The Create Streets
community guide
to creating happy,
healthy places

LOVE THY

NEIGHBOURHOOD

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The Create Streets community guide to creating happy, healthy places

Create Streets is a social enterprise that encourages the creation of more urban homes in conventional, terraced streets rather than complex multi-storey buildings as well as for greater, constructive, public influence on the planning and development system. We do this through research, arguing for policy change, and consulting to councils, developers, communities and landowners. We also share our research widely online and via the media.

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has said of our work*: **"This is a great example of how big developments should work – working with local communities to design real neighbourhoods that work for the existing community."***

This guide contains some of the 'top tips' that we have learnt from our research and community work.

1. The Top Ten rules of Great Places
2. Communities' Guide to Creating Great Places
3. Communities' Guide to Neighbourhood Plans (with some detail on Design Codes)

I hope that you find it useful.

Nicholas Boys Smith
Director Create Streets

ONE: The Top Ten rules of Great Places

Beauty, happiness and health in designing the modern city: *If you could design the perfect urban development what might it be? In our study,* Heart in the Right Street, *we have researched the links between built form with happiness and physical and mental health. The list below is an attempt to summarise the sociological data for maximising wellbeing for the greatest number in the modern city or town.*

Whilst places need, of course, to have their own sense of identity, the numerous findings and growing amount of data available does permit us to pull out the themes which need to find a distinct and individual form and flavour. The 'perfect' urban development, most likely to maximise wellbeing and which also reflects the data on popularity and value, is normally likely to consist of some combination of the following:

1. Greenery. Frequent green spaces inter-woven into the city either as private gardens, communal gardens or well-overlooked public spaces between blocks and where people really need them and frequent them. Large parks are necessary but need not be ubiquitous. Lots of street trees;

2. Homes. Somewhere between the very real and valued advantages of suburban living but at greater densities (think terraces of houses with some flats) and without the long commutes and consequent isolation. Children preferably in houses not flats. As many houses as possible;

3. Height. Most buildings at human scale height. Sparing use of residential towers and only in city centres for the small number of people who seek them. No children in high rise;
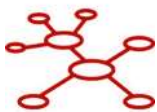
4. Connectivity and streets. Streets that 'plug into' the surrounding city. A well-connected, highly walkable, traditional street pattern of differing types and sizes with multiple junctions and route choices. Some pedestrian or bicycle only streets, but mostly mixed with generous pavements.

5. Land use. Mixed use of residential, commercial and retail wherever possible and where traffic implications can be managed. Retail nearly always interspaced with commercial and dotted around primarily residential as far as density permits;

6. Blocks. Blocks neither too big nor too long. Buildings that appear to be buildings not entire blocks. Narrow fronts with many doors and strong 'sense of the vertical' to break up the scale of terraced blocks. Clear fronts, backs and internal private or communal gardens inside blocks. No deck access;

7. Space. Minimal internal semi-private space. No residential corridors. As few doors as possible off the same 'core.' External open space normally less than about 90m in breadth;

8. Beauty and design. Beauty really matters. Ignoring aesthetic appeal is missing a key trick. Must have a strong sense of place, which normally (but not always) references a place's history through materials or style. A variety of street types, design, green spaces. Streets that bend and flex with contours of the landscape. Some surprises. Not designed by committee;
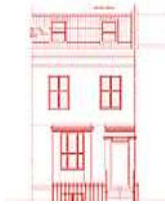
9. Facades. No long blank walls but frequent front doors (ideally with modest front gardens) or shop fronts. 'Walking architecture' is more popular, more complex and more valuable than 'driving architecture.' Some front doors should have steps for social and public health reasons;
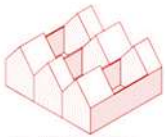
10. Density. Enough density to be walkable but not to be overwhelming, to undermine wellbeing, or to create high long-term maintenance costs. About fifty-220 homes per hectare.

Improving computing power and availability of data is now permitting us to measure, analyse and prove what we have, in fact, always organically known: good streets, human scale and good fences make for good neighbours and great places.

TWO: Communities' Guide to Creating Great Places

Members of the public often agree with what we are saying, but are unsure about how they *themselves* can make an impact. Here are some top tips on how you and your community can make that impact, get better homes and places built in *your* neighbourhoods, and engage with your local councillors and developers to achieve these goals. They are based on our research and work with community groups.

If you want to have a say on what kind of building goes on in your neighbourhood, do this...

