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DESIGN QUALITY

Achieving High Quality Design

Introduction

9.1 Good design is essential to delivering sustainable development. It enhances quality of life, improves perceptions of place, and supports environmental and economic benefits.







9.2 The NPPF places great importance on creating better places to live and work through inclusive, beautiful design, both in plan-making and in the development management process. This Plan includes site allocations whose design will be critical to creating vibrant, safe and functional communities with a distinctive sense of place that respects local context. The same applies to windfall sites expected to come forward during the plan period. A key objective of the Plan is therefore to ensure that all future development is designed with quality at its heart. National planning policy is clear that protecting and enhancing the built environment is fundamental to achieving sustainable development and forms part of the planning system's overarching objectives.



9.3 The borough has a rich and diverse urban and rural townscape and landscape character, containing many established and attractive places and buildings worthy of protection and enhancement. Such examples are the historic heart of Tonbridge, the historic villages of the Medway Gap, the modern garden village settlement of Kings Hill, built on a former World War II airfield, the unique Grade I listed Victorian Gothic Hadlow Tower, locally known as “May’s Folly”, and the numerous traditional oast houses of the historic hop industry, built of Kentish vernacular design and materials.



9.4 This Plan seeks to ensure that new buildings and spaces complement the rich character of the borough and create inclusive, attractive and healthy places which reinforce local distinctiveness. Furthermore, well-designed places can promote economic benefits for residents and users, reduce energy demand, reduce crime, enhance well-being, enhance biodiversity and cumulatively mitigate the effects of climate change.



9.5 In 2019 the Government published the National Design Guide which sets out 10 principles of well-designed places (updated 2021). This is shown in Figure 9.1.

