

North West Leicestershire District Council: Updating district-wide design guidance in line with the NMDC

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Scale:	Authority-wide
Context:	Suburban / rural
Focus:	Review existing district wide design guide; map existing SPD topics onto NMDC themes; learn from elsewhere.
Project team:	North West Leicestershire District Council; rtu.
Region:	East Midlands

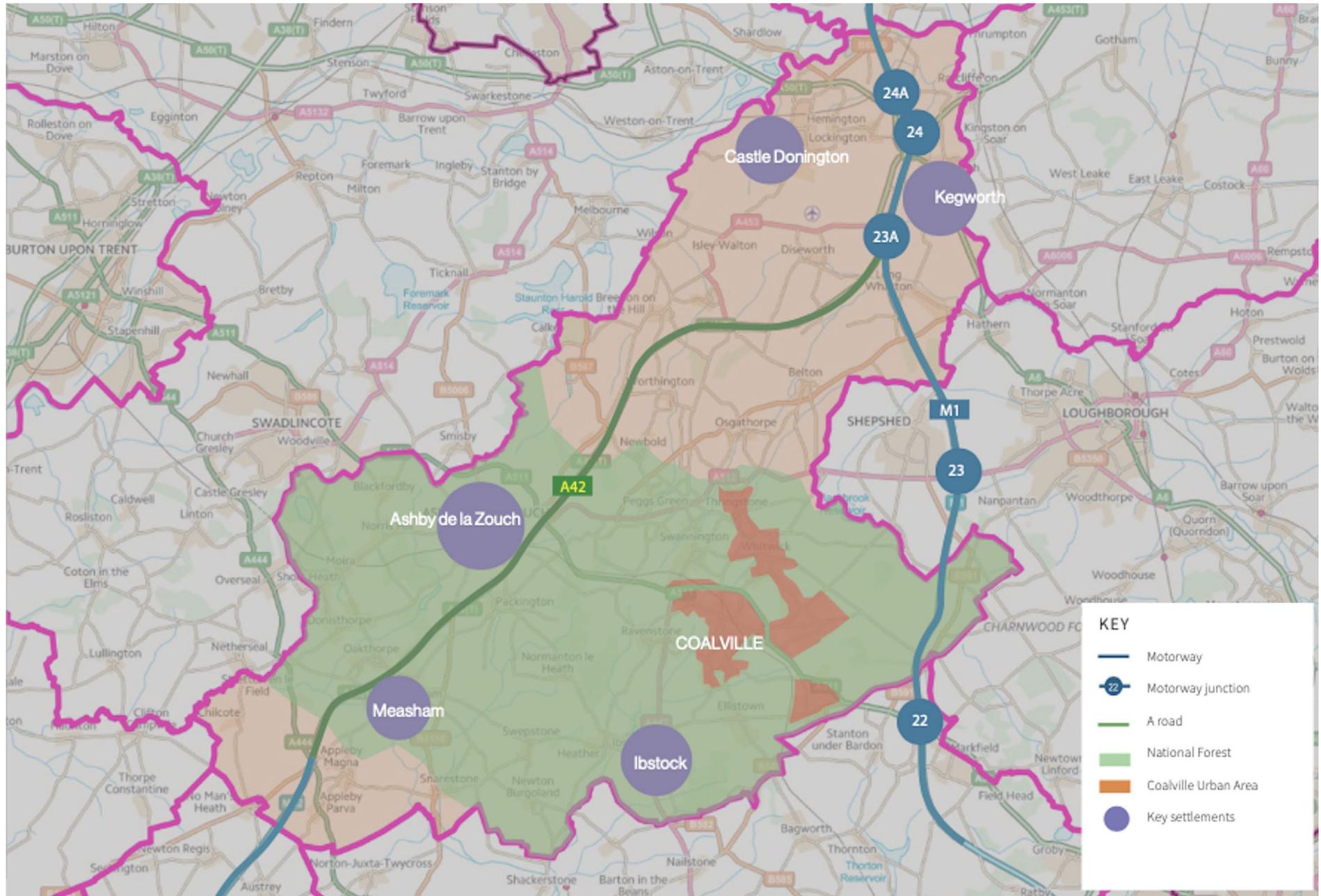


Introduction

This pilot case study sought to focus on evaluating and updating the existing authority-wide residential design guide, through exploration of the National Model Design Code (NMDC). Key themes included aligning and mapping existing Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) topics to the NMDC themes; a range of parameters selected to cover the area-wide design code; and a site visit assessment process to identify local design quality issues whilst also incorporating lessons learned from elsewhere.

“The design guide is fundamental to the coding process. We are proposing to restructure our SPD to follow the national guidance. There are issues we wish to amplify to meet our local circumstances.”

