Planning for places

**Delivering good design
through core strategies**

CABE

CABE is the government's advisor on
architecture, urban design and public
space. As a public body, we encourage
policy makers to create places that work
for people. We help local planners apply
national design policy and offer expert
advice to developers and architects.
We show public sector clients how to
commission buildings that meet the needs
of their users. And we seek to inspire the
public to demand more from their buildings
and spaces. Advising, influencing and
inspiring, we work to create well-designed,
welcoming places.

This publication is available
in alternative formats on request
from the publisher.

Contents

'Design is about the spatial vision, it's not about the detail of shop fronts'

Planning for places features quotes by panel members at CABE workshops for local planning authorities. These quotes are located in the columns of each page

An efficient planning system and a good spatial plan are essential to achieving high-quality places and good design.

All local authorities must produce a core strategy, the document which describes their vision for their place over the coming 15-20 years. It is a vital tool in helping to deliver quality, so getting it right is one of the most important tasks facing planners today. CABE has been working with local authorities to see how design quality can best be embedded in emerging strategies.

Planning policy statement 1 (PPS1) sets out the government's policy on delivering sustainable places: "good design is indivisible from good planning". CABE believes that good design will be facilitated by a core strategy that is based on an understanding of a place and that has a clear vision for the future. The core strategy has to go beyond generic design policies to communicating an understanding of place and a vision for changing things for the better. A clear idea of how a place works is needed to manage its future quality.

'In the built environment, design is the key decision-making process. At the strategic level, it creates the vision for places. At a more detailed level, it describes how we want them to work, look and feel. Good design is not inevitable. It needs to be championed, invested in and worked at'
Good design: the fundamentals, CABE, 2009

What CABE is doing about core strategies
CABE's focus is on design, but its work is not limited
to design policies. Having held more than 50
workshops with local planning authorities, CABE knows
just how challenging it is to write a core strategy that
will deliver good design.

With the help of a panel of independent professional
experts, the workshops discussed local authorities' core
strategies, the challenges they face and their ideas for
the future. The workshops supported local planning
authorities in improving their core strategies and
contributed to CABE's knowledge of placemaking.

What the workshops have shown
Local authorities often have the knowledge and ability
to develop a spatial strategy but don't always
communicate this spatial thinking in their emerging
core strategy. Too many core strategies are focused on
individual themes rather than integrating these themes
into a spatial approach.

The vision for a high-quality place and the strategy
to deliver it often needs to be more clearly set out,
with greater emphasis on how places can be improved.
Simply including a policy on design will not deliver
good quality development. You should add maps,
diagrams and photos to depict the local area and
to communicate the strategy. It may also be helpful
to include photos of quality places, both locally and
outside the area. This is a huge opportunity for planners
to be strategists for the future quality of places.

'You have
the passion
and the
knowledge
in your head.
We've heard
it today, and
now we just
need to see
it written'

Key message for local authorities

Tell the story
A good core strategy needs to tell the story of the
place, explain how it works and highlight its qualities
and distinguishing features. Telling the story helps every-
one understand how the qualities of the place have
shaped the strategy and its priorities for future quality.

Set the agenda
Use the core strategy to say what is wanted for
the area, express aspirations and be proactive and
positive about the future of the place and say how
this will be achieved. Set out what is expected in
terms of design quality and where necessary provide
links to the relevant development plan documents or
supplementary planning documents.

Say it clearly
Make the core strategy relevant and understandable to
a wide audience. Use diagrams to inform the text and
communicate the strategy and show what quality of
place means.

