BETTER CIVIC BUILDINGS AND SPACES
INTRODUCTION

SIR STUART LIPTON

The state of our streets and other public spaces has a major impact on quality of life. At the same time, the quality of public building directly influences the quality of public service provision; better schools raise educational standards, improved housing reduces visits to GPs’ surgeries, enhanced working conditions increase staff retention and productivity. Design can have a direct impact on vandalism and other crime and can have significant benefits for economic regeneration. Empirical research has demonstrated these impacts to be realities.

All building initiatives that local authorities are involved in should be seen as civic projects. Libraries, schools, streets and squares, amongst many others, all have a major impact on the public’s view of their neighbourhoods. So all fall under the remit of this publication. And all present the opportunity for local authorities to lead by example by insisting on the highest standards of design quality.

Local government is increasingly being asked to consider design in the built environment in a coherent and proactive way, both in the buildings they procure and also in influencing the quality of all new development in their area. This brochure provides advice on how local authorities can tackle their design responsibilities to deliver a step change in quality.

Better Civic Buildings and Spaces is part of CABE’s ongoing work as the national champion for better places: places that work better, feel better, are better. We offer advice to all those who create, manage and use buildings and the spaces between them.

This publication offers no single solution. What is offered is a range of structures and policies that local authorities should consider in deciding what is right for them. The aim is to stimulate debate and to showcase the good work that is already happening across local government.

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FOREWORD

LORD FALCONER

The Government is firmly committed to achieving a step change in the quality of the design of public buildings. We want to continue the long tradition of creating boldly-designed public buildings that are the pride of our towns and cities and that help to foster a strong local, regional and national identity – as well as providing public services efficiently.

That is why the Prime Minister launched the ‘Better Public Buildings’ initiative in October 2000. An inter-departmental group of Ministerial design champions is spearheading this drive for design quality in the public sector. We are already seeing results and people throughout the country are beginning to profit from the many tangible benefits of good design.

Local authorities have a very important role to play. They can insist on the highest standards of design in the buildings they deal with through the planning system, as well as in the civic buildings – such as schools, libraries and community centres – and public space construction works that they commission.

The Government therefore welcomes the publication by CABE of Better Civic Buildings and Spaces. This document illustrates how actions at the local level fit in with the Government’s wider design quality agenda and suggests ways in which local authorities can help to create better places in which to live and work and to visit. Its message should be at the heart of everything we do.

I commend CABE and its five partners for producing this extremely useful document and, in doing so, for the contribution they are making to the provision of both more effective public services and a better quality built environment.

Lord Falconer of Thoroton QC
Minister of State, Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
CABE recently undertook an extensive survey of how local authorities manage design issues.

- of local authorities have a qualified designer in their planning department: 48%
- of local authorities have a registered architect in their planning department: 38%
- of local authority planning departments make use of a design panel in assessing the design quality of planning applications in general (not including Conservation Area Committees): 23%
- of local authorities run design award schemes: 32%
- of local authorities have a ‘design champion’ to promote the cause of good design across all areas of the authority’s activities: 20%
- of local authorities have refused planning permission principally on design grounds in more than 20 instances in the past year: 22%

There is growing support for local authorities to raise their design aspirations. The Prime Minister’s Better Public Buildings report demands a step change in the quality of the buildings procured by all public sector bodies, while Best Value allows greater freedom to deliver this change in local government, allowing authorities to lead by example. At the same time, planning guidance such as By Design and Better Places to Live (the companion guides to Planning Policy Guidance notes 1 and 3) demand a more proactive approach from local planning authorities in driving up design quality.

The Urban White Paper identified lack of urban design skills in local government as a barrier to the successful renewal of our urban areas, with subsequent research – outlined on the facing page – showing that less than half of local councils employ even a single urban designer. This design deficit must be addressed.

