

# Herefordshire Council: Guidance for neighbourhood-based design codes

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.

# Herefordshire Council: Guidance for neighbourhood-based design codes

<b>Scale:</b>	Authority-wide
<b>Context:</b>	Rural
<b>Focus:</b>	Producing guidance and templates for coding in a rural context
<b>Project team:</b>	Herefordshire Council
<b>Region:</b>	West Midlands



## Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore how to adapt the principles and process of the National Model Design Code (NMDC) at an authority-wide level within a predominantly rural context. Key themes included the production and testing of guidance and templates, which will be used by Neighbourhood Planning Groups to develop local design codes; in addition to the testing of four different engagement processes within the case study areas (parishes).

## Local Authority background information

The county of Herefordshire is located in the south western part of the West Midlands region, on the border with Wales. It is predominantly rural, and includes the city of Hereford, five market towns, and many villages and hamlets. Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy (2011-2031) document highlights that nearly half of the population live in rural areas – while a quarter of the population are deemed to live in 'very sparse' areas.

Herefordshire is a local planning authority with a very comprehensive coverage of Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) - over 113 are in existence. This forms part of a Development Plan (DP) hierarchy where the current Core Strategy is supported by the NDPs that provide detailed policies, settlement boundaries and site allocations. The intention is that the new Herefordshire Local Plan 2021-2041 will follow this model.

## The context for coding

The strategic aim for the design coding pilot work was to explore how to adapt the principles and process of the NMDC at an authority-wide level. Four case study areas (parishes) were chosen, to explore the coding process through production and testing of guidance and templates. The case study areas were: Fownhope, Weobley, Ewyas Harold, and Bartestree and Lugwardine Group. These were chosen as all four case study areas had adopted neighbourhood development plans, each of which contain design and place-making policies. In addition, previous community engagement exercises had been undertaken locally as part of the neighbourhood plan process, so there was a level of existing knowledge already in place.

**“ The actions of the national housebuilders will be critical in getting the parishes to take on design codes – at a local level there are concerns that a lack of a five year land supply will mean that design codes will not make a difference ”**

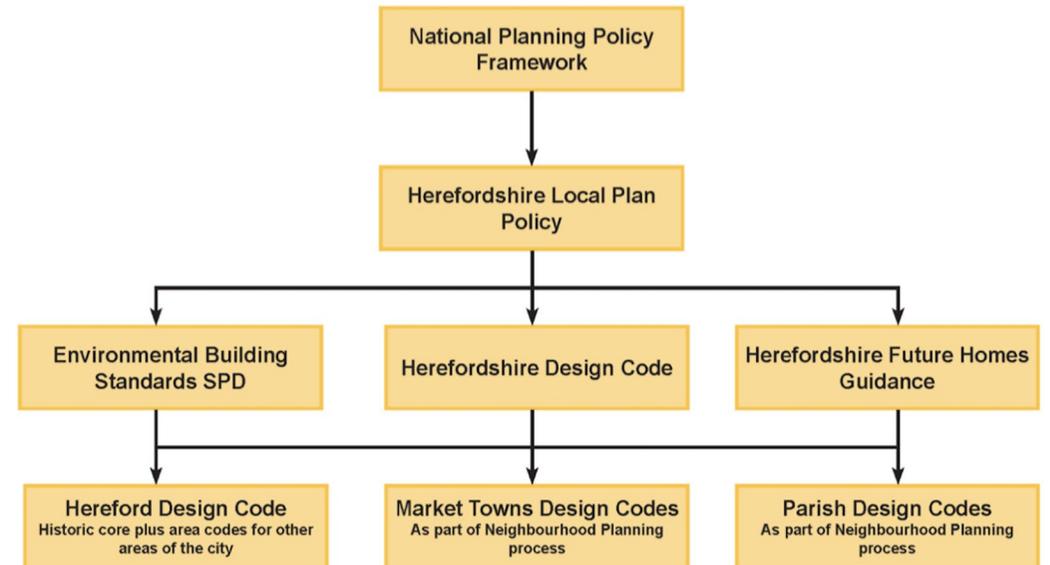
## Why code?

