Report for MHCLG

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National Design Workshop Discussions 2018-2019

Contents

1. Executive Summary

During 2018 and 2019 MHCLG held roundtable conversations with local authority councillors and planning officers to hear about their day to day experiences of delivering well-designed homes through our planning system. 92 authorities across all 8 English regions were represented by 233 individuals. With a wealth of expertise and experience around each table, debates were welcomed by all present. Participants were particularly pleased that MHCLG was taking the time to visit and listen to their concerns, as part of their proactive design programme within the department.

Key findings and recommendations

Whilst the focus of conversation varied from area to area, the most frequently raised issues fell into three broad categories: i) national policy, ii) local practice and iii) resources. Taking each of these categories in turn, we summarise key priority issues followed by a number of actions and suggested recommendations from participants:

(i) National Policy

Participants explained how different national planning policies and processes came together to create unforeseen consequences for the delivery of well-designed homes such as:

- The 5 year housing land supply was skewing priorities and decisions away from design quality as the requirement to meet numerical targets, with the threat of increased targets and/or less ability to have a say on planning applications if they did not, undermining quality considerations. This seemed to be the case in all areas from low to high value, rural to metropolitan.
- The permitted development rights regime created poor quality homes and places but also undermined policies, negotiations and decisions requiring design quality where express consent was required. The argument being that if development could take place as permitted development without meeting design requirements, why should such standards be imposed when express consent was required?
- The viability testing system seemed to be supporting a race to the bottom in terms of quality. When decisions had to be made over the ability of a development to provide affordable homes, social infrastructure or a good quality environment the latter was generally seen as least important and so sacrificed. Changes to a scheme's viability were also used to argue for reductions to quality post permission.
- Questions were asked as to why the nationally described space standards had to be justified and opted into locally, if they were national minimum standards. Authorities were not adopting the standards as they did not have the resources to do so.
- There is disconnect between national highway design practices and planning's design quality objectives. In general, planners wanted to apply Manual for Streets standards, but highway officers did not. Restrictions imposed by adopting highway authorities on the design and maintenance requirements of new streets undermined the delivery of quality places.

Potential solutions
- ✓ Review the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) and PPG (Planning Practice Guidance) to redress the imbalance given between housing target numbers and quality requirements

- ✓ Review Permitted Development Rights so it does not allow poor quality homes and places to be created, thereby undermining policies calling for good design
- ✓ Change the purpose and scope of highway authorities so they have a responsibility for the creation of good quality, well-designed places as well as the safe movement of people and goods. Ensure consistency in approach and use of planning and highway design guidance

(ii)   Local Practice

Participants explained how their ability to deliver well-designed homes was affected by day to day work practices and behaviours such as:

- Authorities do not have the confidence to refuse planning applications because they are poorly designed as it was felt that the Planning Inspectorate would not uphold design related refusals at appeal.
- The visual representation of development proposals is generally poor. This hampers meaningful dialogue and the development of well-designed proposals. For example, 3D models can help people understand and relate to schemes but they are not used often enough.
- There is a paucity of meaningful community engagement with over reliance on developers running such processes, who can be seen as having a vested interest in the outcome.
- There are organisational structure problems within and across local authorities preventing a cross departmental shared placemaking approach. Councillors and officers do not discuss design to ensure they have shared understanding of quality and aspirations as much as they would like to.
- There is a lack of ambition and innovation within the home building industry, with a reliance on standard building types and layouts and a lack of people with good design skills influencing proposals.

Potential solutions
- ✓ Provide guidance on how design should be addressed within planning appeals and publicise appeal decisions that support well thought through and argued design related reasons for refusal
- ✓ Review how visual materials are provided within the planning system, reducing reliance on web-based pdf files and encouraging the use of real and virtual 3D models

(iii)   Resources

Participants explained how changing budgets, staffing levels and skills affected their ability to deliver quality including:

- There is a general consensus that access to people with specialist design skills had considerably reduced in recent years. Some authorities said they had no access to in-house skills.
- Where specialist design skills are available, they are used for reactive, application related planning work as a priority. Design input to proactive planning activities such as characterisation studies or the drafting of design policy, codes etc is seen as a lesser priority.
- Where local authorities are in a position to recruit people with specialist design skills and experience, a significant proportion have difficulties in finding or retaining good people.
- Design awareness of councillors and non-design specialist officers is also a concern. Lack of budget and capacity has reduced the amount of design training people are receiving. This is hampering confidence and abilities to call out poor designs and negotiate better results.
- There is also a lack of design skills employed outside of local authorities, across the built environment sector. This reduces developer and community aspirations for well-designed places and the quality of proposals. Architects, urban designers and landscape architects are not involved in projects as much as they should be.
- Other important skills are seen as missing from planning departments, in particular negotiation and viability testing abilities, which makes it difficult for authorities to achieve good quality outcomes.