1. Ask your local councillors – and planning officials in the council directly - if they know what types of building, material, typology and style **local people prefer**. Do they have any **numerical evidence** for this? If not, why not? Insist that they do proper research, using pictures and polling to generate a usable understanding. And if they *won't* do it, **do it yourself** with online polling and focus groups – thanks to technology this is becoming increasingly simple;

2. **Publish the results** and lobby for this to be **embedded in the council's planning strategy**. Ask officials how they intend to make use of this evidence about what the public like and want to inform the council's strategy and development-control decision-making. Ask if borough strategy or other rules make it hard to produce the type of built environment that people most prefer. Changes may well be necessary – particularly in urban areas guidance on **light** and **street-width** which are normally at borough level;

3. Organise **neighbourhood forums** and use **neighbourhood plans** positively to both **allocate land** and set out the **types of urban form** and buildings that you like (there is funding available to help you do this). Where applicable, make sure to get actively involved in estate regeneration discussion as early as possible;

4. Encourage the council, developers and other local residents via neighbourhood plans to undertake **characterisation studies**. This consists of factors that define your neighbourhood and make it distinctive and special – be as specific as you like, for example building height, materials, block size, and height to street width ratio;

5. Don't just think about style or materials – also think about 'typology', 'form' and, yes, **streets**. What it is about the way in which some older developments are arranged, about their walkability and spatial arrangements that people seem to love? Do any borough rules (for example on street widths) prevent such neighbourhoods?

6. Don't be fooled by the old lie that high density must equal high rise or large blocks. **High density categorically does not require high rise or large blocks.** With the right urban design and planning you can normally achieve high (though not ludicrous) densities within a perfectly conventional street-scape - medium-rise terraced housing, tightly organised but on a human-scale, with many front doors facing onto the street;

7. Developers sometimes use **viability assessments** to demonstrate how financial overheads inhibit their ability to meet certain planning obligations, for example on the provision of affordable housing. More information on this can be found on the government's website here. However, many developers we have spoken to about it in private have admitted that they can make them viability assessments say (nearly) whatever they want. This makes it vital to lobby your councillors to push for these to be made **transparently public**, so that they face the scrutiny of independent experts;

8. **Shift the debate on economics**, through lobbying your councillors, planning officials and developers, and talking to local media. Huge buildings are often justified by short-term economics. But better-designed, more modestly scaled buildings are much better economically when viewed through the prism of **whole life costings** and longer-term value;

9. Demand from your councillors, planning officials and developers a **co-design** approach to large schemes. This is where *you* as local residents get to design the scheme together with

architects, developers, and local planners over several days. Don't be content with the standard design and then "consult" approach where architects design a scheme and then ask (often inconsequential) questions about it afterwards. We can tell you more about this but so can organisations such as **Civic Voice** and the **Prince's Foundation for Building Communities**. Some (but not many) architectural firms also have wide experience of them;

10. Demand from your councillors, planning officials and developers a **Design Code approach** to large schemes, and make sure that *you and your community* get to have a big input into what they say. A Design Code is 'a set of illustrated design rules and requirements which instruct and may advise on the physical development of a site or area. The graphic and written components of the code are detailed and precise, and build upon a design vision such as a masterplan or other design and development framework for a site or area.' See the information box at the end of this document for more information.

To summarise:

- **Organise your local community** into a force that councillors, planning officials and developers *have* to listen to, through neighbourhood forums and neighbourhood plans;
- **Lobby your council** into taking a research-driven approach to planning; taking account of a proper factual understanding of what people like and want, a long-term approach to quantifying economic benefit, and clear, transparent viability assessments;
- For large sites above all, demand that you and your community are directly involved in a **co-design approach** and in the creation of a design code so that your preferences on what gets built, get built.

THREE: Communities' Guide to Neighbourhood Plans

Locality provides useful guidance on neighbourhood planning **here**. What follows is a summary of their key points, along with additional points which we feel ought to be emphasised more, notably Design Codes and allocating sites.

What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

A neighbourhood plan is a **community-led framework** for shaping future development. It may include a vision for your area, your aims, planning policies, your proposals for improving the area or providing new facilities, or the allocation of key sites for development.

Whilst adhering to certain 'Basic Conditions' (see below), neighbourhood plans establish how land in your area can be used and developed, covering issues such as housing, employment, heritage and transport. They can be as wide-ranging or as specific as you choose.

If approved, a Neighbourhood Plan forms part of the Local Development Plan. Their statutory status gives them considerably more weight than some other local planning documents, such as parish plans, community plans and village design statements.

How do I make a Neighbourhood Plan? What's the process?

