
Consultation Paper on Planning Policy Statement 1: *Creating Sustainable Communities*

Response by the Royal Institute of British Architects

The Royal Institute of British Architects is pleased to respond to the Government consultation paper on Planning Policy Statement 1. Following Lord Rooker's commitment in the House of Lords on 25 March to work with CABE and the RIBA on the coverage of design issues in PPS1, we hope that this response will be the beginning of a constructive dialogue with the ODPM to ensure that design quality is given its proper place in the PPS.

While the RIBA broadly welcomes the proposed PPS, we have a number of reservations. Many of our proposed amendments are concerned with drafting, where a sharper wording would remove any ambiguities or possible misinterpretations. Our view is that sustainable development cannot be delivered without ensuring quality design. We feel that the PPS should be much bolder in claiming that important link, and that those existing sections concerning design in the draft should be strengthened, expanded and given a greater profile in the main body of the text.

Throughout this response we have not sought to define "quality design". We feel that to do so would be unnecessarily restrictive. Instead we hope that the new planning system – particularly the new system of statements of design principles – will encourage a more constructive dialogue between planners, architects, and applicants on what is appropriate for a particular project on a particular site.

For the sake of clarity, our comments follow the layout of the Government's proposed draft.

Introduction

We feel that the link between design quality and sustainable development should be clearly and unequivocally stated in the introduction to the PPS. The RIBA fully supports the Government's work to entrench sustainable development as a primary statutory purpose of the planning system. We feel, however, that the inextricable link between sustainable development and design quality – both in terms of process and outcome – should be clearly stated in order to support planning authorities that seek to encourage quality development.

During the passage of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase [Act 2004] the RIBA supported amendments to [section 39] which would have strengthened the duty upon those exercising planning functions to exercise that function with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development *through high quality design or with an emphasis on high quality design.*

Ministers have recognised that link – Lord Rooker having told the House of Lords during the passage of the Bill that:

“Good design is key to the provision of inclusive and sustainable communities and it underpins much of what is set out in the sustainable communities plan.”

Official Report, 22 January 2004; column 1253

A clear statement along such lines in the introduction to PPS1 would send a clear message to local authorities that they should use their powers to identify and encourage design quality, and could give support to those authorities who may be unwilling to reject applications on design grounds for fear of litigation.

Paragraph 1.4

The role of design in ensuring that planning is “a positive and proactive activity, central to the way places work, develop, look and feel” ought to be mentioned and expanded here – perhaps by redrafting the first sentence to read “planning should aspire to make places better for people and deliver *well-designed* development ...”.

We would support the inclusion of a statement similar to that contained in the RIBA’s *Achieving Quality of Design in Local Plans* (October 2002) as a separate paragraph:

“High quality design adds value to the city or town in which it is placed. It can achieve higher values for development sites, provide greater user satisfaction, an improved public domain and owner prestige. Good design attracts people, investment and activity to a place. But good design is not merely about aesthetics, a good design means a building that will be more sustainable, last longer, be more flexible in use and grow old gracefully.”

It is important to differentiate between the narrow and subjective interpretation of “design” as aesthetics, and the more objective interpretation which embraces broader urban design issues. The current PPG1 contains a useful definition which ought to be retained:

“Urban design should be taken to mean the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and the streets, squares, parks, waterways and other spaces which make up the public domain; the nature and quality of the public domain itself; the relationship of one part of a village, town or city with other parts; and the patterns of movement and activity which are thereby established: in short, the complex relationships between all the elements of the built and unbuilt space. As the appearance and treatment of the spaces between and around buildings is often of comparable importance to the design of the buildings themselves, landscape design should be considered as an integral part of urban design.”

PPG1, paragraph 14

Paragraph 1.6

Lord Rooker announced on 25 March 2004 that secondary legislation will be introduced to require local authorities to include design and access within their portfolio of local development documents. We welcome this and suggest that reference to requirement should be mentioned here, together with a requirement for planning authorities to show clearly how they expect to achieve high quality design in consultation with local communities.

Paragraph 1.8

We welcome and entirely agree with this paragraph. The RIBA is working with the Royal Town Planning Institute to prepare best-practice guidance to planning authorities on processing planning applications. We would welcome a dialogue with ODPM on this issue. We would also submit that an efficient and effective planning system requires further investment in the Planning Inspectorate.

Paragraph 1.9

The quality of a planning decision is more important than the time it takes to be determined. We therefore suggest that the first sentence should be removed. Planning authorities should be encouraged to hold out for good design through a constructive dialogue with applicants, even if this means a less hasty decision.

Paragraph 1.14

We feel that the link between sustainable development and design quality – currently alluded to in paragraph 1.27 – should be reiterated and brought forward to here. The Government’s four aims for sustainable development as set out in *A Better Quality of Life, a Strategy for Sustainable Development in the UK* are not in themselves sufficient to deliver sustainable development without good design.

