POLITICIANS AND
URBAN DESIGN

1

Housing Design, the Local Political Perspective

Matthew Carmona, Valentina Giordano and Anastassia Gusseinova report on the results of research undertaken on local councillors attitudes to design

As a nation it is clear that for too long we have been building too few homes, and those we have been building are of a quality that often alienates the communities they are meant to serve, rather than uniting them in an aspiration to build more. This has become a major political problem, and one which is occupying the minds and endeavours of our politicians nationally, as well as locally around the country.

As key decision-makers within their localities, not least as guardians of the local planning system, local councillors play a critical role in helping to shape the local built environment across the country. Yet, despite this, we know little about their role and perspectives beyond anecdote and hearsay. Recent Place Alliance research supported by the Urban Design Group had suggested that councillors themselves are increasingly poorly prepared and equipped to take on such a critical design decision-making role. Indeed, only half of councillors receive any kind of design training at all, and this is typically minimal.

To understand better the role of English councillors as regards the design of new housing development, their aspirations, priorities, challenges and responsibilities, a new Place Alliance survey was launched in 2018 with support from the Design Network.

1 Overdevelopment is one of the major reasons for rejecting development proposals on design grounds

OUR APPROACH

In order to get as accurate a picture as possible of councillors' attitudes to the design of new residential development, a short survey was sent to 16,578 councillors in English local authorities. In total, 1213 councillors responded to the initial survey representing a response rate of 7.3 per cent. A follow-up survey with six more detailed questions was sent to a sub-set of these – 343 councillors – who had expressed an interest in being involved further in the research. 93 responded. The remainder of this article summarises the results of the research and makes recommendations for addressing the key concerns raised.

DESIGN QUALITY MAKES DEVELOPMENT MORE ACCEPTABLE
The first set of questions focussed on councillors' perceptions of housing design

quality. On this front the research found that design quality in residential development is seen as a very important concern for the overwhelming majority of councillors and their constituents. Almost no councillors feel it is unimportant. Councillors in all political parties and across all regions of England share the concern to see high quality residential design in their area.

Given the levels of political support, there is some frustration that local authorities (corporately) are not taking design matters seriously enough. In this context almost all councillors believe that better design can make development more acceptable to local residents and is key to unlocking more housing development across the country.

SOME IMPROVEMENT FROM A LOW BASE

Positively, a small majority of councillors believe there has been some improvement in the design of new residential development in recent years, although this is coming from a low base. This is offset, by a significant minority, concentrated more heavily in regions under the greatest development pressure, who feel that design quality in new residential development continues to decline.

Efforts to involve local communities in the decision-making process and the willingness of some developers to change their practices to prioritise design is seen as having a positive impact on design quality. Here councillors advocate positively engaging with local developers in order to maintain a positive trajectory. On the downside, the standard practices of many developers, inflexibility of local highways authorities, loss of design skills in local authorities, and the perceived change in national policy to a presumption in favour of development (regardless of design), were all blamed for the poor standards of design where that occurred.

OVERDEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL CHARACTER

Councillors frequently perceive that the drive to optimise the development potential of sites (both by developers and in policy) is leading to a different pattern of development that often feels alien in the local context. This is reflected in their two standout reasons for rejecting residential schemes on design grounds: first, that developments are out of character with their area, and second, that by virtue of their height, massing or density, schemes are overdeveloped. Councillors also believe that development patterns are leading to problems which range from integrating parking, to poor access to local facilities and amenities, the creation of over-dominant roads (which feel unsafe), and to a mono-culture of housing without other uses.

Significantly, local character was viewed as a broad concept by councillors that encompasses all the elements that are special about the physical and social qualities of a place and make it distinctive. The choice of materials, relative greenness (including open spaces), prevailing density, a respect for history, the bulk and height of buildings, their architectural quality (not bland standardised designs), and the incorporation of necessary services and amenities were all seen as key character-giving elements.

A minority view worries that new housing too often caricatures the local vernacular (leading to pastiche) and that an undue emphasis on traditional design can undermine the potential for innovation in the design of new residential areas.

POORLY DESIGNED HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS NEED TO BE REJECTED

The second set of questions turned from perceptions of outcomes to the processes through which outcomes are shaped. Here councillors are supportive of their planning team's ability to influence design for the better, although a concern exists in many councils around the absence of the necessary skills and capacity to specifically address design issues. This absence of design skills and capacity in planning teams strongly correlates with perceptions amongst councillors of a decline in the quality of new housing design.

2

3

2–3 Even the same developer can respond very differently in the priority they give to creating local character

In order to send out a firm message that poor design will not be tolerated, councillors frequently express the view that more planning applications should be rejected on design grounds. At the same time they worry that such measures won't be supported nationally on appeal, and on those grounds officers often counsel against rejecting projects on design grounds alone.

