

# Improving the Quality of Housing Layouts



in Northern Ireland

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is sponsored by the Planning Service of the Department of the Environment, the Roads Service of the Department for Regional Development, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, and the Construction Employers' Federation of Northern Ireland. The recommendations in this report are endorsed by all four sponsoring bodies.

The report is based on discussions, workshops and fieldwork with relevant professionals in Northern Ireland. It also draws on seminars and other work related to 'Housing Layouts - Lifting the Quality' published by DETR in England in 1998.

# Improving the Quality of Housing Layouts in Northern Ireland

A publication jointly by CEF, NIHE, Roads Service and Planning Service

## Foreword

Since the introduction of the Quality Initiative to Northern Ireland, developers, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, planners and road engineers have collectively made considerable progress towards improving the quality of new residential environments. There is now common understanding that we need to adopt a more holistic design-led approach.

It is a challenging task to create from scratch a residential environment that will mature into a place that is distinctive, attractive, and safe. We have a good tradition of quality in the design and space provided within the new houses we build in Northern Ireland. But can the same always be said of the streets and places we create? How often have we heard people deplore the loss of woodland or other familiar features in the landscape which it is felt could have been retained? How often do we hear calls for the return of tree-lined avenues and play areas, and for some relief from the monotony of rows of same or similar houses?

To meet these criticisms, it is necessary from the very start of the process to have common purpose - the creation of quality places. Only when all professionals involved in this process are prepared to combine their various skills, in a spirit of co-operation and partnership, can we hope to create places future generations will cherish.

The production of this document is heartening evidence of the will to work together and strive for the highest possible standards in the external residential environments. We endorse fully its publication at what we believe to be an important stage in the process - just as new guidance for design professionals on this topic is being brought forward.

We are in a position to harness the imagination, vision, abilities and integrity of all involved in the development process. As we enter a new century, let us work positively towards creating sustainable quality environments that will contribute to a better life for all - now and in the future.



## Preface

A few examples of the best in Northern Ireland's housing, at Carnlough, Balmoral Avenue, Belfast, and Hillsborough.



The Government's policy is to improve the quality of new housing developments. Improving the quality needs the help and cooperation of everyone involved in creating new residential environments. For their part, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development are reviewing their advice and guidance to assist developers and designers.

This process began with a ministerial announcement on 26 January 1996. Everyone accepts the need for the proper planning of growth through the zoning of development land. However, the announcement established the principle that zoning is only the first step and that the

quality of the scheme is as important as zoning when assessing development proposals. The various measures and advisory documents produced since January 1996 are components of what has become known as the 'Quality Initiative'. The Quality Initiative is the basis of the standards expected of new housing schemes. It was made clear in February 1999 that it applies to all housing throughout Northern Ireland including proposals for land that is already zoned.

The Departments are pleased that the Quality Initiative is supported by the Construction Employers' Federation and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Developers and designers have endorsed the objectives of the Quality Initiative.

It is their imagination and creativity that can achieve significant improvements in the housing environment. Several of the examples of housing in Northern Ireland that are illustrated in this document show that they do have the ability to achieve better quality.

It is intended that this document should stimulate everyone involved in the development process to give greater attention to design issues. Together we can succeed in improving the quality of the places where people will live.



Public open space in a new development near Bishops Stortford, England, by Countryside Properties.

Creating new homes in attractive surroundings is a most important design task. The quality of our home environment shapes our attitude to life. For example, it is the environment in which children spend most of their free time. The home and garden is the daily working environment for around half of the adult population.

The visual quality of new housing developments also has an impact on existing communities. It is important to try to respect and enhance the environment for existing residents, as well as new ones.

The responsibility for creating new housing environments is shared between development companies, their designers and public agencies, especially the Planning Service and the Roads Service. At present, too many of the people involved in housing design concentrate on their own priorities and their personal area of responsibility. This means that housing layouts are often shaped by many separate technical decisions, without a clear vision of an overall design concept. This does not encourage anyone to seek an equitable shared solution.

Good design comes from achieving a balanced response to all of the factors influencing a housing scheme. It is not easy to design an attractive, varied and safe housing environment. Nor is it easy to design in a way that takes account of the natural attributes and constraints of the site, that draws on the distinctive characteristics of its landscape and townscape surroundings, that appeals to customers, and that makes profits for developers and landowners at the same time. If it was easy, such developments would be commonplace rather than rare exceptions.



# Introduction



The best new housing in Northern Ireland achieves high design standards, but the Quality Initiative encourages *all* new housing to match these excellent examples. From top left, clockwise: high quality design in Bushmills, Eglinton and Newcastle.



In the past, dialogue between developers and public authorities has concentrated on the scale of housing land allocation or attempts to resolve problems on specific sites. This has led to the perception that developers and authorities are on opposing sides, yet both are in agreement about their desire to lift the quality of housing layouts. There are some differences in perceptions, and in the detail of how that improved quality might be delivered, but there is fundamental agreement.

