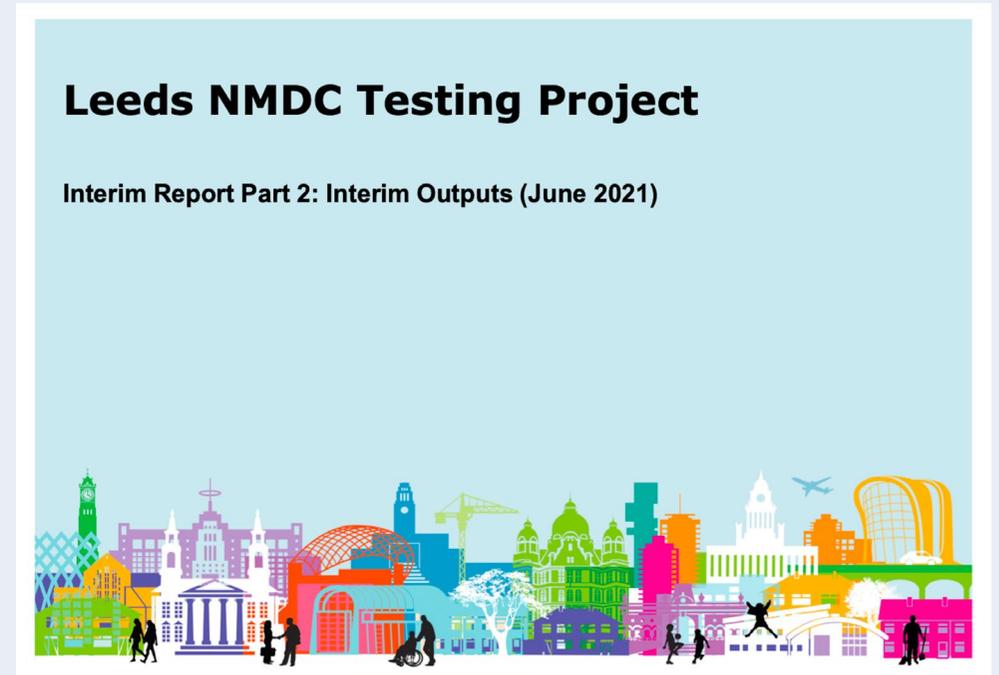


Leeds City Council, testing area types across a complex urban context

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.

Leeds City Council, testing area types across a complex urban context

Scale:	Authority-wide
Context:	Urban/suburban
Focus:	Testing Area Types at the city scale
Project team:	Leeds City Council
Region:	North East



Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore the question: how does the area type approach to design coding as set out in the National Model Design Code work in a diverse city like Leeds? This investigation focused on whether and how the city could be divided up into the example ten area-types illustrated in the NMDC, and how meaningful the mapping work is as a geography for creating design codes and guidance in Leeds. The key themes included investigation of digital tools such as GIS to map area-types; conducting stakeholder engagement including detailed surveys with community groups and developers on the importance of design and design codes; and the role that design codes might play as part of the city's overall design policy guidance.

Local Authority background information

The City of Leeds covers a diverse area, from highly affluent districts to some of the most deprived communities nationally. It includes the City of Leeds itself, alongside five free-standing towns and a wide variety of smaller settlements and villages. As a result of its diversity, all of the proposed 'area types' identified in the NMDC are represented in Leeds. With two thirds of the authority lies within Green Belt, with the majority of development in Leeds focussed within the city centre, main urban areas and major settlements. A significant proportion of the development planned, over 29,000 new homes, will also be built on brownfield land.

The 'Leeds Petals' diagram illustrates conceptually how the character of Leeds and its communities varies as you move across and around the district and this has underpinned the Council's overall spatial strategy.