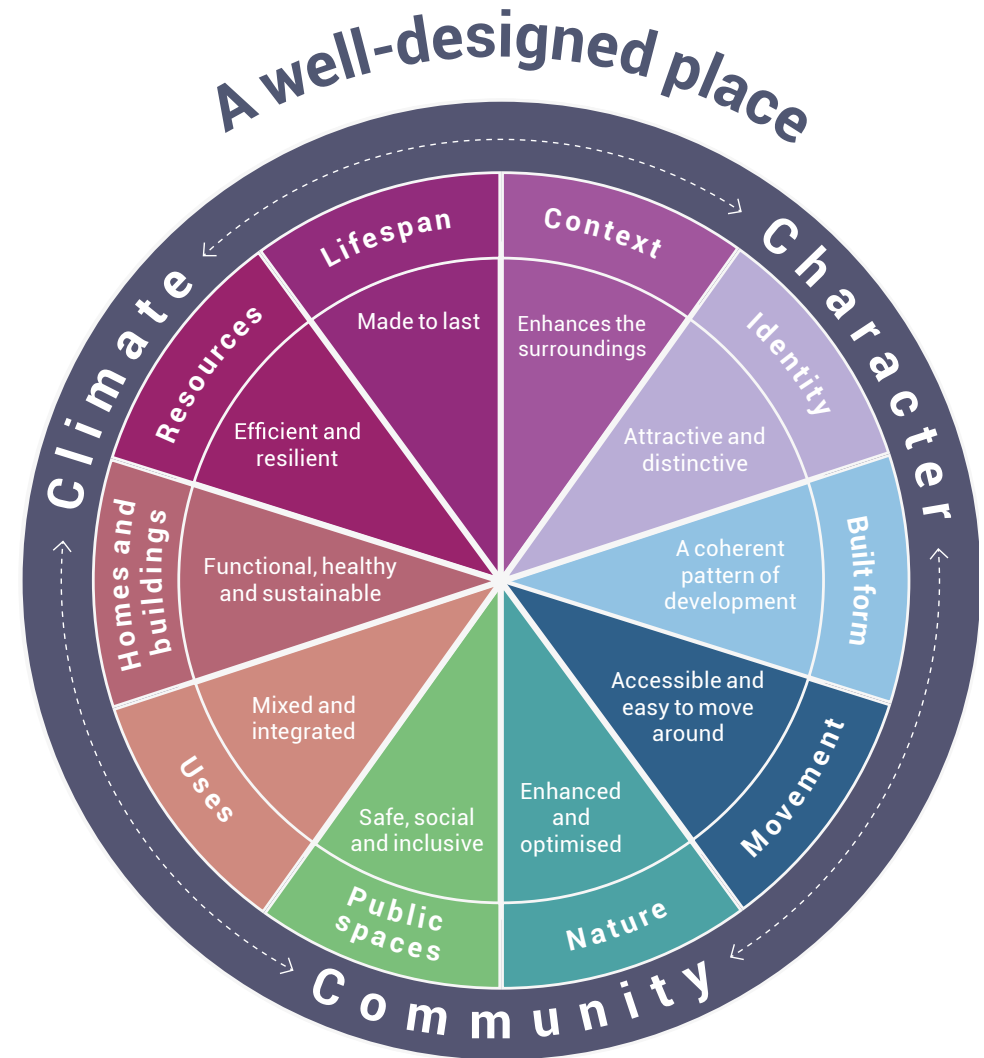


Figure 9.1: National Model Design Code Diagram



9.6 **Policy D1** sets out the council's design expectations for proposals in the borough and includes key principles that should inform all proposed development.

Policy D1: Achieving High Quality Design

- 1 All development in the borough must incorporate principles of good design, be of the highest quality, and create inclusive, attractive places which promote a sense of place, pay regard to local distinctiveness and character and contribute to health and wellbeing.
- 2 Design must be considered at the earliest opportunity, having regard to national and local design guidance (including The Kent Design Guide), relevant design guides and Design Codes.
- 3 Community engagement is encouraged on all major development schemes. Engagement should be proportionate to the scale of development proposed.
- 4 Development proposals will be supported where they:

Context and Identity

- a Are locally distinctive, respond cohesively and create a positive sense of place by demonstrating a thorough understanding of the context and character of an area;
- b Respond positively to the scale, density, grain, massing and rhythm of the area; and
- c Are visually attractive and demonstrate a well-considered design response within the proposed elevational design, architectural detailing and use of local, traditional and high-quality materials.

Built Form and Layout

- d Have regard to 'Building for a Healthy Life' and promote inclusive design;
- e Provide sufficient internal space and layout to support the health, wellbeing and day-to-day needs of future occupants, having regard to the Government's latest Nationally Described Space Standard;
- f Make efficient use of land with ease of access to local public transport, facilities and services;
- g Incorporate wayfinding by using landmarks, vistas, destinations and focal points;

- h Be of an appropriate density for the area with density optimised in a way that accounts for the type of development required to meet the borough's needs, whilst also taking account of the character of the area;
- i Are designed to avoid unacceptable adverse impacts or harm to the amenity of neighbouring properties and their users / occupants in terms of privacy, sunlight and daylight, overbearing, noise, odour, traffic and vibration;
- j Where appropriate, provide high-quality multi-functional green open spaces and public spaces, ensuring that open spaces are designed to be resilient to climate change and adaptable over time and integrated where possible into the existing green and blue network;
- k Support habitat conservation and creation for wildlife and maximise opportunities for Biodiversity Net Gain, incorporating street trees and planting where possible; and
- l Ensure service areas, refuse storage and collection areas do not detract from the public realm and visual quality of a place.

Strategic Policy

Movement

- m** Promote accessibility and connectivity with a clear hierarchy of streets and routes;
- n** Provide high-quality pedestrian and cycle infrastructure, prioritising safe and sustainable transport choices;
- o** Deliver walkable neighbourhoods that prioritise people over cars and reduce vehicle speeds;
- p** Provide vehicle and cycle parking and charging points in a manner that is well integrated, responds to local character and does not clutter the street scene;
- q** Ensure safe movement for service vehicles (including appropriate turning areas).

