

Buckinghamshire Council, County-wide coding

This case study was prepared as part of the six month testing programme for the draft National Model Design Code (NMDC), run by DLUHC (then, MHCLG) from April to September 2021. Not all participants prepared design codes and all the pilot projects were at different stages when the pilot started. This case study is not a recommendation of best practice but seeks to highlight the work the local authority did as part of the pilot programme and the local authority's reflections on the programme and the design coding process.

Buckinghamshire Council, County-wide coding

Scale:	Authority-wide
Context:	Suburban / rural
Focus:	Producing a strategic design code - an 'A' code - to address recurring design issues in developments across the county
Project team:	Buckinghamshire Council, Urban Design Doctor
Region:	South East



Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore the process and outcomes of developing a design code for this new unitary authority. The key themes included the challenges of producing a code in the early stages of the authority's unification after merging four smaller authorities with the county council - time, resources, and commitment were the main challenges; appreciating the different emphases, content and uses of the A codes (strategic and authority-wide) and B codes (detailed and area-based or site specific); and the development and use of a new website and phone app to undertake community engagement on design.

Local Authority background information

With a rapidly expanding population, Buckinghamshire has a significant demand for 50,000 new homes within existing and new settlements. Since March 2020, Buckinghamshire Council has been in the process of merging five legacy authorities (the four planning authorities and the County Council) creating England's newest unitary authority. The four legacy planning authorities (Chiltern, South Buckinghamshire, Wycombe, and Aylesbury Vale) all have Local Plans in different stages of adoption. Until a new Local Plan for the unitary authority is adopted, the council will need to rely upon these legacy Local Plans. The design code will therefore be created in this challenging planning environment.

The council is currently in the early stages of developing a single Local Plan with a unified spatial vision for the new unitary authority's administrative area, valid to 2040. The planning challenge is significant, as is the opportunity to shape high quality and meaningful places.

The context for coding

The communities, landscapes, natural and built environments, and development pressures within the county are diverse while Buckinghamshire Council's administrative precinct covers a broad spectrum of market value areas. With such diversity, the aim is to produce a single effective authority-wide 'A' type Design Code to achieve high quality placemaking outcomes by targeting selected key issues of primary concern. The benefits of this focussed type of Design Code will be to improve design quality and the speed of determination of planning applications.

“ The repetition of the same fundamental weaknesses in planning submissions delays applications, consuming energy and resources that could otherwise be spent on site specific issues ”

Whilst the Buckinghamshire area is diverse, planning officers experience many of the same design issues across the county. The repetition of the same fundamental weaknesses delays planning applications, consuming energy, time and resources that could otherwise be spent on site specific issues, frustrating the ability of officers to improve design quality. Elected Members are keen to explore how an overarching Design Code might prevent the “same problems” being repeated on different sites across the county.

An authority-wide design code will therefore deal with these fundamental, recurring issues and assist in raising design quality, not only by the code requirements themselves, but in leaving more time for negotiations on site-specific design issues.

Why code?

Buckinghamshire Council has a clear vision for improving the quality of placemaking and design with strong political and officer leadership. The opportunity to develop a Design Code for Buckinghamshire is well timed and (if created) could more easily be embedded into the Local Plan as it emerges (rather than ‘fitting’ a Code to an existing Plan).

“ A fantastic opportunity to embed a Design Code into a new Local Plan ”

As of 1st March 2021 the Development Management, Policy, and Specialist officers in the Council continue to work in separate teams mirroring the legacy council administrative areas. They plan to use the design coding work to bring these teams together and develop a single coordinated approach to raising design quality via this new design code covering the whole of the administrative area.

Additionally, Buckinghamshire Council has inherited a very large number of Development Plan Documents, SPDs, and guidance from the legacy authorities. The content of these will need to be considered to inform the creation of a clear and concise overarching Design Code.

The Council has a unique opportunity to develop a local design code applicable to a wide range of conditions, and by embedding it within the new Local Plan as design policy, this would significantly increase certainty in the planning process and the quality of the outcomes in relation to design.