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, there are many examples of poor design where new housing estates

have had a detrimental impact on their surroundings. There are only a few developments of outstanding quality. This cannot be the result of a conscious decision to reject good design. It is more likely that the question of quality has never been fully considered in a process that has concentrated on cost saving and satisfying technical requirements.

It remains a popular myth that good design is inherently expensive, yet some aspects of good design can be achieved with little or no additional costs. Varying the spaces in a layout to create interest and contrasts can be achieved without reducing density

or adding expense. High quality planting will be only a small item in a development budget but it has a significant impact. A good designer may even produce more cost effective schemes.

Developers have put much effort into providing their customers with well built and efficient houses. Many are now acknowledging that design improvements to their layouts can make their projects more acceptable to the community and more appealing to their customers. The criticism of new housing layouts is not just about taste and style.

Urban redevelopment that takes the form of a street of houses bringing appropriate scale, detailing and quality to this visually important site in Londonderry.



It is that many developments have no overall design concept, that they are merely the cumulative effect of meeting technical and functional needs at costs within the developer's budget.

Typical housing estates are criticised for their disregard of local identity, ignoring the character of nearby buildings and their relationship with neighbouring development. They often neglect their impact on the wider landscape and opportunities to make environmental improvements are often wasted.

Where new housing is on reclaimed urban sites it will face many physical and market constraints. In these difficult situations, drawing design ideas from local character will help to mould the new housing into its setting and enhance local distinctiveness. Developers and planners have a chance to demonstrate that they can be sufficiently imaginative to make the most of these important opportunities. Successful new urban places have been enthusiastically received by house buyers. The best examples offer an encouraging model for future projects.

Some new housing will be added to villages and small country towns. Traditional building types, materials and settlement forms are an important part of the special character of Northern Ireland's rural areas. In Great Britain, there are growing numbers of new developments that respect their context and meet the need for rural housing without undermining the local sense of place. All rural housing schemes should seek to follow these good examples, sustaining traditions rather than bringing inappropriate suburban layouts and house types into rural locations.



Traditional spaces have variety, such as avenues along main roads or a courtyard round a green. Tree-lined streets can mature into a charming suburban environment.



Many new housing layouts will be at the suburban edge of settlements, often related to recent housing schemes in order to make effective use of infrastructure investments. The surrounding development may be less significant for these designs, but there is still the site form and landscape to consider and other design clues in the distinctive features of the wider area. This means that suburban housing in Northern Ireland should look as if it belongs here, and not appear to be a transplant from the edges of London or Birmingham.

Identity and distinctiveness are achieved by making the most of the site and its landscape and

townscape setting. This involves the obvious, such as using natural features in public spaces, especially trees and other established planting, and the less obvious such as using some local building traditions, public art or ensuring that a view is retained. In some suburban cases, existing local style may be an important influence on the new development. Sometimes, a bold design might be a welcome contrast. The most criticised designs are those that introduce housing which could be in any suburb. A well-designed housing layout, especially on suburban sites, should provide variety and contrasts. The spaces between the houses should not then be mere standard streets and

culs-de-sac, but avenues, squares, crescents, mews, courtyards, lanes, alleys, greens, and all the other words that our language offers to describe the traditional variety of spaces.

The creativity of roads engineers is critical in achieving diverse spaces that meet technical and safety requirements without imposing stereotyped solutions.

This search for variety should also extend to boundary treatments where walls, fences, railings and hedges can be used to emphasise the shape of spaces and introduce neighbourhood identity. New planting can strengthen these ideas, with



Variety in house types and boundaries, using existing trees, and careful attention to the best characteristics of established housing in the area creates a place of quality that will quickly mature. (Castle Park, Omagh).



shrubs and trees helping to define spaces and enclosure, and species selection reinforcing local identity. All of these measures help the legibility of the housing environment, making 'my place' special and different.

Developers will need to use the best urban design skills to ensure that they take every opportunity to create variety, contrasts and identity in their design concepts or master-plans and as detailed layouts are prepared.

The aim is to create more diversity in the houses themselves. This can not be achieved through the superficial treatment of elevations, with applied decoration or random changes of colour and materials, but in the ways

that the houses relate to each other. Standard house types are usually designed to fit in straight rows on flat sites. They do not easily turn corners, enclose spaces or adapt to level changes. This makes it difficult for designers to make the best of a site.

More imaginative house types could introduce greater variety. For example, spaces could be fitted together and enclosed with terraces or outbuildings. Some house types could even be detached in generous gardens while others could be more modest yet grouped together to make a lively street scene. Additionally, certain houses could be tall to create a landmark while some may be hidden away behind walls

and gates. Unrelieved use of a few standard house types cannot achieve the variety that is an essential aspect of well designed housing. Developers are cautious about the risks in using many different house types but some have shown that attractive and cost effective schemes can be achieved by using variants on standard designs. Indeed some volume house builders in Great Britain are now turning away from their standard pattern books.

Good detailing and materials are important, but they will not turn bad spaces into good ones. The way in which the layout and massing of development fits the site is the key to good quality development.



A well-mannered street of houses shows respect for tradition, and the houses achieve quality without high costs or superficial decoration. This sympathetic development is a sensitive contribution to Carnlough (Herbert Street) although it could have been improved with better detailing of boundaries and retaining walls.