NATIONAL MODEL DESIGN CODE PILOT CASE STUDY



Map of North West Leicestershire district, with significant coverage of the National Forest.

Local Authority background information

North West Leicestershire is a mainly rural district, covering 108 square miles. It shares a border with Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire. Its primary town is Coalville, and other important settlements include Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Castle Donington, Ibstock, Kegworth and Measham. While there are good road links to a number of major cities, there are no passenger rail services in the district. In the north of the district is East Midlands Airport.

The context for coding

North West Leicestershire used the design code testing programme to evaluate and update the existing authority-wide (rather than site-specific) residential design guidance through the creation of a new residential design guide.

Map of North West Leicestershire district, with significant coverage of the National Forest.

Why code?

The council is now ten years into a new emphasis on design quality. In 2007 they appointed their first urban design officer and created a residential design guide SPD. This has brought considerable success in design outcomes, including awards for developers for schemes brought to fruition in this period.

Through this NMDC design code pilot, the council sought to take stock, assess what has worked and explore where there are opportunities to improve as well as taking on board new issues and strategic imperatives. The output of this pilot will be a new residential design guide.

“ The current Good Design SPD is a hybrid document – it has elements of code within it – so we are looking at strengthening the coding elements within the document. ”

What was the coding process?

The design coding work was undertaken by Rob Thompson Urbanism (rtu), in partnership with North West Leicestershire District Council, with additional input from other sections of the district and county councils.

The process to produce the new guide included:

1. Site visits to completed schemes

Visits further afield to examine exemplars, including new developments around Cambridge such as Abode, Great Kneighton and Marmalade Lane were undertaken, in addition to visits to local schemes within the authority area that had been built at different times. It was insightful to explore how properties have been adapted by the occupiers, and how the public realm and public space is being used in real life. This process helped inform what was working and what wasn't within the current guide and helped identify design aspects that are not successful within schemes.

2. Stakeholder discussions and feedback

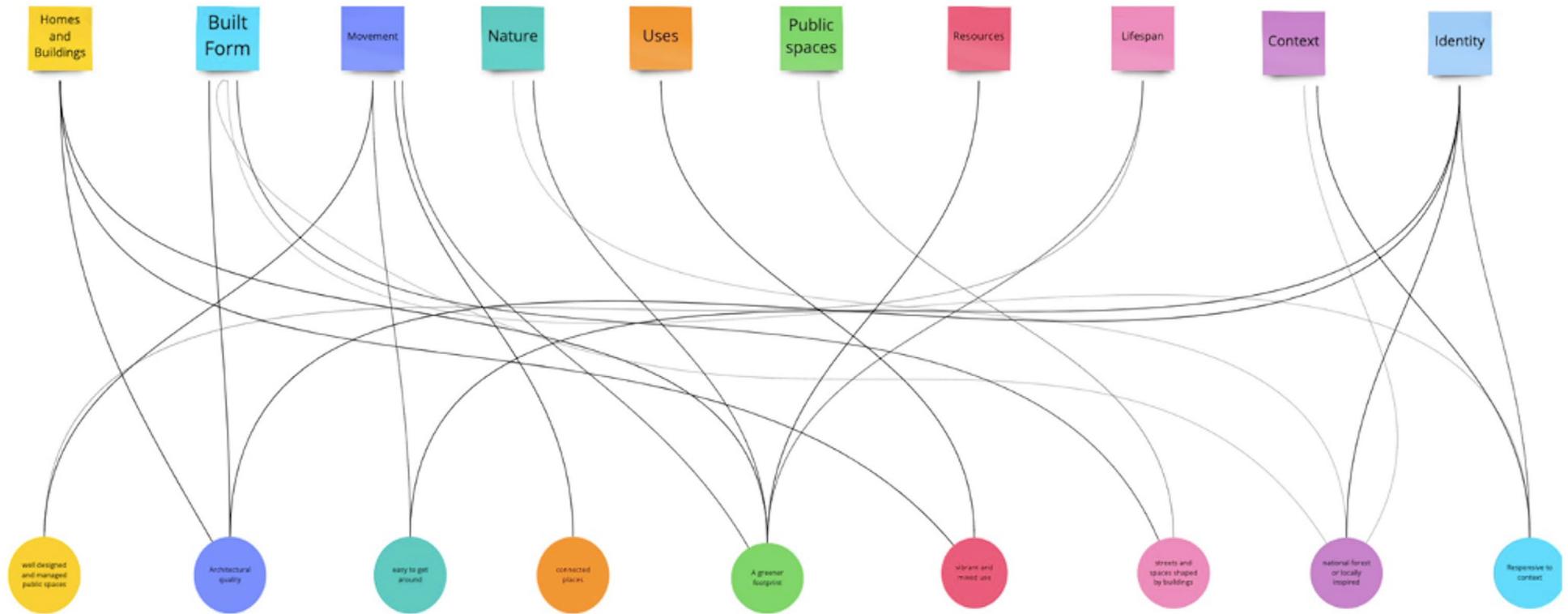
Discussions were conducted with Leicestershire Council Highways team on movement issues, and the National Forest and Woodlands Trust for green infrastructure and landscape issues. A significant element of character within the district is the presence of the National Forest and this has influenced planning policy especially related to zero carbon and health and wellbeing.

