

Design Character

63. This section considers the design and form of layouts, spaces and individual buildings and the objectives that local authorities will have for new residential development in Staffordshire.
64. The site appraisal process set out in this guide will provide a basis for determining the character of layout and spatial strategy that will be appropriate for each site in its setting. The wide variety of development contexts should stimulate a similarly wide variety of responses.
65. Towns and their surroundings normally display a gradient of increasing density from the edge (less dense) to the centre. The character of development sites should normally respect the established density gradient and create lower density forms on the edge of settlements and more intense forms in inner urban locations. The design objectives and most appropriate form of development will be different across this range. This part of the guide provides some principles and examples of successful development ranging from inner urban brownfield sites to development in wholly rural locations.
66. New housing schemes in Staffordshire will be built on one of seven broad divisions or categories of development site.
67. The examples illustrate the use of design principles which recognise the different character to be created in urban, suburban and rural situations. Differences in density result from the application of these principles rather than as a design tool in itself. The scale and form of buildings, their siting in relationship to one another and the spaces between them establish the design character and must be considered as a totality. For example large detached houses with high plot coverage and minimal separation will not fit satisfactorily into either rural or urban situations even though they display elements of both. Nevertheless, following the principles recommended in this guide should result in an overall increase in the density of development and more efficient use of land. Less land should be required for road space, extensive forward visibility lines and junction sight lines as more enclosed urban forms are created.
68. The following pages illustrate some of the diversity of imaginative designs achieved on these various types of site, as a source of inspiration and encouragement to achieve a similar quality in new housing developments that reflect the particular character of their setting in Staffordshire.
69. On the largest sites, it will often be necessary for the designer to create different character zones within the development. These should also be based on the design gradient principle with the most intensive forms of development being used to emphasise the community focus for the development around shops, a school or a community centre for example.
70. High density developments most appropriate to inner urban or suburban infill sites will rely upon a relatively formal pattern of development where buildings are arranged to contain and enclose spaces by use of continuous building frontages arranged as street terraces, crescents, squares or mews. The design objective is to create enclosure between buildings which will lead to a visually interesting street scene if used with a varied building line and a harmonising range of materials and architectural detail.

- Inner urban or “brownfield” sites.
- Suburban infill sites.
- New suburban estates and development on the urban fringe.
- Rural, village or small market town infill sites.
- Greenfield development on the edge of rural villages or small market towns.
- Development in wholly rural locations.
- Development in or adjacent to conservation areas or historic settlements.



Recognising existing design character

71. Enclosure depends upon establishing the correct proportions between the width of the street or space and the height of the enclosing buildings. The taller the building the greater width must be given to streets or open spaces so that they will be defined and enclosed but not dominated or over shadowed. The relationship will vary to reflect the type of space being created, an urban enclosed space relies upon a height/width ratio in the range of 1:1 to 1:2. For more relaxed suburban environments the width proportion should be increased. DETR publication 'Places, Streets and Movement' shows how the elimination of parked vehicles from the front of dwellings helps to create the appropriate proportions and how interest can be created in the streetscene by aligning footways to building lines and varying road widths. When this approach is used the scheme must ensure that the necessary vehicular manoeuvring space (the 'tracking') can be provided within the highway. Garaging and parking should normally be provided in small courtyards at the side or rear of dwellings, which should be overlooked from the dwellings for security. If frontage parking is used it should be well screened by flank walls or hedges although care will be required to avoid visibility being restricted at the private accesses (see Appendix A 'Visibility').



Examples of different character created by varying height / width ratio (Essex)

72. On some sites it may be appropriate to have houses opening direct from the pavement. The close siting of dwellings to the road can create a pleasing and intimate effect. It can create visual variety and higher density land use. Elsewhere, the alignment of a gable end close to back of pavement can close a view; or lead the eye through from one part of a street to another emphasising the spatial structure of the layout.

73. Much recent housing development in Staffordshire has been on the edge of towns or in smaller village sites where highly urban development is not appropriate. These suburban developments too often appear to be standardised with repetitive use of a small range of house types, frequently the emphasis is on the provision of detached houses but on relatively small plots giving little room for visual space or landscape planting between dwellings. This type of site presents the biggest challenge to the designer and it will be important to establish a strong design concept, to produce living environments of variety, quality and visual interest. The inclusion of geometric patterns of roads, squares, crescents and boulevards etc. can provide a clear framework for development which must include intensive planting within and between plots or building groupings as part of the landscape strategy and variety in the siting of dwellings in relation to the road.



74. Regimented rows of house frontages set behind a standard parking depth creates monotonous townscape and should be avoided. With off-street parking accessed from the residential road frontage, developers should adopt a flexible and varied building line although ensuring that any structure has a minimum clearance of 500mm from the edge of the adopted highway.



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75. In wholly rural locations or where development is infilling in very low density areas the design emphasis must be on fitting the development into the broader landscape through extensive planting and landscaping. The objective is to create development where the landscape and planting is dominant and buildings are contained or set within it. Sufficient space between dwellings and front garden space should enable dense planted screening to develop.
76. The form and layout of the buildings, the use of local materials, construction techniques and the relationship of buildings to adjoining streets and spaces all contribute to their character and visual distinctiveness. The design process set out in this guide will help designers to respond to the context of new development, drawing on the qualities of our established towns and villages, and reinterpreting these in a manner, which caters for the needs of present and future generations.

77. Too much or too elaborate detail of the design of individual house types creates a streetscape which is visually confused. The competition for visual attention between design elements such as gables, porches, decorated windows, patterned brickwork etc. reduces the coherence of the environment. Successful urban compositions balance individual feature buildings within a context of plainer house types, which should predominate. High quality residential environments should be restful and design details should be kept muted and simple.

