

Homes and
Communities Agency:
New 'Urban Design
Lessons' Advice

DLP BRIEFING NOTE 144

Prepared by
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Homes and Communities Agency publishes new 'Urban Design Lessons' advice

In January 2014 the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) published the report 'Urban Design Lessons' with the purpose of disseminating examples of good practice in design.

The report has been compiled to benefit both those assessing the design merits of proposals and those involved in the design of new schemes. Four case study sites formed the basis of the report which assessed submissions of a large number of design schemes with accompanying financial appraisals. The assessment of 100 different layouts offered the opportunity to "*analyse and capture good practice and lessons learnt*".

The report concludes that in addition to adding value to quality of life, better quality design can also deliver benefits to developers in terms of the return on their investment.

The key findings of the document are:

1) Cost

The analysis showed that good quality urban design does not necessarily cost more than a less well considered design. Whilst reported costs for elements such as roads and sewers were similar across most schemes, it was found that a strong focus on design quality can lead to both short and long term benefits whilst restricting expensive architectural features of limited benefit to the user. It was concluded that "*the need to focus on cost and achieve financial viability need not be an impediment to delivering better quality urban design*".

2) Layout Efficiency

It was found that good urban design has the potential to achieve highly efficient layouts, with schemes scoring highly on design quality designed to accommodate a high density; although higher density does not automatically lead to better design quality.

3) Revenue

In three out of four case studies, higher design scores reported higher revenues. This was attributed either to the accommodation of higher densities or to efficiency savings from the improved arrangement of circulation and outdoor spaces.

4) Urban Design Principles

Stressing that urban design quality does not have to be complicated, the following urban design principles were highlighted as good practice:

- *Legibility & permeability*: clear and sensible layouts which include perimeter blocks, overlooking and shared through routes;
- *Active frontage*: animation of the public realm through continuous building lines, whilst minimising blank walls and garden fences;
- *Street design*: creating pedestrian friendly environments through shared surfacing and distinguishing between major transport routes and local streets; paving quality can add significantly to the overall experience of a scheme;

- *Parking*: the inclusion of a range of parking solutions can be both convenient and efficient. This can mean maximising on-street, side-of-property and underground parking; whilst minimising rear parking courts, integral garages and front-garden parking. Early decisions on parking through a sustainable travel plan can be key to delivering sustainable places;
- *Landscape*: public street trees can be an inexpensive and effective way of providing positive street character and added value. The size of front gardens needs to be carefully considered, and innovative Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) designed in response to the local topography and drainage requirements can also contribute an attractive feature to the scheme;
- *Building form*: achieving an efficient and positive internal layout, including dual aspect flats, should fit into the emerging street pattern and have the potential to contribute to the public realm.

The report concludes that the consideration of key design principles from an early stage is a significant factor in the creation of well-designed schemes, and advises including specific urban design expertise in the design team. The study recognises that good urban design need not incur additional cost but has the potential to simultaneously increase density, revenue and quality.

DLP Planning Consultants, alongside our design and transport sister companies, Be1 and Matrix, have considerable expertise on design and planning issues throughout the evolution of a development scheme. If you wish to discuss any of these matters further, please do not hesitate to contact our offices and a member of our experienced team will be happy to advise you.

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