More information on design and place making on
CABE's website www.cabe.org.uk

For plan making advice see CLG's Plan Making
Manual on the PAS website www.pas.gov.uk
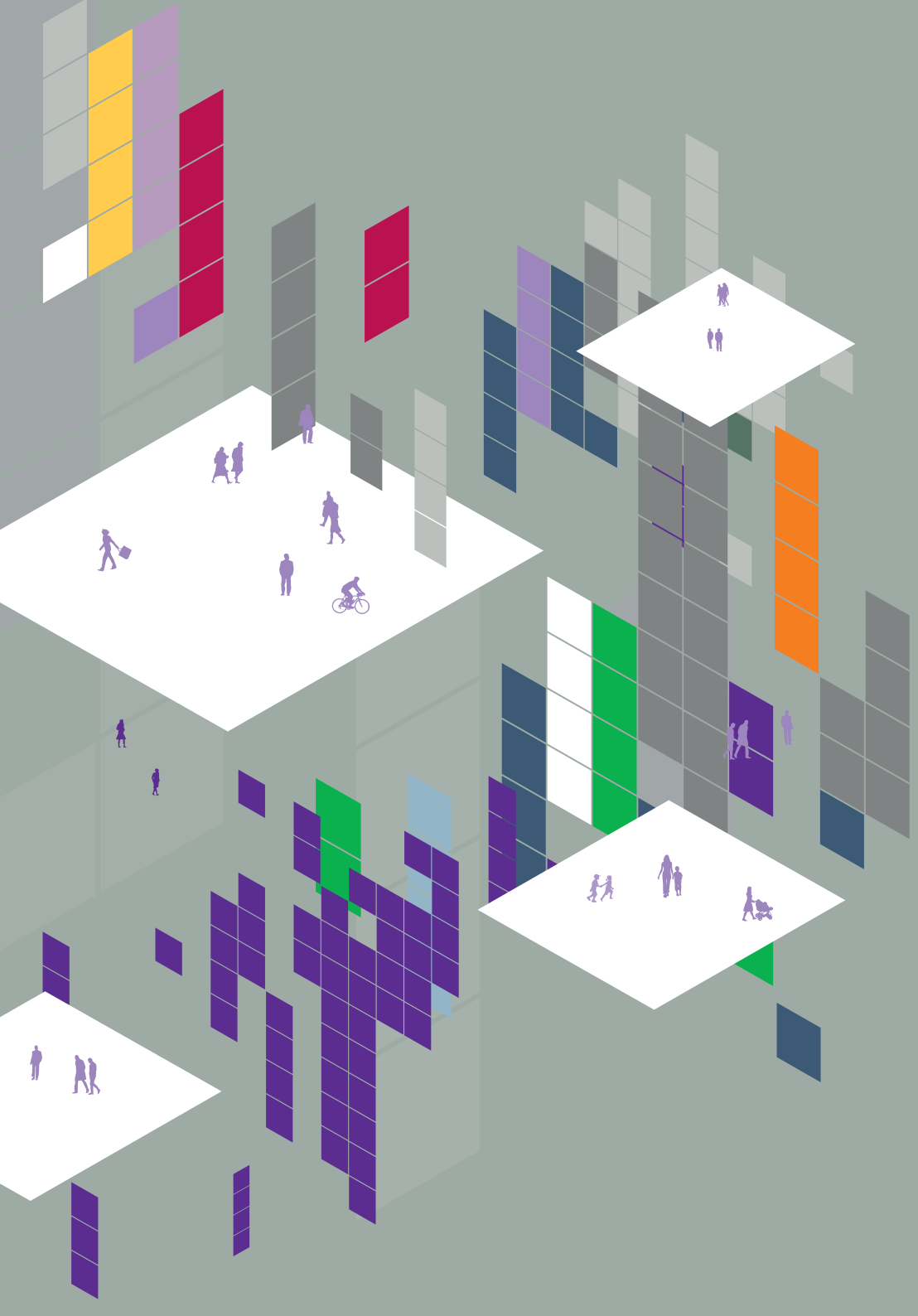
Tell the story

'Your authority is not an island! You need to show where it sits in the region and how it relates to other towns and areas'

A good core strategy needs to tell the story of the place. This should be told in the vision and in the strategy itself. The story can be told by:

- explaining the important history, context and physical characteristics of the area
- talking about the people who live there
- describing how the area functions
- understanding the relationships that exist with the wider area
- understanding the opportunities a place offers.

Think about how a place will work in the future, what it will look like, what it will feel like, how people will use it and how will it be different from other places. Try not to focus on just housing allocation numbers or land uses.

A good core strategy does not need to be lengthy. It is about distilling the knowledge and evidence about a place, its communities and its future. Focus on the key issues and priorities that are relevant to the place. Build on the opportunities the place offers to make the most of development and investment.

From understanding and clarifying the story of the place, it should be clear what is important to that place, what makes it special, and why.

Questions to think about when telling the story

- Is there a clear description of the special character of a place and how it functions?
- Does it recognise the choices facing an area?
- Does it express the role the place plays in the sub-region and region?
- Who lives there and why?
- Is it clear how the physical, economic, environmental and social influences have shaped the place?
- Does the vision set out what the place will be like and reflect the characteristics and issues of the area?

Why a good story is important for design quality

Clearly expressing in the core strategy the existing character of a place and how it functions, and explaining how this informs future choices will:

- focus the strategy on quality of place rather than on policies or housing numbers
- clarify understanding and knowledge of the place - where it has come from, how it is now, and where it is going
- identify important features of that place which need to be protected or enhanced
- help scope different options, which can be tested
- help identify the areas that are stable, will change, and those that need managing and protection
- recognise the needs of the existing and future communities
- make it relevant, to engage people in the process.
- lead to a strong and locally specific vision for the area.

'We really need to focus on place, and the places that make up your authority. How does it feel and work now and into the future'

The Tower Hamlets core strategy uses text, maps, diagrams and photos to present a clear picture of the place

© scenicireland.com / Christopher Hill Photographic / Alamy

Case study: tell the story
London Borough of Tower Hamlets

The emerging Tower Hamlets core strategy is based on the understanding and interpretation of the place. This has led to the identification of 24 separate 'hamlets' that shape the borough.