78. The design of the built environment should be treated holistically, as advocated in the DETR publication 'Places Streets and Movement' (companion guide to DB32). This draws from the historic context to inform the character of future developments and identifies the need to create a sense of place and community as a key design objective. A close working relationship between highway engineers, architects, urban designers, planners and landscape architects should be encouraged to recapture this sense of overall vision.

79. The site appraisal process set out in this guide will provide a basis for determining the character of layout and spatial strategy that will be appropriate for each site in its setting. The wide variety of development contexts should stimulate a similarly wide variety of responses.

INNER URBAN OR BROWNFIELD SITES

80. These are likely to be enclosed by or adjoining existing built development. Some sites may also be reusing and adapting existing structures. No standard solutions will take account of the particular constraints and local context from which the developers must take their cue. Buildings may be terraced and heights could vary, dependent on the prevailing environment. Walling and roofing materials should reflect local character. Often, relatively formal "urban" road layouts may be expected, with well designed areas of hard standing or hard landscaping.

SUBURBAN INFILL SITES

81. These will normally be small sites, such as the redevelopment of former garden land, and will be adjoined by existing development. The scale, layout, materials and proportions of any new dwellings will need to be particularly sensitive to their setting and the character of neighbouring housing. The small scale of such sites may give scope for individual house designs, rather than relying on the standard models of volume builders or trade publications. Such sites will often enjoy established landscaping that should be carefully analysed and safeguarded to help the new development to blend into its setting.



Successful use of simple traditional details



NEW SUBURBAN ESTATES

82. These sites are the largest scale of new housing development and are likely to be developed by companies that rely on standard house type designs. Some developers are now seeking opportunities to experiment with new designs, or recreate older forms of development that are more innovative and imaginative. This more flexible approach is to be encouraged. Even standard house types should not inhibit the creation of a diverse and interesting spatial structure, provided that the distribution of houses is not repetitive and that priority is given to creating a sense of place. In most cases this will mean that the layout of the estate should respect and follow the existing topography and use significant landscape features as focal points. This response to natural features rarely results in a rigid disposition of streets and house plots.

83. Particular care will be needed on the edges of greenfield sites to avoid an abrupt and incongruous transition from open country to housing estate. Geometrical alignment of houses and rear garden boundaries should normally be avoided. Dense belts of landscaping may be required, but should not be used as mitigation for poor design or layout.



New houses - traditional forms



Successful infill developments respecting the locality

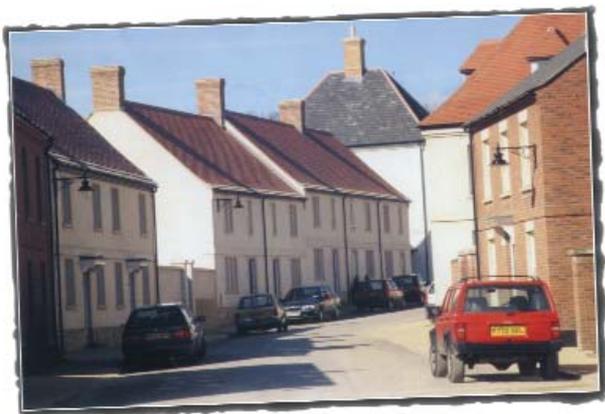


RURAL VILLAGE OR SMALL MARKET TOWN INFILL SITES

84. Most of these sites will have their own distinct character, scale and density of building (even where they are not in conservation areas). The site appraisal will be essential to understanding the locality as well as the constraints and opportunities of the site itself. These infill sites are likely to be small with existing topographical and landscaping features worthy of retention or respect. The style, materials and proportions of new building should reflect their locality; standard house types are unlikely to provide this sensitivity and purpose designed properties will be needed in most cases.

GREENFIELD DEVELOPMENT ON EDGE OF RURAL VILLAGES OR SMALL MARKET TOWNS

85. Such developments will usually be small and should appear as part of the organic growth or evolution of the settlement. It follows they will take their design cue from the better aspects of historic development locally. Normally they should seek to create a gradual, rather than an abrupt transition from open countryside. Some rural settlements are characterised by a hard built edge to the countryside, in which case the detailed building design will be especially important. The form, proportion and layout of the new development should reflect and work with local topography and tradition. The impact of new development on the appearance of the settlement in distant views should be treated with particular sensitivity. Individual house designs will be expected and building materials should reflect local character and tradition.



Modern development as part of the organic growth of a settlement

DEVELOPMENT IN WHOLLY RURAL LOCATIONS

86. Planning policy will normally preclude such development but where exceptional circumstances prevail such sites should be laid out on an individual not a standardised basis. This will involve taking account all internal aspects of the site and its immediate context, and also its impact in the wider setting - perhaps when seen at some distance from surrounding countryside. Integration into the landscape will be important. Normally perimeter boundaries should be kept "soft", and the disposition of houses varied to avoid linear edges to built development.



Soft perimeter boundary

DEVELOPMENT IN OR ADJACENT TO CONSERVATION AREAS OR HISTORIC SETTLEMENTS

87. Conservation areas vary considerably in character and have limited opportunities for accommodating new development. Each area and site must be considered on its own merits, and even the flexible standards in this guide may need to be relaxed to achieve a satisfactory integrated development. Standard house types will rarely be appropriate, and schemes will normally require individual design solutions that are sensitive to the historic setting.



House types designed for conservation areas