The pilot team have identified that fundamental weaknesses in design proposals can frequently be traced back to the land acquisition process where key design parameters are often set, and then act as design fixes that are difficult to overcome. In effect, the applicant has fixed the future design direction during the land acquisition stage. This is not always problematic if the applicant has made these decisions with specialist design expertise input; however, this is far from the norm. A Design Code would identify the key requirements for development so that these can be factored into the land acquisition costs.

What is the ongoing coding process?

The core in-house project team has been assembled from a range of officers and members to ensure a robust outcome. This team will be instrumental in the development and implementation of this spatial vision.

The creative public and stakeholder participation used for the pilot is anticipated to have benefits for shaping the design code as well as testing new ways of engaging communities so that they can contribute to the development of the new Local Plan, particularly those typically disengaged from more traditional forms of consultation. The key issues include:

- Testing of a digital community engagement platform
- High level of development pressure with significant growth in applications and housebuilding; 50,000 new homes projected by 2036
- High levels of child inactivity and adult obesity
- Combination of in-house and external design expertise with a high level of political support
- A new county wide team with responsibility for raising design quality and place making

“ *The Code... will help us educate people to understand how to create meaningful streets, buildings and spaces* ”

The Code will need to work on a variety of scales, from new-build single homes, redeveloped plots (i.e. 'knock down and rebuilt' in valued townscape settings, a particularly challenging issue throughout Buckinghamshire), back land development, to larger residential developments on brownfield and greenfield land. It will apply within Conservation Areas, the Chilterns AONB, and to settlements ranging from large town centres and market towns, to villages and hamlets. It will also need to be highly accessible to non-architects and other non-professionally trained designers. It will help to educate users to understand how to create meaningful streets, buildings and spaces.

For a Code to be effective, it is critical to draw in other teams and specialisms from across the Council: Education (new schools building programme), Highways, Arboriculture, Ecology, Lead Local Flood Authority, Development Management (Majors and Minors Teams) and Planning Policy. It will also be necessary to engage Democratic Services that has responsibility for Member training and the functioning of Planning Committees. The project was managed day-to-day by the Natural Environment Manager.

Due to the heavy case load being dealt with by the Team, they drew on the additional support of their design service provider, Urban Design Doctor, who has provided services to the Council since 2018. This service provider is procured through the Council's supplier framework and has established a close working relationship with in-house officers as well as developing a good knowledge of the county.

There are a high number of stakeholder groups across the administrative area, particularly those involved in Neighbourhood Planning and planning in general, such as Civic Amenity Groups. Officers were also keen to explore how they might engage a younger and more diverse demographic in shaping the Code.

“ *... we are keen to explore how we might engage a younger and more diverse demographic* ”

Neighbourhood Planning Groups and civic amenity groups naturally attract participation by certain demographics due to 'free time poverty' and other life priorities amongst less represented groups. Outcomes are therefore often skewed. By reaching out beyond well represented groups 'at the grass roots' and giving 'time poor' people a quick and easy way to get involved using the bucks.place app, the team aimed to capture the aspirations of different demographics and those who have most to gain from new developments.

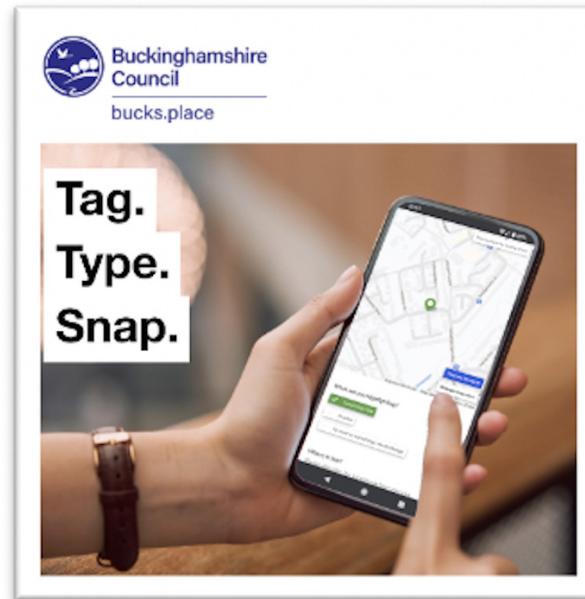
At the close of the pilot process the design coding process was still ongoing. Key areas of focus during the testing period included:

1. **Launching the bucks.place website** to collect feedback on community and stakeholder responses to the local built environment. This is supported by QR coded posters at some of the selected sites in the area.