The context for coding

Leeds did not intend to produce a design code for the NMDC testing programme, but instead presented several opportunities that supported the investigation of area-types:

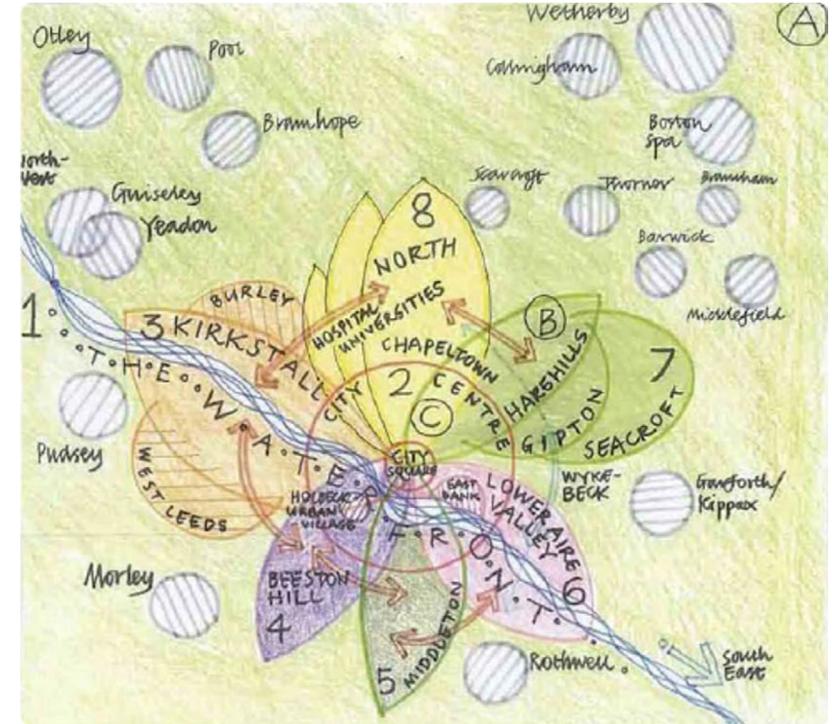
- a wide variety of urban development projects and sites at an early stage, ideally timed for early design input, including examples of city centre development and schemes on the edge of the centre
- a wide variety of sites within areas of urban transformation
- a number of discrete development sites within inner suburbs

Across the authority area there is significant interest in neighbourhood planning. Over half of the district is covered by a neighbourhood plan designation, which generally reflect the make-up of the city in terms of the NMDC area types, including plans covering market towns, rural villages, inner city areas and regeneration areas. This work is being driven forward by a highly engaged and knowledgeable local community that is keen to help shape the development that takes place in their parts of the City. There were particular opportunities within inner city areas, as part of the testing programme, to consider how application of the area-types approach advocated by the NDMC can help neighbourhood planning groups realise the design aspirations for their areas.

“ At the end of the project it was hoped that the core output will be a refined methodology for developing and using design codes, with more place-based approaches to design guidance in Leeds ”

Why code?

Leeds wanted to be involved in the NMDC testing programme as a representative of the Northern Powerhouse cities with their distinctive economics and markets to ensure that these considerations would feed into and influence new national guidance. However, Leeds also questioned the use of area types in the NMDC and therefore chose to focus on an exploration of that approach with a particular focus on 'city', 'urban neighbourhood', and 'inner suburb' area types. These area types are not homogenous



'Leeds petals' diagram illustrating the city's character areas

categories, and within each type there is a wide variety of cultures, markets, and socio-economic circumstances that can be observed. The urban form also varies significantly within and across these areas, with parts of these places presenting different characteristics in terms of movement, nature, built form, identity, public space, use, and homes and buildings, all requiring differing design responses.

Three main elements were considered:

1. How the city could be divided up into the ten area-types illustrated in the NMDC. This included a fine-grained manual analysis, a higher level 'predominant character' approach, and consideration of how GIS can be used to help simplify the process through the integration of existing datasets and automated density analysis.
2. How meaningful the mapping work (and the area type approach more generally) is as a geography for creating design codes and guidance in Leeds, and its merits relative to alternative approaches. This considered the extent of variation within an area type and the implications that this would have for the content of a guide or code
3. Engagement about design in the preparation of design guides and codes. Surveys, workshops and one-to-one discussions were held with a variety of neighbourhood planning groups, community groups, developers, landowners and architects to gain their views and insights into the process, to help shape initial thoughts about design, design codes and guidance, and how we might take this work forward in Leeds.

