


Delivering design value: The housing design quality conundrum

 @housingevidence

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A project supported by:



- What is the *housing design quality conundrum*?
- Project aims and objectives
- Research methodology
- Housing development case studies
- The Scotland cases
- Recommendations and NPF4
- Future Steps
- Conclusions



Edge of settlement housing near Leeds



Gateside West, a recent brownfield development in Scotland

Today's presentation

- Well-designed places have an enduring sense of place characterised by diversity in form, function and community.

Good quality design positively impacts:

- Social value: health and wellbeing
(Jackson, 2003; Kleinert and Horton, 2016; Royal Town Planning Institute, 2020; Scott, 2020; White et al., 2013);
- Economic value: the economy
(Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2016; Savills, 2016)
- Environmental value: sustainability
(Carmona, 2019; Frumpkin et al., 20-4; Hong et al., 2014)



Typical housing development: 'contemporary'



Typical housing development: 'traditional'

The housing design quality conundrum

- Devolution has led to a diverse design policy landscape in the UK.
- Nevertheless, the four governments share the view that good design can deliver economic, social and environmental value.

(e.g. Department for Infrastructure, 2014; Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2019a; Scottish Government, 2013; Welsh Government, 2016a).

Despite shared awareness of design value:

- The quality of new-build housing remains poor and the value of design is under appreciated – we call this the *housing design quality conundrum*.



Can we do more of this? Barratt Homes at Cane Hill Park, South London

The *housing design quality conundrum*

- This research uniquely examines housebuilding and design value in all four UK nations.

Research aim:

- Investigate the extent to which design is valued during the various stages of planning, design and developing new homes and neighbourhoods.

Questions and objectives:

- Develop an understanding of the cultural conditions and expertise needed to deliver design value.
- Identify the 'critical points' in the planning, design and development process where a commitment to design can lead to higher quality outcomes.

Project aims and objectives



Great Western Park, Didcot

Image Credit: Gareth Clark

UK-wide study

- Examined housing developments in one local authority in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- In England, examined one local authority in the South and one in the North.



Data sources

- 48 Semi-structured interviews with 54 participants.
- Documents and archives.
- Direct observation data.



Data analysis

- Five members of the research team each collected the data and conducted a phased analysis.
- The lead author conducted a content analysis of the data and wrote the report.