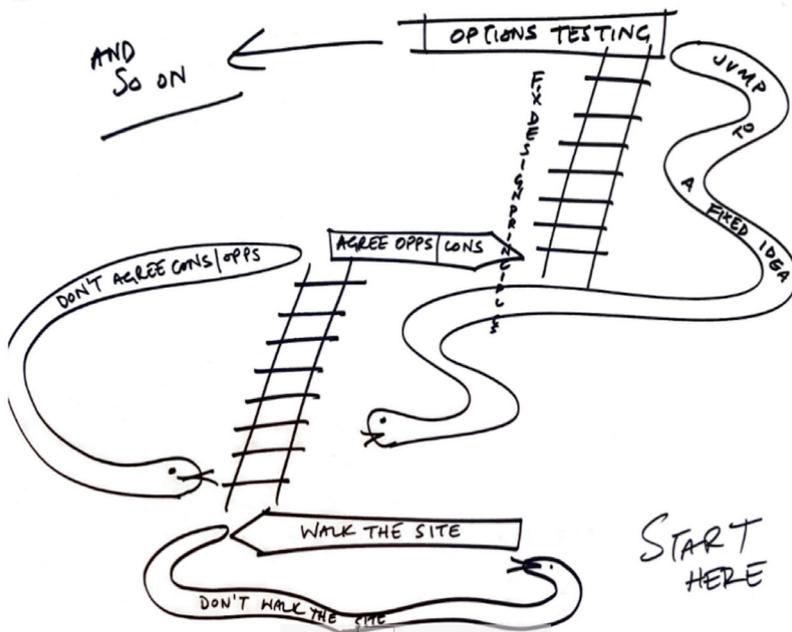
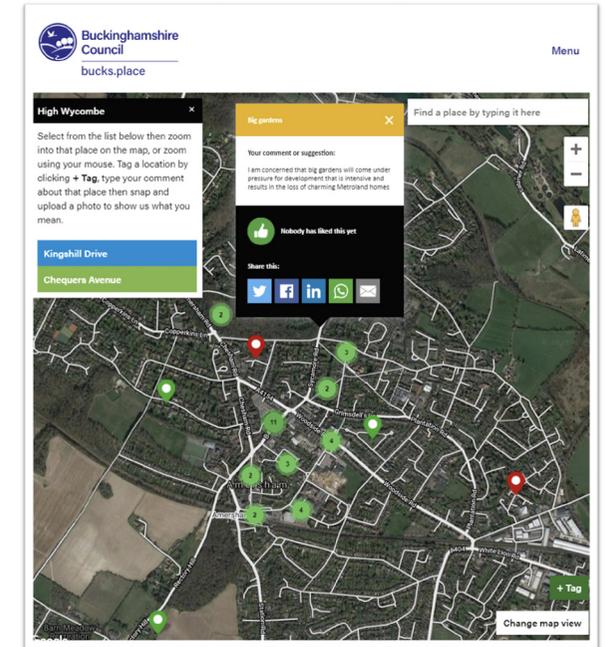
The purpose of the platform is to stimulate discussion about place quality, engage a wider and more diverse demographic, and to identify issues relevant to design coding.

The website will allow users to 'tag' a location on a map, 'type' a comment about that location, and 'snap' a photo to upload to illustrate the point they are making. Other users will be able to see, 'like' and comment on the thoughts of others, allowing the team to build a better picture of public sentiment.

This website and phone app are a key aspect of the Council's work, testing new ways of engaging the public, and new ways to understand and use that input to formulate clear and concise guidance to improve the quality of planning decisions.



The bucks.place app and website



Snakes and ladders sketch

2. A **3-day coding workshop** was held with the project team, Development Management and Highways Development Management colleagues. This initial coding work provided confidence that an effective code could be produced, targeting both process and approach.