Potential solutions:
- ✓ Consider ways to adequately resource design skills and capacity within local authorities, strengthening design consideration of planning applications and allowing design input to proactive planning work
- ✓ Support skill sharing and development approaches, highlighting best practice and encouraging the take up of innovative approaches such as the development of in-house design consultancy teams
- ✓ Require councillors sitting on planning and other relevant committees to undertake regular design training and support them to develop better ways of understanding and expressing design issues

Finally, it is worth noting that during discussions it was clear people felt that planning is a vital activity for the country and can bring many benefits. They were generally proud to be planners and councillors. However they felt that this was not widely recognised and acknowledged, and that in general planners are undervalued, leading to many of the problems mentioned above and hindering the delivery good quality results.

2. Introduction

In December 2018 the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, (MHCLG) undertook a series of roundtable discussions with 120 local authority councillors and 113 planning officials, representing 92 local planning authorities from across England.

These high-level roundtables provided an opportunity to discuss the challenges Local Planning Authorities face when trying to deliver high quality, well-designed homes and neighbourhoods. The sessions also helped participants share good practice and suggest ways of overcoming some of the problems they described.

The Design Network (DN) was appointed to independently facilitate these events. Eight sessions were held across England with MHCLG representatives and Design Network members present at each. The areas, dates and attendees at each of these events can be found in Appendix A.

MHCLG directly invited local authority participants with an interest in the built environment from a list compiled by each Design Network organisation and with assistance from the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Each round-table discussion started with the MHCLG representative explaining that the discussion was an opportunity for them to listen and learn from those present, and that a report would be produced and shared with participants at a later date. They also set out their department's design quality objectives and work program. They mentioned that revised Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on design was being drafted. The discussions where held under 'Chatham House Rules'.

The themes for discussion were shared with participants beforehand and included:

- Decision making
- Local Authority skills and capacity
- Sufficient supply of homes
- Large-scale developments, including new settlements
- Communication of proposals
- Opposition and support
- Increasing densities
- Lower land values
- Outcomes

Some sessions covered all these issues, some only a few.   Ultimately the discussions were broad ranging and driven by comments and observations from the participants.

The knowledge and expertise demonstrated during the good-natured, collaborative discussions gave an extraordinary insight into the issues that impacted on local authority ability to ensure quality and delivery of hew homes in an efficient and timely manner.   Participants came to the session with a positive and constructive attitude and contributed with enthusiasm. Their passion and commitment for good planning and good design was evident, and they shared a desire to tackle challenges and improve the quality of design in their area.

3.1 National Policy

The way the planning system has been set-up at a national level was discussed at every roundtable, with very similar points being made independently across the country.

It was widely acknowledged and welcomed that the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) promoted good design and provided a strong policy base from which to require high quality housing. However, participants felt that national approaches to the 5 year housing land supply, viability testing and permitted development rights have an impact on their ability to apply the NPPF design polices and deliver well-designed homes and neighbourhoods. For example, in terms of housing delivery targets, participants felt that if they jeopardised delivery by requiring better quality designs, they were leaving themselves open to punitive consequences including having little say on what would be built where. Overall, they felt that supply and viability superseded design requirements.

There was also concern over the application, or lack of it, of national space standards and highway design and adoption requirements. We set out here some of the narrative discussed at the roundtables.

3.1.1   5 year housing land supply and presumption in favour of sustainable development

To ensure they are able to function properly as planning authorities, many participants felt that priority must be given to showing they can deliver housing number targets within their plans, and then meeting those targets. They explained that this can override other planning policies, such as achieving the best size units for local need because one-bedroom flats enable more units to be delivered than family homes on a particular site. The pressure to deliver numbers can reduce their confidence and ability to refuse what they see as poor design or negotiate schemes to achieve higher quality results.