Achieving sustainable development is also part of good design. Sustainability is an holistic concept, in which the benefits to be gained through development must be considered against potential negative impacts.

Sustainability requires designers to identify opportunities for new housing to bring with it some environmental benefits. These will certainly include incentives for people to walk and cycle or catch a bus rather than using their car. It may encourage greater energy efficiency in house design, orientation for solar gain or more

use of recycled materials. In cases where development inevitably involves some habitat loss, this could be offset by providing greater habitat improvements nearby. There is no standard solution or checklist. Each site will present its own opportunities.

Public open space is one of the key elements of good housing layout. Well designed open spaces are the easiest way to create variety and contrasts, and they provide a visual structure for the layout. With proper maintenance arrangements, they can also be a valuable resource for passive recreation and children's

informal play, as well as creating wildlife corridors and contributing to habitat conservation.

Housing layouts in Northern Ireland have not provided either the quantity or the quality of open space that is commonly seen in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. New policy guidance will seek to remedy this shortfall, but the introduction of new standards is only the first step towards a significant improvement in the setting of our new homes. Designers and developers will need to respond with a more positive attitude to the environmental and commercial benefits of better open space.

## Landscaping



Existing trees are vulnerable in private land. Mature trees were felled at a site in Dunadry (above). Better to incorporate them into public space, as in the example at Fort Green, Antrim (below).



We provide the highest quality planting to attract industrialists (Antrim Business Park above). Should we not expect the same quality in our home environment?

There will be a general presumption that existing trees and hedgerows, and other natural features, will be incorporated into the layout concept as part of the strategic open space and planting that forms the structure of the design. Wherever possible, these features should be in public ownership and related to footpaths, cycleways and open space areas. Incorporating mature planting into public areas is the most effective way of counteracting the inevitable bareness of the early years of a housing development. When mature trees and hedgerows are left in private hands it is too easy for them to be cut down and destroyed to

make way for inappropriate non-native species.

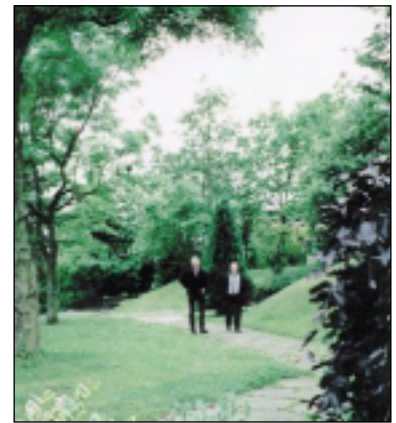
New planting schemes should be used to reinforce existing vegetation. By selecting native plants, the landscaping in housing areas can create a much richer and more diverse habitat than exists on farmed land, encouraging a healthier wildlife community.

Designing open space as an integral part of every housing scheme contributes to creating a sustainable, attractive and varied environment. It has both recreational and social value, and helps to establish a sense

of identity. Too often planting is only a token gesture, scattering a few trees in front gardens or adding banks of ornamental planting to the site entrance. This is superficial with little thought given to how planting can reinforce the spatial structure of the layout or how it will be used and how it will be cared for. The Quality Initiative approach to housing design means that developers and designers will need to use open space, hard landscaping and planting ideas to shape their development concept.



Well-designed planting and hard landscaping forms a structure which individual gardeners can develop with their own ideas. In our climate, the right plants can quickly give new housing a sense of mature quality.



New layouts will be expected to make greater use of planting, especially in public areas, to create a network of visually and physically connected spaces of varying scale, enclosure and detailed character. Planting schemes, boundary treatment and hard landscaping in larger housing developments can all be used to reinforce a sense of place by 'theming' particular streets or focal points within the layout.

Of course, landscaping needs to be maintained. Layouts need to ensure that there are no awkward and useless spaces that will be neglected. This affects details such

