

DESIGN IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

This is a slightly edited version of the script used by Jeff Bishop and Georgina Perry of Place Studio for their opening presentation at the Historic Towns and Villages Forum event on 27th February 2020. It should be read with the powerpoint presentation used. The bullet point format of the script is retained and some links have been added to the relevant slides.

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- Good morning. My name's Jeff Bishop and my colleague here is Georgina Perry.
- We are both with Place Studio, a small practice based in Bristol with considerable experience of all aspects of Neighbourhood Plans and, for me in particular and over many years, advancing locally distinctive design.
- Our brief from Louise was to provide some background and context – an overview to help to shape the day as a whole.
- That means there's a lot to cover, so we'll stick to our script or you'll be listening to us all day!
- We'll be sharing the presentation; I will be making the overall, key points and Georgina will illustrate some of those with examples from our own neighbourhood planning work.
- Much of what we will cover will be picked up later by the other speakers – perhaps even with different views – so I will aim to highlight that as I talk in order to help you see how everything today fits together.
- And finally, before we start, much of what we'll say, and probably what the other speakers will deal with, is design and Neighbourhood Plans generally, not just in historic contexts.
- Our presentation is in five parts as here: **(slide 2)**

A BRIEF BUT IMPORTANT BIT OF HISTORY (slides 3 to 6)

- I'm now going to give away my age - I qualified as an architect 50 years ago.
- In the general professional culture up to that time, architects really only considered buildings, very much in isolation and mainly about special buildings, not everyday housing for example.
- The profession did not really think about places as a whole and considered that we architects were clearly superior to planners and landscape architects and certainly superior to all those mundane road engineers.
- As for ordinary people - users, consumers, what you will – what have they got to do with it absolutely no reason to talk to them.
- As a result, there were two inevitable common responses when you asked ordinary people about design and architecture. It was either ...
- "I'm not trained so I couldn't possible comment" or
- "I know what I like and that's the end of it".

- And that got us nowhere.
- Then, from the end of the 1960s on things started to change in a number of ways.
- Urban design (roughly what we now call place-making) got properly started, landscape work became for more rigorous and professional and heritage issues started to come to the front.
- There was also a huge amount of mainly academic work often called environmental psychology – about how people perceive, understand, navigate and use spaces, places and buildings.
- Recently, a strand of this has focused on what is termed 'place attachment' – why we feel (or don't feel) connected to and value certain places and designs.
- And, building on that, two key themes emerged that are central to design thinking today.
- One theme was local distinctiveness, especially but not solely in terms of design.
- So in today's context that means how one village, town or neighbourhood is different to any of its neighbours in terms of topography, layout, building styles and so forth.
- The other theme was community involvement in all possible senses and certainly in design.
- And that meant moving from gratuitous consultation on almost final, unchangeable designs into genuine involvement in the early, formative stages of designs.
- To cut a long story short, all sorts of things developed from this.
- Conservation Areas and their Assessments, community-evidenced local heritage assets and urban design masterplans but, most importantly, two national initiatives.
- One was community-led Village, Town or Neighbourhood Design Statements that a colleague and I invented.
- These were the first time in the world that local people could produce –and show they could produce - statutory planning documents.
- The other, that I was also centrally involved with, was wide-ranging Parish and Town Plans, i.e. covering all sorts of things, not just land use and design.
- And then, if you put those two initiatives and all the others together, we ended up with Neighbourhood Plans.
- So in our view, Neighbourhood Plans are now the most significant way for local communities to influence design in its broadest sense, including heritage concerns.

SO: WHAT CAN NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS DO DIRECTLY ON DESIGN?

- There are five things that a good Neighbourhood Plan can do to directly influence design, and we'll take each in turn. **(slide 7)**

1. DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

- Local Plans have always included sections and policies on design but, usually covering large, sometimes very large. areas – Wiltshire for example is huge and has just one Local Plan.
- But Examiners of Neighbourhood Plans often moan that they just repeat what is in Local Plans or add nothing of any significance to them.
- So beware, because some Local Plan policies on design are so generalised as to be almost useless in terms of elaborating and protecting local distinctiveness.

- But policies in some other Local Plans are very thorough, good and widely useable on design issues, in which case a Neighbourhood Plan might only need to add a little to these.
- So it is essential to check what's there now – that could be Local Plan policies, authority-wide Design Guides, Conservation Area assessments.
- So just to give you an idea, here's the existing material about design that we found when we started helping with the Neighbourhood Plan in Ross-on-Wye.
- We found the following: **(slide 8)**
 - A good Core Strategy policy
 - A County-wide Design Guide
 - A Draft Conservation Area Appraisal
 - What was called a Rapid Townscape Assessment
 - A Shopfront Design Guide
 - And a Landscape Character Assessment
- As a result the Ross plan only needed to add some top-up, very local work. Some of this was done by local sixth-form students.