The document has five borough-wide spatial themes. Under the 'delivering placemaking' theme, a locally distinct vision has been developed for each hamlet. These visions, along with place-scale and local-scale information, have been used to present a spatial strategy for the borough.

The "Big Spatial Vision" for the core strategy is "Reinventing the Hamlets" which has been developed from:

- research into the historical hamlets, their location, function and how they have grown and evolved over time
- research into how cities are structured
- understanding the issues surrounding improving health and well-being for the people of Tower Hamlets
- a need to retain and develop local distinctiveness in Tower Hamlets
- how local residents and visitors understand and recognise the borough and the places that form it.

The document, through text, maps, diagrams and photos presents a clear picture of the place. By understanding how Tower Hamlets has evolved, it has allowed the local authority to clearly identify a vision for each 'hamlet', what needs to be addressed and how they are going to achieve it for each place within the borough.

The 24 'hamlets' image shows clearly the places that shape Tower Hamlets

© Brian O'Donnell

St Pancras station is a key location within the London Borough of Camden

Case study: tell the story
London Borough of Camden

The London Borough of Camden's 'core strategy preferred approach' consultation document clearly and succinctly sets out what makes Camden unique and identifies the priorities for the area.

The document has achieved this by referring to the key locations and characteristics that people readily identify with Camden, such as Camden Town, Tottenham Court Road and St Pancras station. It has also given an overview of the population, the housing type and quality, Camden's economic drivers, the transport linkages and environmental attributes. Importantly, the document recognises Camden's relationships to neighbouring boroughs and wider areas.

The document also sets out eight key issues and challenges, such as the quality of the local environment, the supply and cost of housing, crime and safety, that the borough will be facing over the life of the core strategy. These are in plain English.

Visuals would have strengthened these sections – but Camden is incorporating more photos and diagrams at the final publication stage.

Set the agenda

The core strategy is where the tough decisions need to be made. A good core strategy sets the agenda and says how it will be achieved by:

- taking the spatial approach that integrates themes and places
- being clear and upfront about what is needed to achieve the vision
- describing how this will be delivered
- outlining when things will happen
- knowing what the priorities are.

The core strategy needs to have its foundation in spatial thinking. This requires an approach that integrates the needs of places with the different issues that need to be addressed. From this spatial approach, the distinctive characteristics of a district, city or borough can be taken to develop the strategy, rather than focusing on thematic policies.

For example, to achieve climate change mitigation and adaptation objectives the local authority needs to take a holistic approach to what the future of the place will be like. This integrated approach ensures that climate change is embedded in the strategy, rather than being a thematic policy which is weighed up against other, potentially conflicting, thematic policies.

By taking a spatial approach to the development of the strategy, it will be easier to be specific about what the place will be like in 20 years time and to identify the things that are essential to achieving the vision.

It is important that the core strategy includes clear priorities for design quality at different spatial scales, setting out the key principles with links to other local development framework documents as necessary, such as area action plans and supplementary planning documents.

Once the vision for the place has been decided, the next step is to identify what is needed to achieve it, along with how it will be delivered and when. For this vision to be achieved, the core strategy needs recognition, ownership and support from the whole of the local authority, especially its leadership.

Questions to think about when setting the agenda

- What are the core principles behind the strategy?
- Are the priorities clear and have the tough decisions been made?
- Does the strategy clearly set out what you want for an area - and where, when and how you want it?
- Is it clear that quality of place is a priority?
- Is the emphasis on neighbourhoods rather than housing numbers?
- What sort of lifestyle will communities have?
- What are the expectations for development?
- Could developers identify what is wanted and where?

'It takes confidence to insist on the right product. It will be taking a step change to ask for high quality design'

'You need to put a trigger in the core strategy to say how you will put good design into supplementary planning documents'

- Has the strategy considered the implications of change and how that change will be managed?
- Are there links in the core strategy to other local development documents?
- Is there backing from the rest of the authority, the local strategic partnership and other key partners?
- Have examples of other places that could inspire change locally been identified?
- Does the strategy set out the brief for areas that need further detailed analysis?

Why setting the agenda is important for design quality

By being specific about the priorities and expectations and how the vision will be achieved, the core strategy will:

- show local authority leadership for prioritising high quality places
- send a positive message about change
- explain the benefits that can be derived for existing and new communities
- help everyone understand the goal and direction for the area
- give a clear message to developers about expectations for high quality design
- identify what needs to be done.