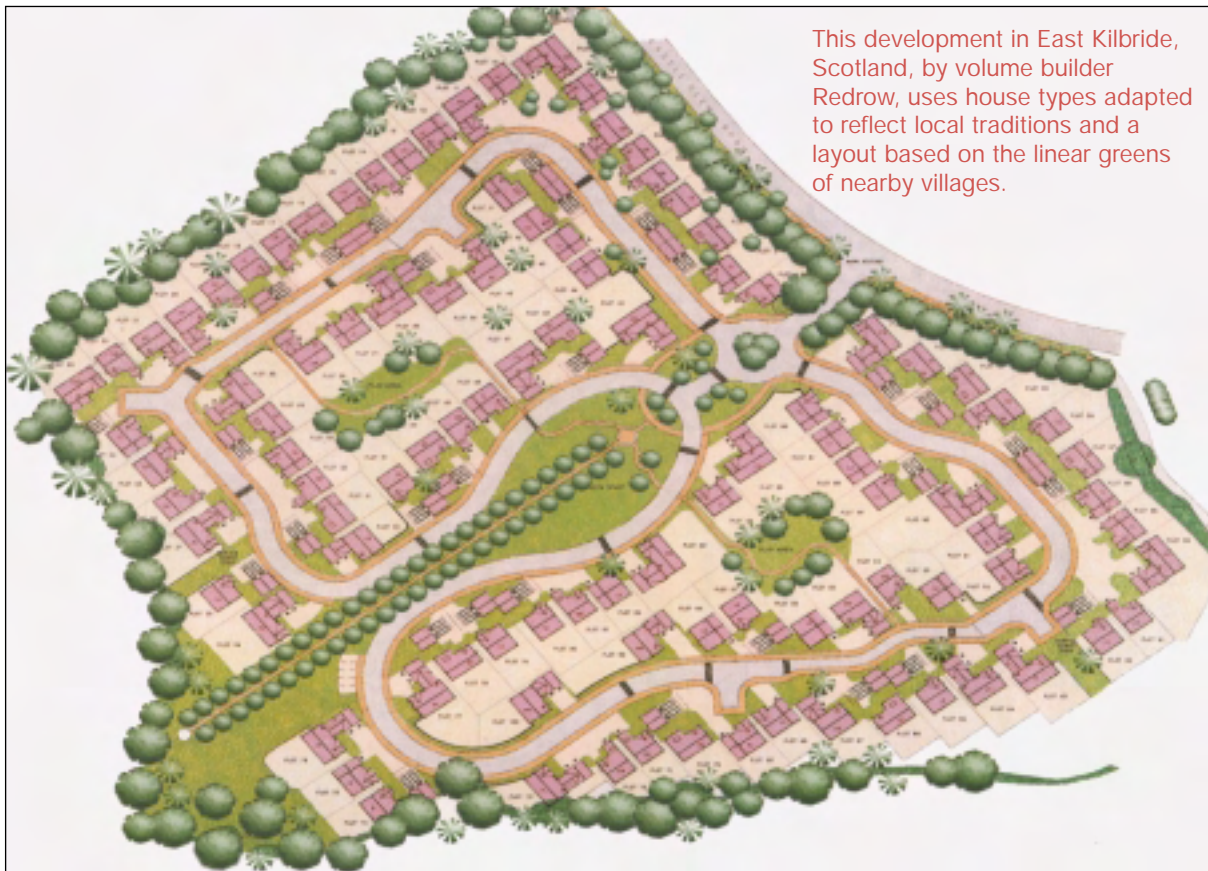
as house types on corner plots that need to have windows that overlook side gardens.

Public areas should be maintained by a local authority or an alternative reliable management company. Councils can play a significant role in encouraging better design by taking a positive view of the environmental benefits of open space. Developers will be expected to make suitable effective management arrangements for all schemes. In some cases these will involve regular charges to house owners. These issues should be resolved before planning applications are approved.

Developers, planners, designers and roads engineers are broadly pursuing the same goal, so why is it so difficult to achieve good design? In the past there have been three main obstacles:

- the developers' reliance on a limited range of house types laid out in repetitive rows;
- road layouts that are considered separately from the rest of the design process and governed by a rigid interpretation of road standards; and
- a planning appraisal process that relies on dimensional planning standards without a clear overall design concept.





Developers are understandably preoccupied with investment viability, minimising financial risks and maximising potential sales. Despite the popular belief that development is an easy way to make big profits, reality suggests that it is also easy to lose money. Financial issues therefore dominate the brief to the designer. Planning and roads concerns are seen as technical requirements that must be met within the financial parameters.

House types are often seen as an important design issue. Most developers rely on a range of standard designs which provide cost

effective living spaces and comply with the required construction standards. Changes to a developer's range are usually evolutionary rather than radical. For example, a new house type may be introduced or the elevations revised to create a new image but there is little change in the house shapes that form the layout.

Economies of scale and the work force's familiarity with the product are factors in this standardisation but the most significant reason for using standard house types is their role in helping to control the cost of development. Developers have no effective alternative means of

monitoring actual spending against their budget for the project. It is possible to encourage greater variety of treatment within standard ranges but it is unrealistic to expect bespoke designs for each site. The standard types are designed to meet the purchasers' space requirements within a building footprint which minimises construction costs and land take. They also maximise the development value and therefore the land value, an essential aspect of layout design in a competitive land market.



## House types

House types can respond to local identity. To the left, house types on the Redrow scheme in East Kilbride. Below, a new design in Omagh by Andrew Coulter.



Reflecting local identity will often be easiest to achieve in the forms of the spaces, the boundary treatments and the choice of materials for a new development. Housing in Northern Ireland is generally more spacious than in England where narrow fronted houses with integral garages make it difficult to recreate the shapes of traditional building forms which have short spans and steep roof pitches. Developers in Northern Ireland are beginning to show that they can create new house types that reflect traditional character, without resorting to pastiche.

Developers confirm that most buyers prefer to be in a development of

similar properties occupied by people similar to themselves. The majority of sites are assessed as suitable for a sector of the market rather than a wide mix. This approach is mainly a response to the location. Market appeal is dominated by location and price, with other factors having little influence on the decision to buy. The target market will constrain the mix of house types and styles in the brief to the designer and this poses particular problems in seeking to re-create the complexity and variety of the traditional street scene or in promoting mixed use developments. Market-led designs tend to encourage uniformity and many are dominated by four bedroomed

detached and three bedroomed semi-detached houses.