2. DEFINE CHARACTER AND LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

- One of things that emerged from work in the 1990s was the need for clear, robust frameworks or principles for assessing local character – and be defensible against challenge.
- This was partly because many Local Plan policies just stated a requirement for designing in context but that context was never described, leaving plan-makers and development management officers almost naked when faced with challenges.
- But no framework existed in the early 1990s for local distinctiveness so I developed one and I think it still stands so we still use it. **(slide 10)**
- This table is quite detailed so perhaps not too legible, so I'll talk you through it.
- This matrix is rooted in local distinctiveness theory and highlights three major dimensions: landscape setting, settlement pattern and building design.
- It then spreads each of those out along 7 more detailed dimensions:
- Physical influences – things such as geology, climate and hence materials.
- Spaces and Enclosure - things such as openness or enclosure, public and private spaces.
- Forms and patterns - field types and patterns, layout of roads and buildings.
- Characteristics, from large scale to very small scale landmarks.
- Circulation, for example road patterns signage and paths.
- Change over time – things such as deforestation, ribbon development, house improvements.
- And Values - which is becoming more important today. This covers things such as meaning, perceptions, history, cultural factors, which brings us back to the place attachment which Jeff mentioned earlier.
- What led on from that, drawing on urban design theory, became one classic way to prepare and present a character assessment, by dividing the built area of a place into different 'character areas' or 'character types', and that should include all built areas, not just the historic ones.
- This example is from the Neighbourhood Plan for Aldbourne. **(slide 11)**
- After several rounds of work, this plan suggests four main character types:
- The historic core (you may also notice the Conservation Area shown).
- Modern infill within that core.
- Linear developments along main roads.

- And later 20th century estates.
- There are also some areas of mixed use / other.
- Each specific area was then assessed in detail.
- The Neighbourhood Plan includes a policy to state that proposed designs must demonstrate how they respond to the character of the area to which they relate.
- There are several different formats for character assessment and I suspect both Ben Castell and Simon Bayliss will illustrate some of that, as may Dave Chetwyn and Rob Lloyd-Sweet specifically for historic settings.
- And there are different ways to put that into a Neighbourhood Plan, probably best as a free-standing 'Part 2' of the Neighbourhood Plan, otherwise it can be too short to be useful.
- But be careful – because local really must be local and sometimes any general guidance is not appropriate.
- When working on the plan for Sonning Common in South Oxfordshire District, we were told that we had to use and refer to the Chilterns Design Guide because almost all of the district is in the Chilterns AONB.
- But not only is Sonning Common NOT in the AONB but it is certainly NOT a Chiltern village.
- It is in fact an absolutely fascinating, almost heritage, example of late 19th century plotlands development, so we had to work with the community to produce a parish-specific Design Statement which was somewhat at odds with the AONB guide.
- The local authority planners hated it, the Examiner loved it! **(slide 12)**
- And, with all of the above addressed, the formal policy in the plan simply has to reference the Statement (or whatever) and require applicants to show how their applications respond to what is in it.

3. SET OUT GUIDANCE OR CODES

- Producing Design Guidance for an area rather than just a site dates back to at least 1973 when Essex County Council produced the famous Essex Design Guide - usually considered to be the first of that form.
- It just arrived out of the blue with no baseline character analysis of the very varied Essex places, and this was exacerbated because it was really only a north Essex guide, bearing no relationship to places in south Essex.
- So, rather obviously, given what we have just said, it is almost impossible to include any useful design guidance in a Neighbourhood Plan if there has not been a thorough character assessment from which the guidance flows.
- And, in some ways, when there is a character assessment in place, you could say that guidance is unnecessary.
- But some guidance is nevertheless really useful to highlight key points.
- And only 'some', because, far too often, we see pages and pages of detailed guidance that throttles any creative and innovative designs.
- Richard Eastham will no doubt be saying more about some of these aspects but we also need to move on a little to an approach becoming far more common – design codes.
- According to the government's manual (quote):
- *“Design codes are a distinct form of detailed design guidance comprising a set of written and graphic rules that establish with precision the two and three dimensional design elements of a particular development or area”.*
- In fact, more and more codes for whole areas, not just sites, are being put into plans, and they can be particularly valuable in Neighbourhood Plans.