3. Mapping of existing SPD topics to the National Model Design Code and gap analysis

An exercise was undertaken to map existing SPD topics to those identified within the NMDC, in addition to identifying gaps and new areas to cover in detail in the guide, which was based on the stakeholder feedback, corporate objectives and site visits.

4. Drafting, review and adoption process

The new guide is being drafted, following which there will be review and consultation before the final version is signed off, prior to the document being subject to the formal adoption process to become an adopted SPD.



Mapping exercise of existing authority-wide guidance against the ten characteristics of a well-designed place in the NMDC

“ *The team are in discussion with local house builders and will undertake visits with them, which will inform learning.* ”

What form will the code take?

The output is a new residential design guide (the North West Leicestershire Good Design Guide), which is intended to be adopted as a revised Supplementary Planning Document. The revised design guide updates its principles to align better with those in the National Design Guide, and within an overall vision driven by three aspirations: a healthy place, a distinct place and a place for nature. Seven cross-cutting objectives are defined to deliver these aspirations, which is an interpretation of the ten characteristics identified in the NMDC.

The new guide is arranged in sections that correspond directly to the layout and headings within the NMDC and the National Design Guide. The layout is organised around double page spreads for each identified individual element within each section. The left-hand page identifies and explains the issues and highlights why they are important. This is accompanied by photographs and/or diagrams that illustrate the issues. The right-hand page looks at exemplars as well as diagrams setting out the design code principles. There is a balance between mandatory ('must' and 'will') and aspirational ('should' and 'could') issues. The table on the right-hand side sets out a checklist for guidance as well as detailed design codes (where appropriate). Each section is completed with a case study, which brings together key points within the section, as well as a series of questions as prompts for consideration.

Applicants will be expected and encouraged to work with local community representatives, the planning authority and other stakeholders to identify and discuss opportunities and constraints early in the design process and against the principles in the guide. Development Management teams will use the principles to evaluate proposals, using checklists within each section of the document.

Lessons learned

The value of site visits – Site visits to completed schemes by officers, members and stakeholders are so valuable and fundamental to understand how people live in a place, including what they adapt and what they use differently, to what had been intended. The site visit programme has been extended because it has produced so much learning.

Learning from elsewhere – Site visits further afield help the council to keep learning. It is beneficial to see what other places - particularly those perceived to be higher value locations, such as Cambridge - have achieved. This helps North West Leicestershire illustrate to developers what to aim for as part of the council's objective to continue raising standards in design.

Mapping exercise – The mapping of existing SPD themes onto the NMDC processes and findings has helped to anchor and align the new residential design guide with the NMDC.

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.

MOVEMENT	CONNECTED NETWORK	STREET HIERARCHY
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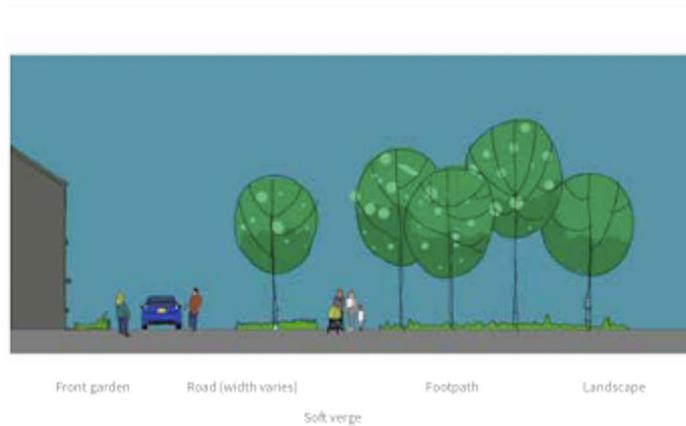
- 01. Development should seek to introduce a clear and logical street hierarchy that responds to and influences the character of different streets and what will happen within them.
- 02. Street character may be influenced by:
 - Building heights;
 - Set backs;
 - Street enclosure;
 - Spacing between buildings;
 - Variations in hard and soft landscaping.

large residential developments

- 03. Residential developments of 100 units or more will be expected to offer a clear street hierarchy comprising **principal**, **secondary** and where appropriate **tertiary** routes.
- 04. The character and qualities of each route within the hierarchy should be clear and logical, with the width of street and the scale of buildings reflecting the importance of the street, the scale of traffic within it and its intended character.