5. Methods of Engagement

Have you been involved in design and new development before?

	allotments on new housing development a part of the bidding process for construction companies
25	As an architect and planner, a consultant/facilitator for Neighbourhood/Village Design Statements and Neighbourhood Plans, preparing Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans and as a member of Leeds Civic Trust Planning Committee carrying out Design Reviews, and engagement on Local Plan preparation.
26	Although there is a Neighbourhood Planning Forum they have never been consulted by developers prior to submitting their own layout designs, and subject to highways and other statutory consultees these are accepted. One development is currently under construction and another with permission granted , both never consulted local residents prior to these applications.

4. Would you like to have the opportunity to inform or have your say about any new design requirements or guidance that we prepare about the design of new development in Leeds?

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Yes	96.55%	28
2	No	3.45%	1
		answered	29
		skipped	0

3. If you have been involved, what have you been involved in?

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Core Strategy	40.00%	10
2	Aire Valley Leeds Area Action Plan	8.00%	2
3	Site Allocations Plan	48.00%	12
4	Neighbourhood planning	80.00%	20
5	Neighbourhood / village design statements	52.00%	13
6	Supplementary planning documents	32.00%	8
7	Commenting on planning applications	84.00%	21
8	Other (please specify):	24.00%	6
		answered	25
		skipped	4

What methods of engagement should be used?

Answer Choices		Response Percent	Response Total
1	Visual preference surveys	53.57%	15
2	Place assessment tools	25.00%	7
3	Structured workshops and charettes	50.00%	14
4	Community panels or forums	75.00%	21
5	Drop in events and exhibitions	92.86%	26
6	Design review panels	50.00%	14

Stakeholder surveys - results extracts, Right: Neighbourhood planning and community groups. Left: Developer groups

What was the coding process?

The exploration of the area types approach involved two main processes:

The development and use of GIS in the analysis process

GIS provided the basis for the area types analysis, using the in-house GIS team that sits within the planning policy team. Mapping work involved testing out different options for dividing the city into area types, with one aim being to potentially automate the process by integrating existing data sets that are already available to the city.

Community engagement including surveys

A second process involved direct engagement (through a survey and discussions) with neighbourhood planning and community groups, and with local developers and building industry professionals, exploring their views on design generally in relation to the built environment, and specifically on design codes. Due to the time constraints of the pilot project the engagement was relatively constrained and tended to involve people already engaged, in some way, with planning in Leeds.

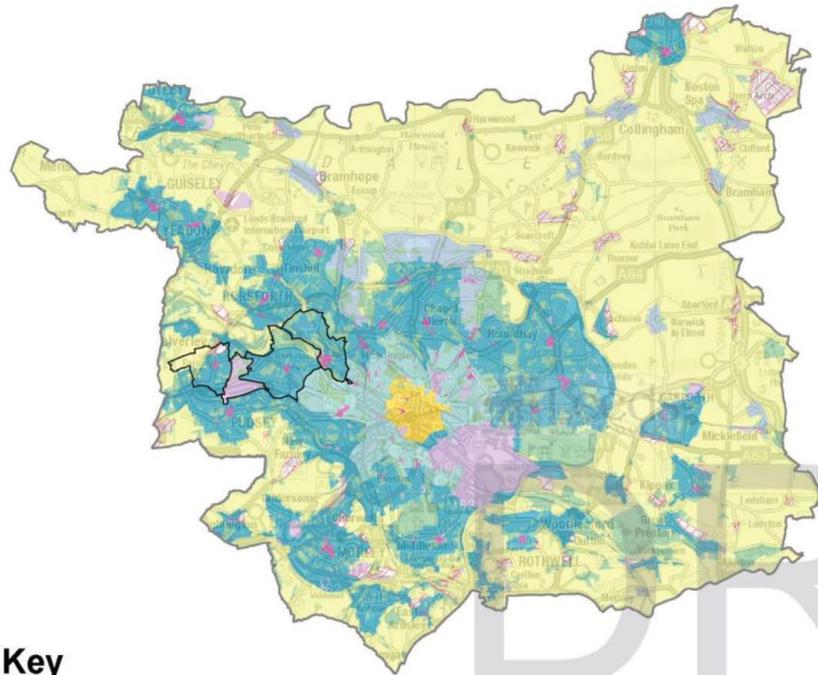
The conversations with developers were particularly useful. Rather than a focus on particular sites or projects, they focused on the value of raising design quality generally throughout the city. As a result, they led to constructive and open discussions about the opportunities and challenges of doing design codes and improving design quality. Overall, and with all groups involved in the discussions, there was much enthusiasm for design being a consistent priority in Leeds and design codes potentially playing a role in achieving that.