It was felt that the presumption in favour of sustainable development puts the onus on the local authority to prove something is poorly designed and so is not sustainable, which with limited resources and deficiencies in staff skill sets can mean poor schemes are approved. The perceived dominance of the 5 year housing land supply requirement can also undermine the balancing factors of ensuring development is sustainable, hence well-designed, before presuming in favour of it.

The impact of Planning Inspectorate decisions was mentioned at each round-table. Authorities lack confidence to refuse schemes on design grounds; they do not believe Planning Inspectors would uphold refusal at appeal and would give more weight to housing land supply issues, and targets, than design quality. One councillor mentioned that she did not know it was possible to refuse an application because of its design quality. Very few participants were aware of examples of appeals that upheld design-related reasons for refusal.

3.1.2 Viability

Participants felt that they were often on the back foot regarding viability testing, relying on input from consultants as many did not have the in-house skills and capacity they felt was required to assess viability reports and negotiate proposals. This related to both initial viability reports submitted with applications, and later in the process when applicants argued that development costs had increased requiring scheme variations to make it viable, often stripping back details, reducing the quality of materials, removing

planting or calling for increased building volumes. Participants felt that more transparency at these later stages would help ensure such practices were minimised.

They also felt that land prices were often inflated based on land owner and developer assumptions that they would be able to get permission for poor quality schemes simply because they were providing unit numbers. This seemed to be a problem for both high and low value areas, as the difference between development costs, including land values, and eventual sale or rental values, could be squeezed from both sides leading to viability pushing down quality across the board. However, it was acknowledged that viability was more likely to stop development happening at all in low cost areas. In high cost areas, it could push densities and plot coverage beyond what the local authority thought was appropriate.

Participants mentioned the difficult decisions which often needed to be made between ensuring affordable housing, social infrastructure or other requirements being funded from the development, and ensuring design and build quality of homes and public spaces. Better design and build quality was perceived by some as 'taking away' from a schemes ability to provide other things and was viewed as the least important thing to negotiate and secure.

Participants generally talked about materials, landscaping and the use of architects/design professionals as the design and quality issues that were put under pressure due to viability problems. This could result in poor layouts, low grade public spaces, lack of trees and greening, poorly built and unattractive buildings and a lack of bespoke designs and local distinctiveness.

3.1.3 Permitted Development
The nationally set Permitted Development Rights (PDR) policy relating to changes of use, both office to residential, and retail to residential, was mentioned at every roundtable session. People felt that these schemes led to poor quality homes and places. There was general concern that these homes were too often being provided for those on the lowest incomes and delivered very poor living conditions, particularly for families. The transient nature of some PDR scheme residents was also mentioned as a concern.

But maybe more surprising was the impact participants felt PDR was having on schemes that did require planning permission. There were numerous mentions of the way local PDR schemes were undermining authorities negotiating position, either applicants saying, if you don't let us build it like this we will just convert the existing building, or by arguing that if that the outcomes of PDR conversion are seen as acceptable by the Government, how can the local authority ask the developer to do more just because they need express permission?

3.1.4 Space Standards
Adoption of the nationally described space standard (NDSS) appeared to be very patchy, as it is an optional technical standard within the NPPF. A significant number of participants said they did not have the resources to deal with the adoption requirements. Some asked why they had to argue that basic standards where applicable in their areas when these had been set as a minimum quality threshold nationally; preferring the system to be turned on its head with standards automatically applied everywhere, unless opted out of.

Participants felt that if one local authority area applied the standards and a neighbouring one did not there was no level playing field. The lack of consistency between authorities was seen as a problem for some, saying that developers argued during negotiations that if the authority held out for better quality

the developer would invest elsewhere instead, saying 'we will not build in your area as you call for higher standards, we will build elsewhere'.

3.1.5 Highway Design and Adoption

Many participants expressed concern about the highway adoption system and the perceived disconnect from good planning and placemaking. They felt that Design Bulletin 32 (DB32) requirements put downward pressure on the quality of public spaces. Participants said DB32 required large turning heads and junction splays which could reduce density and increase costs of both constructing and maintaining public spaces. They also felt it undermined the introduction of Sustainable Urban Drainage (SuDs) systems and other planting including street trees.

