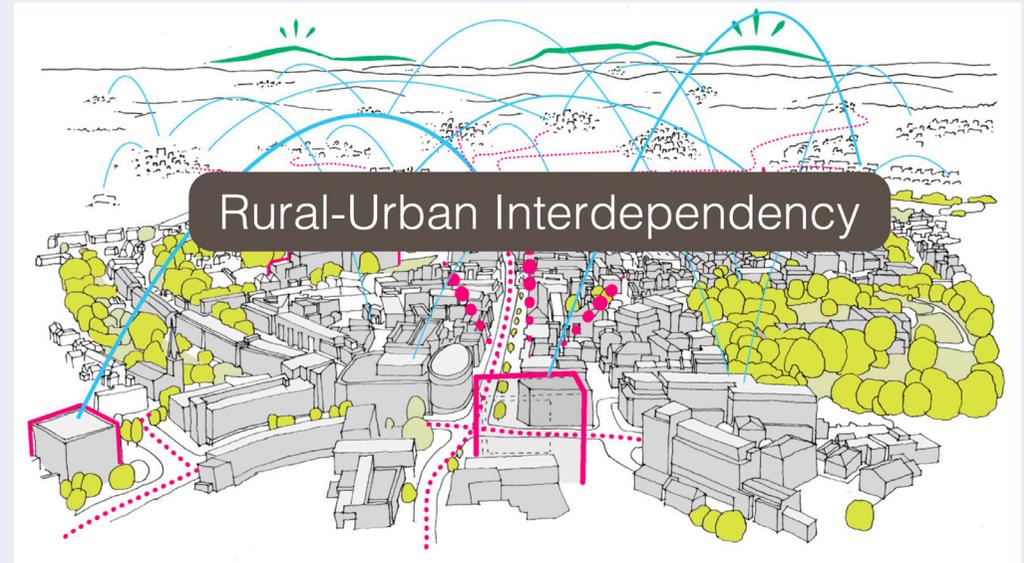


Mid Devon District Council: Design coding in a rural context

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.

Mid Devon District Council: Design coding in a rural context

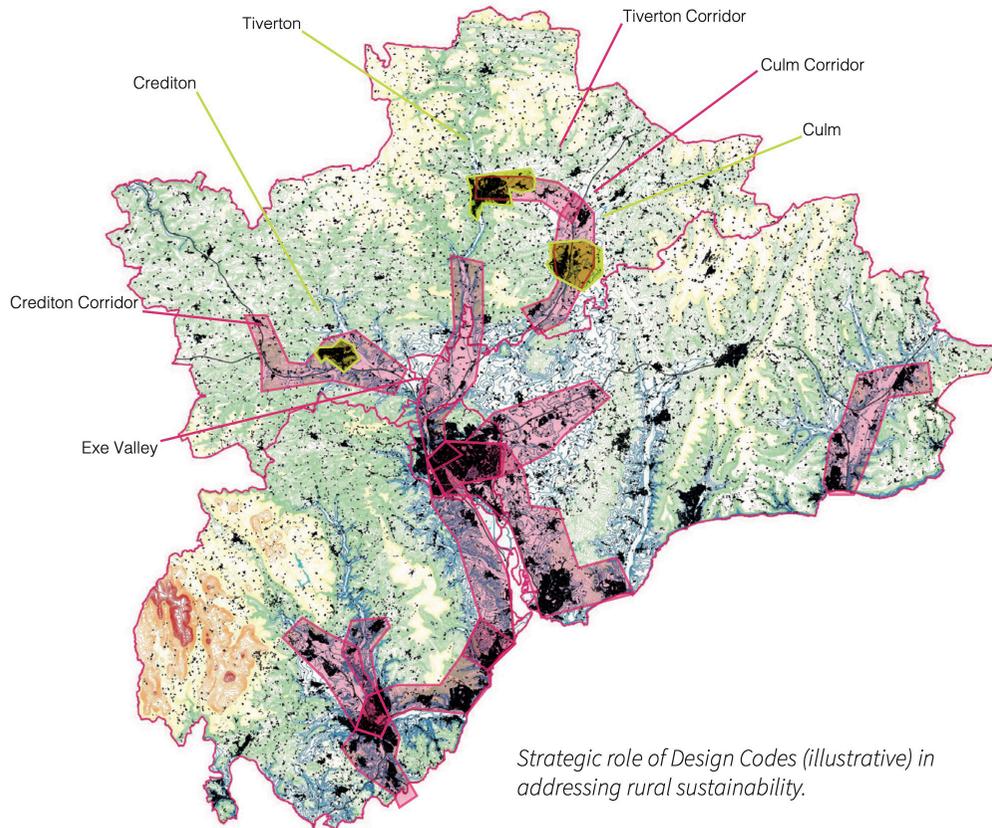
Scale:	Authority-wide
Context:	Rural
Focus:	Investigation of the design coding process, and area typologies within a rural context.
Project team:	Mid Devon District Council; Hyas Associates; DHUD; Hilton Barnfield Architects.
Region:	South West



Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore different elements of the coding process and provides guidance on how a design code may be approached and structured in a wide range of different rural settings and typologies. The principles were applied and tested in three locations, each of which has a page outlining the draft design code scope and content for the area. Key themes included the role of design coding in the plan making process, including its relationship to the local plan; utilising a collaborative approach and coding plan options for the authority-wide vision; exploring the range of area types in terms of function and developing bespoke rural area types.

“ One of the fears of members was that the design coding process would lead to a check list and then everywhere looks the same. Part of the pilot project is to see how we apply what could be considered a ‘mechanised’ approach that doesn’t lead to uniformity. ”



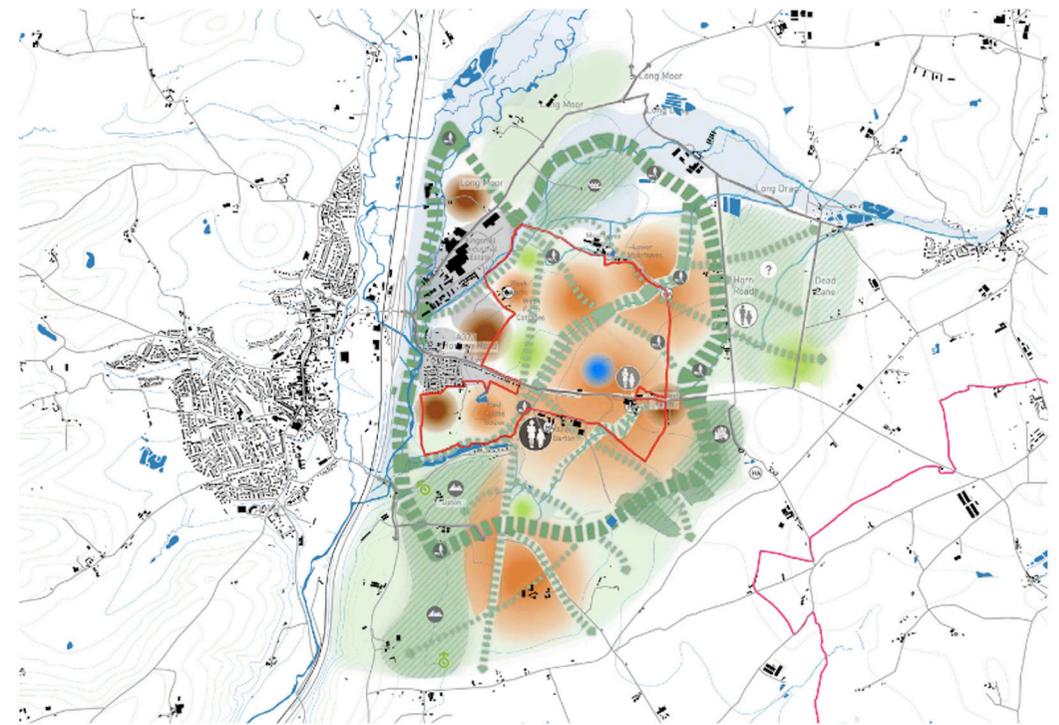
An option to define design code areas based on linked settlements, functions and designations