TERTIARY STREET - TYPICAL SECTION



EDGE OF SETTLEMENT STREET - TYPICAL SECTION



STREET HIERARCHY - CHECKLIST

Hierarchy	<p>A clear street hierarchy must be established at the concept design stage, together with a strong design concept for each street typology.</p> <p>Different streets within the hierarchy should look and feel different from one another.</p>
Primary streets	<p>Primary streets should be designed for 6.1m-6.6m carriageway width, together with landscape verges and pedestrian/cycle routes either side.</p> <p>Raised tables should be introduced at key junctions.</p> <p>Target speed should be 20mph.</p>
Secondary streets	<p>Secondary streets should be designed for 5.5m-6.5m carriageway width, together with landscape verges and footways.</p> <p>Raised tables and frequent pedestrian crossing points.</p> <p>Target speed should be 20mph.</p>
Tertiary streets	<p>Tertiary streets should be designed for 5.5m-6.5m carriageway width.</p> <p>Layout and landscape should be informal to encourage reduced traffic speeds.</p> <p>Target speed should be 15mph.</p>
Green streets	<p>Routes should be at least 3m wide.</p>

HOMES & BUILDINGS	HEALTH & WELLBEING	GARDENS AND BALCONIES
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Front thresholds

- 01. The spaces between buildings and the pavement needs careful consideration as this is the principal experience that people will have and its design has a marked impact on how a street is used by those who live there and how it is perceived by those moving through it.
- 02. **These spaces must not be left to chance and should offer scope for them to be used so that can become a valuable part of the street for residents and contribute to creating an attractive environment for passers by.**

Boundaries

- 03. Creating strong, clear and obvious boundaries are important in defining space and offering clarity as to how spaces are intended to work. Front boundaries reinforce the clarity of ownership/responsibility for the space between the public footway or private drive and the front of a dwelling, helping to demarcate this transition effectively. Developers will be encouraged to consider how homes can be designed to create safer, more vibrant streets and encourage residents to use their front gardens (where provided).
- 04. Where properties are set back it is important to introduce vertical boundaries that help to clearly demarcate the public and private space. The type of boundary treatment should be informed by the wider character as well as the street hierarchy.
- 05. Rear boundaries need to be robust, reflecting the greater vulnerability that may be experienced as this needs to feel secure to offer comfort and safety.

Apartments

- 06. Apartments should have an equal ability to offer semi-private amenity space, both for ground floor apartments and through the introduction of balconies at first floor level and above.
- 07. Ground floor apartments should seek to enliven the street scene through the introduction of individual front doors.



x



Even small front gardens have the capacity to provide colour and interest within the streetscene
Sheffield



Threshold spaces can still offer a place for planting and ownership
Trumpington Meadows Cambridge

The detail of the design guide

The design guide feels like it works on a number of levels. The existing guide has raised the design bar with regard to outlining what the council wants. Some of that has been very specific – what you might call design coding. Part of the new document is to continue to raise the bar through hearts and minds. It is trying to find the balance between clarity of statements and detail. There are things you do want to code and things that you want to keep higher level. The instinct is to want to use positive imagery. The level of detail will depend on the issue. Things to be specific about include, for example, parking ratios vs front garden space or dimensions for bin access.

Site visits highlight the issues within real developments

We are trying to understand the issues as experienced in real developments. What has been very useful are the site visits that have been carried out – what is not working, and what is, and why? Is it because it is in the guide or is it because it has been implemented wrongly? For example, one of biggest issues is what happens to boundary treatments once residents move in. Boundary treatments are an area where we should be more prescriptive.

Status of the design guide

Once the design guide goes through the process of consultation and sign off then it will be adopted. It will be referenced in the new Local Plan and will hold weight within the planning system. We are working with the planning policy manager to align with any design policies within the Local Plan development process.

Developers

For many design considerations developers just want to know what they need to know. They want some certainty and then they can work through it. The council would want something that says to them what areas to cover. The council may hold a developer conference to talk about prospective developments and how the NMDC can inform the design process.

“ *The new design guide has been aligned to up-to-date national guidance (NMDC). This allowed the council to test and check for any gaps. One thing it covers more than the NMDC does is parking as it is a common issue in schemes within the borough.* ”

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Based on research commissioned and facilitated by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) on behalf of the Department for Levelling up, Housing Communities (DLUHC) and Office for Place (OfP)

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