Lifespan

- r** Are designed to be adaptable to changing / evolving needs and to facilitate opportunities for home working; and
- s** Are designed to last, adding to the overall quality of the area utilising local and traditional materials.

- 5** Development should, where practicable and proportionate, be designed to:
 - a** Deter crime and reduce the fear of crime, paying regard to the principles set out in Secured by Design; and
 - b** Reduce overheating and regulate the internal temperature of buildings through building form, orientation, passive ventilation and cooling, landscaping, urban greening and street trees, shading mechanisms, external colouring and green roofs and living walls.

Policy Implementation

9.7 Development proposals must provide sufficient information, including through Design and Access Statements where required, to demonstrate how they have responded positively to the design policies of this Plan and relevant local guidance, including the [Kent Design Guide](#), Character Appraisals and, where applicable, Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans. National design guidance, including the National Model Design Code and Design and Placemaking Planning Practice Guidance, should inform the design and assessment of major development proposals. In preparing schemes, applicants should have regard to relevant national standards and best practice, including Building for a Healthy Life. In considering the quality and functionality of residential accommodation, the Council will have regard to the Government's latest Nationally Described Space Standard as a

recognised benchmark for achieving well-designed homes and a high standard of residential amenity for future occupants. Design and Access Statements should explain how the principles of Policy D1 have been considered and reflected in the project design. Where Design and Access Statements are not required, proposals must comply with the design requirements set out in the local plan and national guidance and policy. A Design and Access Statement should be provided in addition to any issue-specific assessment that is required via the council's validation checklist.

9.8 Proposals should demonstrate, as per the NPPF, how they make effective use of land, including achieving appropriate densities, by paying regard to an area's prevailing character and setting (including residential gardens), or by promoting regeneration and change.



9.9 As a predominantly rural borough, development should respond positively to local landscape character and setting to help achieve well-designed places. This should be informed by the [Landscape Assessment of Kent \(2004\)](#) and other relevant landscape evidence, including the borough's Local Landscape Character Assessment (2025) and Landscape Visual Impact Assessments (2025).

9.10 When assessing the appropriateness of design, the council is informed by the Kent Design Guide (2000) and a suite of Character Area Appraisals, as well as the [Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2021-2026](#), the [Kent Downs Landscape Design Handbook](#) and the High [Weald AONB Management Plan 2024-2026](#).

9.11 Pre-application consultation is encouraged to establish requirements prior to the submission of planning applications. Applicants should discuss public engagement requirements with the council, having regard to the requirements set out in the Statement of Community Involvement. This may include the submission of a Statement of Community Involvement which should clearly set out the outcome of any community engagement activities, including exhibitions, workshops and other consultation exercises.

Design Codes and Masterplans



Introduction

9.12 New development should create environments in which residents can live and work and deliver benefits for existing communities, where relevant. A well-designed scheme will result in sustainable places which help to meet the development needs of the area whilst integrating well with existing settlements and meeting wider Local Plan objectives.

9.13 The NPPF seeks to secure high-quality design and makes clear that poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions should be refused. Design codes should provide a framework for creating high-quality places. The NPPF confirms that, to provide clarity about design expectations at an early stage, local planning authorities should prepare design guides or codes consistent with the National Design Guide and National Model Design Code, reflecting local character and design preferences. These may

apply to particular areas or strategic sites identified in the local plan for housing or other uses, such as retail, employment or leisure. The National Model Design Code defines codes as a set of simple, concise, illustrated design requirements that are visual and numerical wherever possible to provide specific, detailed parameters for the physical development of a site or area.

9.14 Design guides and codes therefore provide a local framework for creating beautiful and distinctive places with a consistent and high-quality standard of design, providing certainty for the local community.

9.15 Policy D2 sets out the council's expectation that developers use masterplans and design codes as part of a robust design process to achieve high-quality development across the borough that responds positively to its built environment and supports innovative, sustainable, modern design.

