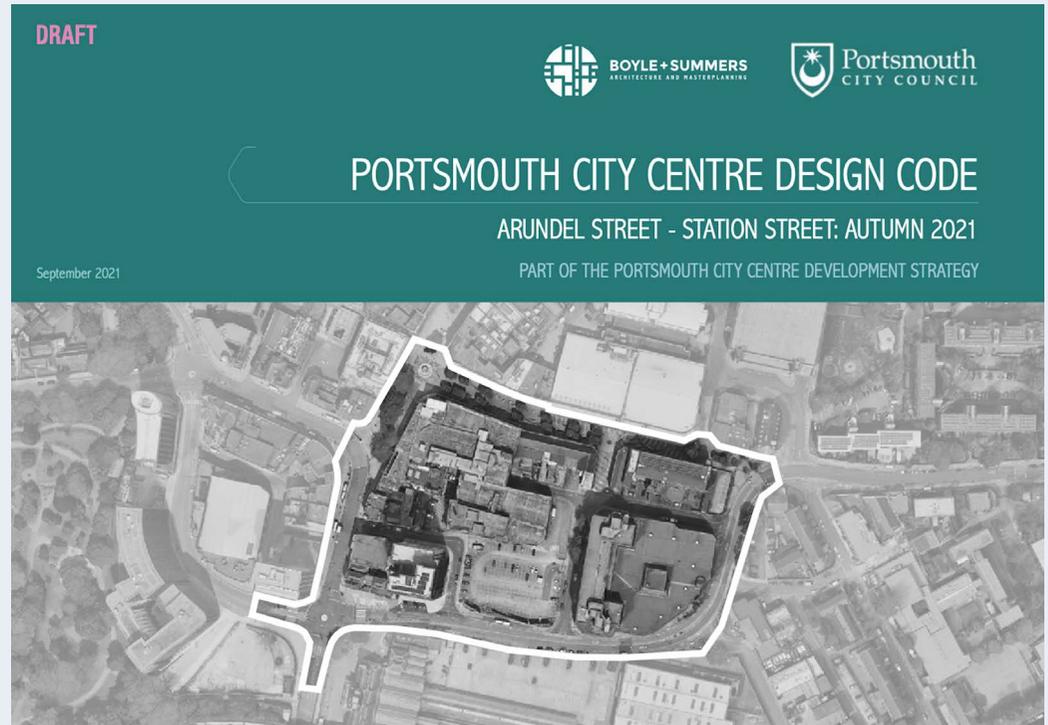


Portsmouth City Council: coding for city centre sites

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.

Portsmouth City Council: coding for city centre sites

Scale:	Site-specific
Context:	city centre
Focus:	to inject quality into the urban public realm and attract investment into a city centre (former Debenhams) site using a design code
Project team:	Portsmouth City Council, Boyle + Summers
Region:	South East



Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore the process and outcomes of developing a design code for this city centre block. By engaging actively with the multiple landowners to raise design quality using a design code, the city council sought to create positive partnerships with developers. The key themes included introducing a design code to provide clarity and certainty in the development process which would be particularly useful in the context of multiple landowners on this site and enhancing the city centre's public realm using a design code within a new public space strategy.

Local Authority background information

Portsmouth, home to approximately 214,000 people living on a land area of 40 square kilometers, is the most densely populated city in the UK outside of London. The city is compact with an average density of 5,000 people per km², and extremely flat and low lying. As a result, Portsmouth faces many unique challenges to effectively use land to provide homes, open space and sustainable transport solutions whilst protecting the city from flood risk and other environmental challenges, such as climate change and air quality.

The context for coding

The former Debenhams site is located within the city centre district. The main thoroughfare is Commercial Road, a traditional pedestrianised high-street shopping precinct, close to the Guildhall civic area, and the Portsmouth and Southsea train station; it has a wide variety of high street shops including the Cascades Shopping Centre. With the closure of the Debenhams store in 2021, the future of the site and its redevelopment is of significant importance to the city, and will be a hallmark site for the future of Commercial Road.

The entire coded area falls within the town/city centre area type as defined in the National Model Design Code (NMDC). The site is part of the broader City Centre Development Strategy (CCDS) area which has been identified for significant regeneration. The site is within a ten minute walk from the waterfront, which contains the Historic Dockyard, Gunwharf Quays, Old Portsmouth and Southsea Common.