There is a range of new opportunities to enable the delivery of high standards by local authorities:

- the expansion of public capital investment
- increasing central government support for local intervention to demand quality design via stronger planning guidance
- greater freedoms through Best Value, with Ministers stating that good design is inherent to Best Value
- the development of Beacon Status for design and sustainability issues
- the availability of support from CABE and local Built Environment Centres
- the availability of performance measurement tools to allow clients fully to evaluate design and construction standards

Design is integral to the social, environmental and economic objectives local authorities aim to deliver, for example:

- The Urban and Rural White Paper objectives
- Transport White Paper objectives for integrated and more sustainable transport, encouraging walking and cycling where possible
- Community Strategies
- Neighbourhood Renewal
- Improved service delivery
- Agenda 21

Juniper House, King’s Lynn
The Borough Council of King’s Lynn and West Norfolk rebuilt a corner site within the King’s Lynn conservation area creating an imaginative mixed development responding to the council’s Agenda 21 commitments. The building structure is an integral part of the heating and cooling processes and high levels of insulation and airtightness minimise heat loss through the fabric. Waste heat from occupants, lights and equipment is sufficient to heat the building for much of the year saving 200 tonnes of CO₂ per annum.
THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE OF DESIGN QUALITY: THE EVIDENCE

Education
The most recent UK study by Pricewaterhouse Coopers for the DfES found that capital investment in schools had a strong influence on staff morale, pupil motivation and educational achievement. For example, the study points to one school where the design of playgrounds and the school hall had enabled a reduction of lunchtime assistants from 8 to 5, with resources switched to direct educational expenditure.

Services
The new Peckham Library (left) won the Stirling Prize for the best designed building by a UK architect. The figures for the first full year of the new library compared to the two closed libraries it replaced show that annual visits are up from 168,000 to 536,000 and loans from 93,000 to 385,000.

The Public Realm
The bold design of the Hulme Arch Bridge (below) in Manchester has created a new landmark, helping to promote a confidence in the area. The bridge, which is playing a significant role in the regeneration of Hulme, was a factor in the dramatic rise of land values in the area.

WHAT IS A WELL DESIGNED BUILDING?
Design is more than just beauty; it is an integral part of the success of any project. The key facets of building design quality are:

Appearance: the building should be excellent in itself and appropriate to its surroundings, attracting a favourable response from users, customers and the wider public
Context: the project is seen as a place, not an isolated building, including creation of public space, contribution to the neighbourhood and its environment, effect on transport patterns
Buildability: including ease of construction, materials from sustainable sources, prefabrication, use of standard components
Maintenance: including energy use, cleaning, repair costs, all estimated over the life of the building
Operation: including use of space, navigation around the building, comfort of users, flexibility, effectiveness of the service, accessiblity

WHAT IS A WELL DESIGNED PLACE?
The joint DTLR/CABE publication, By Design, promotes higher standards of urban design. It states the objectives of urban design as being:

Character: to promote character in townscape and landscape by responding to and reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development, landscape and culture
Continuity and enclosure: to promote the continuity of street frontages and the enclosure of space by development which clearly defines private and public areas
Quality of the public realm: to promote public spaces and routes that are attractive, safe, uncluttered and work effectively for all in society, including disabled and elderly people
Ease of movement: to promote accessibility and local permeability by making places that connect with each other and are easy to move through, putting people before traffic and integrating land uses and transport
Legibility: to promote legibility through development that provides recognisable routes, intersections and landmarks that help people find their way around
Adaptability: to promote adaptability through development that can respond to changing social, technological and economic conditions
Diversity: to promote diversity and choice through a mix of compatible developments and uses that work together to create viable places that respond to local needs
Better Public Buildings Report

100 years ago public buildings were often the pride of Britain’s towns and cities. Schools, railway stations, post offices and libraries set high standards of building design that the private sector tried to emulate. The best embodied a strong sense of civic pride. We know that good design provides a host of benefits. The best designed schools encourage children to learn. The best designed hospitals help patients to recover their spirits and their health. Well designed parks and town centres help to bring communities together.

Tony Blair in the foreword to Better Public Buildings October 2000.

DRIVERS FOR CHANGE

Better Public Buildings

The Better Public Buildings report includes a checklist of do’s and don’ts for how to ensure quality buildings, from schools and hospitals to theatres and bridges. These are helpful advice to local authorities developing a new approach to design quality.

