whose designs? the battle for beautiful

Jeff Bishop highlights some of the challenges that may arise from the Planning White Paper reforms regarding the involvement of local communities in preparing design guides and codes

The *Planning for the Future* White Paper[1] potentially sets up a battle royal in relation to design, not just between the aspirations of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (in the government's corner) and the development industry, but also with local communities, and perhaps even with the design professions. (Luckily this particular ring has four corners!) Normally, one would expect local communities to be the featherweights in this battle, but maybe that is not as obvious as it might seem. That is because of the more than 40 mentions in the White Paper of 'local communities' (and other similar terms) – far more than I can ever recall in any government document on planning. So what is going on here? Let's start with the surprise, the proposed role of local communities.

In the 'community' corner …

The White Paper aims to 'move the democracy forward in the planning process and give neighbourhoods and communities an earlier and more meaningful voice in the future of their area as plans are made'. This is in effect a re-emphasis of what became known (if soon forgotten) after the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act as 'front-loading' and has direct relevance to design because (note the last sentence in particular):

'*Local planning authorities and neighbourhoods (through Neighbourhood Plans) would play a crucial role in producing required design guides and codes to provide certainty and reflect local character and preferences about the form and appearance of development. […] These could be produced for a whole local authority area, or for a smaller area or site (as annotated in the Local Plan), or a combination of both. Design guides and codes would ideally be produced on a 'twin track' with the Local Plan, either for inclusion*

within the plan or prepared as supplementary planning documents.'

Avoiding for a moment the issue of what might and might not be allowed in a design guide or code, this sounds extremely positive for local people. There are, however, huge practical challenges if this is to happen in time to inform any new-style Local Plan. Wiltshire, for example, has over 250 parishes. There are currently around 77 Neighbourhood Plans made or in progress, but most include no more than short and very limited design policies; only a handful of plans include linked, thorough design guides (or statements). In addition, Wiltshire, as with many authorities since Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) replaced Supplementary Planning Guidance, does not adopt free-standing community-led design guides as SPDs.

If design guides are to emerge through Neighbourhood Plans (which I support), detailed guidance on their content and production would be needed as a matter of urgency; and, anyway, such plans generally take four years to pass referendum and be formally made – not exactly in line with the 30-month preparation time now proposed for Local Plans. But at least there is funding available for guides (and even codes) if they form part of Neighbourhood Plans, and they can be 'adopted' that way. If communities wish to move ahead really quickly to accept the government offer to produce guides and codes, and to complete them in far less than four years, no separate funding is available (which would stop most communities in their tracks) and, as above, authorities would have to be told firmly from above that guides and codes can become SPDs. (South Cambridgeshire Council has recently taken forward a programme of Village Design Statements, all of which are or will become SPDs.)

It is therefore difficult to see how any more than a handful of community-led design guides and codes could be available for the new fast-track Local Plans, in which case authority-wide guides could then (as the White Paper suggests) be produced by the local authority – which takes us on to the scope and content of guides and codes.

Authority-wide guides have rather gone off the radar for many authorities, in part because of the unfortunate decline in the general importance of design issues, in part because of the related huge loss of design skills (and resources in general) in local authorities, and in part because guidance at overall authority level is generally inadequate to address what are now considered to be issues of very local concern – as in the rise of local distinctiveness. (The famous Essex Design Guide is really only relevant to North Essex, not to the very different South.)

Once again, and even if we think authority-wide guides are a good thing, there seem to be practical challenges in authorities gearing up to get overall design guides and codes (let alone local ones) established, ready for the new-style Local Plans. In which case we shift up a level, and national standards would be applied. So much for localism; but it may be worse than that.

There are many mentions in the White Paper of local determination of design standards, although the term 'local distinctiveness' never appears. For example:

'Too many places built during recent decades fail to reflect what is special about their local area.'

The system will be '*rooted in local preferences and character*' through the production of '*locally-popular design codes*'.

And, slightly less dramatically, *'we will expect design guidance and codes to be prepared locally with community involvement'.*

But, at the same time, there are direct statements and several hints that what might be covered both in planning generally and in design – and what standards guides or codes might include – will be limited. For example:

'Rather than removing the ability for local authorities to include general development management policies in Local Plans, we could limit the scope of such policies to specific matters and standardise the way they are written, where exceptional circumstances necessitate a locally-defined approach.'

There is also one key aspect, from the community perspective, not even mentioned in the White Paper: pre-application community engagement and, in particular, making it a legal requirement, which is what was in the Localism Act (and is now a requirement in Wales). This is surely an inevitable final stage in the process of establishing local character and providing design codes, because it is only through project-specific discussion that even the most detailed codes can be used properly in relation to the design of any specific scheme.

