

How does design fit within planning?

CABE's *Making Design Policy Work* does not spell out the all important link between policy objectives and the setting and assessment of the physical form or any place or development. We are still to see a great example of how to do this, says Esther Kurland.



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Asking how urban design fits into the planning system is a bit like asking how the nervous system fits into the body – Things might carry on without it, but not at their full potential. Urban design enthusiasts might go as far as to say we can't have planning without good urban design, in fact PPS1 says this. But practising planners might scratch their heads and think that the planning processes they deal with every day will carry on just fine without the need to consider design.

But when you look you find that design straddles many of the objectives, processes and policies that make up our current planning system. This article will look briefly at how, maybe, design should be considered within both the application process and policy formulation.

Design and planning applications Statements

The most obvious link between design and planning is the use of design and access statements. These are nothing new, although their formal requirement has been in place only a year. They are a communication tool, nothing more, and should be used as such by both those writing and reading them.

Statements are not normally part of the application, so they can not be

enforced unless conditions are used requiring that the principles or details they contain are adhered with. For example, instead of a condition saying details of landscaping should be submitted and approved, the condition might say that landscaping details should be submitted and will only be approved if they accord with the principles set down in paragraph xxx of statement dated xxx. Paragraph xxx might have said that landscaping on a certain part of the site would create a sensory garden or shelter belt. Or it might have explained how absorbent surface materials would be used to reduce surface runoff. The use of conditions to fix information in the statements is particularly relevant for outline applications, where recent case law has shown that statements need to contain very significant amounts of information. Whether dealing with outline or detailed applications, some applicants even like to include a list of suggested conditions in their statement. That would save time later!

There is increasing interest in using statements within the pre-application process. Some authorities require draft statements before they will enter into pre app discussions or offer advice. They might circulate the

draft statements around internally to decide which issues should be discussed and who should attend pre app meetings. They feel that if the applicant has considered the issues to be covered in the statement they will have gone some way to think about what is feasible or practical on the site. So maybe using draft statements in this way helps to focus the discussions and circumnavigate totally unrealistic proposals or unfocused pre app meetings based just on an OS plan with a red line around the site.

But statements are only of use if they are well written to start with. Far too many are useless bits of waffle without proper site analysis. Sometimes they just regurgitate national or local policy without considering how they relate to the scheme. Then they need to be properly used inform the proposal. It is amazing to see statements written by one consultant that have obviously never been seen by the people drawing up the plans. For example how useful is a statement where it shows how buildings will step down a hill but the application plans are for a monolithic block with no break in roof line? If, as an applicant, you want to use the statement to show that you know what you are

LEFT: Design and Access Statements are meant to help applicants think about what they are doing. Not like this example of following design rules without thinking. One foot sections of barrier have been used to make cyclists stop and get off their bikes before they get to the road – but wouldn't they just go around them?

RIGHT: Abbots Ward, Tower Hamlets, London, Building for Life silver award winner 2006

Underground bin storage with above ground shoots are a practical way of dealing with rubbish. Assessing design quality at the application stage can check if this amount of thought is being given to other schemes.



This article is based on a talk given to an RTPI conference in June

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