The importance of the Brighton seafront is recognised through a clear vision and approach to managing future change in this area

Case study: set the agenda
Brighton and Hove City Council

Brighton and Hove City Council's 'revised preferred options' document identifies seven key areas of change for the city – Brighton Centre and Churchill Square Area; Brighton Marina and Black Rock; Lewes Road; New England Quarter and London Road; Eastern Road and Edward Street; Hove Station Area; and Shoreham Harbour and South Portslade. The document clearly and succinctly sets out what is wanted in each of these priority areas.

For each, a short introduction sets out the context of the area, its role in the city, along with issues and opportunities. A list of local priorities is then identified as well as a "mini vision" which sets out the preferred option.

The supporting text references other local strategies and provides links to other local development documents, such as supplementary planning documents. A list of 'implementation actions' identify how the preferred option for each area will be achieved.

The document clearly sets out the council's aspirations for change and expectations for delivery.

Say it clearly

'Use words
that you
would use
if you were
telling your
family about
the strategy'

A good core strategy is written in language that people can understand. This is not always easy within the framework of statutory planning, but if a compelling story is told and priorities are identified clearly the strategy can be presented coherently. The core strategy can be expressed by:

- using plain English
- prioritising the important issues
- being selective about the information contained within the strategy
- using easily read graphics, maps, and photographs.

It is important that the core strategy is clear and concise so that developers, the community, and the local authority understand how the area will be changing and when, as well as their role. Background information should not overburden the core strategy, so be selective.

Graphics (including three dimensional ones) are essential in making the strategy easier to read and understand. By explaining the strategy visually you can reduce the length of the text. Maps can show the topography, urban grain and regional context. Diagrams can express ideas. Photographs can highlight the special qualities of a place. During the development of a strategy, mapping the strategy on a plan can help to clarify ideas and direction.

Questions to think about when saying it clearly

- Does the document use plain English?
- Is the strategy selective in its content?
- Are maps, diagrams and photos used to tell the story of the place, explain the strategy or show benchmarks?
- Are the issues set out and the response to them shown clearly?
- Has the strategy been expressed at different spatial scales so that its implications are understood at the neighbourhood, town, city, sub-regional and regional level?

Why saying it clearly is important for design quality

Clearly articulating the core strategy using plain English and visual aids will:

- Help everyone understand, engage and contribute to achieving the vision
- Create a clear link through the local development framework of expectations and standards
- Ensure the core strategy is direct about issues that need to be addressed and clear about how they will be dealt with
- Let local people understand what the strategy is and what they can do.

'Excite people through the communication methods used. This should be an exciting and engaging process!'

York's 'preferred options' document clearly and concisely sets out the local and regional context, the issues that York is facing and the vision for the future of the city.

In the first section of the document, the issues and challenges facing York are clearly set out, as well as providing an overview of the opportunities. It also addresses the geography of the area, the regional context and the population trends, along with housing, employment, the historic environment, education, transport and minerals and waste. And it sets out the ecological footprint for York, which establishes a baseline for measuring climate change objectives.

The section on York's special historic and built environment clearly identifies design quality as a priority for the area. This is reinforced in the proposed policy, particularly where it sets out the standard of development that is expected:

"encourage a strong sense of place through maintaining and enhancing local townscape and landscape character, river corridors, street patterns and frontages (in particular York city centre's medieval street patterns, urban spaces, burgage plots and snickleways). Development should respect local form and scale, and promote high quality standards of contemporary design in buildings and the spaces and surfaces between, in terms of:

- urban grain, with respect to the arrangement of street blocks, plots and buildings in determining the texture of the city;

The York Minster plays a key part in the heritage of York. This image shows the Minster facade in lights as part of the annual 'Illuminating York' event

© City of York Council

Case study: say it clearly
City of York Council

- urban structure, and the framework of routes and spaces connecting locally and more widely;
- the character and appearance of landscape, landforms, open space, planting boundaries and treatment;
- density and mix;
- scale, in relation to its surroundings, views, vistas and skylines, in particular the prominence of York Minster both from within the city and in longer distance views across the open countryside;
- massing in relation to other buildings and spaces; and
- the texture, colour, pattern and durability of materials, and techniques and elements of detailing used." *Proposed policy CS4(b)*

The policy makes specific references to the characteristics of York, such as the burgage plots, snickleways and York Minster. However, the policy could be strengthened by including examples of important local characteristics for each of the bullet points, such as the green wedges that shape the urban structure of the city.

Extra maps and photos would have supported the document and reduced its length, but the text has painted a clear picture of York and the priorities for the area.

An understanding of how a place works, what makes it special and the opportunities it offers is critical to developing a core strategy. *Planning for places: delivering good design through core strategies* has been produced to help local authorities take a spatial approach to their strategy. Drawing on workshops, it helps planners place good design at the heart of their core strategies.

1 Kemble Street
London WC2B 4AN
T 020 7070 6700
F 020 7070 6777
E enquiries@cabe.org.uk
www.cabe.org.uk

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

The government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space

CABE