Although some authorities included highway officers in their pre application processes, many did not, and highway authority requirements could come forward too late to be practically resolved. There is disconnect between national highway design practices and planning's design quality objectives. In general, planners wanted to apply Manual for Streets standards but highway officers did not. Restrictions imposed by adopting highway authorities on the design and maintenance requirements of new streets undermined the delivery of quality places.

The planners tended to understand that Manual for Streets was the relevant guidance to be used for new residential developments, but they felt that highway officers did not. Highways officers were understandably concerned with maintenance costs after adoption, which could undermine more creative designs. The creation of good quality, well-designed places was not seen as the responsibility of highway authorities and this was a particular problem in two tier areas where the planners and highway officers worked for different organisations. In some cases, authorities had produced their own street design guidance to try and overcome this issue.

3.1.6 Possible Solutions

Participants suggested a number of ways around the problems described above including:
- Review NPPF and/or PPG (Planning Practice Guidance) wording to ensure greater balance is created between the 5 year housing land supply, presumption in favour of development, viability policies and the design quality policies
- Ensure local plans better express community infrastructure and other needs and explain how they will be funded and delivered aside from through the viability of individual development schemes
- Alter the system for space standards, ensuring nationally described space standards can be applied without local authorities having to justify and resource their adoptions, and make it easier to set local place enhancement and quality requirements that build on these
- Review Permitted Development Rights policy so it does not create poor quality homes and places, and does not undermine ability to secure quality elsewhere. This could be done through quality related conditions to PDR rights
- Change the statutory role of 'highways departments' to include the delivery and maintenance of high quality places (alongside the safe movement of people and goods). Potentially change the name of highway departments to street or public realm departments, revoke DB32 and update and publish Manual for Streets as dual 'highway' and planning guidance.

3.2 Practice

The roundtables were held with people immersed in the practice of making plans, negotiating and deciding on planning applications and dealing with planning processes. They had live, relevant and very real experiences to share. Whilst there was some frustration, there was also pride in what they were achieving, or trying to achieve.

The main practice issues mentioned related to community engagement, communicating and understanding designs, dealing with conditions, minor amendments and appeals, the role of councillors and industry approaches.

3.2.1 Community Engagement

There was general agreement that productive community engagement was important to delivering well-designed homes, but frustration that this did not seem to happen often enough. Much engagement is provided and managed by scheme promoters and participants felt that as they had a vested interest in the outcomes, this blurred the process and created distrust. However, participants said that developer led engagement could work well, for example where they take the time to talk directly to those property owners and neighbours abutting or close to the site and go on to demonstrate good buffers and landscaping and address points raised.

There was also significant concern over how to respond to very real community concerns which were outside of the planning departments remit or ability to control. For example, the timely provision of services such as GP surgeries, which it was felt where decided upon and funded independently and often not in the same timeframe. Highway and parking issues were very often of great importance to communities, but the perceived disconnect between the highway officer and planners' roles undermined the way these could be dealt with. Not being able to have a concrete answer on how these elements, that service and facilitate growth, would be delivered before population growth was seen as undermining the relationship between communities and the planning authority.

Neighbourhood Plans were mentioned in some, but not all sessions. They were seen as potentially useful, but a drain on limited staff time and resources. They were also seen as tending to express a generally negative attitude to change that participants seemed to expect from communities. Participants felt that people did not like change, did not see what benefit it could bring them, were distrustful of promises and did not think highly of planning. Permitted development rights did not help with this, as people did not understand how 'the planners let that through'.

Participants described a disconnect between national planning polices and aspirations of local communities. In particular, residents in many areas did not believe that moving away from dependency on the private car was either a good idea, or would happen. As such they mistrust proposals with reduced car access or parking. Similarly, participants said there were concerns over new building typologies or styles. Tall and/or dense buildings and neighbourhoods were viewed warily or in some places with open opposition.

There was recognition that the planning system generally only hears from the 'hard to avoid groups', the objectors, not those who want and need somewhere to live and work. In part, this was seen as due to

mediocre standards of design over the past 20 to 30 years that have potentially bred resistance to new development. Also, it was felt that local aspirations to achieve well-designed places, where people want to live and work are not given the same weighting as the need to build housing, sometimes at any cost.

Participants said that 'more, better, faster' might be what the Government wants, but it is not what communities care about; they just want 'better'.   Overall there was a feeling that people really just don't want change and so planners and councillors have to deal with inertia or hostility from communities alongside the challenges outlined elsewhere in this report.