“ Good design won't always impact on viability, but clearly this depends on what is required in the design code ”

What form will the code take?

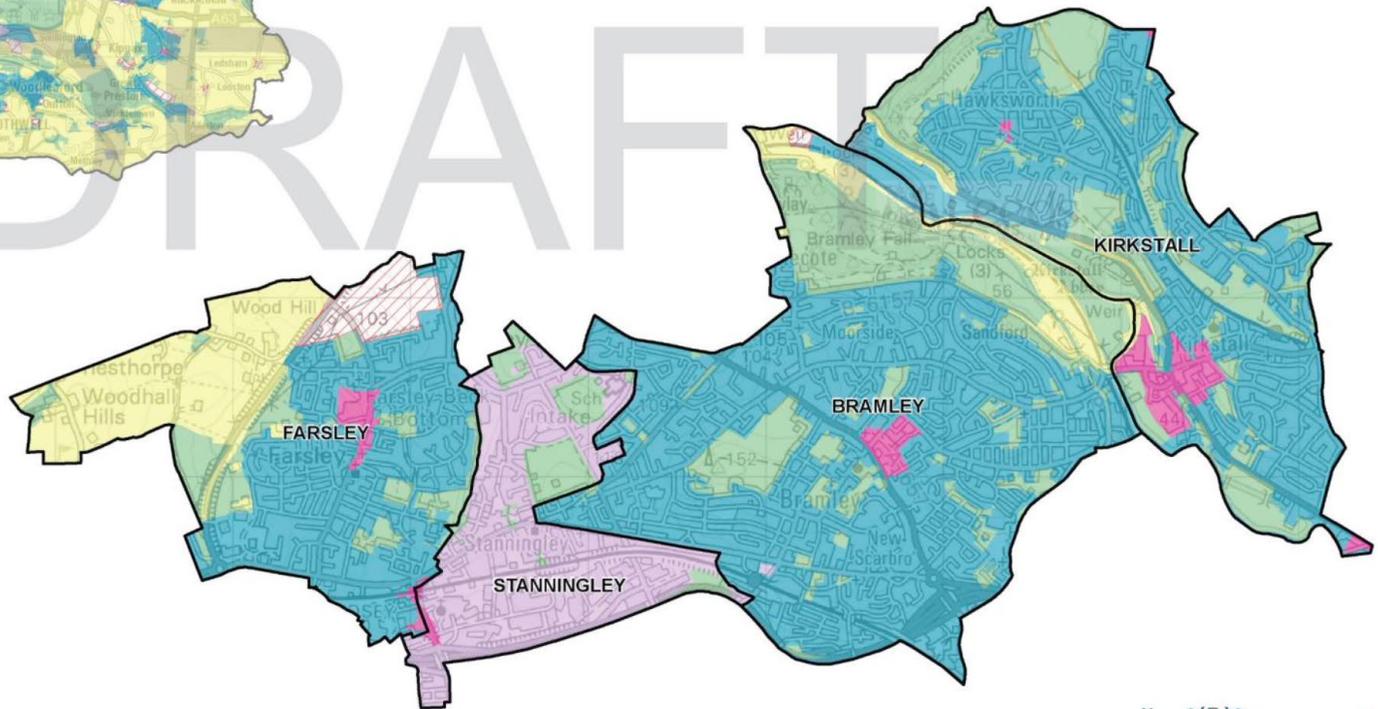
Leeds did not produce a design code but instead tested a number of approaches to defining area types and producing maps that illustrate character area analysis. These could then be compared to each other, and to the known character areas in Leeds which had previously been identified and illustrated in the Leeds 'Petal' map.

Leeds started by using a detailed mapping approach using officers knowledge (combined with aerial images) to define area types on a street by street basis across part of the main urban area. This turned out to be a very time consuming process to cover a relatively small part of the city, though did produce a fine-grained plan that reflected the significant degree of variation in the character of places within the area. They then tried a broad brush, higher level, approach, looking at the predominant area type within previously defined 'community areas'. This was refined further through the integration of existing GIS data sets, and density across the city was also mapped. The density analysis revealed that very few places in Leeds currently have densities at the upper end of the density ranges used in the NMDC.