Policy D2: Design Codes and Masterplans

- 1 The council will require the submission of a masterplan for all sites of 100 or more dwellings, or sites for significant non-residential development (such as large-scale employment or mixed uses), submitted in either full or outline applications. For other major residential developments below 100 dwellings, the submission of a masterplan or framework plan is encouraged where this would assist in demonstrating a comprehensive design-led approach.
- 2 Design Codes will be developed for large key sites as identified in the spatial strategy and on the Proposals Map. On large scale strategic sites of 500 or more dwellings the council will require Design Codes (in addition to masterplans). Design Codes are encouraged for developments of 100 or more dwellings or in relation to specific development types.
- 3 Schemes proposing 100 or more dwellings, or where significant design implications are identified, will be referred to a Design Review Panel.
- 4 Design Codes will be required for self-build or custom build projects proposing 5 or more units, to encourage a coordinated approach to the design and development of individual plots.

Policy Implementation

9.16 Masterplans are expected to be prepared by the applicant/developer and should provide detailed supporting evidence of the design concept and evolution, providing a thorough site analysis, an evaluation of constraints and opportunities and provide a framework for new development on the site. Masterplans should be subject to pre-application advice and community engagement.

9.17 A masterplan will be required for sites delivering 100 or more dwellings and for significant non-residential development, such as large-scale employment or mixed-use schemes, to help secure high-quality, sustainable places. These masterplans should be based on best practice, informed by a thorough understanding of the site and its surroundings, and comply with Policy D1. For large-scale employment or mixed-use sites over 2 hectares with fewer than 100 homes, applicants should discuss masterplan requirements with the council.

9.18 Design Codes for sites referred to in Policy D2 are expected to be prepared by the applicant/developer using the National Design Guide and the National Model Design Code as a framework for how they should be prepared, including the seven-step coding process they need to follow. The content and level of detail of the Design Code will be agreed at pre-application stage. The content should be proportionate to the scale and design context of the site. Design Codes should be prepared in accordance with the National Model Design Code and should provide clear, measurable and site-specific design parameters that can be used to guide development and inform the determination of planning applications and reserved matters submissions. Design Codes should be submitted to the council for consideration before final submission as part of any planning application.

9.19 To ensure that development delivered is of the highest quality, the council will seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission being granted and the construction of the development. Adherence to the design codes is likely to be a condition of any outline planning approval. Reserved matters applications will need to demonstrate in the Design and Access Statements how the development conforms to the approved Design Code.

9.20 The use of Design Review Panels is supported by the council as a means of securing good design across large and complex sites. A Design Review Panel is an independent body of built-environment professionals that assesses the architectural, urban and landscape design quality of development schemes. This is best done during the pre-application stage. The panels provide expert feedback that can be used to make changes to a scheme or as a material consideration in the decision-making process. Schemes that are likely to trigger the need for a Design Review Panel include major developments in sensitive locations such as conservation areas or national landscapes. Design Review Panels can be funded through planning performance agreements between the council and the developer.

Housing Density

Introduction

9.21 Making effective use of urban land is an important policy objective of the NPPF. Increasing net density reduces the need for additional greenfield release and the release of Green Belt land. National planning policy supports making effective use of land and requires planning policies and decisions to optimise site densities through a design-led approach.. It requires establishing minimum density standards for town centres and those locations that have a high level of connectivity. It goes onto recommend that Local Planning Authorities seek a significant uplift in the average density of residential development within these areas, unless it can be shown that there are strong reasons why this would be inappropriate.

9.22 Whilst the existing character should be considered, it should not preclude development that makes the most of an area's potential. The NPPF promotes the use of area-based density expectations informed by local context, rather than the application of a single uniform density in the rest of the plan area. This is to be informed by the existing density characteristics, heritage and local context.

