ever-increasing pressure. Generally, we feel that Greenbelt development should be resisted until supplies of previously developed land have been exhausted. Should Greenbelt land be required, then each site needs to be carefully examined with regard to its specific character and quality. Some Greenbelt land may well be less valuable in its contribution to the quality of the environment than other areas and any development should consider the impact on the neighbouring green and built context. Any change to Greenbelt status needs to happen in a positive way that offsets the loss of valuable countryside. This requires a thorough understanding of the site characteristics and a skilful contextual design approach, and here the input of a Design Review Panel would be beneficial in ensuring that the best design approach is being adopted.

More homes in the right location

Densifying existing places, if done well, could help to relieve the pressure on undeveloped land. We feel that there is considerable scope to densify existing settlements, and doing so would yield social and economic benefits, allowing people to better support existing shops, facilities and services. Before expanding into Greenbelt areas, every effort should be made to accommodate development where new residents can bolster the local community. Reducing garden standards for inner urban schemes may help to support higher densities, and an integrated policy approach to reducing car dependency might also help to free up space for more homes.

Density is not a measure of quality, and setting arbitrary density measures can often lead to inefficiencies in the use of land. In order to deliver more efficient layouts, developers should be encouraged to use simple measures such as an interconnected grid of streets with parking close to the fronts of people's homes. Green buffers and wedges should be resisted as often these serve only to isolate communities and hide poor quality development. Placing multiple functions into any green space proposed helps to increase site capacity, so design teams and Local Planning Authorities should be encouraged to explore multifunctional design solutions that help increase the efficiency of a site.

Densification around key centres is to be encouraged as it is a highly sustainable model of development that maximises the use of land without overly burdening the wider transport network and land supply. We encourage the use of models of housing that take advantage of key locations, but in doing so we urge that the high-rise mistakes of the past are avoided and that the quality of this kind of development is a core consideration.

Good design is always sensitive to the specifics of the location, and high density development is no exception to this. Establishing case studies and best practice guides, arranging study tours and ensuring that good models of development are disseminated is critical in making this a success. The Design Network is a perfect vehicle for this kind of work, so we encourage Government to explore opportunities for supporting the delivery of higher density development going forward.



Tools to fix quality from the outset

We especially welcome the use of design tools to help boost both quality and delivery. Design coding and masterplanning, whilst often the best tools we have for setting out design visions and expectations, are also often poorly devised and deliver places that fail to meet best practice. We suggest making masterplanning an integral part of the site allocation and wider spatial planning process, so that spatial expectations are clearly communicated. Design coding, where appropriate, enables design quality to be explicitly stated, but their use requires that Local Planning Authorities are given the resources necessary to manage them. A 'design champion' within the Local Planning Authority or community is a good way of embedding custodianship into the place that development is happening, and having someone dedicated to maintaining quality throughout the life of a project has been shown to be beneficial in terms of outcomes.

If you want good quality design outcomes, then early engagement in the design and development process is critical for achieving good outcomes. Engagement at this early stage between Local Planning Authorities and designers and developers is critical. Local Planning Authorities need to be given the tools and resources to carry out constructive pre-application engagement with developers so that they can speed up the planning application process. Front-loading design and other planning discussions helps all stakeholders understand what is expected of them, but to be effective LPAs need to be fully supported in this activity. External support may frequently be necessary to bolster the ability of LPAs to give constructive and timely advice to applicants. We suggest that the local Design Network centre be used to support LPAs in giving design advice, so that an impartial service provider is able to act in line with agreed best practice but without being seen as solely acting in favour of one party. Design Review can be used as part of any pre-application discussion to set design parameters and to begin a dialogue between stakeholders in bringing sites forward for development.

The need for support

Finally, we stress to Government the importance of providing the right support to all stakeholders for delivering new development. In our experience, external support networks that are impartial and objective help to bring all stakeholders together. Design Review Panels that draw from local expertise are especially valuable, as they avoid accusations of political bias. In addition, direct support through training, skills and conference events, networking and opportunities to share best practice and help to add skills and capacity to Local Planning Authorities, which in turn helps them to deliver more housing and to a higher quality.

About us

Design South East is the region's leading source of built environment design support. Local authorities, developers and communities throughout the greater south east region trust us to provide outstanding and impartial design advice and assistance.

The south east plays a huge role in the UK economy and is the gateway to mainland Europe. The region is facing the enormous challenge of accommodating new homes and infrastructure while maintaining its status as one of the most beautiful parts of the country. Good design is at the heart of that conundrum, and the key to ensuring that the south east remains an exceptional place to live, work and visit.

Design South East is a not-for-profit organisation and 100% independent. We facilitate understanding between local authorities, developers and local communities. We combine local knowledge with world-class expertise, providing clear, constructive and consistent advice on design issues. We provide great value for money, working alongside local authorities and developers to harness or complement their existing skills to create great buildings and spaces.

Get in touch to find out how we can help you deliver better places:

Design South East
Admiral's Offices
Historical Dockyard
Chatham
Kent
ME4 4TZ

t: +44 (0)1634 401166
f: +44 (0)1634 403302
e: info@designsoutheast.org

T: +44 (0)1634 401166
E: info@designsoutheast.org
www.designsoutheast.org