Key

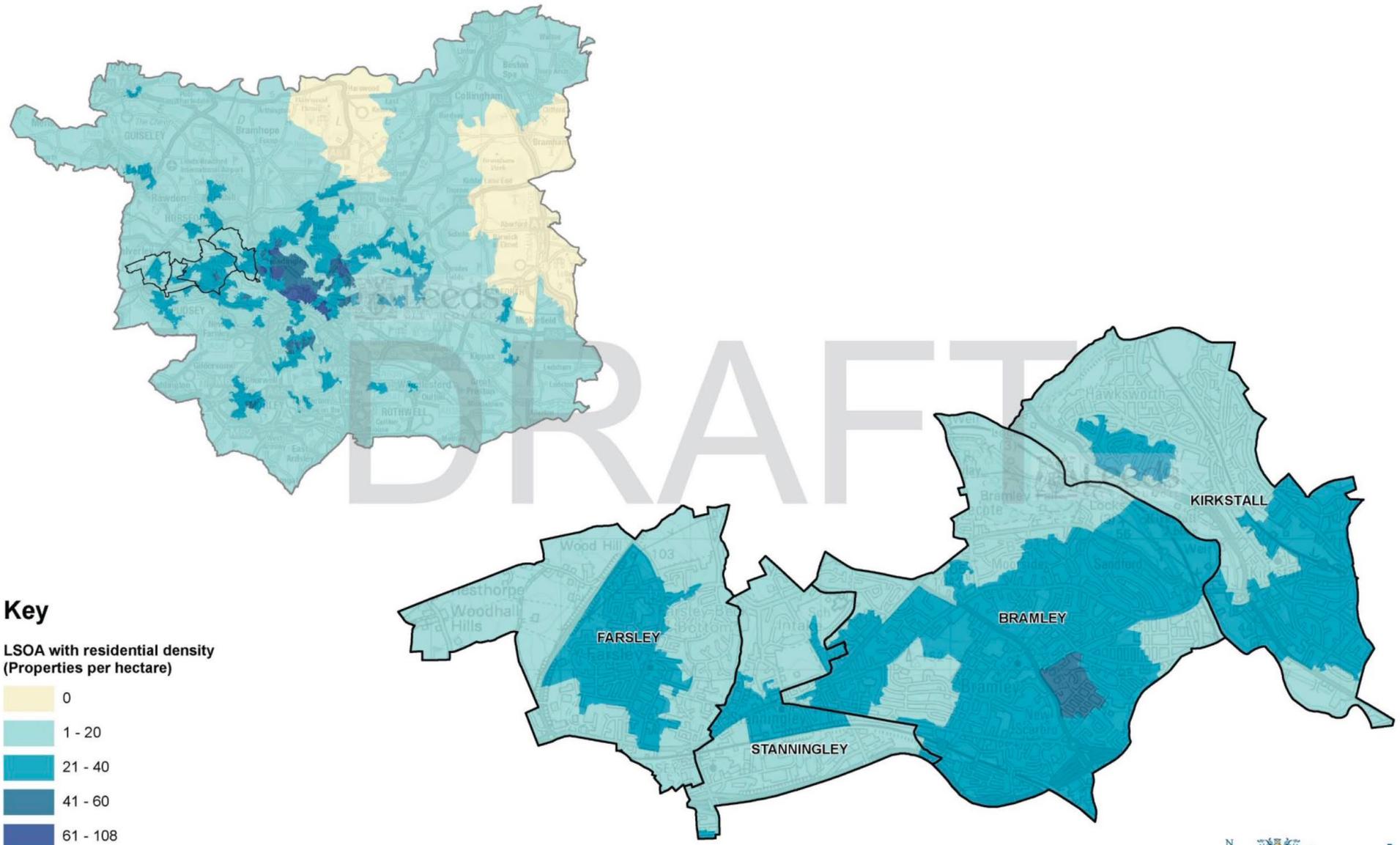
- Urban Neighbourhood
- Inner Suburb
- Outer Suburb
- Green Space
- Rural
- City Centre
- Local Centres
- Village
- Industrial Area
- Uncoded