The scope of the design code project evolved during the pilot programme with the design code area expanded in size so it has a larger impact on Portsmouth city centre's future and regeneration. This also ties in with the draft Local Plan strategic site allocation policy underpinned by the CCDS framework masterplan. As a result, the selected area for the pilot covered a very large block within Portsmouth city centre that includes the former Debenhams store and Station Street car park, which are located directly north of Portsmouth and Southsea Railway station, with frontages on Commercial Road, Station Street and Arundel Street. The site also has a former Post Office building, student accommodation and several other low-level mixed-use blocks.

There are multiple recently-approved and live planning applications for sites within the design code testing boundary. As the development of this site is being led by the landowners and their agents, a design code is seen as a positive planning tool to raise the quality of design proposals going forward.

Why code?

Various major developments over the last five years in the area have been built with varying degrees of success and support from both the local community and council members. Development of these sites has not followed a design-led approach and correcting this underpins the drive to use a design code.

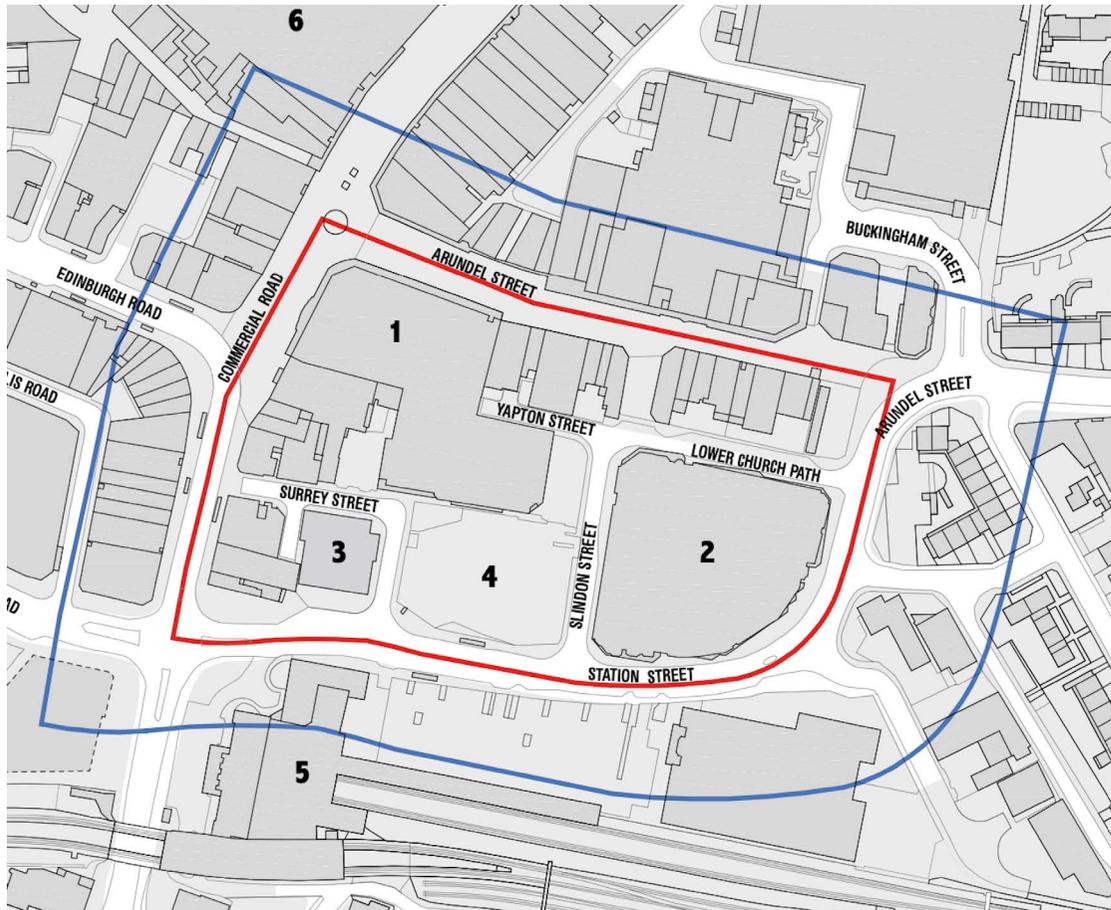
The design code aims to assist developers and designers in the production of high quality development proposals within the design code testing boundary, and provide a framework for public realm schemes in the future. It is also vital that the design code be sufficiently accessible that it can be referred to by non-professionals when considering and assessing those proposals and schemes.