The design code sites and their context

Although the council's intention was not to produce any actual design codes through the testing programme, three areas were identified that would serve as potential design code sites to enable meaningful exploration of the process. The three sites chosen were the Culm Garden Village, Tiverton Parkway Corridor and the Crediton Valley Corridor. Culm Garden Village is located to the east of the village of Cullompton and was awarded Garden Village Status in 2017. The aspiration for the Garden Village is to deliver up to 5000 homes, employment, community facilities and transport. The Tiverton Parkway Corridor runs eastwards from Tiverton, is defined by east-west transport links, and is the location of a number of large site allocations. The Crediton Valley Corridor is an area extending north west and south east from Crediton, and acts as a hub to a number of rural settlements.

Local Authority background information

Mid Devon is an inland district, which is situated between Dartmoor, Exmoor and the Blackdown Hills. It is sparsely populated; a significant proportion of residents live outside the three market towns of Tiverton (the largest settlement), Cullompton and Crediton. It has a number of transport routes, including the M5 motorway, the A361, and the Great Western mainline railway. There are 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, three Local Nature Reserves, two nature reserves and over eight square kilometres of ancient woodland. The Mid Devon Local Plan 2013–2033 was adopted in 2020.



Culm Garden Village vision

“ Officers thought it could be beneficial to use the design coding pilot to explore how they could embed thinking about design at a strategic scale – strategic urban design as such – and to incorporate such thinking into the Local Plan revision so design is included up front as part of the strategic vision and not just as a ‘design’ later in the Plan. ”

Why code?

Mid Devon produced and adopted a well received, authority-wide design guide in late 2020. Building on this work, the council has used the pilot project to investigate the design coding process within a rural setting, using the National Model Design Code (NMDC). In addition, it offered the opportunity to explore how the NMDC may inform and influence the plan making process from its inception through the development of a design vision and objectives for the district and its places. As a further objective, it was felt that an investigation of how design coding could support the council’s strategic objectives - for example delivering a net zero carbon agenda – would be beneficial.

“ Elected members have concerns with design quality, especially with large schemes. By contrast, they feel that smaller sites and one-off homes in villages do broadly achieve good outcomes. Members’ aspirations are to raise design quality wherever they can. ”

What was the coding process?

The engagement and consultation work was undertaken by Mid Devon District Council, while a consultants’ team led by Hyas Associates (including DHUD and Hilton Barnfield Architects) undertook the planning and urban design work for the pilot project on behalf of the council. Officers and stakeholders contributed to the process through a series of three workshops. In preparation for these workshops evidence from a wide range of council strategic documents and prior analyses for the design guide were synthesised into five emerging themes to set a design vision for the whole district. These themes were then used within the workshops with stakeholders and officers to rank their relevance to Mid Devon as a whole and for specific locally designated places which function in different ways and contribute to that whole vision.

A series of bespoke Mid Devon coding plans were tested through a second workshop where different methods of defining coding plans were explored, including: functional/planning areas and designations; landscape character areas (defined within the Design Guide work); and settlement typologies (again relying on work done for the Design Guide).

These conversations with stakeholders were very informative. It was clear that places had many functions, and these worked at different scales – some had functions beyond the district in the wider Greater Exeter region. The Tiverton Parkway Corridor comprises a variety of issues relating primarily to the location of the town set apart from the motorway corridor and the mainline station (Tiverton Parkway Station). The land in between (the corridor), is low-lying and is host to the historic villages of Halberton and Sampford Peverell as well as a new urban extension to the east of Tiverton itself. There is also potential new development at Junction 27 of the M5. The corridor is traversed by a motorway, mainline rail and the strategically important North Devon link road to holiday resorts.