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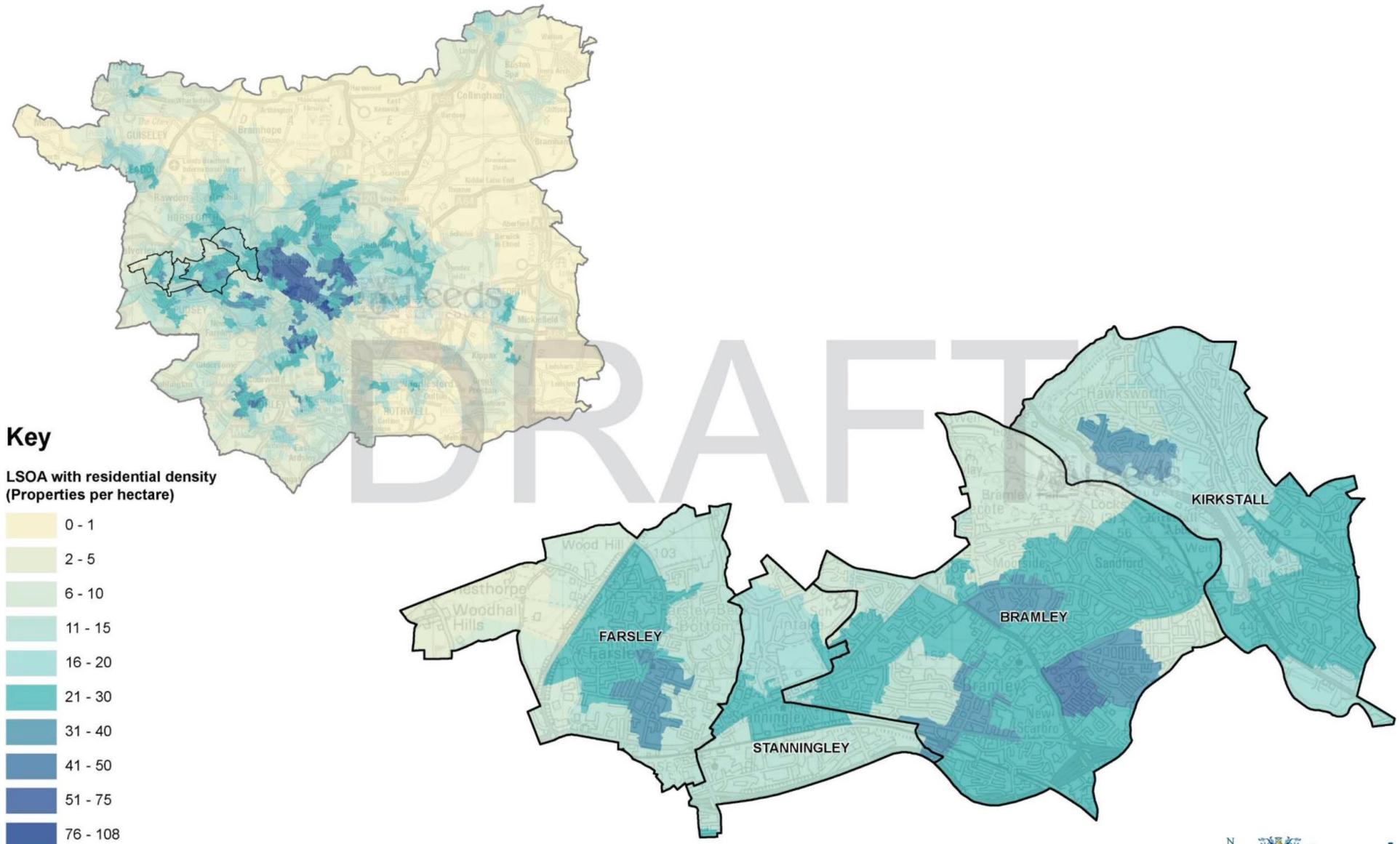
Trial 3 integrated GIS data to the predominant character map



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Trial 4, used a map of density by LSOA, with densities set to those suggested in the NMDC for City Centre, Urban Neighbourhood, Suburb and Outer Suburb area types.