The council - through the design code pilot - wished to test mirroring the DP hierarchy with a set of design codes covering the county from an overarching design policy within the Herefordshire Local Plan and a countywide design code which is then supported by local design codes produced by parish councils. An understanding from the case studies within the pilot will enable the council to determine the ability of this hierarchy to succeed.

## Herefordshire policy and design code hierarchy

A further driver to this pilot was seeking to resolve tensions between parishes and the council on design issues. There has often been some tensions between Development Management and parish councils regarding the terminology within some neighbourhood plan's design policy, concerned it may not be defensible, especially at appeal. The process of testing design codes looked at whether coding processes - and ways of putting a code together - could deliver more certainty regarding planning decisions for all stakeholders.

A key part of viability of the above hierarchy is testing how NDP groups / parishes could develop their own design codes through establishing: how current NDP policies and background evidence can be used to inform 'upwards' to a countywide Herefordshire Design Code; how engagement techniques and communication networks used in neighbourhood planning can be expanded to incorporate design coding; and how parish councils can use the NMDC to review and develop their own local design codes to complement the Herefordshire countywide code.



Herefordshire policy and design code hierarchy

*“ Elements of identity and built form are the critical parts – what it looks like and how it fits in. We originally started in conversation with the parishes using the terms ‘good, bad, ugly’ but revised that after some felt it was unfairly naming particular residents’ homes. Using the terms ‘characteristic’ or ‘uncharacteristic’ was better ”*

## What was the coding process?

### 1. Adapting the NMDC into a proposed hierarchy

Initially consideration was given to which elements of the NMDC ‘wheel’ of characteristics of well-designed places would be appropriate to include within a countywide Herefordshire Design Code and which would be more appropriate at either a market town scale or the parish scale. An exercise was undertaken to set out the different documents being developed to implement model design codes in Herefordshire and how the 10 characteristics of well-designed places could be included at different grains in different places.

### 2. Developing material to support a countywide code

Alongside this work the council also developed material that could be used as part of a Herefordshire countywide code, particularly looking at sustainability, as it is in the process of developing a Draft Environmental Building Standards SPD, focusing on sustainable and low carbon building design, surrounding environment and use. This document will be used to inform the overarching county-wide design code.

### 3. Testing design coding with parish councils

The most substantial part of the coding process was for the council’s Neighbourhood Planning team to ‘translate’ the NMDC into a set of locally distinctive templates and guidance notes to assist parish councils and give them the confidence to produce a design code as part of the neighbourhood planning work. Coding templates and guidance were developed, to cover Context, Built Form and Identity, Nature and Open Space, and Movement. The parish councils (of the four case study areas) were tasked with using the templates and notes as if they were undertaking the development of a code, and support was given through virtual meetings every two weeks. The first exercise was to undertake a consultation activity with their community (restricted to 15 people due to COVID restrictions). Each parish council tested a single engagement technique and shared the feedback with the other parish councils. The parishes - in pairs - were asked to look thematically at character and built form, and open spaces and movement, respectively.

One of the challenges to discussing character was understanding - in a village context - what character means. This could be assessed overall for the village and specifically for particular dwellings in terms of their contribution to character (or if they were seen to be detrimental to character). Issues arose when those doing the assessment realised that they may know (or may themselves be) the person who lives in the negatively classified dwelling. The parishes felt perhaps ‘characteristic’ / ‘uncharacteristic’ was less controversial. Through this process, it was agreed that the local character assessment would reference local places as ‘characteristic’ or ‘uncharacteristic’ as opposed to other terms that could be viewed as less positive or helpful.

*“ Whatever is produced at the end in terms of a design code should be produced also in consultation with landowners and local developers so that the code that emerges should not be a surprise to anyone ”*

## What form did the code take?

At the conclusion of the testing programme, a series of templates, guidance notes and examples were produced with the four case study parishes. The guidance notes are a balance of text, photographs, drawings, and annotations seeking to explain design terms in language that is accessible to local communities. The council's Neighbourhood Planning team made significant efforts to assemble photographs and drawings of buildings, spaces and features that were from Herefordshire so that the documents would be seen as applicable and relevant to the areas in which they would be used. One of the challenges was balancing the visual content of the material while making it possible for parish councils in rural areas with limited internet connectivity to download or distribute the information easily.