Portsmouth's current design policy as a chapter in the local plan is broad brush and open to interpretation. When submissions come to the planning committee and officers present them to the council members, there is perceived to be an absence of policy hooks on which to hang an assessment of design quality. Design codes should help to achieve better design outcomes in a manner, it is hoped, that can be used and referenced by all stakeholders.

Additionally, the council wants to use this pilot process to bring stakeholders together so the local population and the council members can influence design outcomes. They want to include the developer in a collaborative rather than a confrontational approach to deliver higher quality design outcomes.



The city centre Framework Masterplan with the design code area indicated in the white box



The design code test site is outlined in red with the frontages to the site boundary outlined in blue

“ For PCC, the design code is an additional tool for the council not only to regulate but also to enable high quality development and place-making in a pro-active and comprehensive manner ”

In the pilot programme, the design code was developed as a 'prototype' to evaluate the process of producing (and potentially adopting) a design code for a particular sub-area of the city centre as defined by the CCDS. This will inform the Council's future approach to design coding other sub-areas of the city centre so that in time there will be a substantial planning policy framework for managed delivery of well-designed development within Portsmouth city centre. The design code will be treated as a material consideration in relation to Planning Applications within the area, and the weight afforded it will increase with consultation, leading to potential formal adoption.

For the Council it is important for the design code not to be seen as an inhibitor of development - it should be seen as an enabler, also bringing benefits to developers of sites with viability issues. Often developers are looking at Portsmouth as a place to achieve commercial development in a place of lower land values. Therefore, Portsmouth needs to be commercially aware and flexible and responsible by striking the right balance in the design code to nurture high quality and viable development.

What was the coding process?

The design coding process focused on the development of the draft design code and undertaking in-house consultations. Public consultations will also be undertaken after the Council has completed its work on the Local Plan.

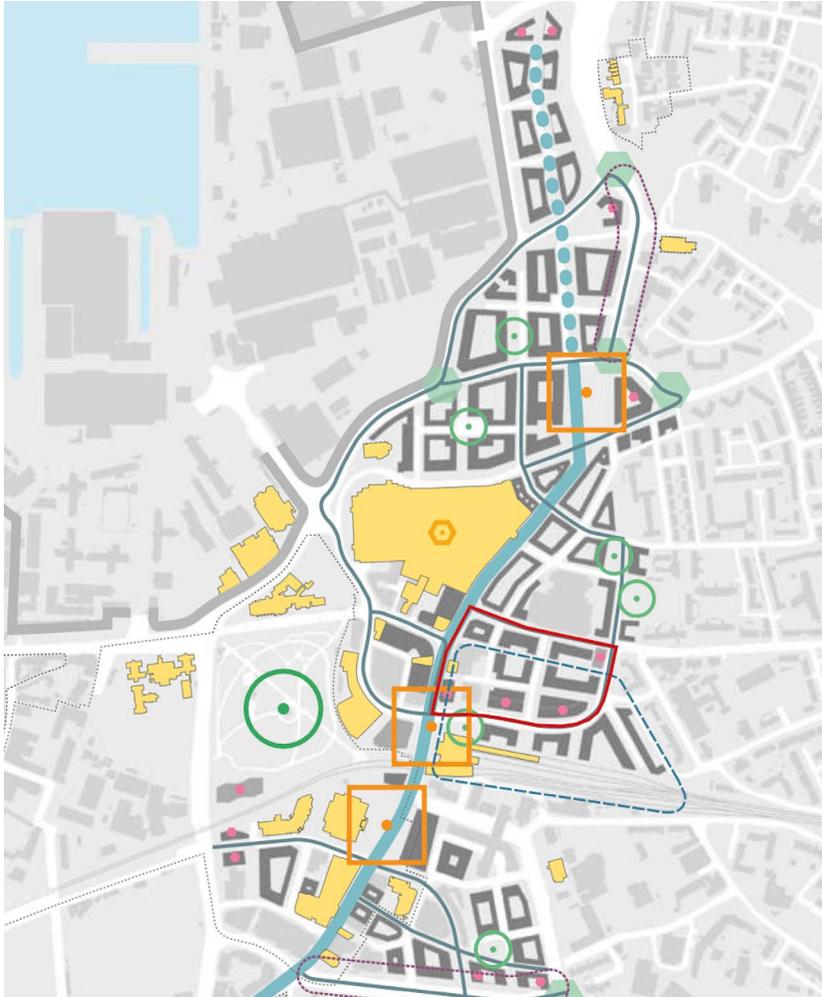
In lieu of community consultations for the design code, there were a series of questions in the draft Local Plan consultation related to design, design coding and city centre Draft Strategic Sites Policy that will provide some useful insights for development of the design code. Meanwhile dialogue by the council's Planning Policy team has focussed on internal stakeholders such as Highways and Economic Growth to inform them about the code and get their feedback. The analysis and vision underpinning the design code have therefore come from the draft Local Plan consultation, and internal stakeholder discussions.