Defined in this context, the work showed how design codes could offer the opportunity to influence design in a more strategic way and contribute to the plan making process at an early stage. This then led into further workshop discussion on area types, developed by drawing upon existing characterisation and design guidance and the NMDC covering: NMDC Illustrative Area Types; Settlement Typologies; Countryside Typologies; and Transitioning to Net-Zero-Carbon Area Types. These were tested in three locations – the Culm Garden Village, Tiverton Parkway Corridor and the Crediton Valley Corridor. It was found that many of these area types overlapped, although this was less noticeable in the - as yet unbuilt - new settlement of the Culm Garden Village.

“ It is right that the process encourages early engagement – however, it can lead to frustration if there is not key information available for the public because you are thinking more conceptually. They may come back with many questions that you don't have the answers for. ”

What form will the code take?

The pilot project has explored different elements of the coding process and provides guidance on how a design code may be approached and structured in a wide range of different rural settings and typologies. The principles were applied and tested in three locations, each of which has a page outlining the draft design code scope and content for the area.

With regards to the potential coding plan for Culm Garden Village, it is anticipated that a design code would be structured to include chapters on Context, Vision, Strategic Objectives and the Design Code Plan. Specific place area types (described according to built form and identity and assessed as being appropriate for Culm Garden Village) would be identified on a map of the area. General area types (drawn from the NMDC plus other national and regional guidance) are also explored.

Lessons learned

Differentiation of rural area typologies – Rural districts like Mid Devon need more area typologies than just the one rural type in the NMDC and this pilot explored how functional attributes, landscape character-led designations and settlement typologies can all be used to develop area types.

Complexity and overlap of area types – Developing and defining area types can become very complex, particularly as area types often overlay each other. They can, however, relate to rural areas where the variation is comparable to urban locations.

The coding process can inform site allocations – The process of design coding could be used much earlier in the local plan process and can inform site allocation with a much greater level of design information.

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.

Culm Garden Village: Draft Design Code Scope and Content

Chapter	Description
Context	<p>The long term plans for Culm Garden Village are to deliver up to 5,000 new homes, as well as employment, shops, schools, healthcare facilities and leisure opportunities including the potential for new sports facilities and country park.</p> <p>The garden village will help to deliver M5 J28 motorway improvements and the long-awaited town centre relief road and will provide benefits in terms of natural flood management.</p> <p>There is also an ambition to re-open Cullompton railway station and improve bus transport.</p>
Vision	<p>Culm Garden Village will be a new settlement in the exceptional Mid Devon countryside that will become a distinctive, vibrant and inclusive place that is physically and socially integrated with the historic market town of Cullompton. Residents will feel a strong sense of shared identity, civic pride and community ownership.</p> <p>The garden village will carefully and imaginatively use the outstanding natural environment to create a successful and sustainable place set in a beautiful landscape setting. New infrastructure, parks and open spaces connect local people to a range of jobs, facilities, recreation and services that are accessible to all. In this green setting, Culm Garden Village will promote active, healthy, fun and safe lifestyles. It will deliver high quality, well designed and affordable homes, new work places, streets and neighbourhoods that use innovation and technology to support sustainable approaches to living, working, and travelling.*</p>
Strategic Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure continuing distinctiveness and sustainability of Cullompton as an individual settlement within the valley, connecting and integrating the new place with the old, both physically, socially and economically. • Embed the countryside within the garden village – green and blue infrastructure opportunities. • Create a healthy living environment which is community focussed with well-designed neighbourhoods, places and great homes and includes ambitious employment opportunities.



Design Code Plan

The Design Code Plan corresponds to the masterplan area for the Garden Village, however consideration needs to be made of the consequences of the developing the Garden Village on the existing town centre, the overall settlement form and identity of Cullompton as a whole.

As a completely new development which is subject to a masterplan process, exploring character area definition and function of the place, the development of the Design Code area and component parts is development in tandem with masterplanning work.