On some urban redevelopment sites, developers have replaced their suburban house types with higher density schemes that follow the principles of good urban design which have found a ready market. There may be opportunities to introduce some of these higher density elements into suburban schemes in order to create focal points. Over simple or prescriptive planning requirements that define site capacity only in terms of dwelling numbers will prevent developers from exploring these design opportunities.



Dominant road layouts and repetitive house types, no matter how well they are built, will not provide house buyers with a choice of attractive homes in well landscaped settings, such as the example above from Hertfordshire.

Typical standard house type ranges do not provide enough design flexibility to meet urban design objectives. With its emphasis on creating places and spaces, good urban design needs house types that turn corners and define or enclose spaces, and it needs the opportunity to link buildings into terraces that define a street form or a focal point within the development. These are basic elements that enable the designer to provide contrasts and interest within the layout. It is possible to produce variants of standard types that will assist good design, without the developer losing the benefits of established house types.

Evidence from recent schemes in England suggests a strong positive response from house buyers when they are offered developments with a wide mix of plan forms and elevational treatments, arranged around varied streets, squares and greens. Consumers in Northern Ireland have not yet been offered this choice.

The application and interpretation of road standards has been, on occasions, a difficult problem. It is a major factor in the developers' approach to layout because of the importance of ensuring that the roads are adopted as public highways. Mortgage companies

will not release all of the purchase money without adoption and developers will suffer a financial penalty.

Developers must meet the Roads Service requirements, and up to now the approach has been to simply follow standard road types and dimensions. Road standards were always intended to offer flexible guidance but practice has tended towards rigid conformity.





## Road Standards

Examples of 20 mph roads in new estates in Holland. Reduced speeds allow designers to create much more intimate and attractive places.



The same problem has been encountered with highway standards throughout Great Britain. Recent advice on good practice in 'Places, Streets and Movement' (by Alan Baxter Associates for the DETR) shows that some schemes have achieved more sensitivity to site and context and that standards have been applied with flexibility in individual developments. But these result from the rare occasions when both designer and roads engineer have seen the benefit of a co-operative approach.

In many cases throughout the UK there has been no incentive for imagination. Engineers have

preferred the comfort of layouts which comply with published standards, and the developers' need for a quick approval favoured uncontroversial proposals which followed the standards. Imaginative road layouts must not be allowed to result in delay or increased costs for the developer.

Layouts up to now have been dominated by a preoccupation with the car rather than creating attractive spaces and road form considered before space. There is clearly a need for housing areas to be safe places for children, pedestrians and cyclists but the application of a highways engineering approach to layout

design has posed a major obstacle in the way of more imaginative and sensitive solutions.

The responsibility for applying road standards lies with the road engineers. Much of their training relates to engineering principles based on ensuring the safe, free-flowing movement of traffic. These principles are largely mathematical and lead to absolute answers, rather than encouraging engineers to explore the potential of their judgement and creativity.



Effective traffic calming is an integral part of designing interesting and varied spaces within a layout. If designers rely on one or two standard calming devices they will emphasise the uniformity of suburban spaces.



Assessing the urban design qualities of a layout has not previously been the role of the engineer and often the roads adoption process has been based on technical and dimensional requirements without a design quality appraisal.

The quality objective is to make housing layout design a process in which road design is an integral part but not the over-riding consideration. To this end, the Department will no longer consider preliminary road

layouts separately from other aspects of housing proposals. Roads and planning professionals will jointly examine schemes and support each other in pursuing the aims of the Quality Initiative. Through this joint approach they can exercise sound judgement, satisfying reasonable tests of safety but also considering innovative design features, including non-standard ideas that are central to the design concept and contribute to the quality of the scheme.

The planning system has evolved some basic 'rules' that are used to assess proposed layouts. These planning standards generally relate to space around the dwelling, such as garden sizes and privacy distances. New standards in Northern Ireland will establish requirements for the provision of play spaces and other forms of open space within private housing schemes, although these have been commonplace in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland for many years.

## Planning Standards

may have moderated the worst designs, but have not encouraged others to match the high quality of The Steadings at Drumbeg.



Planning standards are usually expressed as minimum requirements and most of them concentrate on suburban estate developments. There is always a risk that they will become the basis of housing layouts. Designers anticipate the application of planning standards and design to them. 'Development controllers' often begin their assessment of proposals with this technical process rather than considering the merit of the overall concept. Even standards that are intended to be flexible guidelines, allowing designers to respond to the best solution for each particular parcel of land, may become unquestioned rules that pre-determine the layout, especially

when combined with the constraints of dimensional road standards. All developers face competitive pressure to maximise development values. When preparing schemes to assess project viability and land values, no developer or designer can exceed minimum space standards without giving a commercial advantage to competitors. Any attempt to drop below minimum standards incurs a risk of delay or refusal, even if the variation is seeking valid design objectives such as higher urban density or reflecting traditional rural character. The developers' need for speed and certainty leads to designs that are based on safe standard solutions.