3.2.2 Communicating designs

There was general concern with the way design and quality issues were communicated. This could be between developer and local authority, both of these and communities, between councillors and officers or different council departments or tiers. Poor communication could lead to people switching off, not engaging or misunderstanding proposals or their impact. There was concern that this was particularly a problem for low value areas where schemes did not generate the income to pay for good graphic or communication materials.

Comments were made that design guides and other documents could be too large and impenetrable, that everyday language was too often not used and that drawings and pictures were hard to find and interpret. There was concern over the accuracy of computer-generated images and the mistrust these could create when the end product looked quite different. Overall there was a sense that the use of visual materials within the planning system was not fit for purpose and needs an overhaul.

The relationship between the use of visuals and the way different stages in the development process worked was discussed. In particular, the lack of accuracy and detail in planning drawings was seen as contributing to the watering down of quality as the processes progressed, for example when conditions were discharged.

3.2.3 Processes

Participants talked about pre application work, design reviews, conditions, minor amendments and appeals at most sessions. In general, good pre-app and design review processes were seen as beneficial to achieving well-designed homes if they could be resourced and staffed. There was more concern over how conditions, minor amendments and appeals were working in practice.

Overall, design review was not discussed as much as other issues. There was patchiness in its use and participant's perception and experience of the process. However, where discussed, participants said it could be very helpful. They pointed out that some architects do not like to be challenged by planners on design issues and in such cases, they find using a design review panel particularly helpful.

Whilst participants felt that the pre-application processes could help them work collaboratively with developers to understand policy drivers and resolve issues, they were also viewed with some suspicion. For example, there was worry from some councillors that agreements were reached during these early stages that excluded broader public participation and limited any change later in the design process.

Many participants said the fees that come with the discharge or removal of conditions, or dealing with minor amendments to consented schemes do not cover costs, or go nearly far enough to pay for these to be properly considered. They felt that this can be where design quality can easily be reduced, and that they often can not afford for someone with design expertise to be involved. They said that the amount and complexity of materials which come in at this stage can be overwhelming and there can be a disconnect between how and why a scheme was consented and what is allowed at this later stage.

Councillors also said that they were not always aware of changes post permission to schemes in their wards, which could undermine their relationship with residents, their role in delivering quality and their trust in the planning process.

The Planning Inspectorate and influence of the appeals system was brought up at every session. People felt that inspectors would not uphold refusals on design grounds, most were not aware of examples where this had happened. They acknowledged that in general they did not refuse applications on design grounds, or not solely on design, because they did not feel planning inspectors would agree with them. So there appeared to be a conundrum. Planning authorities were not taking design issues to appeal, based on an assumption they would lose because no appeals had been upheld on design, but this in itself means there are no, or vey few precedents, to work with.

3.2.4 Councillors

The roundtables were attended by a mixture of councillors and officers. Some councillors sat on planning or other relevant committees, some did not. They all had an interest in design quality. The role of councillors was seen as very important, not only helping link community and professional approaches and interests, but by developing and championing aspirations for their area.

There were feelings that some councillors could do with help and support to improve their understanding of both planning and design issues. This was expressed by councillors more than officers. It was suggested that councillors could find it particularly useful to have good officer briefings on design issues, updates on pre-application discussions, and notification of minor amendments and applications to remove or discharge conditions on key schemes within their wards.

Officers suggested that councillors should feel able to contact them and ask for advice, or to discuss proposals more than they do. There were a number of comments made about the need for better communication between officers and councillors. At one round-table, which included a number of members and officers from the same authority, participants said they had never discussed together what they wanted to achieve in terms of design quality before. They found it very useful to do so and hoped to continue the dialogue after the round-table.

There was some debate over what design quality meant to different people. This did not specifically relate to councillors but seemed to be of particular interest to them. Although a common definition of design was not discussed at any session, there was a general indication that councillors may feel it is about visual and aesthetic issues, while officers think of design as relating to more functional built environment issues.

3.2.5 Industry approaches

The round-tables did not include people from private practice or the development industry, although there were councillors and officers present who where involved with council building projects. This perhaps meant participants felt free to comment on how they feel the industry at large works.