The design code was seen as one way to manage or codify what was characterised at the workshop as a snakes and ladders planning application process in which it was often difficult in obtaining the required information from applicants.

As part of the process, once draft design codes are developed, it is intended to test the code through workshops to ensure any weaknesses or ambiguities can be addressed or clarified.

What form will the code take?

There will be two types of codes: the A codes which are county-wide and the B codes which are area or site specific, localised or topic-based. The pilot focused on developing the early stages of the A code, particularly on two key considerations: clarity and universality (across the County).

The idea for the A code is to address frequently re-occurring issues or problems that have repeatedly affected design quality, notably the following topics: street networks and street hierarchy, walking and cycling, inclusive streets, parking, services and utilities, and open spaces. The design code is intended to be an easy-to-use tool to help development management officers, council members, stakeholders, and applicants understand the minimum requirements of good design for Buckinghamshire. To be effective, the code will need to be clear, concise, and avoid the need for guidance notes or specialist advice.

'A Code' and NMDC elements to be tested Rules that apply cross Buckinghamshire's administrative area	'B Code' Potential future local Codes for individual settlements
CONTEXT	
Site assessment [AONB]	Character types; site context; historic assessment; heritage assets; [AONB]
MOVEMENT	
Street network; [public transport]; street hierarchy; walking and cycling; junctions and crossings; inclusive streets; car parking; cycle parking; servicing and utilities (where within our control/influence).	See 'A Code'
NATURE	
Network of spaces; OS provision; design; working with water; SUDS; flood risk.	See 'A Code'
BUILT FORM	
Blocks; building line; potentially also types and forms; height	Density; party-wall; types and forms; building line (if local variation to 'A Code' required); height (if local variation required).
IDENTITY	
Legibility; <u>masterplanning</u>	Local character; design of buildings.
PUBLIC SPACE	
Primary; local and secondary; tertiary; meeting places, multi-functional; home zones; secured by design; counter terrorism.	See 'A Code'
USES	
Efficient land use; schools; community facilities; local services	Type
HOMES AND BUILDINGS	
[Space standards?]; [Accessibility – B/Regs]; Light, aspect and privacy; security; gardens and balconies.	See 'A Code'
RESOURCES	
No intention to codify addressed by Building Regulations	No intention to codify addressed by Building Regulations
LIFESPAN	
Not proposed for Bucks Testing pilot	TBC

Suggested content for the Buckinghamshire A and B design codes

Lessons learned

Digital engagement tools - There were challenges around developing and implementing innovative engagement tools such as a new website and phone app to facilitate public engagement around design. This involved achieving a consensus in-house about this new approach and the design of the tools, as well as raising awareness throughout the Council about this new initiative. All departments need to be informed of these types of initiatives, and the importance of their role in supporting this work. This involved more time and effort than was at first envisaged.

The content for the two types of design codes - strategic A codes and more detailed B codes - These two types of design codes will be used for different purposes and at different stages, so deciding what goes into each code was challenging, particularly given that there will be some overlap in topics. Drafting the codes takes significant time, and consulting on them throughout the different departments in the council to gain feedback and advice is important.

In their words

As part of the NMDC pilot project research, interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders involved in each of the pilots. This section summarises some of those reflections.

Using design coding to bring teams together

The design code will be one of the first planning documents to come out of the new authority and it is hoped that this will help to unify the various planning teams behind this effort to improve the quality of design outcomes in the county.

Nurturing a culture of design quality

Design thinking needs to be in the DNA of the organisation. Design thinking is a way of working, delivering better outcomes, getting more out of the council's teams, making services more customer responsive. Teams can be very different politically, organisationally and culturally. Design codes might be used to introduce and nurture a more unified culture around good design.

Coding for process as well as outcomes

A big discussion in the workshop focussed on addressing process issues in the design code so that applicants would have to submit the required information to support their applications. This would address another recurring problem experienced county-wide. It would signal to developers that the baseline research, site analysis, and design concept are important parts of the planning application process.

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The full National Model Design Code (NMDC) Pilot Programme Monitoring and Evaluation can be downloaded here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1083852/NMDC_M_E_final_report_v5.pdf