- Having introduced the rather heretical Sonning Common Design Statement - this next example is even more heretical.
- That's because it deals with a place – Cam in Gloucestershire – that is made up almost entirely of late 20th century developers' housing estates – beloved of their residents but hated by many architects and planners.
- The last thing that community needs is new developments based on things like the new National Design Guide; they'd stick out like a very sore thumb and be totally inappropriate in that specific context.
- So how did we approach that challenge?
- Based on lots of work directly involving people from the local community, the Cam code celebrates, and aims to build on, the factors that make Cam distinctive and special, almost despite the swathes of developer housing.
- The Code highlights key factors that must be taken into account in new proposals.
- These key factors include the use of significant tree planting and retaining views through to the surrounding countryside. **(slide 14)**
- The Code also directs attention to retaining and adding to the many regular alleyway or 'snickets'. **(slides 15 and 16)**
- And, once again, the examiner loved it, although this time so did Stroud District!

4. INCLUDE DESIGN BRIEFS FOR SITES

- The next thing you can do in a Neighbourhood Plans is to include design briefs for sites.
- One key point, however, is that, if you have good overall policies, robustly defined local character and guides or codes, not only can any site specific briefs be shorter but they will also carry more clout.
- Here is one example, from Sonning Common again, where the thorough Design Statement was in place – and this might almost be thought of as a site code.
- You don't need to see the detail but, first of all, there is the graphic material – a site plan identifying and locating key features and criteria. **(slide 18)**
- Then the text covers aspects such as landscape context, open space, infrastructure and access. **(slide 19)**
- And finally, there is a mention of community involvement, which we'll come back to in moment.
- And that showed in Sonning Common when the site brief, supported by the whole plan, stood up successfully against an application and subsequent appeal by a very predatory housing developer, in part also because of the Design Statement.
- So, if you don't have things like character assessment and guidance in your plan, you are always at risk with any site-specific briefs.
- But there is also one other key thing you can add to a Neighbourhood Plan in terms of site-specific proposals.
- Far, far too often, planning applications are submitted – even by architects - showing the proposed buildings in total isolation from their context.
- Given the importance of context, you can press very hard, maybe not formally require, that any application includes drawings, photomontage or whatever to show the proposals in their context, with all the surrounding buildings and spaces.
- In one case we know of, the Parish Council now provides applicants with the photos that they think would, with a montage added, genuinely show proposals in context! They can't actually 'require' that from a developer, but it's a great idea.

5. PRE-APPLICATION INVOLVEMENT PROTOCOLS

- 50 years ago, what is known as the Skeffington Report was published, promoting the value, and suggesting key methods for, community participation in plan-making.
- Since then, and despite the cynical practice by most developers' PR teams pretending to 'consult', there is now a huge catalogue of really good examples of the benefits of community involvement in all areas of planning, and agreement about core methods.
- But involvement still sits just one step outside the mainstream of planning and design; it is still, after 50 years of staggeringly strong argument, the exception not the rule.
- And, of course, this is unavoidably relevant to Neighbourhood Plans because they are or should be done by communities.
- But, what happens once a plan is made and Barratts or Persimmon loom over the horizon with their standard house types?
- You can wave the plan in their faces, and a good plan can certainly be effective, but you can do more.
- For some years we and a few others have been developing ways to ensure more and better - most importantly early - community involvement.
- The revised National Planning Policy Framework (2018) states in paragraph 39:
- *"Early engagement has significant potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties. Good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources and improved outcomes for the community."* (slide 22)
- Built on that, a standard Protocol can outline the following: (slide 23)
- The national and local policy background about community involvement – as just described.
- Why well designed and managed involvement can provide benefits for community, applicant and local authority.
- The basic roles for community, local authority and applicant/developer.
- The key principles for effective community involvement.
- And here are what we usually offer as the key principles (all to be used according to the type and scale of development):
 - Very early means exactly what it says – day one.
 - Agreed process is about making sure that what is done is done in a way acceptable to all parties.
 - Applicants must of course lead any engagement process but any community can and should play a role in delivering it.
 - Openness and transparency should be obvious (but are often ignored).
 - Who is meant by 'the community' for a project? That also needs to be agreed.
 - Agreeing the scope is very important, ie. what is and is not open to change as a result of any engagement.
 - And finally, ending with a clear, thorough report to show how engagement results have (or maybe have not) influenced the final outcome.
- Such Protocols can be put into a Neighbourhood Plan as a policy but, as of now, that can still only 'encourage' early engagement, it cannot 'require' it.
- Ignore that and push for it in any Neighbourhood Plan because – as we'll say at the very end - it may become a requirement quite soon.

WHAT CAN NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS DO INDIRECTLY?