National Model Design Code Illustrative Area Types | Mid Devon Design Guide Settlement Typologies | Mid Devon Design Guide Countryside Typologies | Transitioning to Net Zero Carbon Area Types | Place Specific Area Types

General Area Types (Described according to Movement, Motion, Public Space, Use, Homes & Buildings)

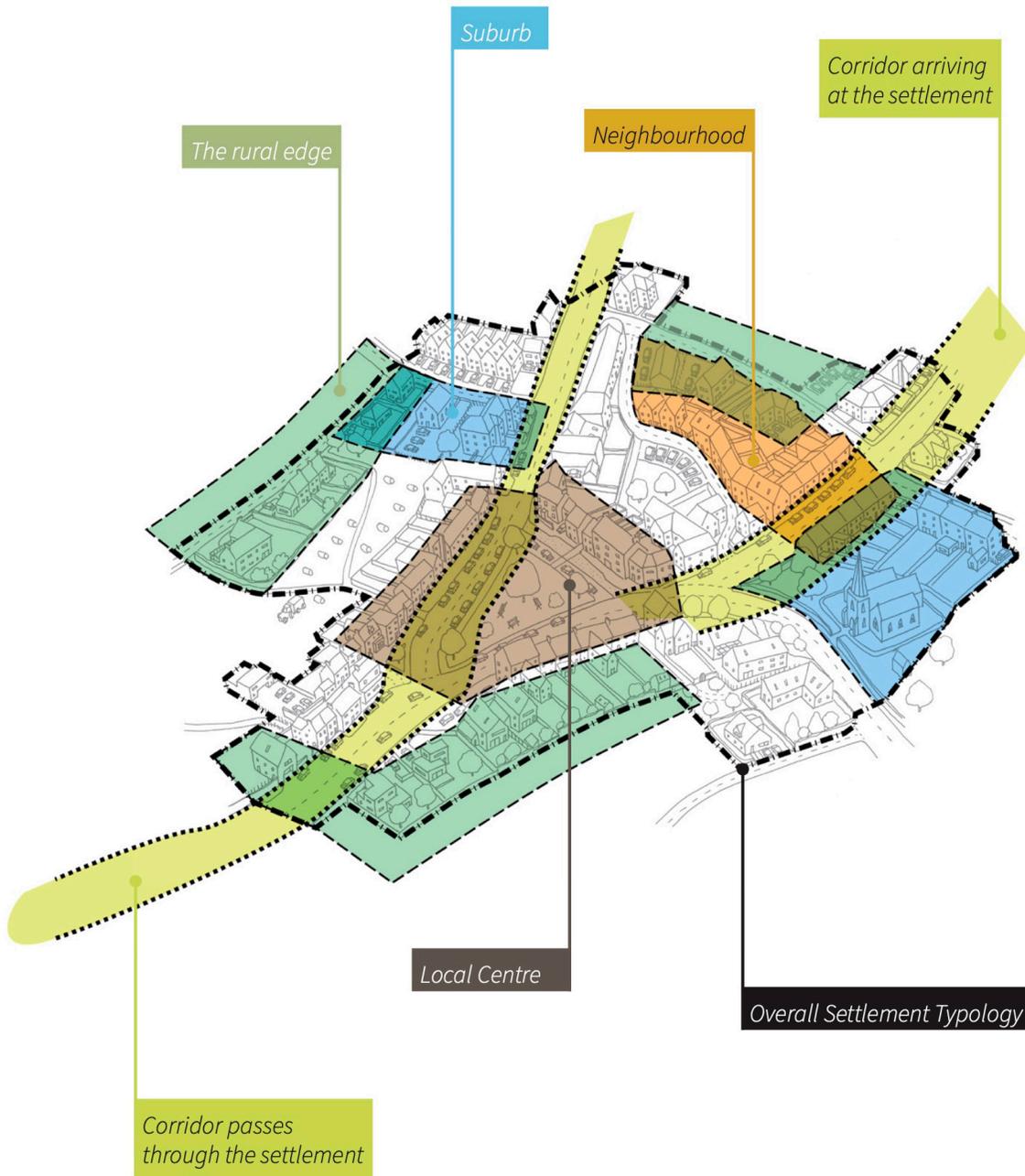
Place Specific Area Types (Described according to Built Form & Identity)