The drafting process focused on two areas:

1. Context and Design Vision

- a. Character Studies
- b. Defining Area types
- c. Area and Site Context – historic development, movement, streets, heights, architecture, plot ownership on site

2. Development of seven coding elements



City centre Development Strategy framework masterplan (design code test site outlined in red)

Development Management (DM) colleagues have tried to react proactively to the coding process, engaging the coding team and a local property agent in discussions concerning a proposed new development. The design code has influenced these early consultations, including in tying down a Planning Performance Agreement that includes various design review stages.

What form will the code take?

The team have produced a prototype design code which is still a work-in-progress. The overall aim is to establish key design principles for the site area which are detailed and specific where appropriate. The draft has seven design chapters following seven of the ten characteristics of a well-design place in the National Model Design Code (NMDC): Context and design vision, Movement, Nature, Built form, Identity, Public space and Uses. The characteristics that have not been covered are dealt with in other Council strategic documents.

The approach they have taken is to make sure the coded elements are clear and separate from the general text and images and that the 'Must', 'Should', 'Could' aspects are clearly articulated. This separation has been achieved by visually arranging coding into different coloured boxes. This will be tested with the public to see if this format is easily understandable.

“ The Council is conscious that images work better than text for most people ... In general, imagery, plans, maps, sections and artist's impressions are great ways to stitch together a series of ideas and concepts ”

The coding team were conscious that images work better than text for most people and have adopted a visual approach as far as possible through a combination of general imagery, plans, maps, sections and artist's impressions in order to stitch together ideas and concepts

N.1.ii Open Space Provision

Open spaces are typically shared or pooled in city centres in the form of public parks or shared communal gardens. Within a short walk of the code area is Victoria Park which offers a significant area for recreation and relaxation of various types. Open space in the code area will take the form of a micro-park or mini-square, as described above. There is also the potential for public or private garden space at roof level, perhaps in conjunction with a public facility such as a restaurant, spa or gym. Open space for residents should be provided by balconies or communal space, with the former being preferred.



Figure 63. Planters/water features used for informal seating.



Figure 64. Identify opportunities for roof-top terraces.

CODE:

- A minimum of 5 sqm of private outside space should be provided for one-to-two person dwellings and an extra 1 sqm should be provided for each additional occupant. (London Plan, Policy D6-F9, pg.126)
- The minimum depth and width of all balconies and other private external spaces must be 1500mm.



Figure 65. Approx. 99% of the code area is within a 5 minute walk to Victoria Park.