1. See if there's already neighbourhood planning going on in your local area by checking your local authority's website.
2. If not, it's up to you to define your **Neighbourhood Area** – aka **choosing what area is to be included** and where the boundaries are drawn (and submitting this to the council for approval). For town or parish councils, there is a strong presumption that the neighbourhood area will be the same as the parish boundary. However this is not obligatory.
3. You'll need to make this application through a 'qualifying body'. That is the local parish or town council, or - if you live in an area without a town or parish council - through a prospective **Neighbourhood Forum** (once the Area is designated, you'll need to apply to the local authority to establish your Neighbourhood Forum before starting work on a Neighbourhood Plan).
4. **Consult the community on what they want** (and don't want!) to see built, through surveys, focus groups and drop-in sessions. Gathering **evidence to back this up is crucial** (see below).
5. Based on this evidence, get drafting your plan! There is **support, guidance and money** to help you do this from both your local authority and independent consultants (see below).
6. Submit the plan to your local authority, which will check you've complied with Basic Conditions. They'll then forward it to be checked by an independent planning inspector.
7. All being well, your plan will be put to a referendum in the Neighbourhood Area. If more that 50% are in favour, your local authority is legally obliged to bring it into force.

What is a Neighbourhood Area?

A Neighbourhood Area is a **defined geographic area** in which a future Neighbourhood Plan will have jurisdiction. Defining this area is the first step in creating a Neighbourhood Plan. The specific boundaries are proposed either by a town/parish council (if one of these exists then the Neighbourhood Area usually - but not always - follows its boundaries), or by a group of local people or a community organisation that intends to create a Neighbourhood Forum. It must be submitted to the local authority for approval.

Neighbourhood Areas cannot be overlapping; however they are not confined to the boundaries of existing local authority or parish boundaries. For example, a Neighbourhood Area could encompass streets across two or more London boroughs, or two or more parish boundaries.

What is a Neighbourhood Forum?

A Neighbourhood Forum is an organisation of **local people empowered to lead the neighbourhood planning process** in their area. It's specifically set up to create a Neighbourhood Plan.

In parts of the country where you have a parish and town council, these parish/town councils function as the 'qualifying body' for creating a Neighbourhood Plan. In areas without them (such as in most of London, for example), a Neighbourhood Forum must be created.

For this to happen, a group of local people or a community organisation must apply to the local planning authority, demonstrating their Forum is representative of the Neighbourhood Area.

How many people need to be involved in a Neighbourhood Forum?

A Neighbourhood Forum must include at least 21 local people, who either live or work within the defined Neighbourhood Area or are elected members of the local authority which represents it. The membership ought to be representative of the wider neighbourhood; in practice this tends to mean an approximate cross-section of local people based on characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and employment, to name but a few.

What are Basic Conditions?

When submitting a Neighbourhood Plan to a local authority, you must submit a statement to show that the Plan fulfils Basic Conditions, which are specified in law. In 'legal speak', Neighbourhood Plans must:

- *be appropriate having regard to national policy;*
- *contribute to the achievement of sustainable development;*
- *be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan for the local area;*
- *be compatible with human rights requirements;*
- *and be compatible with EU obligations.*

What this means in layman's terms is you have to adhere to various local, national and EU-wide policies, obligations and regulations on issues such as light levels, listed buildings and housing tenure, to name but a few. More detail can be found on the government's website **here**. See **here** for advice on how to write a Basic Conditions statement.

What consultation is required?

It is a legal requirement that there is a public consultation on the proposed Neighbourhood Plan, before it is submitted to the local planning authority. This means it must be publicised in the Neighbourhood Area, certain consulting bodies and local stakeholders must be contacted, and the local authority must receive a copy.

You need to provide evidence that you have undertaken all the necessary consultation, and you must also produce a 'consultation statement.' This is a brief report summarising the comments received and issues raised by those comments. You must outline how the plan has been changed, if it has been, in response to these comments and issues raised.

Over and above what you legally *have* to do it is best practice to engage early and properly with the wider community. This will lead to a better plan and avoid conflict later on. Remember you need to win a local referendum. Genuinely working with as many neighbours as possible from as early as possible will maximise the chances of this being won.

What can a Neighbourhood Plan do?

A Neighbourhood Plan allows communities to influence the future of their neighbourhood by setting out **a vision for the local area** and general planning policies to guide developments. All planning applications in your area will be subject to these policies - it is the surest way to oblige developers and your local authority to consider the wishes of *your* community – including the look and size of buildings, the extent and nature of green space, the level of affordable housing, and future street and walkway configuration.