- Taking design in its broadest sense, there are also a few other fairly standard plan topics in Neighbourhood Plans that can be used to link to and reinforce any specific content and policies on design and heritage.
- We're just touching very briefly on 5 issues here.
- **First, Key Views: (slides 25 and 26)**
- Part of the character of many places is the ability to see in from outside with a view – classically to the church tower or spire – or even to see from the inside out.
- The latter was important here in Ross to prevent development of the fields in the distance.
- These can be 'key views' that should not be damaged by future development, maybe even enhanced, and such views can be protected by a policy in a Neighbourhood Plan.
- **Secondly, Local Green Spaces: (slide 28)**
- We are currently working with a community where much of the centre of an historic village, that was once green space, has now been lost to parking and, in many places, key small areas of green in housing estates are also being lost to parking. A Neighbourhood Plan can include a policy to protect these. This one is a temporary, now permanently protected, community garden.
- **Thirdly, Locally Valued Heritage Assets: (slides 28 and 29)**
- This is very relevant to today because a Neighbourhood Plan can protect important, locally valued assets such as key buildings that might otherwise not be fully listed as Grade II for example, and even smaller features such as a signpost, an old water pump or a memorial. In fact the government have just announced further encouragement to local authorities – and hence Neighbourhood Plan groups – to do this local listing. Rob will no doubt talk about that later.
- Here is a classic example – an historic water pump which is currently devalued by all the parking nearby.
- And this one? You decide but It does have local social and cultural significance. Ask us later what and why!
- Fourthly, Neighbourhood Plans can also include future **practical projects**:
- These may not be formally examined but, if you are thinking of an initiative for example to promote shop signs done by local artists, or opening up an historic but almost lost footpath, including those in your plan can reassure the plan examiner that the plan's design policies are being backed up by practical community action.
- **Finally, Sustainable Design and Construction:**
- This is one that is beginning to get a genuine foothold in planning and there are reasons to be fairly certain that it will become standard practice over the next few years.
- It is, however a topic that can't be covered briefly so just note it and we'll move on and hopefully some conversations later in the day will refer to this too.

KEY POINTS ON HOW TO ACHIEVE ALL THAT (slide 30)

- First of all, there is an enormous amount of guidance – maybe too much (it can confuse people) - to help communities take the lead, and Ben will probably be saying something about that.

- There are also grants available, always up to £9,000, potentially more according to any plan's coverage, and forms of free consultancy on specific topics such as site assessment.
- And then there are consultants (like us) and we can offer a key point on this based on some research we did on how made plans were (or were not) being used (an article on that research is coming out soon in the TCPA Journal).
- Some plans are literally done, in almost their totality, by consultants.
- Some are done entirely by the community (though such communities often include some relevant professionals).
- But what we have noted is that those plans that are more community-led, rather than being done for a community by consultants, are far more likely to be actually used once they are made because the community has a sense of 'owning' the plan – it really is their plan.
- For us, in the way we do things, it's not a question of either/or but of both, and therefore, critically, it is about how any consultants are used - because some sort of professional advice is almost indispensable.
- (We have, for example, just been asked to rescue a plan done without any professional help that – almost inevitably - had 90% of its policies deleted by the Examiner.)
- We base our approach on what a community development activist argued years ago – he termed it 'professionals on tap, not on top'!
- Consultants should be there to guide, help, support and yes – ask tough questions - but the aim is always to end with a plan that local people really feel is theirs.

KEY POINTS (slide 31)

- Now just a few overall key points from our perspective in terms of all aspects of design and Neighbourhood Plans, including design in historic settings.
- Design has to be considered very widely – place-making is as good a term as any for all of that.
- The focus of that must be local distinctiveness, and new developments must show how they contribute to that (which is not, by the way, a recipe for banal 'fitting in' as I suspect Simon will argue).
- And this can only develop if built on community involvement – involvement in the preparation of Design Statements, codes, briefs or whatever and then involvement in specific projects.
- And – crucially - that also means making use of your Neighbourhood Plan once it is made; leave it on a shelf and the whole plan-making exercise would have been a waste of time.
- And, very finally, two bits of highly topical news. **(slide 32)**
- First, the Conservative Party manifesto for the December election included this statement:
- *"We will ask every community to decide on its own design standards for new development, allowing residents a greater say on the style and design of development in their area, with local councils encouraged to build more beautiful architecture."*
- The phrasing of that is rather uncomfortable in places but the principle is great and centrally important to Neighbourhood Plans.

- Secondly, it links to the recently published final report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, to which we contributed.
- That report places considerable emphasis on local distinctiveness, on place-making (that key level of 'Settlement' in our matrix) and on the importance of early community engagement.
- And for us that last one – community engagement - is probably the best point on which to end thank you.