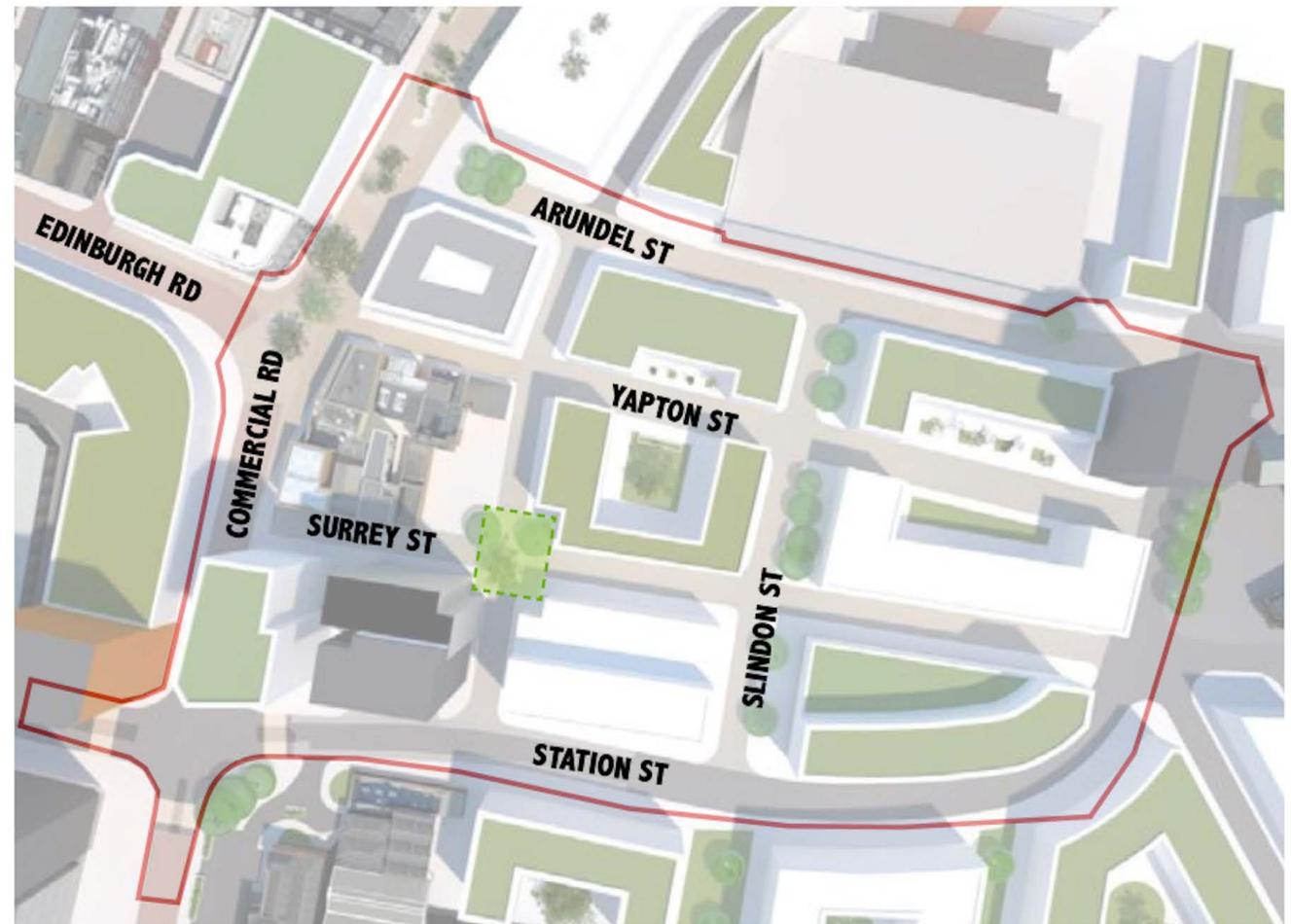
Figure 66. Residential balconies providing private open space.

Open Space page from the draft design code shows the Code requirements in the purple box. There is a site map and illustrative, precedent images to suggest how the open space environment might look.

THE CODE:

- **Commercial Road (bus section)** must be designed to:
 - + accommodate buses and taxis;
 - + have a vehicle carriageway width no greater than 10m including;
 - + provide pedestrian crossings at or close to desire lines, and broad pavements on both sides;
 - + include active ground floor uses such as showrooms, office or apartment entrances, shops and service uses.
 - + be flanked by buildings a minimum of 6 storeys tall on both sides, all of which follow a continuous building line at the back edge of pavement.

- **Commercial Road (pedestrianised section)** must be designed to:
 - + be exclusively for pedestrians and users of mobility scooters;
 - + provide a spacious and clutter-free environment;
 - + include street trees
 - + include active ground floor uses such as showrooms, office or apartment entrances, shops and service uses.
 - + be flanked by buildings a minimum of 6 storeys tall on both sides, all of which follow a continuous building line at the back edge of pavement.



The Code list of requirements in a purple box in the Streets section of the draft Public Space chapter

P.3 Security and Public Space

P.3.i Secured by Design

Once fully developed, the public realm within the code area will be clearly defined by private frontages. This clarity will assist with security in public spaces, as will well-defined and direct routes through the area.

Public realm will be overlooked by active frontages at ground floor and windows to residential or commercial space above. Well-designed street lighting will also help ensure public spaces feel safe 24/7.



Figure 118. Active streets with residents windows overlooking.



Figure 119. Well-lit public spaces providing security at night.



Figure 120. Children's play area overlooked to provide passive surveillance whilst incorporating greenery.



Figure 121. Well lit minor streets to improve resident and community safety.

CODE:

- Development proposals should include active frontages where possible and offer natural surveillance from all upper storeys.

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Draft Security and Public Space page with the Code and illustrations as examples of the types of safe spaces that could be provided

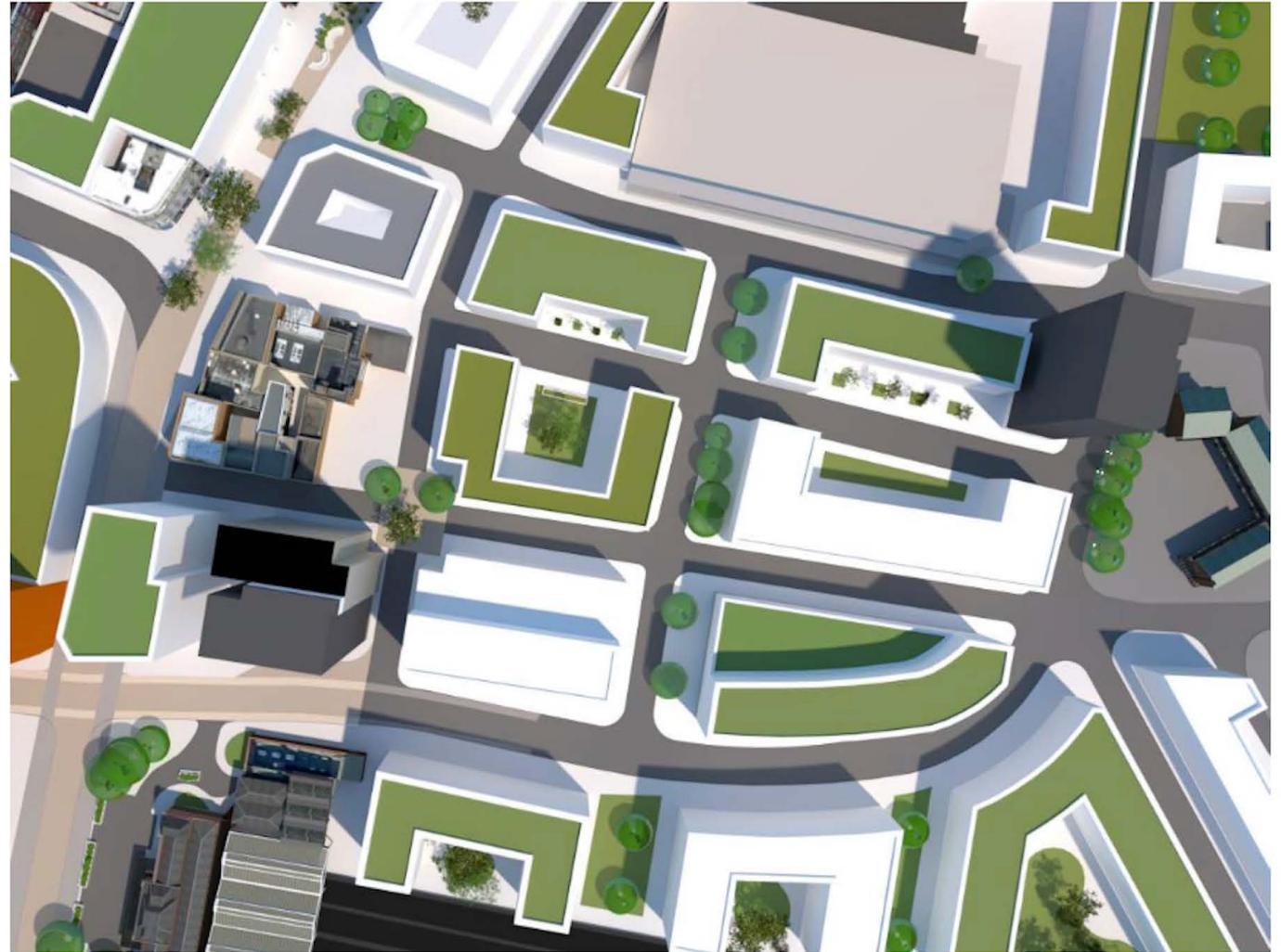
N.1 Green Infrastructure

N.1.i Network of Spaces

- City's emerging Urban Greening Factor initiative
- Junction of Commercial Rd, Arundel St key city space/ nodal point
- Streets (tree lined – Commercial Rd, Arundel St, Slindon St, Surrey St)
- Communal Gardens
- Balconies
- Green Walls and Roofs
- Key open space within the area

CODE:

- Development proposals must...
- Development proposals should, subject to viability...



In the initial draft of the design code, a 3D image, Code box, and list of public realm initiatives in the Green Infrastructure section, illustrates the effective combination of text and images

With regard to clarity, Development Management colleagues want immediately useable documents, while developers and their agents want documents that show what the authority is trying to achieve, clearly and concisely. Getting the text right, and the balance between flexibility and prescription in the code has been a key challenge.

Lessons learned

The role of the design code to integrate strategic initiatives focused on the public realm – Portsmouth City Council (PCC) views the benefit of design coding as being able to synthesise, co-ordinate, and respond to other projects/interventions within a particular area in the city. The future of the design code site in the city centre is influenced by other projects such as the Future High Street project led by Portsmouth's Economic Growth team, and the Southeast Hampshire Rapid Transit project (a range of local authority highways departments including Portsmouth as the unitary authority) that is looking to remodel nearby junctions from a highways perspective to enable a new Bus Rapid Transit system. The design code could present a more integrated vision for the qualities of public space relating to the highways project, and help nurture a broad design-led approach in the future.

Design coding as an extension of plan making and placemaking strategies – Since the NPPF has a clear expectation for authorities to prepare design guides or codes, for Portsmouth the design code is viewed as an additional tool for the council not only to regulate but to enable high quality development and positive place-making in a pro-active and comprehensive manner. As a consequence, officers are beginning to evaluate how design coding as a function within the planning service might be sufficiently resourced in the future.

When to develop and use a design code is critical – When to design code and what to code are important aspects of the process. Additionally, Portsmouth currently doesn't have an up-to-date local plan, while strategic spatial policies are still in the process of being drafted and subject to a future Examination in Public. If an up-to-date underlying plan is not in place or yet prepared, then it makes it very hard to prepare a code as part of the plan. This further supports the value and importance of having design codes at the site-specific scale.

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.

Challenges engaging landowners in an area with multiple ownership

The Local Planning Authority has a dual role as a regulator of new development and as a protector of the public interest, but must also ensure that the development needs of the city are being met. This requires the authority to be commercially minded when making planning decisions and to enable the sustainable development of sites by developers. This is the outlook of Portsmouth City Council historically and presently, especially for a city faced with challenges of land competition and viability. Design codes would introduce clarity and certainty into the development process, allowing multiple landowners in an area to operate on a more level playing field, by working to the design code requirements.

Selection of design parameters to deliver a unified, more pedestrian friendly public realm

Portsmouth would like to enhance the city centre's public spaces using a design code within a new public space strategy. They would like the code to specify what is required in public realm terms in the spaces between buildings, especially to enhance the experience for pedestrians.

Precision of the language used in the design code - a key challenge

With regard to the proposed text in the code, the Policy team has said that the text is too jargonistic. They are grappling with communicating clearly and not over complicating

things so that it is accessible to everyone. They have gone through an exercise with the Local Plan to get the corporate communications colleagues to try to get planning policy expressed more clearly and approachably. At the same time, because planning policy and design codes could be challenged more formally, for example in a judicial review or an appeal, the council is keen to ensure that any document is precise. Balancing these two requirements in the code is a challenge.

Council leadership and the push for better design quality

The wider push within the authority for better design quality has given the coding team confidence. There were various new senior appointments with design backgrounds made in the authority. The council is keen to bring forward a higher standard of design quality and instil a culture for good design. Our new Planning Director is also very keen on design and on setting our stall out that good design matters and is expected from developers.

Additionally, the council recently approved a scheme within this design code area that is pushing the boundaries to deliver high quality outcomes. In the wider area, better schemes are coming through, including a recent one which is seen as a very good development that used a high quality architect firm.

Be positive and proactive in the design code

Be positive and ambitious in the design code. We were preloading the defensive elements in the code to take account of the lower development pressure in Portsmouth – lower land values and not being seen to inhibit development. I think we should be stronger, using 'musts' and 'will'. The code should be proactive in seeking for higher design quality in new developments.

Portsmouth needs to decide whether to augment internal design skills to do coding in the future and thereby have an internal designated team, or to go the route of using external resources. While there have been resources to complete the pilot in 6 months, there is the need for more time to carry this work forward. This is a strategic decision that we need to make.

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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