Research methodology



Great Western Park, Didcot



Sycamore Rise, Thame



The Banks, Rotherham



Sky-House, Rotherham



Dovecot, Haddington



Gateside West, Haddington



Parc Derwen, Bridgend



Ysgol Bryn Castell, Bridgend



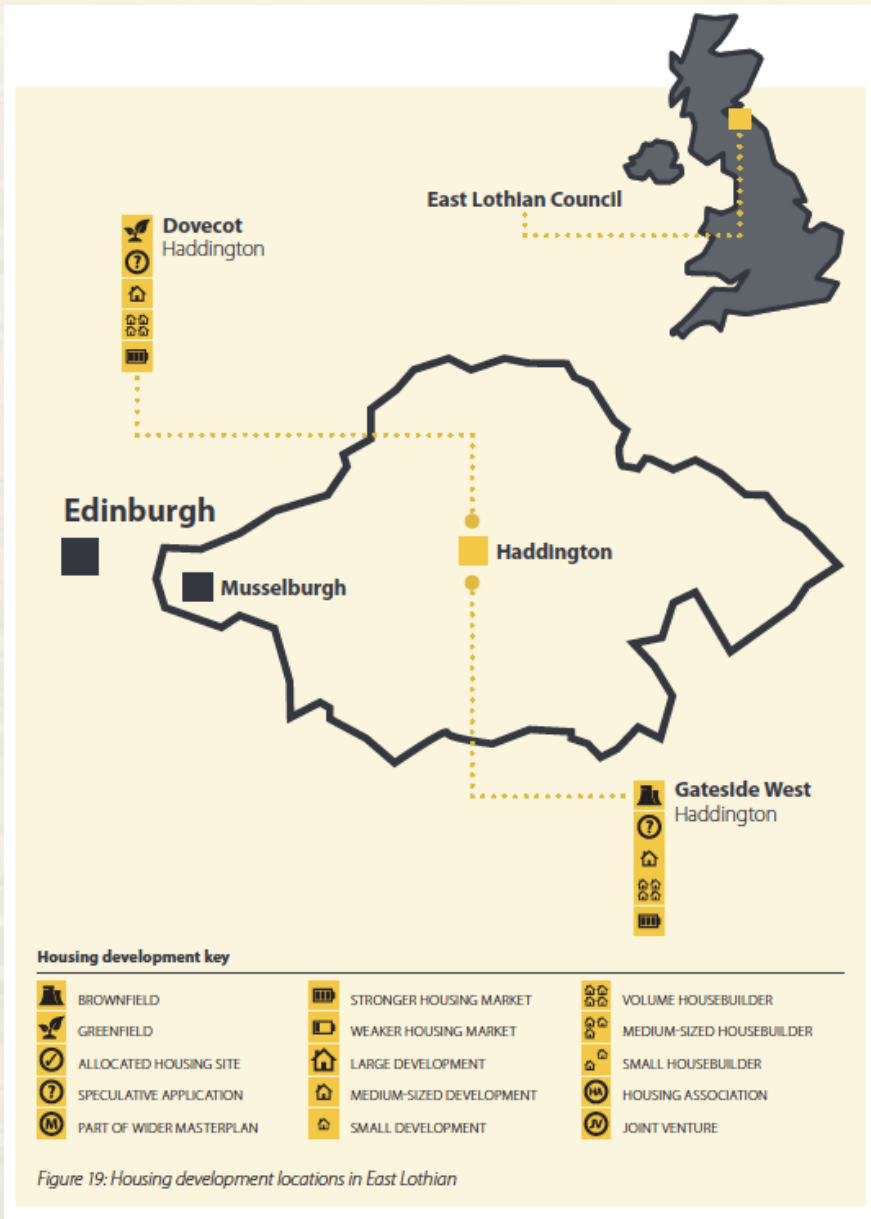
Peter Pan Complex, Belfast



Portland 88, Belfast



Critical points of intervention



Dovecot, Haddington



Gateside West, Haddington

Scotland case studies

Application:

- Speculative application for 113 homes by David Wilson Homes on a greenfield site.
- Successful on appeal due to 'urgent housing need' in 2014 after LPA failed to determine within four-month window.

Design language:

- Crescent spine road with two cul-de-sacs composed of detached homes with a small number of flats.
- Unremarkable standard house types.
- Poorly landscaped open space and limited streetscape landscaping with little variation to the hardscape.

Dovecot, Haddington



Standard house types at Dovecot, Haddington



Open space and play park at Dovecot, Haddington

Application:

- Speculative application by Persimmon Homes initially for 112 then later 97 homes on an edge-of-settlement brownfield site.
- Original application recommended for refusal by officers, but approved by Committee due to 'land supply'.

Design language:

- Spine road with looping streets forming two rectilinear perimeter blocks.
- Mix of detached and semi-detached standard house types that are mostly rendered with simple detailing.
- Basic soft landscaping palette with little variation to the hardscape.