Despite some of the final comments above, all of this leaves us with clear ambitions about local community determination on design standards and a need to celebrate local distinctiveness. But what of the other parties in this battle?

In the government corner …

There can be no doubt that the results of the work of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC), summarised in the *Living with Beauty* report,[2] underpin almost everything about design in the White Paper; this is now 'the government corner'.

Given the chilling picture of much of the current 'anywhere' housing design around the country, there is much to applaud in the BBBBC report. As Tom Perry of the Design Council said (in *The Planner*): '*Living with Beauty* sets beauty within a much wider context than aesthetics alone.'[3] That is very true, because the report comments on issues such as land values, inadequate design skills in planning authorities, the short-termism of most developers, and the lack of attention to overall place-making. It then elaborates what to do to tackle these issues, with an emphasis on, for example, longer-term stewardship, creating places not just building houses, value planning, and procurement. And note that some of that is only indirectly to do with planning policy; but, again, it is all – at least in overall terms – welcome.

There are positive statements in *Living with Beauty* such as 'bring the democracy forward' (almost word for word what is in the White Paper), 'radically and profoundly … re-invent the ambition, depth and breadth with which [local councils] engage with neighbourhoods', and 'we should be offering the public a voice in planning decisions from the very beginning of the planning process'. But is this apparent commitment maintained? A summary chart in the conclusion section lists all the report's specific proposals and then indicates whose responsibility they should be or who should be involved in taking the ambition forward: central government, local government, developers and/or civic society (the community). Unfortunately, it does not appear from this chart to be the role of local communities to 'ask for beauty', 'support the right development in the right place', or, unbelievably, 'promote a common understanding of place' or 're-discover civic pride in architecture'!

There are clear whiffs of elitism in *Living with Beauty* that must lead us to at least question some of what then surfaced in the White Paper about design. As it happens, I showed the examples in *Living with Beauty* to (very ordinary) neighbours in my street in Bristol. Most photos were disliked, some were described as ugly, and one person even

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Councillor training on character assessment

said that several 'look like council houses'! Add in all the suggestions about speeding up the whole of the planning system, in part by reducing its scope and influence, and this runs slap bang up against issues of community views and aspirations and local determination.

We now have the National Design Guide and will soon(ish) have the National Model Design Code, which will set out 'detailed standards for key elements of successful design',[4] although it is also expected (as above) that authorities and presumably communities will develop their own design codes or guides for their areas. These would be required to be in accordance with the national version, but what 'accordance' means and what scope there might be for genuine local variation is uncertain (something I explored in this journal in 2019,[5] describing the professionally challenging design code for Cam in Gloucestershire). One can only hope that the National Model Design Code says as much about *how* a local code is best developed (notably through community involvement if not leadership), as about what should be in one.

In the design professions' corner …

Neither surprisingly nor inappropriately, the design professions – notably architects – will have a lot to contribute to the next stages for the White Paper ideas on design, and right on through to the details of local guides and codes. But there is no point in pretending; there is going to be a battle about whose views prevail.

This is not, at the outset, an issue of design in terms of appearance. Very basically, the majority of volume housebuilder projects are not even designed by architects, or, if they are, that involvement is early and minimal only. And for the many small builders/developers for whom the government says it is seeking to provide many more opportunities, most

of their projects either do not involve an architect or the designs are produced by a surveyor or an architectural technician. The exceptions to this pattern are mostly the more complex urban sites, schemes for the upper end of the market or projects by social housing providers, and it is the latter that (as research has shown) exacerbates the 'council housing' response to architect involvement noted earlier. So the first step, on which the White Paper is worryingly silent, is to ensure some level of genuine architect involvement in more than a small minority of projects.

Then there is the elitism factor again; experienced by me over many years when daring to suggest to architects that local people might have anything at all of value to say about design. And this takes us to one recent example of how some of what is in the White Paper might play out. Given its title – *Distinctively Local* – a recent report by four well known housing design practices[6] would seem an obvious choice to start with for ideas for a more community-led future on design. But there are two fundamental cautions here.

First, although the text relentlessly stresses the importance of designing in context, barely a single one of the 85 or so photos shows the authors' designs (attractive though they are) in their local context. In fact, the photos mainly show just the buildings, not really the wider aspects of place-making that are rightly now so important. Secondly, even more worryingly and despite the publication's title, there is not even a hint that local distinctiveness might have anything to do with local people and their ability to record, analyse, celebrate, value and enhance their own local distinctiveness; that remains, of course, a strictly professional preserve!