9.23 The Local Plan supports this approach by establishing indicative minimum density expectations across the borough. Higher densities will be expected in the most sustainable locations, including areas with good access to town and district centres and high-quality public transport services, in line with the objective of increasing overall residential density across the borough. The most sustainable settlements are identified through the settlement hierarchy in Policy SP3 of the Spatial Strategy, with Tier 1 and Tier 2 settlements expected to accommodate the greatest uplift in density.

9.24 The Local Plan recognises that increased density is a means of creating sustainable, liveable places, not an end in itself. Area character, heritage significance and local context should inform scale, massing and form. However, these factors should not be used to resist appropriate intensification where growth can be accommodated through high-quality design. A design-led approach should be used to optimise site capacity, ensuring that the highest appropriate density is achieved in each case.

Policy D3: Housing Densities

- 1 Proposals must demonstrate that they have made the most effective use of land by optimising development density and delivering an increase in residential densities, whilst respecting local character. Development proposals should achieve the highest appropriate density compatible with a high-quality design, local character and placemaking. The optimum density of a development should be informed by a design-led approach which considers site-specific constraints and opportunities.
- 2 In determining the appropriate density, proposals should take account of:
 - a Accessibility by walking, cycling and public transport;
 - b Proximity to services, facilities and town and district centres;
 - c The capacity of existing and planned infrastructure;
 - d Site characteristics, context and constraints; and
 - e Opportunities for brownfield regeneration and land assembly.
- 3 The following indicative minimum net density expectations should be applied, subject to a design-led assessment:
 - a 45 dph in Tier 1 and 2 settlements within 800m walking distance of a railway station, or town centre.
 - b 35 dph in Tier 1 and 2 settlements outside 800m walking distance of a railway station or town centre.
 - c 30 dph in Tier 3 and 4 settlements.

Higher densities will be expected in locations with high levels of accessibility, including areas within 800m of railway stations, high-quality and accessible public transport and town and district centres.
- 4 The indicative minimum net density expectations will apply to all major developments unless a lower density is required to respond appropriately to site-specific design-led considerations. A lower density may be supported where it is demonstrated that it is necessary to respond to:
 - a Local character, townscape or heritage assets;
 - b Landscape setting;
 - c Site constraints or configuration; and / or
 - d The capacity of existing or planned infrastructure.

Policy Implementation

9.25 Making the most effective use of land is an important aim of the local plan. Policy D3 is therefore applied across all Tier 1 to Tier 4 settlements in the Borough. Planning applications for major development providing 10 or more homes, or on sites of 0.5 hectares or more, must state the net residential density and demonstrate how the policy requirements have been met. Proposals should demonstrate how the density has been optimised through a design-led approach, rather than being based solely on numerical targets. Regard will be had to preserving the liveability of a place. There should be no compromise on the provision of privacy and adequate car parking to meet the needs of residents.

9.26 Density should be expressed as net density in dwellings per hectare and calculated by dividing the number of homes by the net developable area¹.

9.27 The approximately 800m walking distance to railway stations, town centres and district centres should be measured along actual walking routes that are paved and well-lit, rather than by straight-line distance. On larger sites, proposed walking routes that improve access may be considered when defining this catchment. Consideration should also be given to access to frequent public transport services, including bus routes, when assessing site accessibility and appropriate density.

9.28 Where masterplans and design codes are required under Policy D2, applicants should set out the density profile across the site and show that the overall net density meets the indicative density expectations and reflects a design-led approach to optimising development capacity.

9.29 Where proposals do not meet the indicative minimum density expectations, applicants will be required to provide a design-based justification within a site design statement explaining why a higher density would not be appropriate. This should demonstrate, through a design-led assessment, how site constraints, local character, infrastructure capacity and other relevant factors have informed the proposed density. Alternative density options should also be explored through pre-application discussions.

¹ Net developable areas exclude primary distributor roads, strategic landscaping, structural open space, schools, employment land, and other non-residential uses, but include residential streets, local open space, and shared amenity areas serving housing.