LOCALLY TAILORED DESIGN GOVERNANCE IMPROVES DESIGN

To improve the situation, councillors argue that key design governance tools can help to improve design and strengthen the case against poor design at appeal. Effective tools, they believe, include better design policy in local plans and neighbourhood plans, local design guidance (including design codes) that articulate clear design aspirations, and the availability of design advice from specialist design officers and/or a design review panel. They suggest that more comprehensive national guidance on design would support the creation of design governance tools locally.

Councillors advocate confronting highways authorities over the negative impact of their highways and road adoption standards. They call for the adoption of new standards with a strong place focus at their heart.

COUNCILLORS ARE POLITICAL AND OFFICERS TECHNICAL

The final group of questions focussed on the particular role of councillors within the design and development process. Councillors revealed that in some circumstances, design can become very political locally, notably in the face of ubiquitous pressures to densify, when development pressures are set against conservation concerns (built or natural), or when local facilities and amenities (including parking) are under strain. Despite this, design per se is rarely a party political concern, although judgements over local needs are often wrapped up in the extent of local opposition from residents to development proposals. Councillors admit that design can be used as a smoke screen to hide NIMBY tendencies, but this is much easier to achieve when the design of developments are obviously poor.

Developers, and to a lesser degree officers, were often not trusted by councillors. Indeed, the large majority of councillors would and do vote against officer recommendations if, in their opinion, developments that have been recommended for approval are either poorly designed or will impact negatively on local needs. Here the ability of officers to give confident advice on design matters was seen as a critical factor in gaining and retaining the trust of councillors.

THE UNIQUE LOCAL POLITICAL ROLE

Ultimately, councillors see their unique contribution as acting as a bulwark against powerful developers (and national policy) seeking to impose what they see as inappropriate developments upon their localities for short-term economic gain. In this regard they are often frustrated over the compromises which they see as preventing them from fully representing residents' views that developments should 'fit in' to the existing context.

Whilst many councillors feel they have no positive influence at all, most see their key leadership role in terms of setting and upholding local policy on design. Other important roles involve contributing local (lay) knowledge; acting as a conduit to the community; helping to educate constituents about the process by explaining how things can go wrong (which is often the focus for residents); and, helping to support the case within the council to better resource planning (and design). In all of this, councillors would welcome better design training, including case studies of success from which they can learn.

4

4 The adoptable standards of highways authorities are a major concern of councillors

CONCLUSION

In seeking to understand the views of local councillors in England on the design of new residential development, this research examined a critical but often overlooked stakeholder group. As has already been argued, for too long we have been building too few homes and those that we build are often of a quality that unites local communities in opposition against them. Understanding the perceptions and role of local politicians as regards the design of new housing development offers a valuable surrogate for the views of local communities more widely. It is not a group that can, or should, be ignored.

The research offers important insights into how design might be made more acceptable locally, and therefore how more housing development might be delivered nationally. Our key recommendations for different stakeholders that flow from the work are summarised below. ●

Matthew Carmona, Valentina Giordano and Anastassia Gusseinova, The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KEY STAKEHOLDERS

For government
● There is need to publicise successful planning appeals made on design grounds in order to give councils the necessary confidence to reject poor quality design.
● The advice on design in the national *Planning Practice Guidance* needs urgently updating in order to strengthen guidance to local authorities on the design of residential development and to encourage the adoption of proactive design governance tools locally.

For local planning authorities
● Local authorities need to take the achievement of high quality residential design more seriously as a corporate objective. This can only be achieved by investing in: i) the necessary specialist design skills (in-house and through design review), ii) the preparation of proactive tools of design governance such as local design guides and design codes, and iii) by demonstrating leadership and rejecting applications outright if proposals fail to meet clearly defined local design quality aspirations
● Policy and guidance locally should be more specific about: i) defining the valued dimensions of local character, ii) parameters for measuring the acceptable development quantum (height massing and density) on sites, iii) how to successfully integrate roads and parking, iv) expectations regarding the provision and integration of non-residential uses, facilities and amenities (including greenery), and v) avoiding caricaturing the local vernacular.

For highways authorities
● Highways authorities need to rapidly update their highways design and road adoption standards to give them a strong and explicit place focus (along the lines advocated in *Manual for Streets*).

For developers
● Good urban design shaped through local engagement and a genuine understanding of local character is the most effective means of winning local community support for new housing development.

For councillors
● Encouraging communities to get involved in neighbourhood planning can help to establish clear local design aspirations in a manner that can't be ignored.
● It is incumbent on councillors involved in decision-making on design to engage in comprehensive and ongoing training on the subject, in order facilitate their important local and lay knowledge with the more specialist design knowledge required for a design leadership role.