Frustration was expressed with the way some homebuilders operate and in particular their design skills and aspirations. Participants recognised that there were some good developers who they could have constructive relationships with, but generally they were disappointed with the quality of proposals they received.

There were comments on the lack of architectural input on many schemes, use of standard building types, uninspired, highway dominated layouts, small rooms and units, home types that did not fit with local needs and aspirations – nor furniture - and poor quality detailing and materials. Some participants said they kept saying the same thing to developers, but they did not listen.

There was also concern over land trading; people gaining permission then selling the site on. Participants felt that this reduced viability and subsequently the eventual quality of the place. They also felt that at times developers did not have an interest in the long term success of the area.

Participants did seem willing to support small builders, developers and home owners 'doing it for themselves'. There was also some excellent practice amongst council building programmes, which participants were finding to be a good alternative way of creating high quality homes and neighbourhoods that included affordable housing.

There was some discussion on different housing types, with a focus on issues around tall buildings in London and areas including other large cities, homes of exceptional quality in the countryside in some regions, and an interest in all regions in homes for older people and families. Problems with getting new bungalows built were mentioned at a couple of sessions. It seemed that outside of metropolitan areas, participants were not seeing newer forms of homes such as wheelchair accessible flats, stacked maisonettes, infill blocks or co housing development.

There was significant discussion on new methods of construction and off site assembly of either part of all of a home. Some raised concerns over this, thinking it led to identikit, hard to modify and manage buildings, while others thought it offered real opportunities in terms of build quality and delivery cost and speed. There appeared to be a willingness to see new methods of construction capacity and facilities develop with opportunities for factories and jobs to come forward to support this industry in some regions. There was suggestion that the types of product developed could be better informed by good planning and urban design requirements.

3.2.6 Possible Solutions
Participants suggested a number of ways around the problems described above including:

- We should celebrate the difference that good planning can make. Planning should be a valued and respected profession.
- A guide on how to communicate effectively would be useful

- Digital approaches should be used, including 3D and other virtual models to explain and discuss proposals
- BIM is not used in planning, but it should be. It can change how images are shared and used and could help deal with minor amendments and conditions more effectively and efficiently
- The issue of how design is addressed at appeal should be discussed with the Planning Inspectorate, appeal case studies shared and more information made available on how best to deal with design within planning appeals
- Key themes keep coming up at Design Reviews, these should be captured and shared widely
- When conditions or minor amendments are dealt with there should be a higher standard fee, or this should be required through Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) where appropriate. More time should be spent on this aspect of planning and those submitting should include a clear schedule of proposals and changes to help make it easier to 'spot the difference' from consented designs
- Off site construction methods should be supported so they develop to provide better choice of high quality units and parts which can be used in adaptable ways and so contribute to achieving build out of better quality homes and places

3.3 Resources

There was a very significant feeling, whether participants were councillors or officers, that they were working under pressure and did not have enough people with the right skills to do everything needed. There were concerns over capacity, recruitment and retention and specialist design skills. There was also recognition that associated skills like good negotiation and financial acumen were very important but sometimes missing from planning departments.

Different ideas as to what design might mean were put forward, leading to varying perceptions of the key skills and activities needed to create well-designed homes and neighbourhoods

3.3.1 Design understanding
Varying ideas were put forward on what design actually is, and what constitutes good design and it was clear that perceptions vary greatly.

Some present were urban designers or in-house architects, but most had more wide ranging roles such as head of planning departments or teams and councillors – with less design knowledge. Some non-design specialists appeared to see design as being about style, character and appearance, others focused on scale, optimising sites and public spaces, while for some the important issues where construction quality and internal living conditions. All are valid considerations but approaches and perceptions seemed relatively polarised. This in itself identified a barrier, either people are not reading the NPPF and PPG wording on design quality, it is not clear enough, or they are interpreting it differently.

It was noted that design can be subjective, but also that some rules of thumb could be applied. Use of Design Reviews and Building for Life to support and inform local design evaluation were found to be useful tools and processes by many authorities. These, and other forms of support such as training and

mentoring, were helping some non-design specialists to increase their confidence and ability to deal with design issues themselves.