Paragraph 1.27

While the spirit of paragraph 1.27 is clear, we feel that it could be improved with sharper drafting. The first bullet point, stating that design policies should encourage developments which “are appropriate to their context of scale and compatibility with their surroundings” is of particular concern on several counts:

- High-density developments will often, by definition, be “out of scale” with their surroundings. Does the Government really intend to jeopardise its existing commitments to encourage densification?
- The existing wording may perpetuate the “in keeping” culture within many planning authorities, thus stifling design innovation. Buildings that contrast with their surroundings can be as appropriate as those which echo their surroundings.
- A proposed development’s surroundings may be of extremely poor quality or may be unsustainable by today’s standards, in which cases a contrasting development may be an important catalyst for change.

A building's surroundings should not, of course, be entirely disregarded. We suggest therefore that the first bullet should be redrafted to read "have regard to their context in respect of scale and compatibility with their surroundings."

The 1992 revision of PPG1 contained the clear instruction that "local authorities should reject poor designs" (at paragraph 17) – a direction that ought to be retained in PPS1. Such a clear statement would help encourage planning authorities to ensure design quality, and would give confidence to those willing to challenge or reject developers' proposals on design grounds.

Annex B – The Plan Led System

Paragraph 23

This paragraph may need to change in the light on ongoing consultation on planning obligations. It may be worth stating that planning obligations ought to be about much more than meeting affordable housing targets: for example they can be a useful mechanism to bring about improvements to the public realm. Detailed guidance on planning obligation should be provided elsewhere by the Government.

Annex C – Design

We feel strongly that placing detailed consideration of design in a separate annex from the main body of text can no longer be justified. To do so places an unnatural, unnecessary and unhelpful separation between sustainable development and design quality.

In PPG1, detailed guidance on design was contained in annexes. Since the last revision of PPG1 in February 1997, however, the Government has rightly attached greater importance to the need to ensure high quality design in the built environment. The continued treatment of design in a separate annex runs contrary to this spirit and gives a misleading impression that its consideration is an afterthought or, worse still, optional.

The contents of Annexes A and B are largely explanatory whereas Annex C is more directive. For this reason too we feel that it should be moved to the main body of text, where we suggest its rightful place ought to be after paragraph 1.27.

Paragraph 1

It is worth repeating the link between planning for sustainable communities and good design. Instead of "planning should encourage good design" as the first sentence we suggest:

"planning needs good design."

The paragraph could be further strengthened by redrafting “local planning authorities should have regard to good practice set out in ‘By Design’” to read:

“local planning authorities should seek out and follow good practice such as that set out in ‘By Design’”.

Paragraph 2

The word “arbitrarily” in the first sentence is unnecessary and possibly dangerous, as it implies that local authorities can attempt to impose a particular architectural taste or style as long as they do not do so arbitrarily. We are sure this is not the intended spirit of the sentence: sharper drafting would remove any risk of mis-interpretation.

The first version of PPG1 contained the following statement (at paragraph 28 with our italics):

“Only exceptionally should [local planning authorities] control design details if the *sensitive* character area or the particular building justifies it. Even where no such detailed control is exercised it *should not be over-fastidious* in such matters as, for example, the precise shade of colour of bricks. Authorities should be closely guided in such matters by their professionally qualified advisers. *This is especially important where a building has been designed by an architect for a particular site.*”
Planning Policy Guidance 1 (January 1988)

We would welcome the re-introduction of this sensible, proportional approach. Hiring an architect does not *per se* guarantee design quality. But there should be some recognition that architects bring a wider range of skills and considerations to a scheme than those without any form of architectural training.

We broadly welcome the remainder of this paragraph, particularly the encouragement of inclusive, innovative design. Such a clear statement should be repeated in paragraph 1.27 of the main text. For the sake of clarity, it is perhaps worth repeating our earlier point that designs which contrast their surroundings can be as valid as those which seek to echo them.

We hope that planning authorities would apply the direction to encourage the inclusive and innovative as widely as possible. While the resource efficiency example is doubtless well-meaning, there is a risk that its inclusion may unintentionally narrow the application of the direction.

The last sentence – “... policies and guidance should recognise that the qualities of an outstanding scheme may exceptionally justify departing from them” – places the burden of proof firmly upon applicants to show their proposed scheme is of exceptional design quality. We feel this is misplaced and that the burden should instead lie upon planning authorities to show that a proposed development does not meet their sustainable development criteria. As suggested earlier, a clear and unequivocal direction to local planning authorities to reject poor design would be welcome.

Paragraph 3

While the intention of this paragraph is clear, it should be borne in mind that a successful planning system – one which delivers continuing, sustainable, physical improvement to an area – will bring positive changes over time to the character of local areas as design quality and innovation are encouraged.

There will be cases where the perpetuation of “defining characteristics” should not be encouraged – particularly where these are by their nature unsustainable. Examples would include a 1930s suburb (low-density, single-use) or houses with chimney stacks (environmentally unsustainable).

Paragraph 4

A distinction should be made between inclusive access to the public domain – a valid concern of planning policy guidance; and inclusive access to individual private buildings – which is fully covered by Building Regulations in the light of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Paragraph 5

This paragraph needs to be strengthened and worked out further. The final sentence before the list of key pieces of information should read “should include” rather than “is likely to include”.

An annex is the rightful place for further information on each of the component parts with, if necessary, cross-references to more detailed information or guidance. At present the list is rather bald which raises too many questions. Further guidance – for example on the application and content of design principles – must be provided by Government.

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