



10 August 2018 by John Geoghegan

Now updated and expanded, this section in our series of briefings on the final revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) looks at its policies for improving design quality and examines responses to their introduction from key sector organisations. [Updated 13/9/18]



Design quality: the Spiral Eco House in Membury, Devon, which was permitted under the 2012 NPPF's paragraph 55 clause requiring "exceptional quality"

Key changes introduced

The new framework's paragraph 124, added since the draft version published in March, describes the creation of high-quality buildings and places as "fundamental" to what the planning and development process should achieve. The same paragraph goes on to say: "Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be tested, is essential for achieving this. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process."

Another addition is in paragraph 130, which says councils should try to ensure that the quality of approved development "is not materially diminished between permission and completion" as a result

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of changes being made to the permitted scheme - "for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used". Paragraph 129 says tools for assessing and improving the design of development, such as design workshops, design advice and review arrangements and assessment frameworks such as Building for Life, are of most benefit if used "as early as possible" during the evolution of proposals. and are "particularly important" for significant projects such as large-scale housing and mixed schemes.

The chapter on design otherwise sticks closely to that in the March draft. This includes a requirement in paragraph 127 for planning policies and decisions to ensure that developments "are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping". They should also be "sympathetic to local character and history", it states.

Forthcoming guidance

The government response to the consultation said ministers "will reflect on the broad range of consultation responses and publish updated national planning guidance to support local authorities in delivering high quality places". The government's social housing green paper, published on 14 August, elaborates on this, promising strengthened planning to take into account Secured by Design principles to ensure that external spaces, parks, streets and courts are well lit and maintained. It also says that guidance will be strengthened to encourage healthy and active communities, new affordable homes to be designed to the same high quality as other tenures and well integrated within developments and encouraging design that reflects changing needs - for example, inclusive design for an ageing population and family housing at higher densities to ensure effective use of land.

Implications for the sector

The Royal Town Planning Institute's briefing on the revised framework notes: "One important addition is the requirement for local planning authorities to ensure that design quality is not lost between permission being granted and completion, indicating a stronger monitoring role for enforcement teams. It is, however, worth noting that the 2012 framework already gave considerable scope for good design to be achieved, so the impact the additional wording in the revised NPPF remains to be seen.

Matthew Carmona, professor of planning and urban design at University College London and chairman of campaign group Place Alliance, said: "Paragraph 124 sends a very clear message that it is the government's expectation that design should be taken very seriously during the planning process. Ultimately, it is now up to local planning authorities to see that this is delivered, and this gives them the teeth they need. The key challenge they now face is to properly resource the design function of their planning teams. As we have consistently seen over many years, where local authorities prioritise design quality, they reliably achieve better results from developers. Many developers will use a high-quality design team to get planning permission and then abandon the team and engage in a round of value engineering to reduce costs, including using in-house teams for detailed design and delivery. So this warning in the NPPF is helpful, although it will be up to local authorities to take such matters seriously by following up permissions to ensure they are delivered as consented. In these days of austerity, that rarely happens."

Philip Waddy, a partner at architects and planning consultancy West Waddy ADP and chair of the Royal Institute of British Architects' national planning group, said: "These are good intentions but the key issue is a lack of resources within planning authorities to evaluate design. They must either employ designers in-house or else make better use of design review at all levels, not just for major schemes, if there is to be a commitment to creating a high-quality built environment. There's no shortage of talent - only a shortage of desire."

Royal Institute of British Architects past president Ruth Reed, a director at planning and design firm Green Planning Studio, said effective pre-application consultation is the "key requirement" in improving scheme design. "A lot of developers make a very good viability case to reduce standards,

but paragraph 130 will help councils stick to the quality of development that they want to achieve. It's telling developers that they need to get their sums right at the initial application stage. You find that what's promised at application stage gets watered down. Often it's just holding local authorities to ransom."

Neil Cameron QC of Landmark Chambers raised concerns that the new policies may be too subjective and are likely to result in prolonged arguments at committee meetings. He highlighted paragraph 127's call for developments that "are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping". Cameron asked: "How many arguments are we going to have about that at planning committee? This will depend on the views of committee members."

Professor Stephen Gleave, an independent consultant and senior director at consultancy Turley, pointed out that fundamental changes to design and layout need to be resubmitted for planning approval. "At this point, any diminishing of the original design objectives and commitments must be justified," he said. "One issue is that implementation of significant schemes occurs across the development cycle, with its highs and lows. Also, when materials are specified and approved, builders will always be chasing the market for the best price. The planning system must hold its ground in maintaining the standards set in the original approval. However, the test of what constitutes a materially diminished scheme may be subject to challenge. Setting standards for the very highest outcomes may see some compromise according to economic and social circumstances," he acknowledged.

RPS director Mike Straw, voicing a personal view, warned that viability challenges and first-time buyers' inability to afford higher-quality products mean developers "don't have much wriggle room" to raise quality. "Few can indulge in high-quality design unless they are landmark developments aimed at high-end occupiers or investors," said Straw. "Many authorities have no or few planners with urban design skills and defer to design review panels who often cannot agree amongst themselves what is a good design. Despite the government's good intentions, design will tend to be standardised." Straw pointed to a shortage of enforcement resources as another factor in councils' inability to ensure that schemes are implemented in line with consents.

Matt Shillito, a director at Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design, said the main issue will be to find the will and mechanisms to achieve quality on the ground. "Clear and robust local design guidance and encouraging the use of design codes is going to be more important than ever. Planning officers will need the capacity and skills to engage meaningfully in the design process," said Shillito. Getting the timing of design advice is essential, he added: "We regularly find that these tools are deployed or received when positions have crystallised, and are therefore perceived as obstacles to be grudgingly overcome." Tackling erosion of design quality between permission and completion will need much greater design officer capacity and expertise "to make the detailed, nuanced, case-by-case judgements needed for this to work as it should", he suggested.

CONFERENCE

Meeting housing design quality requirements will be discussed at the Planning for Housing summit, which takes place on 9-10 October in central London. Speakers include Essex County Council design champion Peter Dawson, Design Council head of cities Tom Perry and Pocket Living land director Nick Cuff. Visit www.planningforhousing2018.com for details.

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