Many councillors indicated that they do not feeling confident in dealing with design issues. Some said they expect and rely on their officers to deal with design quality, but others felt that, as councillors, they should play a larger role in securing quality for their areas, for example helping local communities and stakeholders to understand, describe and look to build on local character and context. They understood that to do this they need to feel confident in their own understanding what is proposed, what is possible and what makes for good or bad designs. Often, they felt they did not know enough, or that their councillor colleagues do not carry out their roles as they should. Participants said that the councillor training offered by their local authorities did not include help with developing design understanding.

3.3.2 Capacity

Participants acknowledged the usefulness of proactive planning work such as setting design requirements for sites through local plans, preparing Supplementary Planning Guidance and Design Codes etc. But they said they have very few planners or urban designers with the relevant skills to do this type of work.

Where they do have staff with these skills, they have to decide what to prioritise: reactive work assessing and negotiating active development proposals or doing pro active work setting the parameters for future proposals. In general, reactive work takes precedence, 'we spend most of the time fire-fighting'.

Capacity was also impacting on skill development. Less time was available for either external or in-house training, leading to an inability to raise design understanding amongst non-design specialist planners.

Capacity and design skills amongst sister teams such as highways was also an issue, as was outsourcing of design work which was costly but seemed to be required by some authorities.

3.3.3 Recruitment and retention

Participants mentioned two main problems, first they lacked the budget to employ enough people with design skills, or simply enough people. Second, if they could afford someone, many authorities found it difficult to attract, and then retain, highly skilled staff.

It was recognised that Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) and funds from central government could be very helpful, but it was felt that PPAs were reducing and even when used did not help with pro-active planning or the design scrutiny of small schemes. In some parts of the country there was a despondency that they could not achieve what they wanted to for their areas under the current circumstances.

As noted earlier, comments were made that the lack of design skills affected developers and applicants as well as local authorities. However, it was not clear if this was due to lack of resources and recruitment issues, or lack of willingness in the industry to employee design professionals. Mention was also made that private firms are seen as paying higher salaries and so recruit from local authorities.

Some authorities were sharing officers, for example having combined design teams. Some authorities were seen as good at 'bending spend' and utilising resources and funding opportunities while others struggled. There was a desire to learn and share best practice.

3.3.4 Specific skills gaps

Apart from specialist design skill requirements, there was a recognition that to deliver good design other generic skills, often not taught in planning schools, were needed. In particular viability and negotiation skills were seen as greatly needed and in short supply.

The delivery of good residential design is closely tied to the being able to understand, discuss and interrogate scheme viability and the ability to negotiate across all issues for a particular development proposal.

These processes were seen as being too opaque and complex, for example with over-inflated land costs factored into viability assessments. As with design issues there was a lack of confidence and understanding of how viability assessments are being considered at appeal.

3.3.5 Possible Solutions

Participants suggested a number of ways around the problems described above including:

- Skills are required across the built environment profession including basic understanding of design, viability and negotiation, what makes a good place, how design at appeal works as well as understanding drawing plans.
- Councillors need training and support to develop design skills and confidence. However, the time and appetite some councillors have for training should be considered. Mandatory design training could be introduced for councillors sitting on planning committees. Councillor design clubs could also be introduced so they can self-support and learn through site visits etc that they organise themselves and create a culture of learning.
- Provide a combination of collaborative events, activities and easy to understand briefings for Councillors and officers so they increase confidence in dealing with and understanding design and making better decisions in the delivery of quality homes and places.
- Learn from what has worked well elsewhere to help local authorities create a shared mobile, design, viability and negotiation team that can be regionally focussed.
- Local authorities could develop in-house design teams with architects providing a paid-for service for applicants and others, and use this to fund design support for their local planning authority functions
- Multi-disciplinary teams should be created, for example where the highway engineers sit next to the planners to overcoming email-lag and improved shared interpretation of design issues.
- Look at how planning authorities can be supported in ring-fencing money for proactive planning work around characterisation studies, understanding places and working with community leaders.
- Additional and/or ring fenced resources are needed to recruit, train and retain design skilled officers

- Have an expansion of Public Practice supporting in-house design skills would help build capacity and understanding of good design in planning authorities, and strengthen links to professional networks providing design review, training and other ways to increase design skills.
- Use Building for Life and other tools to assess new development, where officers and councillors can collaborate and share knowledge of good and not-so-good outcomes.
- Use Design Review to support and expand skills available in an area, and can do more than advise on pre-application schemes. Panels can help with local plan, design guidance and other work, and can help to upskill councillors and officers.