Planning standards are vigorously defended when the planning system is focused on stopping schemes that are of such a poor standard they should be refused. They are less relevant when the emphasis of the system is to approve only those proposals that provide quality and sustainable housing environments of which we can all be proud.

Although planning standards might reasonably claim to have prevented the worst excesses of development, they have failed to stimulate good design.

The designers of these apartments at Eglinton achieved appropriate scale and detailing to form a robust edge to the street scene. The simple proportions of the brick houses at Fortwilliam, Belfast (below), also respond to their setting.



They encourage the planning process to judge schemes in a mechanistic two dimensional way, rather than the more difficult task of visualising urban design qualities.

There is comfort and certainty in relying on minimum dimensions. For planners, engineers and politicians, just as much as developers and their designers, they offer speed, simplicity and absolution from responsibility. But these standards remove the incentive for creativity and imagination. They result in uniformity, which is the planners' main criticism of new housing layouts. They encourage

layouts which meet the minimum requirements but which lack design concepts, and fail to achieve the complexity and diversity of design solutions that are needed to respond to local character and site specific conditions.

It is unlikely that changes to dimensional standards would improve the quality of layout design. Different standards would result in different standard solutions but the fundamental problem remains that it is not possible to quantify and measure design quality against such standard rules. Standards can not stimulate or promote good design.

Dimensional standards, however we choose to set them, provide a bottom line below which a design is unacceptable.

Improving the quality of housing development requires that we should devise a way of setting a bold and ambitious target, aiming for a high level of achievement. Even if designers are only partially successful, the overall quality of the housing layout will have climbed above the base level set by conventional standards.





Much effort has gone into building high quality well-designed houses and spaces in this scheme at Bushmills, but it misses opportunities to give residents views over the River Bush and the open fields beyond. Design concepts should always try to make the most of every advantage that a site offers.



Planning standards have been useful in helping to define the lowest level of acceptability, but we need to allow much greater freedom to vary standards for such things as garden sizes and privacy distances, in the interests of creating more complex, varied and attractive spaces. With that freedom must come responsibility. Developers must demonstrate that they can use this opportunity to create more attractive places to live, resisting the temptation to over-develop their land in order to increase values. High quality designs will encourage a more flexible planning approach.

It is through the introduction of concept statements that developers will be able to demonstrate depth of design thought and show how their proposals will meet quality objectives, and thus enable them to justify proposed variations on normal standards.

Variations must always relate to the overall design concept. That in turn stems from the nature of the land, its natural features and existing planting and the characteristics of the surrounding area. Therefore the exercise of judgement and flexibility in one scheme can never be taken as

a precedent for a similar approach elsewhere. The variables of site conditions and design concept will always demand individual solutions.



## Land values

The Housing Executive has led the way in demonstrating how new housing can respect the character of traditional rural settlements. Simple, cost effective designs and strategic planting achieves qualities that are lacking in some layouts.



Land owners' expectations of value are normally based on recent transactions in the locality. They may be adjusted to take account of any known physical constraints, but they are likely to assume that the character and density of future development will be similar to past developments. Value expectations are usually established before quality objectives have been discussed with the Planning Service and therefore may fail to allow for the costs of delivering higher quality layouts. Yet it is land value that must resource better quality, not the developer's profits or the home buyer's pocket.

When land is sold by competitive tender, the process demands that developers maximise the value of the houses and minimise costs in order to be able to bid the highest possible residual land value. By this process the landowner gains the maximum benefit from the planning system but achieves it at the expense of design quality. Not all developers consider quality before buying land. Some choose to ignore quality objectives and then argue that the high land price does not allow for good design. The planning system will have no sympathy with this line of argument. The Planning Service is promoting

widespread awareness of the elements of good housing design, and the general introduction of concept statements will enable all developers to make proper provision for meeting the requirements of the Quality Initiative.

Negotiations about the purchase price of development land allow for abnormal costs to be discounted from the notional land value. 'Abnormals' usually cover the cost of infrastructure provision or the requirements of a planning agreement. In the past much of the design happened after the land value was fixed.

Low cost housing at Braithwaite, near Keswick, shows how new development can follow tradition without resorting to pastiche. Careful use of natural and recycled materials helps the scheme to fit into its Lakeland surroundings.



Any aspect of quality with cost implications introduced at that stage would have to be funded from the developers' profits. Many people think that developers make easy money, but the profit margin on a house is often less than 10 percent. By contrast, granting outline planning permission will commonly increase the value of landowner's asset by more than 10,000 percent. Outline planning permission may establish land value expectations that are too high and too rigid, and do not allow sufficient scope to achieve quality and design objectives which emerge between outline permission and the

reserved matters application. The introduction of a 'concept statement' provides a simple mechanism for defining quality objectives before the land value is established. Concept statements can ensure that any cost implications are understood and accepted by landowners.