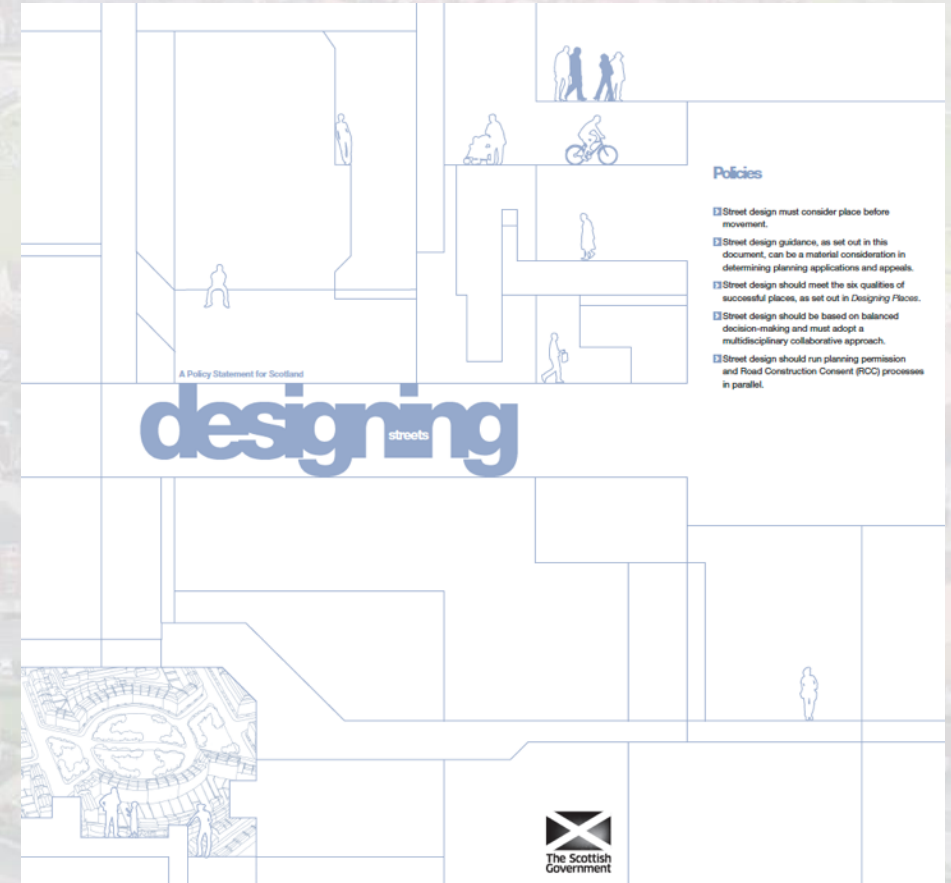
Gateside West, Haddington



Streetscape Gateside West,
Haddington

National design policy implementation:

- **A land promoter:** National design policies provide good advice, but a minimum design quality standard is needed to change developers' behaviour.
- **An architect:** *Designing Streets* has been interpreted very differently by local authorities across Scotland and roads officers often resist adopting it.



Variable implementation of national policy, like *Designing Streets*

Findings from the Scotland cases

Site-specific design briefs:

- **A planning officer:** Design briefs can play an important role in establishing a minimum standard and ensure that housebuilders understand their design obligations.
- **A planning officer:** East Lothian only produces design briefs for sites allocated in the local plan. This makes it hard to insist on design standards on speculative applications.

"...[the] key debate on design was between us, or our architect on our behalf, and the planning officers. So, they were really...the sole voice in terms of quality of design"

Land Promoter (East Lothian)

Pre-application discussion:

- **A planning officer:** It is important to encourage early discussions with developers to avoid 'design freeze'.
- **A planning officer:** To encourage compliance with design policies and guidelines, East Lothian offers a free weekly pre-application advice service.

"Sometimes we do go through the preapplication process, we do give the general place-making advice of all these different components of how the development should work and sometimes we're just routinely ignored. They'll just come in with the development that they want to put on the ground, rather than a development that we've advised might be a bit more successful"

Planning Officer (East Lothian)

Land Allocation:

- The impact of the land allocation processes is laid bare when a local authority fails to meet its housing delivery targets, as happened in East Lothian.
- A failed land allocation process left East Lothian vulnerable to speculative planning applications for new housing on undesignated land.

“The house-building sector went through, over the last decade, more issues on how to provide a more energy-efficient home, putting sustainability measures in, and the conclusions reached is the cost of it is not perceived by the incoming house-buyer as an additional price to add onto the value of the house. So, if it cost £25,000 to get a more highly sustainable house then that price rise in construction costs can't be passed on”

Planning Consultant (East Lothian)

- National and local design policy and guidance is frequently overlooked because other policy objectives take precedence, and environmental design value is rarely foregrounded.
- A chronic lack of resourcing and a scarcity of design skills in local authorities means that design governance is severely restricted.
- Design priorities vary between local authority officers and 'siloes' decision-making limits local authorities from making decisions that prioritise design.
- Engagement with local communities about new housing development tends to be 'top down' and poorly implemented.

"I remember we lost half of our department [after austerity measures introduced post-2010]...I'm afraid collectively you just have to accept that there are less people. And, whilst government constantly criticise us about wanting local government reform to build resilience, you've still got to have those bums on the seats. It doesn't matter what form the authority takes, whether it's one big authority or individual authorities, there are not the people there, because they were cut"

Planning Officer

Significant barriers to design value

- Housebuilders have a razor-sharp focus on profitability and exhibit a limited interest in design.
- Housebuilders are rarely prepared to make design investments in areas where land values are low. This leads to a culture of low expectations.
- Masterplans and other formal design governance tools can help to deliver design value, but they are often poorly enforced.
- Due to resourcing challenges, there is often a lack of scrutiny by local authorities over decisions taken on-site after planning permission.
- Post-occupancy evaluations of new housing developments are rarely conducted.



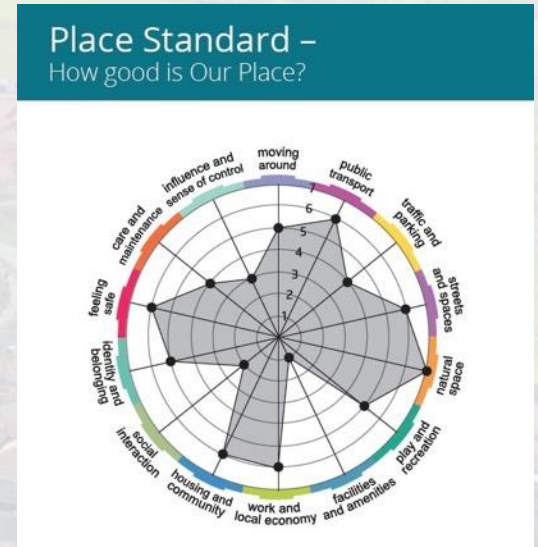
The 'leaky bucket' of design value

Significant barriers to design value

- Housing and neighbourhood design principles should be regulated by the four UK governments in design value standards.
- These should embed the economic, social and environmental value of design at the heart of planning and housebuilding.
- Design value standards should be are limited in scope. Local authorities must still be able to judge matters of context and fit.