- 1 Garden Village Centre
- 2 Living area to the north of Honiton Road
- 3 Living area to the south of Honiton Road
- 4 Garden Village Parks & Open Spaces
- 5 Kentisbeare

References

- Local Plan 'Main Towns - Cullompton'
- Culm Garden Village Masterplan & SPD (Stage 1)
- Conservation Area Statements and Management Plans: Cullompton
- Cullompton Town Centre Masterplan
- District Design Guide

Draft Design Code scope and content: Culm Garden Village



Layering of area types in an existing rural settlement

Design coding within the district

We have not done a code - this has been a testing exercise. There is the intention to do design coding in some form in the Garden Village but there is still a big decision to take regarding when, where and how to use design coding. That is the next step. It hugely depends on resourcing as to how widespread coding will be used across the district. The design of smaller developments in the villages tends to be less controversial - it is more about the larger sites. Part of the rationale for the pilot was to produce a 'route map' and some tools for the structure to go forward.

Area types

One of the key things we wanted to do was to look at area types as functional areas rather than as settlement based or allocation based. So more design typologies are needed for Mid Devon. For example, we have looked at the area of Tiverton and its corridor to connect it to the M5. It is a movement corridor - a canal, a train line, a motorway and also existing settlements. We have been able to go into quite a lot of detail, looking closely at area types and across three areas within the authority. A lot of work and analysis had already been carried out to create the design guide so much of the information was 'ready to go'.

Layering typologies

The approach to area types was less of a list and more that they could be applied as a series of layers as the typologies overlap, eg a plot on a village street might be suburban, it might be framing a village green and it may also be on a major route. This layering was then reflected in the coding plans. In contrast with the idea that there are boundaries between types and that you are in one or the other, we consider that you could easily be in several at the same time. This was backed up by the workshop sessions with the public who did not see how where they lived was only one area type. Exploration of this layering point suggests that you could take your design guidance from different typologies and ultimately have a better suite of guidance. So, there is some prescription (so it is not free rein) but there isn't the rigidity of a checklist.

Spatial size of area types

One thing that has been tricky has been the spatial size of an area as an area type and what happens at the boundaries between area types. One of the

tools for engagement was a long list of 10-20 area types. For each of the three test areas we ran an exercise (a 'drag and drop', done online) to see which area types would be relevant to those places – but it actually showed that all of them had most of the area types. The discussion with stakeholders/public suggested that perhaps a town centre is too big for a single code. Even with the layering idea it was quite difficult to establish the spatial area the plan should cover. The risk for a town centre is that it includes all area types.

Community engagement

The enthusiasm that people have for it is very interesting – the number of people that contacted us wanting to be part of the testing was significant. We had already been through this process with the design guide - the audiences were 'up to speed' on some of the design expressions so we were able to have quite sophisticated conversations with the public. Some topics caused more discussion than others. The audience was shown a series of diagrams and drawings to illustrate particular aspects of design and to get them to think what type their area was. The one issue they did tend to react to was building heights – people were concerned about development being two storeys and no more, even when shown that in their village there were three storey or even four storey buildings. In some groups they were able to look at town centres and accept there was a place for taller buildings but still there was resistance to anything over two storeys once away from the town centre. The height concern is an interesting topic, because if two storey houses are what is 'provably popular' then it is a struggle to achieve enough density to support services.

Good design outcomes

There were challenges from the public regarding whether schemes will have the same quality when constructed even with a code, and in relation to any appeal. This very much encourages the council to think how codes could be used much earlier on so you don't end up with unsuitable sites allocated that cannot produce good design outcomes.

Time and resources

It's important not to underestimate the time, effort and resources needed. There's quite a bit of licence to how you develop a coding plan, which does require some quite specific choices, and needs careful handling and direction. So, the skills, experience and capacity required to make the choices and deliver a code that is locally relevant are really important. Within Mid Devon it would not be possible to do it without getting outside consultants – in terms of capacity, skills and experience.

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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