Stop:
- Regarding good design as an optional extra
- Treating lowest cost as best value
- Valuing initial capital cost as more important than whole-life cost
- Treating buildings as purely functional plant without civil significance
- Imagining that effectiveness and efficiency are divorced from design
- Being frightened to take calculated risks
- Assuming that the public does not care

Start:
- Identifying the high-level post which should incorporate the role of ‘design champion’
- Insisting that measures to ensure the appointment of good designers are reviewed by the design champion
- Promoting high-quality design on PFI projects in line with Treasury Note 7
- Ensisting on appropriately high design standards for all projects
- Allowing enough design time for projects of real quality to emerge
- Measuring efficiency and waste in construction
- Appointing integrated teams focusing on the whole life impact and performance of a development
- Encouraging longer-term relationships with integrated project teams as part of long-term programmes, always subject to rigorous performance review
- Using whole-life costing in the value-for-money assessment of buildings
- Ensuring there is a single-point client responsibility for any given project, with authority

THE PRIME MINISTER’S BETTER PUBLIC BUILDING AWARD

To encourage and acknowledge good practice in public buildings, the Prime Minister has endorsed an accolade to be awarded annually to a project which demonstrates excellence in design and procurement. It is open to schemes of any size, commissioned by or on behalf of central or local government or grant-aided organisations.

Full details are available from CABE.
RETHINKING CONSTRUCTION

The Rethinking Construction agenda bears many similarities to Best Value, focusing on continuous improvement, whole-life costs, and overall quality. The emphasis on a quality, customer-focused product is a key vehicle for delivering higher design standards.

The delivery of efficiency savings and greater safety through effective partnering between the supply chain, contractors, designers and the client is being realised across a range of local government Rethinking Construction projects. Increasingly, local authority capital budgets are being committed to Rethinking Construction principles, which will help to ensure high quality buildings. Celebrating Innovation, a joint CABE/Rethinking Construction publication shows how design and the Rethinking Construction agenda come together.

Any procurement route, for example design and build or public/private partnership, can deliver quality design as long as there is a commitment from the client. Guidance from 4Ps and the Office of Government Commerce gives useful advice on how to approach the procurement process.

The Torrs Millennium Walkway, Derbyshire The Torrs Millennium Walkway is an example of Rethinking Construction principles delivering a project of outstanding design quality. The challenge was to construct an elevated pathway along the sheer face of Torrs Gorge in the Peak District National Park. A commitment to partnering between the client, Derbyshire County Council, the council’s in-house design team, the contractor and the supply chain delivered an outstanding project with improvements in the capital cost, construction time and with an exemplary safety record. For full details see Celebrating Innovation, a joint CABE/Rethinking Construction report.
DELIVERING AN URBAN RENAISSANCE

The drive towards better civic buildings and spaces must be understood in the context of attempts to revitalise our towns and cities, with good design high on the agenda. Taking the lead from the Government’s Urban Task Force, led by Lord Rogers, and articulated in the Urban White Paper Our Towns and Cities: The Future, the push for an urban renaissance is as relevant for small market towns as it is for inner cities.

The White Paper presents a vision for urban living that involves:
- people shaping the future of their community, supported by strong and truly representative local leaders
- people living in attractive, well-kept towns and cities which use space and buildings well
- good design and planning which makes it practical to live in a more environmentally sustainable way, with less noise, pollution and traffic congestion
- towns and cities able to create and share prosperity, investing to help all their citizens reach their full potential
- good quality services – health, education, housing, transport, finance, shopping, leisure and protection from crime – that meet the needs of people and businesses wherever they are

The provision of new civic buildings that are accessible, sustainable and well-designed is an important element of a local authority’s contribution to providing better places to live.

DELIVERING DESIGN QUALITY

Currently, all government departments with a significant capital spending programme are producing action plans to ensure the delivery of higher standards of design quality. This initiative provides helpful direction for local authorities also wishing to develop their own action plans. The departmental action plans focus on three main areas:

- Delivery
  - examine current procurement methods and programmes to ensure that design is encouraged and not lost in the process of procurement and construction
  - ensure best value not lowest cost is the basis of policy and practice
  - gain value out of money already committed, for example on road and building renewal, getting the message across that design quality will add value to the ‘ordinary’ as much as the ‘unusual’
  - consider where design could improve the delivery of services
  - make best use of the skills that departments already have
  - ask the right questions at the start of the project – do you need a new building or a change in processes?