We believe that some of the best tools to achieve this including allocating sites for development and setting out a clear and predictable Design Code (see below) for what that development should be.

What can't it do?

A Neighbourhood Plan cannot stop development. However it can play a big part in making sure any new development is popular and fits into the area. It can't contravene local and national planning regulations.

So far Neighbourhood Plans have not been used that often in larger urban areas – though that is beginning to change. We believe that they are also sometimes underutilised – there is potential through Design Codes to have a very strong say in the appearance of new development.

What does allocating sites involve?

In a Neighbourhood Plan you can **allocate sites** – which means identifying land in your area for future development and to what purpose (residential, commercial, business, leisure), as well as safeguarding land you want protected (such as green open space). It means that you're more likely to **protect areas you want to see remain the same**, by constructively suggesting alternative areas to be developed.

You'll need to consider planning policy guidance, the Local Plan, and the local development need, to inform criteria against which you can thoroughly test the applicability of sites. Ask such questions as, 'is the site suitable for the type of development proposed?' 'Is it available for development?' 'Is it economically viable?' For more information on assessing sites for allocation, see **here**.

Once a list of preferred sites has been drawn up, the wider community ought to be formally consulted prior to their inclusion in the Plan, to evidence the level of support.

What are Design Codes and how can we use them in Neighbourhood Plans?

As referred to above, a **Design Code** is a set of illustrated design rules and requirements which instruct and may advise on the physical development of a site or area. The graphic and written components of the code can be detailed and precise, and build upon a design vision for a site or area.

This is potentially a powerful tool for *you and your community* to have an input into what kinds of buildings and typologies you want to see built in your local area. Consider the factors that define your neighbourhood and make it distinctive and special. See the information box below for more information.

How much work does it take to create a Neighbourhood Forum and Plan?

A lot! Creating a Neighbourhood Forum and Neighbourhood Plan requires long-term commitment – but don't let that deter you. If the work is spread across an engaged Neighbourhood Forum, parish council or local community, the **work will be manageable and the rewards will be felt for many years to come**.

Previous examples of Neighbourhood plans demonstrate that it often takes around 18-24 months from the get-go to the referendum, with the work mostly done by local volunteers. Professionals can help you navigate this process.

How can we get funding?

In spring 2015 the Government launched a three-year support programme for neighbourhood planning. You can apply for **grants of up to £9,000**, to cover costs such as developing a website, undertaking research, employing a planning consultant and consulting the community. **A further £6,000** is available for Neighbourhood Forums (where there is no town or parish council).

More information and details on how to apply can be found **here**.

Where can I find out more?

You can find out more here:

- An introductory guide from the government-funded organisation *My Community* can be found **here**.
- A more comprehensive guide from the *Department for Communities and Local Government* can be found **here**.
- *The Prince's Foundation*, a charity which helps to empower local communities, outlines the support they offer **here**.
- *Locality* offer helpful guidance **here**.
- The **Forum for Neighbourhood Planning** enables people to share experiences about neighbourhood planning and access relevant news, resources, and case studies.
- *Civic Voice* is a 'national charity for the civic movement in England. We make places more attractive, enjoyable and distinctive. We promote civic pride.'
- The CPRE provide a guide to neighbourhood planning **here**.
- **Here** is a crowd-sourced bibliography on neighbourhood-planning.

Design Codes

What are they?

A design code is a set of illustrated design rules and requirements which instruct and may advise on the physical development of a site or area. They can be part of a Neighbourhood Plan. It is a set of detailed written and illustrated instructions or rules which set out what future development can (and can't) look like. Used well, they can create certainty about what should be built.

We recommend that it is often right to include a design code in your neighbourhood plan. We feel that they are often underused in neighbourhood planning and that more emphasis could be placed on them. They are an effective way to make sure new development is in keeping with your local area.

What can be included?

They can be as wide-ranging or as specific as you choose. For example, they can address:

- the relationship between the public realm and building facades;
- the mass and form of buildings in relation to each other;
- the scale and types of blocks and streets;
- window size, detailing, and proportion in relation to the building façade;
- depth of front gardens; and
- building materials, to name but a few.