### When looking at materials used in buildings consider:

- Use of colour/ Are there contrasts or uniformity



- Detail of materials



- Quality/finish and style of materials



- Symmetric/ asymmetric patterns design



- Age of materials/ Historic/ Contemporary materials



- Use of local materials/ i.e local brick or stone



- Are there contrasting materials



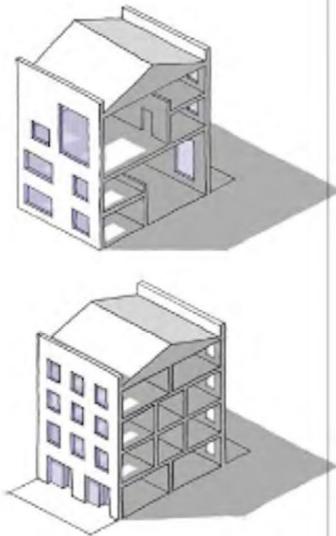
- Are there a variety of materials use or continuity



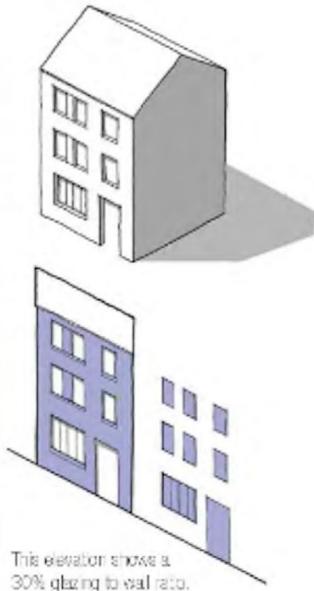
*Extract from the Village Character, Identity and Built Form Information Guide – Building Materials*

## 7. Building frontages and window layout (Fenestration)

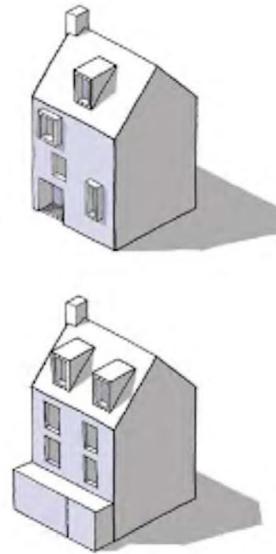
**Composition:** The façade needs to relate to both the external context and the arrangement of internal spaces. Windows need to be composed to reflect the daylight needs and hierarchy of these spaces.



**Windows:** Elevators work best with a wall to window ratio of 15-35%. The proportion and design of windows can shape the façade based on whether they are horizontal or vertical, and the depth of the reveals.



**Articulation:** Façades can benefit from depth and articulation. This may be achieved with architectural features such as setbacks, balconies, porches and bays. These set forward or back from the main façade that relates to the building line.



**Materials and detail:** The details of design combine to enhance the building. The choice of symmetry or conscious asymmetry, the use of colour, quality materials and detailing – preferably drawn from the surrounding context. A degree of complexity will ensure that buildings are attractive from a distance and close-up.

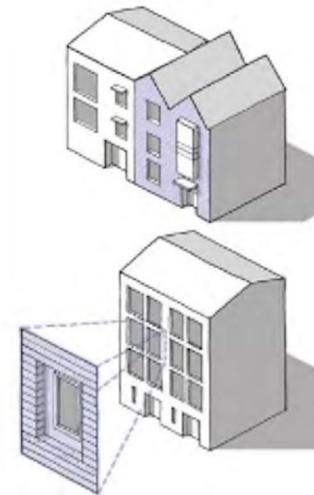


Fig7

There are a vast range of building styles developed over the centuries this helps to shape the character and identity of a place. Elevations/ façade of a building is the external face of building, the façade relates to both the outside and inside arrangement of a building. Consider the building line-A building line represents the alignment of the front face of the buildings in relation to a street or other public space. The nature of this line and its position in relation to the street contribute to the character and identity of a place. It may be straight or irregular, continuous or broken. A consistent approach to building line in an area type or street type helps to give it a coherent identity.