- Integration
  - develop an integrated approach towards design in the built environment – linking planning, highways, and construction and also close working relationships with those managing public spaces such as town centre managers and the police
  - consider an obligation across the local authority to consider design
  - consider training on design appreciation for both officers and Elected Members
  - ensure a long term commitment to proper whole life maintenance of buildings

- Placemaking
  - be concerned not with buildings in isolation but with places
  - ensure that community consultation is built into the procurement, planning and design processes
  - consider how to develop a procurement process that is proactive, preparing design policies, urban design frameworks and design briefs in anticipation of and to aid the promotion of public and private developments
  - question if the development control process has access to high quality design advice

Creative Spaces: A Toolkit for Participatory Urban Design

Ensuring a proper understanding of the local community’s priorities is vital. There are a number of projects local authorities can draw from, including the Urban Design Alliance’s Placecheck Initiative and the Architecture Foundation’s Creative Spaces work.
For design quality to be delivered it needs leadership and championing. A local authority design champion may be the means of delivering this leadership.

A design champion would:

• provide a symbol of commitment to good design
• create leadership, to generate enthusiasm and commitment for design quality and provide a point of contact for external bodies
• co-ordinate effort across the authority, joining up the different departments and combating organisational ghettos
• promote the benefits of good design and ensure every new investment in the built environment, from a building to a road-crossing is of a high quality,
• ensure all investment is seen as a piece of urban or rural design, rather than in isolation

Although the status and role of a design champion will vary according to the needs of individual local authorities, there are a number of shared principles. Generally, the design champion should be embedded within the council. A design champion should be someone senior, either a member or an official. Political and organisational support for the design champion is vital.

At Leeds City Council the City Architect, an officer of the local authority, acts as the design champion, supported by the Chair of the Environment Committee. Birmingham has taken a different approach, creating a strong Urban Design Department. Such a team within the local authority would ideally combine building design, highways, town planning, urban design, landscape design and property maintenance and management. In some cases it would be appropriate to have support from an external design panel. This local design panel would be consulted by the Council on all significant design issues within the local authority and all major planning applications.

Lack of resources, particularly in small authorities, is a concern, as any design champion must be properly resourced. There may be a case for design services to be provided at a regional or sub-regional level. This could be done via the evolving network of local Built Environment Centres. In addition, geographically close authorities facing similar issues could band together to share a design champion’s skills.

CO-ORDINATING THE PUBLIC REALM

An unco-ordinated approach to the management and design of streets and other public spaces leads to inefficiency and poor quality. We need to ensure that we reduce the clutter in our public spaces, promoting pedestrian friendly environments. We also need to make sure that there is a positive relationship between new buildings and the public realm. This will need a co-ordinated approach from planners, designers and highways engineers, to come up with creative solutions that address the often car focused built environment.

Relatively small interventions, such as upgrading street crossings and improving street furniture can make a huge impact. The current DTLR Home Zones initiative is providing funding for best practice to improve residential streetscapes.

There is a range of actions that local authorities may consider taking to better co-ordinate the public realm. A good starting point is Places, Streets and Movements, the companion guide to Design Bulletin 32, which gives guidance on the integration of planning, urban design and highway engineering practice.

Individual local authorities are encouraged to build on this generic guidance by preparing local or district Streetscape Design Guides and by being flexible in the interpretation of national guidelines. Local authorities should also take steps to better integrate the different departments responsible for the various elements of managing the public realm – this could take the form of a public realm champion, cross-departmental training or even structural changes.

The Planning Officers Society guide, Moving Towards Excellence in Urban Design and Conservation, is another useful point of reference on this topic.

Brindley Place, Birmingham
Throughout the 1990s, Birmingham City Council commissioned and implemented a series of urban design studies, including downgrading the inner ring road and creating Centenary and Victoria Squares. Working closely with private sector developers, Argent, the council also extended the city centre with the development of Brindley Place, where high standards of design had demonstrable economic benefits.