Clearly drawn diagrams are just as important as succinct, precise wording. Here is an example of a particularly thorough design code for a new town - Sherford - **here** and **here**. Others can be much shorter though it is important to be precise on key issues. Here is a generic example from the BIMBY code (see below).
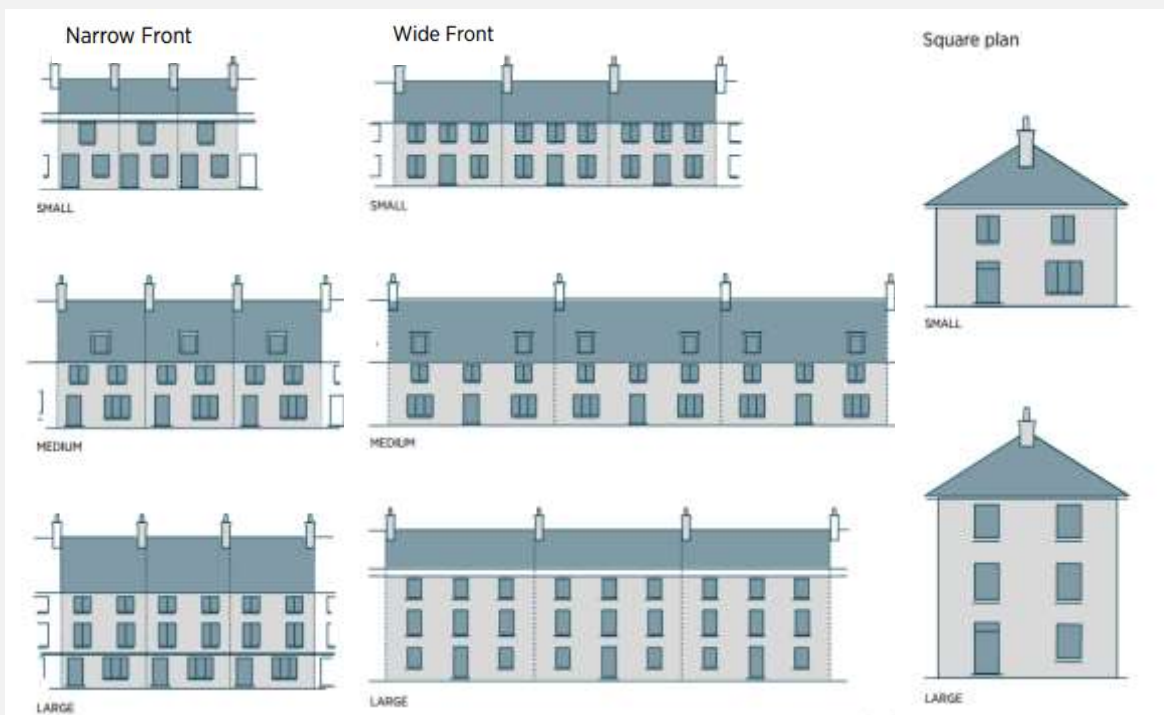
A bit of context

Design codes are not new. Statute-based codes on what could and could not be built dominated London 'planning' (as we now call it) for over a hundred and fifty years expressed through legislation such as the 1667 'Act for Rebuilding London' and the 1707, 1709 and 1774 Building Acts. Design Codes have not always sat easily with the Planning system as it has evolved in the UK post-1947 and so design codes are now far more common abroad then in the UK.

Today, design codes in various forms are used internationally, for example in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Australia and the United States, as a means to focus on the delivery of high quality developments with popular support. The *Form-Based Codes Institute* has led the way in the US (see their website **here**). Albeit an American organisation, their comprehensive **'Step-by-step Guide for Communities'** is nonetheless transferable to a UK context and worth a read. The *Congress for the New Urbanism* is another American organisation working towards creating better-designed, more authentic and walkable urban environments.

So how do I make one? Tell me more…

As *Locality* do caution, *'design codes are technical documents and do require the expertise of an experienced design professional'*. (However, there is funding available to support neighbourhood planning - see above - and Create Streets feel that resources spent on expertise to create a design code can be well spent.) *'Preparing a good design code,' Locality* adds, *'is about finding a balance between technical specificity and a succinct description of what is required. Some of the best, most effective codes are very short.'* See their document **here** for more information and links to neighbourhood forums and community groups who have created design codes.

Here are some additional resources and information:

- The *Prince's Foundation for Building Community* has set up a useful resource called BIBMY ('Beauty In My Back Yard') – which Create Streets is supporting. **Here** you can find their 'Housing Toolkit' and advice on how to create a 'Housing Manual'. This sets out how to consult your community about design, the aspects you could potentially consult on, and how to draw together this information into a workable document to influence design in your area

- The government offers some key points to take into account on design **here**
- *Placecheck* offers a handy beginners' guide to thinking about how to improve your local area
- Our latest publication *Heart in the Right Street* explores what types of urban form are better for our happiness and wellbeing. Find out more **here**.