**When looking at the village roovescape consider the:**

**Overall roofline**

**Meeting the sky:** Townscape can be enriched by using varied roof heights and forms. Alternatively, a more formal character can be created with a consistent roofline. This relates to both the roofline and the eaves line.

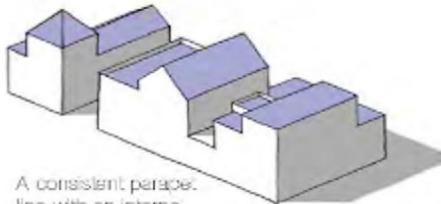


Fig 6

**Roof form-Is the roof form varied or regular?**



**Ridge heights do this vary or uniformed in areas**



**Roof type- are they flat, pitched, include dormers**



**Eaves line-are they overhanging/clipped and guttering**



**Materials used/typical colours-are they thatched, metal sheet/ use clay/ slate tiles.**



**Chimneys-Regular or irregular. Are they integrated or act as a feature.**



**Dormers-Are dormers featured in the roof? Do they vary or are they uniform?**



**Decorative extras (i.e-gargoles/ ornamental gable ends)**



*Extract from the Village Character, Identity and Built Form Information Guide – Roovescape*

## Lessons learned

**Facilitating community-led local design codes in rural areas** – The pilot project has demonstrated that it is possible to translate the NMDC to represent local rural environments and create a potential hierarchy of design codes at different levels of granularity. Establishing a systematic code-making process using templates and guidance will allow neighbourhood groups to directly shape future local development. Where formal neighbourhood planning groups are already in place, the process will benefit from existing knowledge and experience.

**Extend neighbourhood plan funding and support to include design coding** – Integrating design coding into the already established neighbourhood planning processes has potential but it would particularly assist parish councils if the funding and support packages to produce neighbourhood plans could be extended to include design coding.

**Knowledge and understanding of design issues can vary at parish / community level** – As a planning authority very experienced in supporting communities carrying out neighbourhood planning, the level of knowledge and understanding of wider ranging design issues and terminology within the parishes and their communities was found to vary - design was often thought of as just the aesthetic of the building itself rather than the wider range of characteristics and elements.

**Training and support for parish councils** – The pilot demonstrated that more time would be required to inform, upskill, and train parish councils on all aspects of the NMDC. A supportive, proactive and well-resourced local planning authority would be required to support parish councils if this model was to be adopted.

**Barriers to online consultation processes in rural areas** – Developing codes and running consultation exercises has challenges in rural areas with limited broadband and with parish councils working to quite long decision-making timescales (for example meeting bi-monthly). In addition, the cost of online consultation software licences could be prohibitive if every parish council wants to use them and there is a considerable upskilling need among the parishes to use such online tools.

**Communities may need convincing of the benefits** – In some areas a significant amount of work will be required to convince communities that design codes will make a difference, particularly with national housebuilders and at appeals and if the Local Planning Authority do not have a five-year land supply.

## 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.

### Adapting the design coding process across Herefordshire

Our aim for this pilot was to take the very rural environment of parishes and use the NMDC content to explore how codes could be produced. At this stage the guidance notes and templates are predominantly aimed at the rural parishes and not the market towns or the city of Hereford. Consideration has also been given to how a design coding hierarchy can be rolled out across the county. We envisage the parishes will develop a code for their whole parish as part of their neighbourhood development plan work, potentially with different characteristics for the village centre. For the market towns and Hereford, we will develop more area-led individual type coding support which will require a different set of guidance. It is likely that these places will need more professional support to create design codes too.

### **Design codes and permitted development rights**

There's a balance required between the locally produced design code versus permitted development rights. Some thought needed to be given to how they interact. It is often the piecemeal small developments and changes that are added onto the building which can change the character of the place that local communities comment upon. These alterations can cause tensions regarding how the village is changing whilst accommodating people's changing needs, for example, to build an extension affordably.