Land zoning merely confirms that a site is suitable for housing. It is often thought of as a 'blanket' land use approval, in other words the land satisfies technical requirements and any housing development will be acceptable in principle. The Quality Initiative should have tempered that

perception. As the Minister said in the speech that introduced the Quality Initiative "the scheme is as important as the site". Good design will not make housing acceptable on land that is fundamentally unsuitable, but equally, housing on zoned land will be acceptable only if it meets the objectives of the Quality Initiative.

Delays in the planning process add costs for both developers and the Planning Service. Many of these delays can be avoided if detailed layout applications comply with a concept statement that has been agreed by the Planning Service.

## The Design Process



Imaginative private housing at Strangford and Portaferry uses a mixture of house types and apartments to create an attractive new edge to the waterfront.



In the past, land allocation has rarely specified the appropriate quality of the development, and planning policies have lacked the site specific clarity needed to impact on land value calculations.

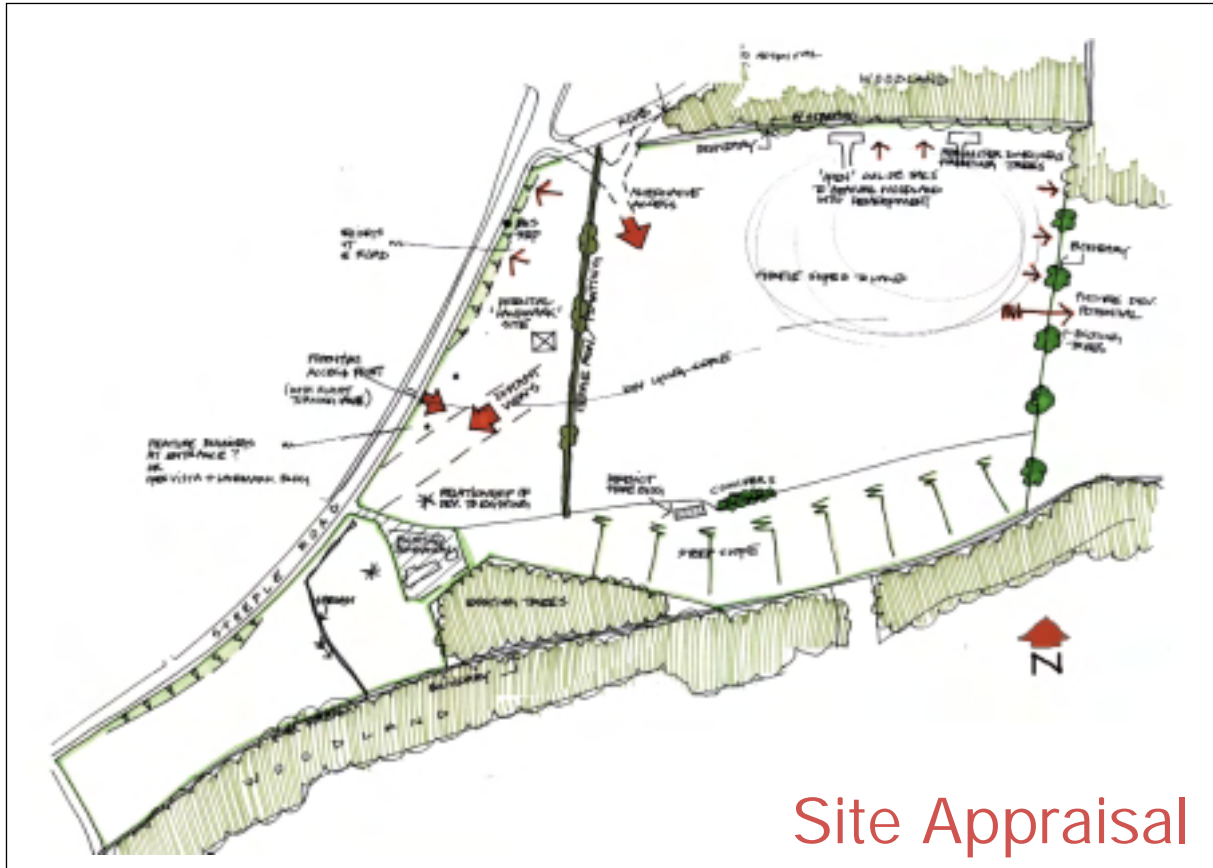
Master-plans, design or development briefs, stronger design policies in plans, and design guides can all help to address the land value problem by establishing early design parameters for identified housing land and potential development sites.

Ideally, people who are selling development land should provide

sales details that take account of quality objectives. It is acknowledged that good development briefs are the most comprehensive way of establishing design objectives before land values are fixed. To help achieve quality objectives, briefs should emphasise creative opportunities and options and seek to liberate imaginative design skills.

Landowners, or developers who have an interest in the land, may choose to fund the process and appoint suitable designers to prepare a brief. The Planning and Roads Services will offer advice and participate in their preparation where possible.

There are no mechanisms established as yet for developers, planners and road engineers to work together on brief production. Nevertheless, the ingredients of good design need to be agreed between all participants. The detail and complexity of the brief will vary with the size and context of the site, but the underlying approach should be consistent. Briefs and master-plans are only appropriate or necessary for larger developments (the definition of 'larger' depends on the particular local context). Where large sites are to be subdivided between developers there is particular need for an agreed overall design.