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Trial 5 used an alternative approach to the density ranges that gave a different mapping result which was more suitable to the Leeds context

The mapping work showed that, in Leeds, area types are highly complex and overlapping, and that simple mapping and area types would not capture the complexity. The engagement process offered further valuable insights into the views of wider stakeholders about how design codes could work in Leeds to improve design quality in new developments. As a result of both forms of analysis it was concluded that design codes would add most value when focussed on specific sites or tightly defined areas, where they can respond to the specific context, constraints and opportunities presented, and where there would be a clear focus to the analysis, visioning and coding work.

Leeds is currently progressing towards the Publication Stage of their Local Plan Update, which will include a new 'placemaking' policy to further embed key principles of high quality design and place-making within planning policy, and clarify expectations from developers in relation to the production of design codes. Whilst the pilot study focussed on area types, Leeds intends to focus its in-house work on design coding, to updating their existing city-wide design guidance to form a city-wide guide / code, and on key strategic sites where there would be particular value in design codes more prescriptively setting out how the overarching principles established through city-wide guidance should be applied. They will also be looking at how they can support neighbourhood planning groups who wish to prepare codes for their areas / parts of their areas.

The analysis revealed that alignment between design guides and codes and the requirements of wider stakeholders in the planning process (particularly in relation to highway engineering standards, which were mentioned as a design constraint by all of the development industry representatives) will be essential in ensuring that expectations are deliverable. This, in turn, will be vital in creating trust in any new guidance, from both developers who prepare plans in accordance with it and the wider community who have engaged in its production.

Lessons learned

Use of GIS in area types analysis – There are many different approaches that could be taken to analysing area types in a city based on the sorts of area types suggested in the NMDC. Higher level approaches which integrate existing GIS datasets are significantly quicker to prepare and could have benefits in terms of consistency with other planning designations, but won't easily reflect the differences in the character of places on the ground. This may have implications for how subsequent design codes and guidance can be used in the effort to encourage higher quality design, but this could be mitigated by finer-grained analysis in selected areas.

Neighbourhood Planning and design codes – There is a significant potential role for neighbourhood planning groups to lead in the preparation of neighbourhood or site-level design guides and codes. This will need ongoing training, resourcing and support.

Alignment between design guides and design codes – It is important to ensure that all planning policy works together to deliver high quality design outcomes, and meets the requirements of the wider stakeholder group who participate in the planning process as this will be essential to ensure deliverability of a clear design-led vision. If thought through from the start, good design and place making will not cost more.

Site specific design codes – In the context of Leeds, it was concluded that design codes would add most value when focussed on specific sites or tightly defined areas, complemented with a more general design guide or code for the whole city.

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.

The use of GIS in mapping the areas

GIS has been a particularly valuable resource for the pilot work and Leeds are lucky to have an in-house GIS team who sit within the planning policy team. They have been able to do some excellent mapping work, testing out different options for dividing the city into area types.

As a result, Leeds were able to try out a lot of different methods and to automate the process by integrating existing data sets. Using GIS has saved time and resources over doing this work manually, although has revealed a far more complex pattern of area characteristics than any over-simplified notion of area types would suggest.

Design policies working together to raise the quality of design outcomes

Design codes in isolation are not going to be the solution to all future development and vision-making challenges. The ideal situation is to have everything all aligned so planning policy hooks up to design codes which hook up to regeneration strategy and this all helps to deliver the vision.

But having stronger controls on development through design codes would give council members the confidence that the expectations for the design of a development are clear, enabling them to be stronger and more demanding when viewing development proposals that fall short of this. It will also give the development management planners on the ground who are undertaking the negotiations, greater assurance of their ability to say that the proposals are unsatisfactory, and they have to be done according to the design code.

“ The issue of everything looking the same with codes is something that communities are concerned about. If there is a code for a whole area, this could be the result. Codes will need to reflect variety and not quash creativity. ”

Interest in good design fuels community engagement

There was a lot of interest from the wider community in what the council was doing in this pilot programme. Good design is something that many people are interested in, at many levels within the council and externally. As a result, people want to be involved; this is very positive. In itself this will be a challenge to organise and programme but with the help of Neighbourhood Planning Groups, for example, this enthusiasm and commitment can contribute to our efforts to raise the quality of design outcomes in Leeds.

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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