

11 April 2016 Place Alliance Press Release

Safeguarding quality via PiP

The Housing and Planning Bill suggests a radical departure for British planning through the move to permitting development via a 'Permission in Principle' (PiP) relating to sites on a register of brownfield land or otherwise identified in the development plan. It raises the big question, how will design and place quality be guaranteed through this new system? It is only by delivering high quality new homes and places that the vital support of communities will be guaranteed for the new housing the nation clearly needs.

The Minister of State for Housing and Planning, agreed with this when he argued last October at the Place Alliance BIG MEET 4 that "an increased focus on good quality design could help us to deliver more homes, at a quicker pace, which communities can feel proud of".

The Bill itself in Clause 136 makes provision for a new process of 'Technical details consent' to be determined in accordance with PiP. It means that PiP plus the technical details consent will represent the planning permission. A Technical Consultation on implementation of the changes proposes that design would be one of the matters for consideration at the technical details stage. However, this raises a number of concerns:

- Design is not a detail, but is a fundamental part of the process of assessing a planning application. Without proper consideration of the fundamental design considerations that relate to matters such as height, density, landscape, layout, connectivity and so forth, and what this means for how uses and spaces are distributed on a site, it is impossible to properly determine whether a proposal for development is or is not suitable for a site.
- In particular it is very difficult to assess the quantum of development appropriate for a site and the right mix of uses (both issues that the legislation proposes should be decided at PiP stage), without having due regard to how this will actually be delivered. Will it, for example, be stacked up high in a single tower, laid out in streets, or perhaps distributed in a series of detached units?
- Communities will quite rightly be resistant to the giving of Permission in Principle to new development without having any sense of what that would mean on the ground and how, therefore, it might affect the surrounding context and properties. What is currently proposed may actually increase rather than decrease local resistance to development.

The coordinating code, a possible solution

Taking as a starting point three aims of i) streamlining the process of securing consent to develop, ii) increasing certainty for developers and investors, and iii) maintaining a focus on quality outcomes; it is suggested to combine the designation of PiP with the production of a simple 'Coordinating code' for each allocated site. Design codes are tools that establish the key urban design parameters for a site with a particular focus on making the place, but without the requirement for a detailed masterplan. Their use is encouraged in para. 59 of the NPPF. Coordinating codes would be slimmed down simple codes that, on a single sheet, establish the critical principles for making the place.

As shown in the indicative example, they would:

1. Focus on the four 'place' issues that are common to almost all sites:
 - Community and land Use
 - Landscape setting
 - Movement
 - Built form / massing issues
2. Contain minimal text that describes only these fundamental design parameters and fixes the expected design response
3. Illustrate, through a simple plan graphic, the design concept in two dimensional terms in order that the essential parameters of place are fully understood.

In effect this would bring a proper consideration of fundamental (not detailed) design and place quality concerns forward in order to streamline the technical consents process later on. It would guarantee a level of quality to give certainty to both developers and local communities about what the development would entail, and would provide a basis against which to make “an estimate of the number of dwellings that the site would be likely to support” which the Explanatory notes to the Bill (para 420) suggests would be required information in the register of brownfield land. Finally it would help to avoid increased community opposition to proposals as they would have a much better idea of what they are being asked to approve.

Coordinating codes would be simple, quick and easy to prepare (the example took two days) either by local authorities in-house, by consultants, or developers promoting a particular site. Because they would be site specific (not generic), the qualities they espouse could be subject to public engagement early in the development process (as proposed in the Technical Consultation) and would help to ensure a greater focus on securing early agreement about the need for high quality new development. Finally they would help to make planning propositional once again, reviving the role of planning as a positive, confident and proactive force for change.

The next page shows an example of an indicative coordinating code.

BROWNFIELD SITE CO-ORDINATING CODE

Studio Real 2016

SITE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

Community and land

Centrally located site with allocation H15 in Local Plan (1)
 With 5-10 minutes walk of shops, services, employment and parks (2)
 Located on strategic road network and within walking distance of railway station (3)
 Surrounded by residential development of varied quality and character (4)
 >> Central and accessible location suitable for live-work units
 >> Surrounding area is fragmented and has no uniform character. The development needs to establish its own identity

Landscape

Sloping site falling towards the north east with views towards the town centre (1)
 Established woodland along southwest boundary. This forms a buffer and barrier between southwesterly neighbourhoods and the site / town centre (2)
 Several mature trees within site boundaries (3)
 >> Street pattern to follow topography
 >> Retain views towards the town centre
 >> Integrate woodland in development to enhance character and connect with surrounding neighbourhoods
 >> Retain existing trees as indicated

Movement

No direct street frontage, access through "gaps" in building line to north (1)
 A network of footpaths runs along the site boundary, but do not connect through the site; site forms a barrier between town centre and neighbourhoods to the southwest (2)
 >> Vehicular access from residential street to north
 >> Connect internal streets and paths to surrounding footpaths to facilitate through movement and improve connectivity of surrounding neighbourhoods

Built form

Housing type and orientation of surrounding development varies and needs appropriate response:
 >> Back gardens with minimum 10m depth to respect privacy of existing family dwellings (1)
 >> Pull back from boundary to avoid overlooking and overshadowing from 4-5 storey apartment blocks (2)
 >> Position homes to overlook woods (3)
 >> Position buildings to allow views through to town centre (4)
 >> Opportunity for triangular green at the centre of the site to address shift in alignment (5)

CO-ORDINATING CODE



- New streets and footpaths aligned to follow contours, and create convenient and legible routes linking the site with the surrounding development thus improving access to the town centre for residents in existing neighbourhoods to southwest (1)
- Position homes to overlook routes and appropriate in scale and character to development along the site edges:
- Area for 2-3 storey family housing (2) including:
 - Terraced housing backing onto existing family housing; back gardens with minimum depth of 10m (2a)
 - Homes orientated towards the woodlands to benefit from setting and improve security of woodland paths (2b)
 - Area for higher density development up to 6 storeys (3) with:
 - Set back and buffer with apartment blocks to south (3a)
 - Triangular green space in centre of the site to accommodate shift in grid alignment and create focal point for community (4)
 - Retain long views (5)
 - Retain key mature trees in high quality setting (woodland extension and central green) (6)
 - Opportunity for landmark building up to 8 storeys to further strengthen identity of the development (7)

Notes for editors

The Place Alliance is a new movement which emerged following the Farrell Review of architecture and the built environment (2014). It brings together organisations and individuals who share a belief that the quality of our built environment has a profound influence on people's lives.

For further information please contact placealliance@ucl.ac.uk