### **Guidance notes**

The design code guidance and templates for the parishes has concentrated on movement, identity, built form and nature. We are looking at an overall authority-wide code to cover some of the larger grain issues. The current set of guidance notes for the parishes has not included building sustainability issues in detail as a specific county-wide document is currently being produced. Within the first draft of the guidance notes we had overestimated the level of technical detail that lay people understand, so we had to simplify wording for the guidance notes; including glossaries to help explain wording. Matters that some parishes struggled to comprehend included the wider issues of design - active travel and movement, and public and private space. The movement section was particularly difficult, whereas built form and identity were easier for people to grasp as they see that as the focus of 'design' as they traditionally understood the term. We know that in some NDPs some parishes have been quite prescriptive, for example 'no leylandii trees'. However, some parishes are quite nervous about being so prescriptive within a code. Some villages have a very characteristic look, for example the 'black and white' villages but many have quite a lot of variety so if they are overly prescriptive then they are not really responding to the character.

### **Community preferences on design – provably popular**

In terms of community preferences on design, it will be interesting and challenging to understand whether the local community agree or if there is a spread of opinion, particularly on what constitutes character and preferences for individual dwelling / building styles – particularly as this will require commenting on their neighbours' properties! The parishes did express that they felt a weight of responsibility to decide what was characteristic and not characteristic in their village. Although they consulted their wider community, they felt they had to make that initial decision of 'what is right and what is wrong'. Part of it was a confidence issue with a new process - some individuals within the parish had the confidence to express these options and others didn't.

### **Community engagement**

It is really important that survey questions are well planned and well structured - asking questions with valuable quantifiable results. Parishes will need help in shaping consultation questions. We are also trying to encourage the parish councils to talk to each other, and to go to each other's consultation events so they learn from each other. We found it valuable to use a hybrid approach in consultation – a mix of online and face to face. Many areas of Herefordshire do not have reliable broadband or mobile connections, some places have no 3G, and some don't get broadband at all. We found it can be difficult to distribute material online, especially containing imagery as file sizes were too large for personal laptops/computers and some home broadband speeds. An understanding of (and research of) new methods of consultation and engagement techniques is required, to allow different parishes to use different solutions depending upon skills, technology available and broadband speeds.

### **Confidence in the process – and the impact**

The biggest issue that concerned the parishes was whether the whole process would actually make a difference, in the face of other pressures - for example: the highways standards; development pressure from not having a five year housing supply; Planning Inspectorate decisions following applications being refused for design issues only; and standard designs from national developers. The locally based builders, building smaller schemes, tend to be more responsive to local character. The parishes wondered if their code would stand up to those external pressures.

### **Time and resources**

The process for producing the templates and guidance notes has taken a lot of time to ensure that they are pitched at the right levels to assist parish councils, this included finding suitable photographs and illustrations to reflect the rural nature of Herefordshire. Many within the NMDC were not suitable for rural settings.

The model of producing design codes via the neighbourhood planning process by local communities and their parish councils also relies on significant amount of volunteering time and the testing of the templates and guidance notes was also subject to time constraints. However, the council has seen the value of investing resources in the beginning and will see the benefits in time saved in the long run. This was a similar model to that used to initiate the neighbourhood planning process. Parish councils work on monthly and bi-monthly meeting cycles, so any work involving parish councils and their local communities needs to take account of these extended timescale requirements. We possibly underestimated how much time each parish team would need to spend on testing the draft templates and guidance notes for the pilot.

There could be significant costs to produce codes across 113 neighbourhood planning groups. Online consultation for one parish can be very costly, so across the whole authority the costs would be significant. Upskilling on design issues is required, both within the council's Planning Services teams, which currently does not have any specialist design skills in house, and within the parishes themselves. We would need to provide more training sessions within the parishes and would consider bringing in outside expertise to deliver additional training, especially on design issues.

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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](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1083852/NMDC_M_E_final_report_v5.pdf)