

13 October 2017 by Michael Donnelly

The urban design skills and capacity within local planning authorities are 'woefully low and declining' and the gap is not being filled by local design review panels, a report based on a survey of English councils has revealed.



Design: report warns over declining skills in local authorities

The report, *Urban Design Skills in English Local Authorities*, was published yesterday by a team at University College London's Bartlett School of Planning with support from membership organisation the Urban Design Group and the Place Alliance.

It is based on the responses to freedom of information requests from 204 local authorities across England which asked for details of urban design skills/resources within local planning authorities, and how they have changed over the last five years.

The report said that the responses included "numerous comments" that "capacity lost in the years prior to the last five years had never been replaced, or alternatively posts had been merged so that roles remained on paper, but at a much reduced level in reality".

Increasingly, the report said, "specialist' design skills (as they are seen) such as urban design or landscape, are either being shared across local authority departments, across local authorities, or

are being incorporated into 'mainstream' planning or conservation roles, perhaps with some retraining when required".

The report says that the research demonstrates that urban design skills and capacity within local planning authorities are "woefully low and declining and that these gaps are not being filled by the patchy, albeit increasing, use of design review".

It says that "critical gaps exist within local planning authorities, including the ability to produce proactive design guidance in-house in order to positively shape the future of new housing development".

A "very real danger now exists", the report adds, that "as we gear up to deliver a greater number of homes nationally, the absence of design expertise locally will result in a new generation of substandard developments".

The report calls for all councils have access to "dedicated design capacity within their planning departments delivered by specialist urban design staff trained to degree level".

It says that, ideally this "should be available in-house and should be sufficient to offer informed and timely advice on all major development projects, as well as to prepare proactive design guidance for key sites and development areas".

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