Examples of well-respected standards



“I think it’s often left to the private sector of putting the sites forward and the kind of sifting process. I think local authorities do need to....be more proactive...actually saying: how are we going to grow? And, identify the areas where they want to grow. Rather than putting out this call for sites and then using a spreadsheet approach of sifting the sites....”

Planner Officer interview

Principal recommendation

1. Housing and neighbourhood design principles should be regulated by the four UK governments in 'design value standards'.

2. Creating well-designed places should be a core national planning objective in each of the four nations.
3. Volume housebuilders should be held to account on design matters.
4. The four UK governments should encourage and support a more diverse housebuilding industry.

5. Housing land allocations should be based on sustainable development principles and prioritise brownfield development.

6. Design governance leadership should be championed in local authorities.

7. Local plans should be more place-based and outcome-focused.

8. Masterplans should be produced and enforced for larger housing sites.

9. Genuine community engagement should be undertaken early in the planning and design process where it can have the most influence.
10. Design and construction procurement decisions should be more design driven.
11. Post occupancy analysis and development monitoring should be used much more widely.
12. The four governments should provide more direct funding for design governance, especially at the local level.

Further recommendations

From Designing Streets to Designing Neighbourhoods?

- To meet 'net zero ambition: Design value standards should mirror the status of building standards, which have already been tightened to ensure that new housing is more air tight.
- A national design value standard: Specifically focused on delivering the '20-minute neighbourhood' concept.
- The position statement notes the aim to 'refresh' *Designing Streets*: This provides the right template to begin developing a design value standard, which might be renamed *Designing Neighbourhoods*.

Considerations for NPF4



Housing land allocations should be based on sustainable development principles and prioritise brownfield development:

- Housing allocations must be less influenced by powerful development interests.
- Local authorities should allocate a wide range of housing sites in different locations to achieve a balance of tenures and dwelling types.
- All allocation decisions should be made with the concept of '20-minute neighbourhoods' in mind.
- Brownfield land should be prioritised and the assessment of appropriate sites (i.e. technical impact assessments) should be completed during the local plan process.

Considerations for NPF4



Masterplans should be produced and enforced for larger housing sites:

- Masterplans could help to deliver '20-minute neighbourhoods' and more high-quality homes.
- Masterplans are often poorly enforced, altered to such a degree that they become ineffective, or don't happen at all.
- Masterplanning should not be a theoretical exercise and should be *the* local mechanism for creating well-designed places based on a national design value standard.
- Scottish local authorities should establish a design vision and masterplan for allocated housing sites, even if the technical work is undertaken by external consultants.

Considerations for NPF4



Developing a 'design value animation' with support from the Scottish Government:

- Research revealed that local councillors often have a limited understanding of housing design value.
- Often councillors are understandably swayed by other concerns.
- Many lack the confidence to intervene in design matters.
- Animation aims to demystify the various ways in which design value can be enhanced through the development and planning process.



Animation stills



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Championing design and animating value




An aerial photograph of a residential development. The scene is split vertically: the left side is a faded, semi-transparent view of a dense residential area, while the right side shows a more detailed view of a planned community. This detailed view features a central green space with a winding road, several buildings, and a large green field in the background. The overall tone is light and airy, with a focus on urban planning and community design.

We're interested to know what you think:

- To what extent do our findings reflect your experiences in practice?
- How receptive do you think local members would be to 'design training'?
- What do you find are the biggest barriers to delivering well-designed places?
- To what extent do you think NPF4 is an effective instrument for delivering well-design places?

Workshop Discussion

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- An aerial photograph of a residential development. The scene shows a mix of housing styles, including terraced houses and larger detached homes. A prominent feature is a large, curved green field or park area in the center. A road network winds through the development, and several cars are visible on the streets. The background shows more green fields and a distant town or city.
- The housebuilding industry must stop receiving a 'free pass' on design.
 - Good design should be understood as a crucial public good.
 - Future planning reforms must put design at their heart.
 - Design value standards should become a precept for addressing The Climate Emergency and helping us emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Final Thoughts

Project supporters:



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government



An Roinn | Männystríe o
Pobal | **Communities**



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

A word of thanks