In the development industry corner …

As stated above, there are significant variations among developers. There are what are termed the 'volume builders', who mostly operate across the country, and most of whom use standard house designs and site layouts, if with a bit of local variation such as a regional brick colour. There are some medium-sized developers operating nationally or, more often, regionally. Then there are dozens, at any one time perhaps hundreds, of smaller developers, often also builders (or builders who occasionally develop), operating at sub-regional or county level.

As the White Paper notes, the latter do not generally get much of a look in when it comes to discussing standards of any sort, including on design; nor do they have the ear of government as the big players do (including at political party dinners). And it is quite remarkable how many of the larger developers continue to produce their 'anywhere' (or 'cookie-cutter') designs while at the same time saying that they fully support all the emerging ideas from government, planners, architects and others about more beautiful and/or more locally distinctive design

and, also at the same time, wheeling in their barristers to resist all attempts by local authority planners to push them towards better standards.

There are, however, some factors about the housing development industry and the public that have to be understood if progress is to be made on raising design standards. If not, the different sides will simply be talking across each other (or, to continue my analogy, will not even be in the same ring as each other).

First of all, we have to consider why people buy the houses they buy. We might like to think that design is or should be the key factor, but, given how frequently people move or expect to move house today to chase jobs and promotions (every four years on average), a prime reason for choosing a volume builder's house is because of a perfectly understandable assumption that such houses will sell again really quickly, in comparison with a less standard but perhaps more interesting-looking, architect-designed house. Many may prefer the latter but they are less likely to buy it. (And, sad to say, that prejudice about architect-designed often indicating council/social housing still exerts its influence.) There is, in other words, an inherent decline to the lowest common denominator. (And price also has a lot to do with it, of course!)

'There are battles to fight about whose definition of local character should hold sway'

Then one has to consider all aspects of marketing, as in the memorable comment on *Desert Island Discs* attributed to Lawrie Barratt when asked relentlessly what he enjoyed about building houses. Apparently, he said something like: 'I ain't interested in building houses; I'm only interested in selling 'em.' A key sales factor in estate layout for volume builders is 'kerb appeal', i.e. what it all looks like to prospective purchasers as they drive around (which is in itself also an indicator of the importance to many of being able to drive around, and to have on-plot parking). Then it's about repetition, i.e. 'if I can't have that house there, are there others exactly like it please?' And, of course, there are; often many. Move on and you have to look at how, in show houses, the doors are often removed, mirrors strategically placed to make it all look larger; and, yes, there can even be deliberately under-sized furniture on display.

And this is just a tiny percentage of the ways in which volume housebuilding is organised (often extremely efficiently in its own terms), from site option to show house. Without understanding that or being able to offer equally fast-track procedures, all the highly supportable arguments about raising design standards could well flounder.

So who will – and who should – win out?

As with most White Papers, what finally emerges into legislation and practice may well be very different. But taking it at face value for now, in terms just of design, there are some important things to applaud, from the general commitment to raising design standards (dramatically so for much new housing) to the potential role for local people in defining locally distinctive character and guidance to ensure that it is picked up, respected and enhanced – including through patently contemporary design (especially in the key current and future context of sustainable design and construction).

There are, however, those battles to fight about whose definition of local character should hold sway (local ones often include factors such as green infrastructure, historic meanings and values, all well beyond most codes), and about whether the replacement of 'anywhere' volume builders' designs with 'anywhere' design code schemes imposed from above really constitutes significant progress.

And finally, there are the many practical aspects of how to deliver a framework of appropriately consistent, high-quality and forward-looking community-led guides and codes across the country in time to influence the proposed new breed of Local Plans – not least because it seems clear that, if one cannot influence a Local Plan, further influence at site selection and detailed application stage will be lessened, and perhaps even removed.

So, round one of the battle is now complete, but who can say how things will end up at the final bell?

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Notes

1 *Planning for the Future.* White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future

2 *Living with Beauty: Promoting Health, Well-being and Sustainable Growth.* Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Jan. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-beauty-report-of-the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission

3 Reported in 'The quest for beauty – views on the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission report'. *The Planner*, 2020, Mar., p.8. https://issuu.com/redactive/docs/pln_march20.lrc

4 *National Design Guide: Planning Practice Guidance for Beautiful, Enduring and Successful Places.* Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Oct. 2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843468/National_Design_Guide.pdf

5 J Bishop: 'Design and local distinctiveness'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2019, Vol. 88, Jun., 229-34

6 *Distinctively Local: How to Boost Supply by Creating Beautiful and Popular Homes and Places.* Pollard Thomas Edwards/HTA/Proctor & Matthews Architects/PRP, May 2019. www.distinctively-local.co.uk/