Coventry
Many local authorities are taking a highly proactive and creative approach to creating new civic spaces. Coventry, through an ambitious programme, has created a series of new quality public spaces, helping to link together what was a disjointed city.
RUNNING A DESIGN PANEL

A number of local authorities have set up design panels to review development proposals. Panels’ members are drawn from local design practices and the public sector, and provide advice to the authorities’ planning officers and Elected Members. The following points provide helpful advice on how to run a design panel:

- Get the panel involved in schemes at the earliest possible stage so that they take ownership of them, rather than simply reacting.
- Do not swamp the panel; better that they undertake 3 or 4 key schemes well over a period of time, than dot around a whole host of smaller schemes.
- Be prepared to use individual members or sub-groups of the panel on particular cases.
- Ensure you have urban design as well as pure architectural skills.
- Keep the panel relatively small, probably no more than ten people.
- Go for individuals of recognised quality within their field.
- Consider offering a small honoraria to the members, as this stresses the importance of the panel and can yield a much more serious response in return.
- Do not be afraid to go for one or two members who may not know the area as knowledge of geography can be gained quickly, professional skills cannot.
- The panel must clearly work within the open and accountable development control process of local planning authorities.

DELIVERING DESIGN VIA THE PLANNING SYSTEM

Local authorities’ development plans and supplementary planning guidance provide invaluable tools in setting out the vision for the local area and defining clear design thresholds. PPG1, the guidance on the overarching principles of planning in England, states ‘applicants for planning permission should be able to demonstrate how they have taken account of the need for good design in their development proposals and that they have had regard to relevant development plan policies and supplementary design guidance.’

Better Places to Live, another joint DETR/CABE publication, takes the By Design analysis a step further by focusing on the attributes that underlie well-designed, successful residential environments.

‘Better Places to Live challenges local authorities and developers to think more imaginatively about design and layout’

Lord Falconer of Thoroton QC, Minister for Planning Housing and Regeneration, Sir Stuart Lipton, Chairman, CABE, Better Places to Live

Taunton Deane Borough Council Residential Design Guide Numerous local authorities have already produced detailed planning guidance on issues such as housing, landscaping and shop fronts. In addition it is worth considering area-specific design policy, not only to protect historic environments, but also to raise the quality in other areas.

Design Review includes detailed guidance on how to run a Design Panel and is illustrated with projects which have been seen by the CABE design review committee in the last two years.
CONCLUSION

If these principles are followed we will all be rewarded with attractive, aesthetically pleasing buildings that are fit for their purpose and represent good value for money. Our public building stock, and the public realm that surrounds it will be better appreciated, will last longer, will work better, and will better represent our civic aspirations.

Woodlea Junior School, Hampshire
Local government can deliver design quality where there is a supportive culture. This requires corporate support from the centre, organisationally as well as politically. SCALA, the representative body for architects and construction managers in local authorities, produces an annual review showcasing the work of local authorities in delivering quality buildings.

The importance of in-house design teams, working with elected members, in delivering a long-term programme of quality buildings is vital. For example in Hampshire County Council a mixture of political support (and stability), personal commitment, plus adequate resources has led to a strong design history spanning decades.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Websites:
- CABE
  www.cabe.org.uk
- Rethinking Construction
  www.construction.detr.gov.uk
  www.rethinkingconstruction.org
- The Confederation of Construction Clients
  www.clientsuccess.org.uk
- 4Ps
  www.4ps.co.uk
- Office of Government Commerce
  www.ogc.gov.uk
- DTLR
  www.dtlr.gov.uk
- SCALA
  www.scala.org.uk
- Local Government Association
  www.lga.gov.uk
- Planning Officers Society
  www.planningofficers.org.uk
- SOLACE
  www.solace.org.uk

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MORE HELP FROM CABE

Can CABE be of further help to your local authority?

Our design review committee appraises the quality of projects before a planning decision is made. Last year we received projects from over 160 authorities, and were able to provide advice across a whole range of cases. While we cannot comment in detail on every scheme we receive, we will be prepared to provide guidance on those schemes that are likely to have the most significant impact on the local environment. We can also receive schemes directly from the developer or design team on a confidential basis before a planning application has even been submitted.

Our enabling programme offers technical assistance to local authorities on complex public building and urban masterplanning projects. If your scheme is selected for our assistance, we will assign an expert to you from the outset of the project to help work through the procurement issues as they affect the quality of the final product. Depending on the size and type of project, we are sometimes able to offer this service for free.

Our regional programme may be able to provide some help with skills development for your officers or members. We will be running events in your region on a regular basis about key elements of the design process.

Check our website for further information. You will also find other resources on our website, including a growing digital library of best practice schemes from which to draw inspiration.

This document was produced by CABE in partnership with: