

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council: A toolkit for canal-side coding

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.

Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council: A toolkit for canal-side coding

Scale:	area based	
Context:	urban	
Focus:	applying a design code to the urban regeneration of Bootle's canal-side corridor	
Project team:	Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council, Hyas Associates, Optimised Environments (OPEN), BE Group	
Region:	North West	

Introduction

This pilot case study sought to explore the process and outcomes from developing a design coding toolkit for canal-side regeneration in Bootle. The focus on the canal area developed out of its importance as a community resource during the pandemic when it was reconfirmed as a valuable placemaking asset. Its suitability for the design code work also stems from the fact that the canal runs through the town incorporating various area types - inner urban centre, transition zones and the outer urban/suburban zone. The key themes in the pilot work included developing a transferable and practical coding toolkit to drive area-wide change; using a strong and effective visual presentation to highlight the code requirements; and addressing the influence of viability on the design code requirements.

Local Authority background information

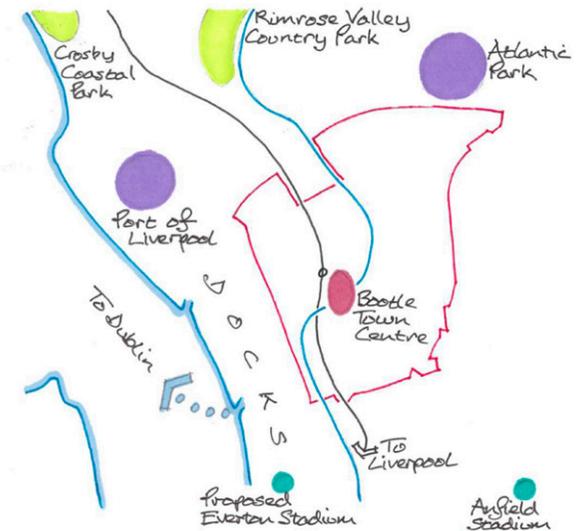
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council comprises five main settlement areas and is a borough of contrasts. In the south, Bootle, Litherland, Seaforth and Netherton share the metropolitan character of Liverpool. The built-up areas comprise about half of the area of the Borough and are where 95% of Sefton's residents live. The Leeds and Liverpool Canal passes through Bootle before continuing to Liverpool. It is already very well used for recreation by local communities. The canal offers great potential to be used more intensively for tourism and ecology. In recent years Bootle has seen a number of regeneration schemes with modern homes being built on former industrial areas and on former residential sites.

The context for coding

Bootle Town Centre is the largest economic, administrative and commercial centre in Sefton, providing central services in terms of jobs, shopping and administration for nearly 100,000 people. The centre is host to major public sector agencies including the Council, the Inland Revenue and the Health and Safety Executive.

There is a commitment to the comprehensive regeneration of Bootle Town Centre in the emerging Bootle Area Action Plan (AAP) – a transformational opportunity for the whole area. With the fragmented nature of the area and connectivity challenges, there is the potential to stitch the various parts of the urban environment together through the AAP and associated design codes. The Leeds and Liverpool Canal passes through the centre of the AAP with a range of key regeneration sites immediately adjacent to it.

“ *The existing character of the Leeds- Liverpool canal is recognised as both a weakness and potential future opportunity by all stakeholders* ”



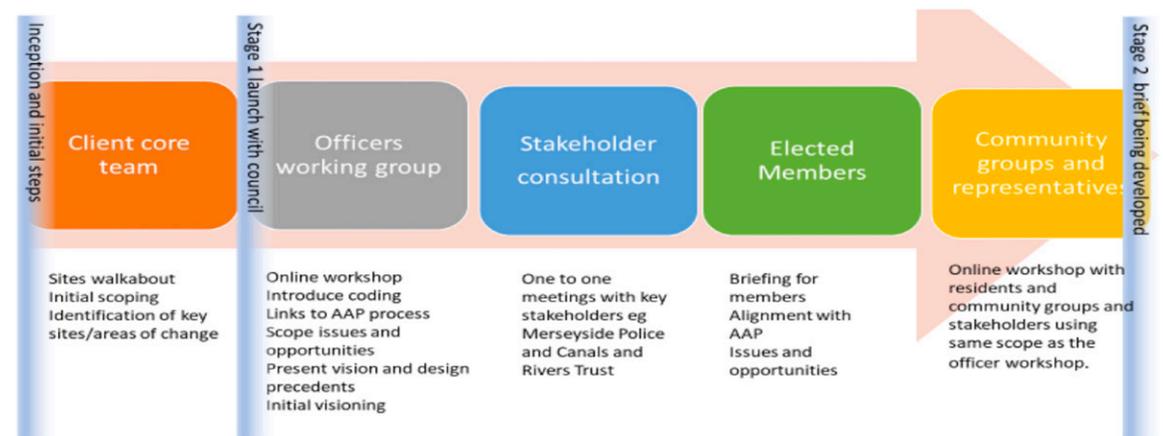
Bootle Town Centre and Bootle AAP area outlined in red, with the canal running through the town

Why code?

The Council are undertaking a Bootle Area Action Plan to address the present and future challenges of Bootle and its hinterland, which is a deprived area. The Council saw a good opportunity to use design coding to factor design quality into their regeneration work, believing that that better design will improve viability and create a more sustainable place in the long run. They also aim to raise civic pride in the area with a new emphasis on high design aspirations that will enhance urban character - recent development had tended to suburbanise and dilute the local character. The planning policy team had started a text-based design SPD but the launch of the new highly-visual NMDC prompted a change of thinking and the new focus on design coding.

The following were the aims of the design code pilot:

- Communicate visually the Council's aspirations for Bootle
- Promote design as a catalyst for better development, for investors and developers to see Bootle differently, potentially improving viability and long-term sustainability
- Encourage people to take pride in Bootle and be actively involved in its future
- Address the canal as a significant asset and characteristic of the area
- Provide a transferable and practical tool in the form of a design code for similar areas of deprivation
- Provide a draft design code that aligns with and informs the emerging Area Action Plan, to define and guide area wide, deliverable regeneration and transformation



The consultation strategy focused on internal engagement across teams before holding a series of community workshops

- Use the ability of design codes to identify and drive forward environmental enhancements and public realm improvements, as a regeneration tool for complex urban environments
- Provide a programme of clear actions to ultimately develop detailed area guidance across Bootle (informed by the testing programme pilot) as drivers for area wide change and site-specific regeneration – that can be developed further as part of the ongoing AAP process
- Nurture an enthused and engaged community, actively involved in informing the future of their area.



The canal route through Bootle is the focus of the design code toolkit

“ The Council thought there was a good opportunity to use a design code to bring design forward for this work. They feel very strongly that design could be a catalyst for better development rather than what had happened before - that “any development is okay ”

What was the coding process?

There were two key design code stages primarily being testing during Sefton's pilot: the vision stage (design vision and coding plan) with engagement as well as the preparation of the code.

The original engagement strategy for the Bootle design code testing programme was designed to meet the constraints of the pandemic, with an initial focus on online engagement moving later towards in person sessions should the pandemic restrictions in place at the time allow. The original ambition of the

1.26. A key premise of the coding approach is that this should be a code that sets placemaking fundamentals - improving the way people move towards the canal and the experience of being beside it. We see this as a code for community orientated canal-side places (not just new buildings).

The Council's premise for coding

design code pilot was to run alongside the emerging Bootle AAP process; however, this alignment proved to be challenging due to differing priorities and progress and so it was decided to move ahead independently with the pilot programme. Initially this involved:

- A canal walkaround by officers and the consultant team drawing out the extensive local knowledge of longer serving officers and their aspirations for Bootle
- Stakeholder conversations – Canals and Rivers Trust and the Police – which identified a clear synergy between their thinking and the emerging design guidance
- A public online survey using SurveyMonkey which worked well to elicit community views

Officers were pleased to see the community's strong connection with the canal, perhaps boosted because of the pandemic. Previously the canal had been largely overlooked, but was apparently rediscovered under lockdown restrictions as one of the nearby places 'permitted' for outdoor exercise. Hence the consultation showed significant support for the canal to be better used and for character areas along the canal to be the focus of design guidance.

CODING COMMUNITY-ORIENTATED CANAL-SIDE PLACES

CHARACTER AREAS

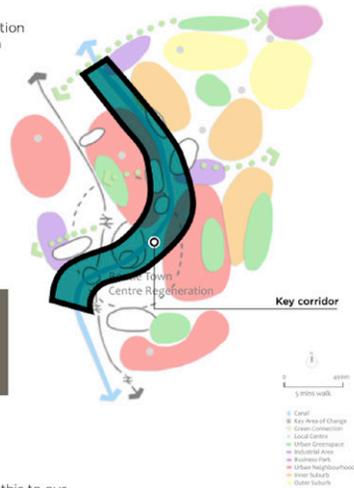
A CORRIDOR OF STRATEGIC AND LOCAL SIGNIFICANCE

1.31. Analysis and consultation feedback confirms that the section of canal corridor lying within, and extending east of, the town centre is a key area of focus for change and improvement. This section not only links together a series of potential opportunity sites but has an important strategic role to play improving east-west integration across Bootle.

1.32. This section of canal could be said to currently act as a divide between communities. Several gap sites, poor connectivity (towards and across the canal), and a tow path which is not always overlooked (compromising safety) all combine to create a sense of severance.

1.33. New development can achieve a better sense of connection and integration, helping this section of canal to function not as a divide between communities but as a seam which unites them.

This key corridor has strategic placemaking potential. New development can help repair the fractured urban neighbourhoods that currently exist in this part of Bootle.



CHARACTER AREAS

1.34. Identification of character areas is key to understanding and mapping the legibility of places - their past evolution and their future growth potential. NMDC is clear that an area-based approach is important to design coding:

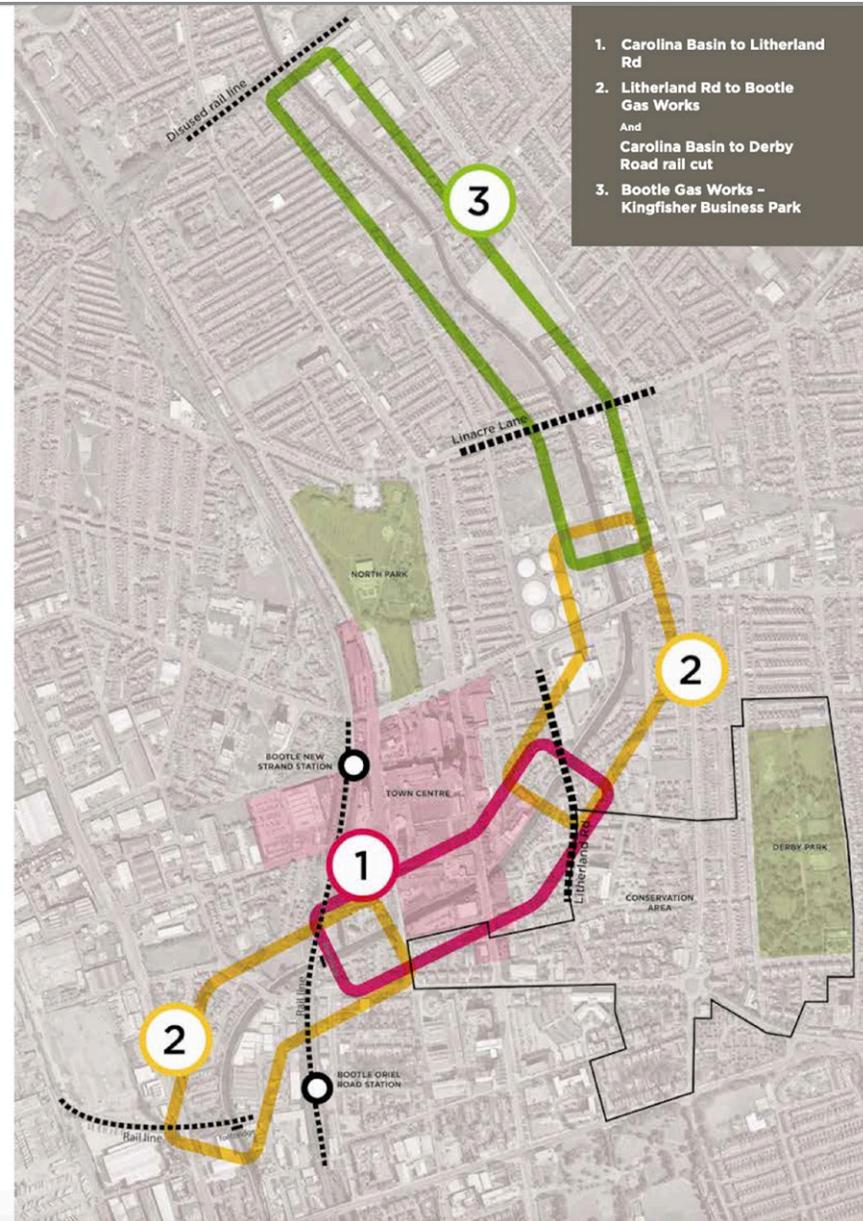
- para 34: "When preparing a design code... one approach is to divide the existing built-up area to be covered by the code into area types. These are areas of character that will be used to set common parameters in the code."
- Para 36: "Area types are based both on the existing character of the place and how the local authority and community expect the area to develop in the future."

1.35. We have applied this to our focus on the canal, identifying sub-areas within the overall key corridor. These sub-areas - or **character areas** - are informed by analysis of the canal's idiosyncratic and eclectic characteristics, which change moving along it. If addressed with a positive, joined up approach these characteristics can help inform a sequence of distinctive new developments that contribute to Bootle's wider sense of place.

1.36. The character areas are identified on the facing page and introduced over the following pages. This is the foundation to the coding guidance that follows in sections 3-5.

Right: character areas forming the basis of the coding work

BOOTLE DESIGN CODE: CODING TOOLKIT
A NATIONAL MODEL DESIGN CODE PILOT PROJECT



Three character areas defined Bootle's canal corridor in the draft design code

CHARACTER AREA 1

Carolina Basin - Litherland Rd

EXISTING PROFILE

- Urban, town centre setting but with pockets of low density housing
- Intense: urban development and sites tight to the canal edge
- Mixed use context
- Several bridges - mainly main roads forming part of n-s radial links and creating 'strategic gateways' into Bootle
- Canal edge of variable quality, and tow path 'flips' from side to side
- Poor sense of pedestrian connection between with the town centre
- Unrealised potential to links west, towards Liverpool



Character area 1 in the canal-side corridor

Coding Plan

Next the team developed a high-level coding plan which identifies the area types within Bootle, including a new type focussed on the canal-side as a 'corridor area'. These local area types will inform the AAP content.

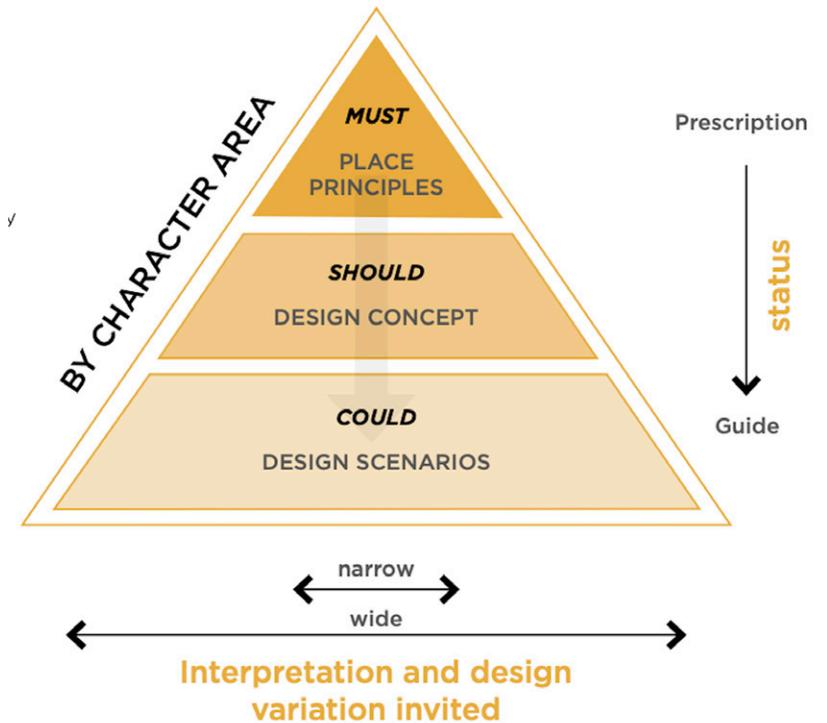
Within the canal-side area, three distinct character areas were defined with design coding prepared for each, initially in the form of key principles, design concepts, and design scenarios. These were accordingly developed to provide 'must', 'should' and 'could' guidance to guide developers. The council believe this will become a useful tool to promote dialogue between developers and the local planning team – and indeed a draft version is already being used to hold pre-app conversations.

What form will the code take?

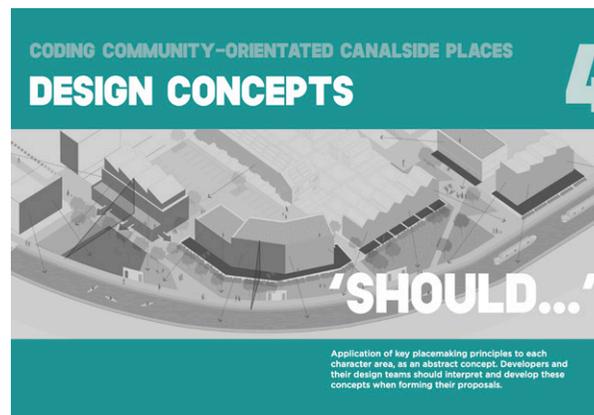
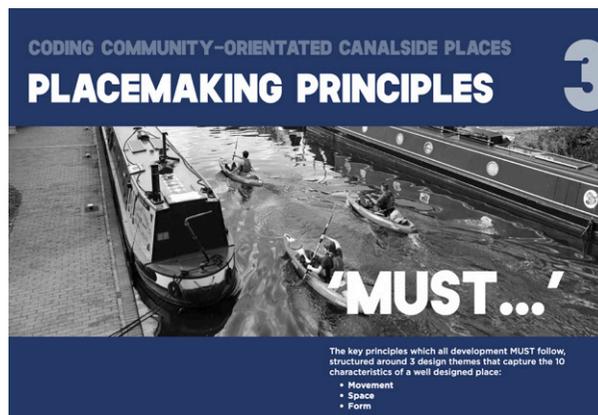
Sefton's testing programme was, by definition, exploratory, and in this spirit the resulting design code toolkit does not constitute a fully complete, 'operational' design code; rather, it contains materials that shows a potential approach to design coding in central Bootle. This includes illustrative visuals of coding principles applied to different canal-side sites that are quite different to how the Council has communicated its place-based intentions before.

This coding material sets out the high-level principles which must be taken into account by developers, establishes design concepts which should be adopted in new designs, and demonstrates design scenarios which show how the design code could be applied to a typical site along the canal. The regeneration proposals and design codes are detailed clearly in three sections that are visually distinct and well illustrated.

Within the design concepts section, illustrations are used to highlight how sites could be developed to promote key themes of movement, space and form to enhance the canal corridor.



The 'Must', 'Should' and 'Could' pyramid emphasises how certainty and aspiration is illustrated in the design code through principles, concepts and scenarios.



Visually distinct sections in the code

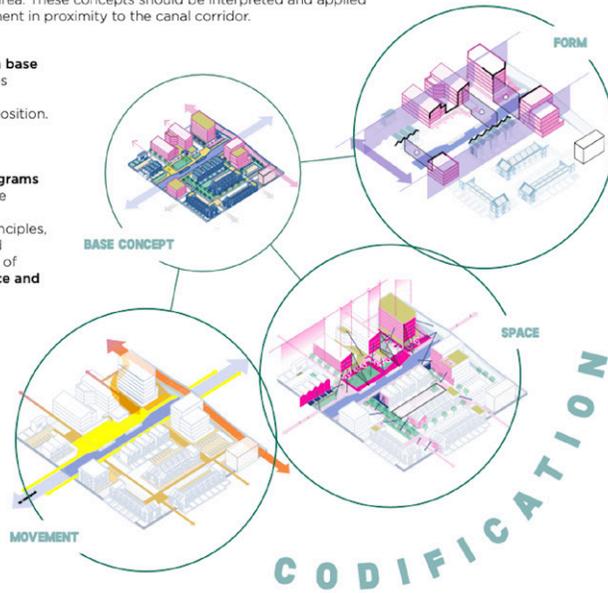
CODING COMMUNITY-ORIENTATED CANALSIDE PLACES

KEY DESIGN CONCEPTS

INTRODUCTION

1.37. The design concepts over the following pages provide direction to developers and their design teams on the design approach required in each character area. These concepts should be interpreted and applied to any development in proximity to the canal corridor.

1.38. For each character area, a **base concept** provides an overarching illustrative composition. This is analysed and articulated through a set of **codification diagrams** that demonstrate application of placemaking principles, carrying forward the core themes of **movement, space and form**.



BUILT FORM: THE 'CENTRAL BOOTLE MIX'

1.39. Design concepts are based on the premise that residential development will comprise new building forms that interpret building formats that have historically contributed to Bootle's distinctive identity;

- Its vibrant terraced streets
- Its bold, 'villa style' urban semi-detached homes
- Its industrial picturesque commercial clusters

1.40. These forms are synonymous with Bootle, and there are many positive examples of where they create characterful, people-friendly streets. This creates the sense of a **Central Bootle Mix**: a collection of building forms where plot characteristics and street composition help strengthen and enhance Bootle as a distinctive urban neighbourhood.

BUILT FORM: THE 'CENTRAL BOOTLE MIX'

DISTINCTIVE TERRACED STREETS



BOLD, URBAN SEMI-DETACHED



'INDUSTRIAL PICTURESQUE' LARGER FORMS



SPACE

- Linear flow of predominantly green space
- Opportunity for a new 'destination' space at a main nodal / arrival point within new development, marking the junction with a key link
- Linear soft landscape adjacent to the canal - semi-natural tree planting
- Marginal aquatic planting encouraged to soften the canal edge and enhance biodiversity
- Coordinated and flowing residential frontage to the canal providing overlooking and spatial definition

ALIGNMENT TO STAGE 1 STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES



- ✓ Context: Integral to Sefton, the broader waterside and green network - 'putting Boots on the map'
- ✓ Movement: A walkable '15 minute' location with safe and convenient access, including to, along and across the canal
- ✓ Resources and Lifespan: A revitalised community where local people are at the heart of new development, regeneration ambition and long-term stewardship. Consideration of design proposals to enable a low carbon lifestyle and to provide opportunities for post pandemic changes to the way we live.
- ✓ Identity: using canalside and maritime heritage as an inspiration for transformational contemporary placemaking
- ✓ Nature and public spaces: Supported by a network of well loved green and urban spaces as a community, town and natural resource, with the canal as a green / blue spine

FORM

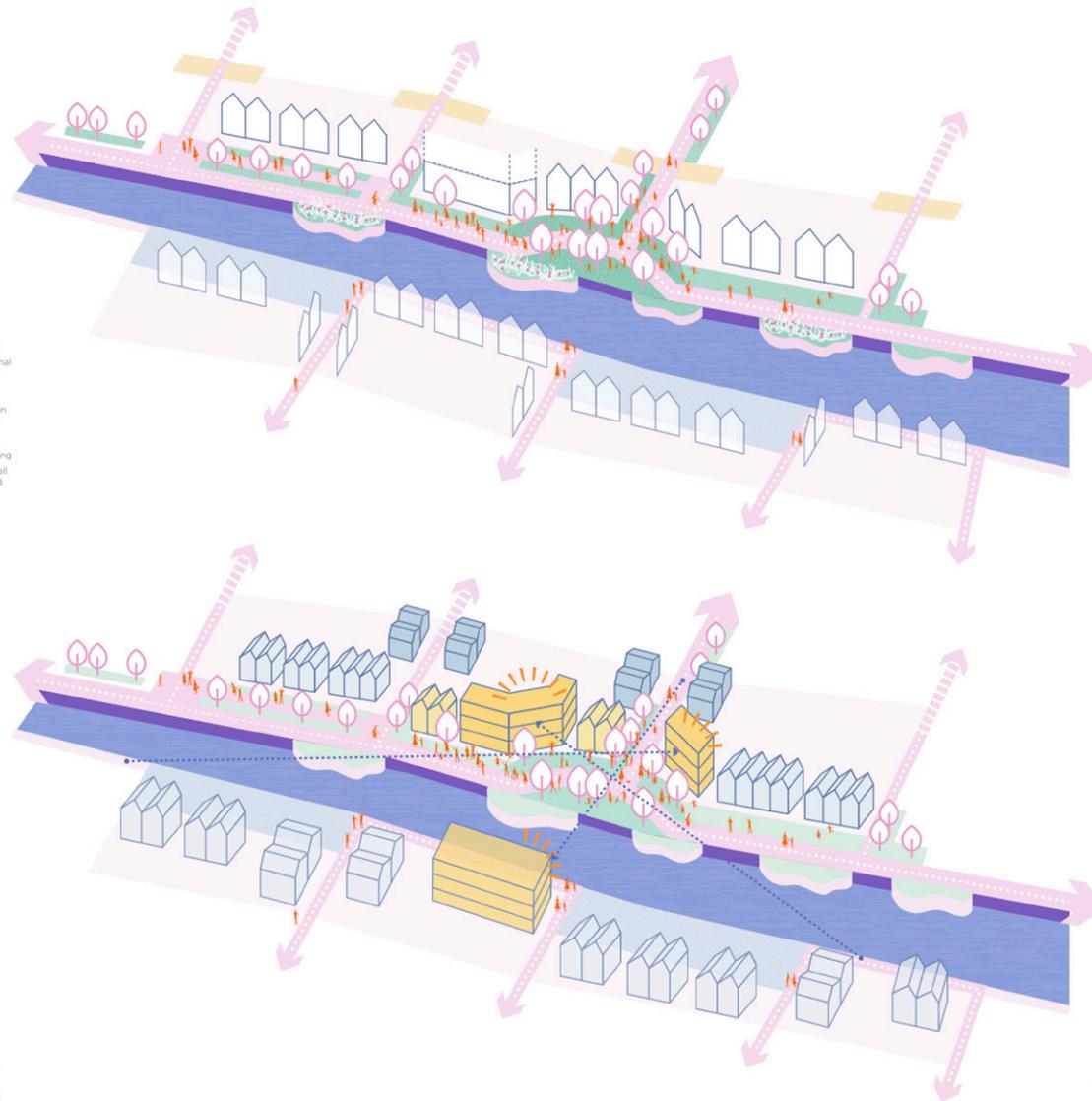
- A more uniform approach (compared to 1 and 2)
- Potential to introduce larger scale / higher density forms clustered at key open space(s).
- Some taller, gable-ended buildings helping to provide distinctive local landmarks (e.g. terminating local views).
- Predominantly domestic scale formats but including apartments and retaining an urban neighbourhood character
- Some ground floor interaction (mixed use / commercial) but limited to nodal spaces (convergence of key routes driving footfall)

STAGE 1 STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES MET...



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- ✓ Movement: A walkable '15 minute' location with safe and convenient access, including to, along and across the canal
- ✓ Resources and Lifespan: A revitalised community where local people are at the heart of new development, regeneration ambition and long-term stewardship. Consideration of design proposals to enable a low carbon lifestyle and to provide opportunities for post pandemic changes to the way we live.
- ✓ Locally distinctive: using canalside and maritime heritage as an inspiration for transformational contemporary placemaking
- ✓ Nature and public spaces: Supported by a network of well loved green and urban spaces as a community, town and natural resource, with the canal as a green / blue spine
- ✓ Built form, homes and buildings: A compact network of neighbourhoods focused along the canal
- ✓ Uses: A compact, fine-grained mixed-use community of homes, workspaces, facilities and leisure opportunities - with positive active use of the canalside

BOOTLE DESIGN CODE: CODING TOOLKIT
A NATIONAL MODEL DESIGN CODE PILOT PROJECT



open
optimised environments

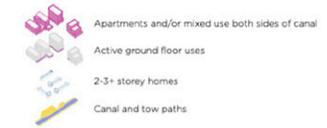
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The approach to public space and built form along the canal edge in the draft Placemaking Principles, Area 1

CODING COMMUNITY-ORIENTATED CANALSIDE PLACES

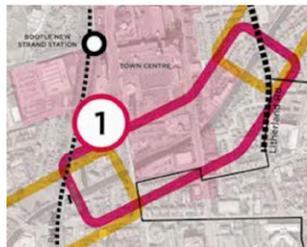
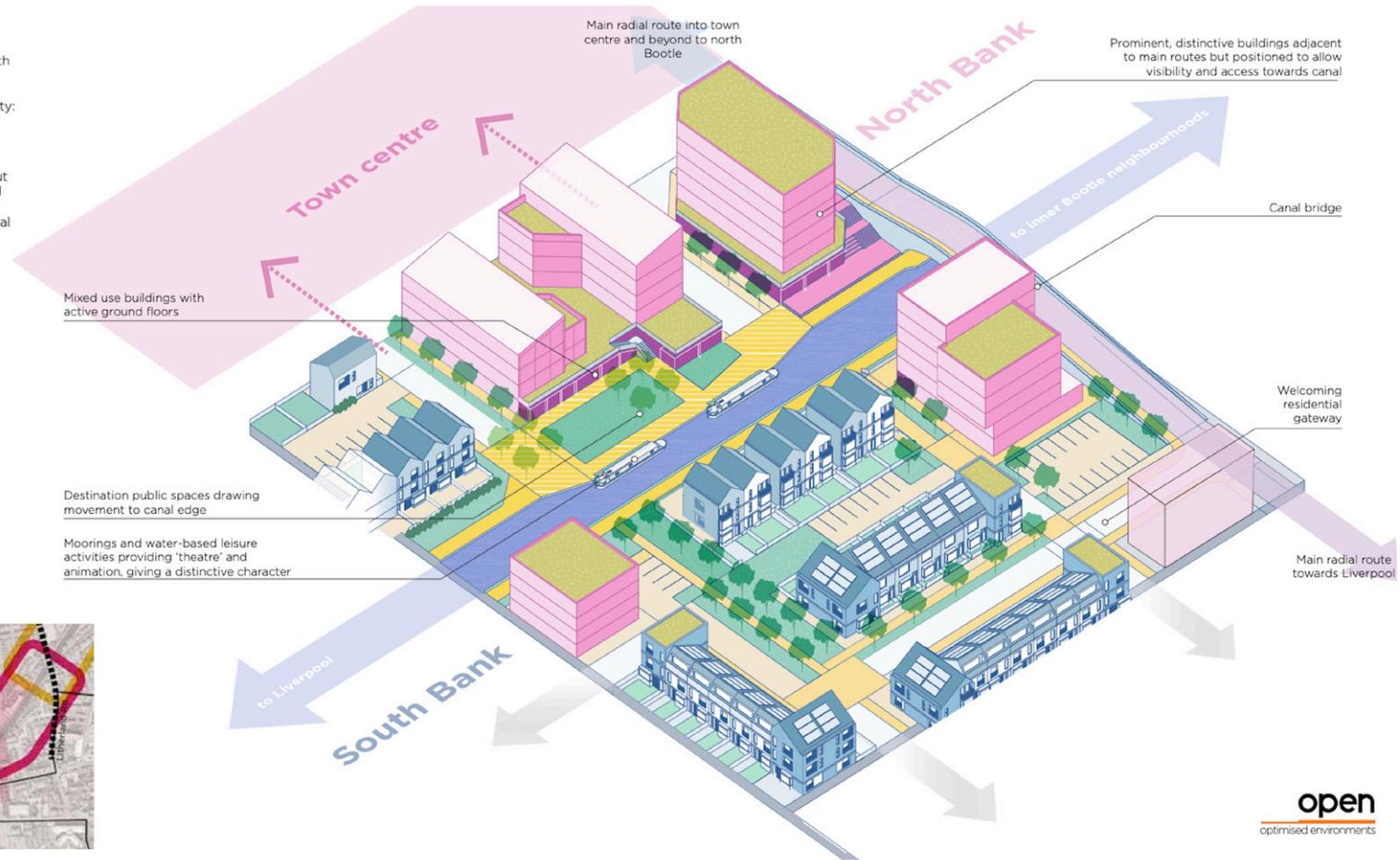
KEY DESIGN CONCEPTS

AREA 1



BASE CONCEPT

- Mixed use character to north bank drawing movement from adjacent streets and generating waterside activity; designed as an integrated part of the town centre.
- Predominantly residential character to south bank, but with a bold urban form and higher density approach reflecting Bootle's traditional urban core



BOOTLE DESIGN CODE: CODING TOOLKIT
A NATIONAL MODEL DESIGN CODE PILOT PROJECT

open
optimised environments

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Draft Key Design Concepts and Base Concept illustration for Area 1 in the Design Concepts section.

Lessons learned

A speedy and targeted analysis – In accordance with the NMDC, the process began with an area analysis of the Bootle Town Centre and its environs. The analysis stage was speedy and targeted – getting to the key influences as quickly as possible. This resulted in a baseline analysis that gave a strong direction to establish the vision based on a strong understanding of the local circumstances and character.

A new area type for canals – The economic, viability and deliverability challenges and opportunities of many locations across the country, including Bootle, require even greater promotion of the value of good design and creative solutions. Dialogue with the Canals and Rivers Trust has already identified some synergies with their own proposals for a national approach to develop design codes for canal-side sites. The design code approach developed by Bootle for their canal-side sites could be useful for many similar northern towns or cities with canals. Ultimately, promoting the value of good design in areas such as Bootle has strong 'levelling up' benefits. There is also potential for a new national area type for linear infrastructure / movement corridors.

Addressing varied audiences – Deciding on the appropriate approach to communicate design coding was very important, and there is a need to allow adequate time and resources to get it right. The format and layout of the design code is not just about communicating to planners; the design code needs to be a tool that is accessible to developers and architects, as well as being accessible to council members, planning officers, stakeholders, and local residents.

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.

“ It is one thing to generate the idea of what you want a code to say, but it is another skill entirely to communicate using drawings that people will understand. ”

The Pilot process and its influence on the AAP

The coding material produced through the pilot programme will inform the AAP process. The Bootle Area Action Plan will include an overall design policy and a specific canal-side sites policy that will take into account the design code pilot work undertaken. The AAP will identify sites for future coding while the wording of policies will draw upon the design principles that have been identified in the design code. To achieve this, the draft design code could be made available alongside a future Bootle AAP community engagement stage to illustrate how development might look on canal-side sites. In the meantime, the draft design code will help case officers provide advice on applications and pre applications in the area and the Council are already using the principles to provide advice on emerging schemes.

Learning from history

Five key area types were identified when developing a coding plan within the redline boundary area of the AAP: local centres, urban neighbourhoods, lower density 'outer suburbs', industrial areas, and movement corridors. This analysis enabled the team to quickly develop case studies for these area types that including an overview of local history, character and traditional green spaces. This highlighted that existing neighbourhoods of traditional terrace streets and Victorian villas were delivering significant densities, giving some comfort to the potential for higher density urban development in the area, including along the canal corridor.

Thoughts on viability

As the team progressed the design code pilot, viability testing looked at a range of variables, including density. In areas of low property value, increasing density through height may be counter-productive where the increase in new homes, and thus total development value, is exceeded by the increase in costs associated with building higher. The testing of site options helped identify the optimum development density. Deliverability is key in a regeneration context and having property / viability advisors as part of the team has been invaluable. Greater time would have allowed for exploration of co-production with key landowners and developers on specific sites, however the testing programme timeframe was limited.

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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