For most sites, a 'concept statement' will be the starting point of the design process, setting out quality objectives for the development. It can establish a more cooperative approach to design, more effective dialogue at the beginning of the design process, and ensure that all design considerations are included in the developer's site evaluation.

The preparation of concept statements depend on designers capable of visualising spaces in three dimensions and who can combine good conceptual skills with a practical understanding of housing layouts. This early stage of the

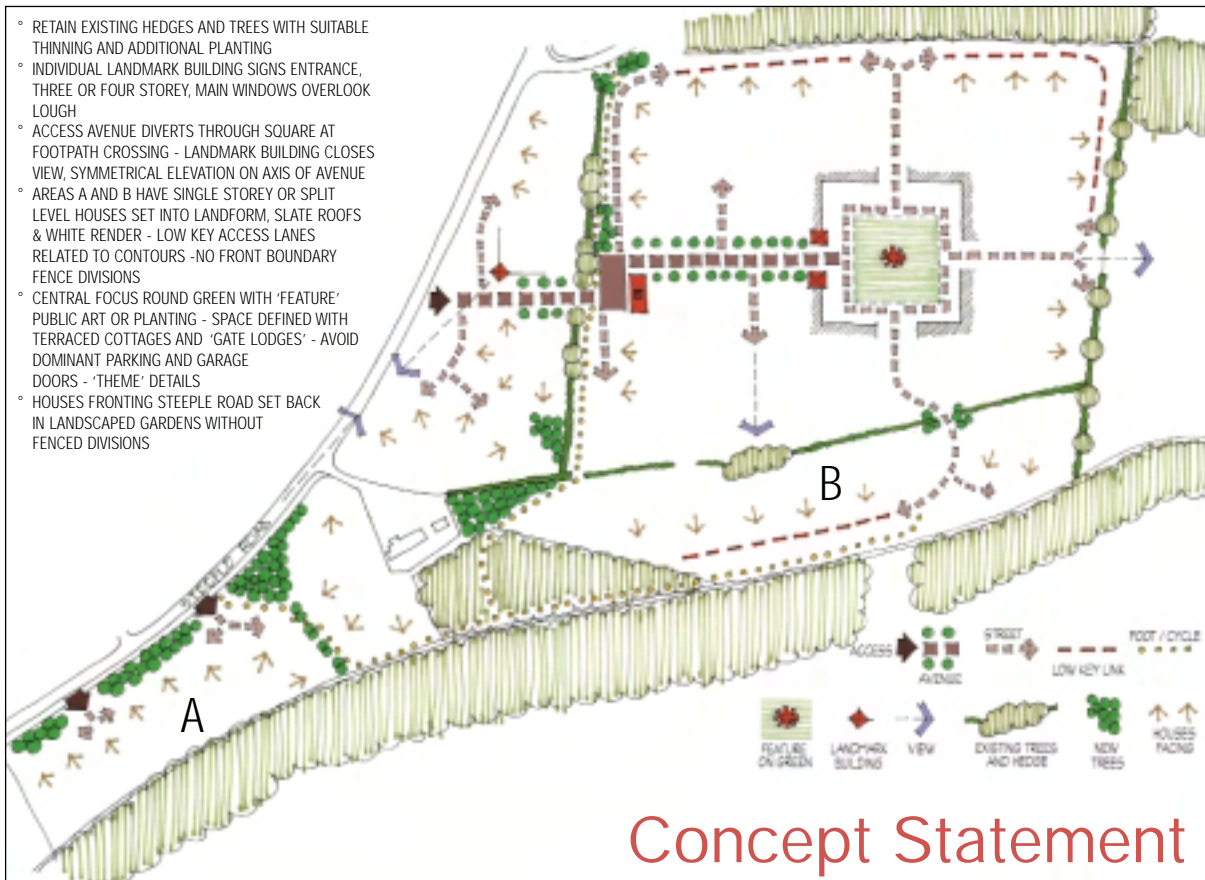
design process should also draw on landscape skills to make the best use of existing planting and to contribute ideas to the overall spatial form. Developers will need to appoint skilful designers who can work with planners and roads engineers towards shared solutions. The mutual understanding gained by this cooperation will result in proposals that can be processed and approved more quickly.

A typical concept statement will be a diagrammatic illustration of the potential to make the most of a site and its surroundings. It is therefore essential that the process begins

with a proper site appraisal, not with an emphasis on the collection of technical data. Rather it should contain an analysis of the opportunities to bring special elements of quality into the design, to use views, slopes and planting, to build on local identity or to respond to the surrounding context.

The concept statement should be concise, limited perhaps to one side of an A3 sheet with diagrams and bullet points. It should be imaginative, positive, ambitious and practical, to open up design opportunities. A concept statement should definitely not be a list of





## Concept Statement

dimensional standards. Any references to planning policies should show how good design principles and quality objectives should be interpreted for the specific site. The concept statement suggests the overall form of the housing layout and proposes elements that will provide a clear spatial structure leading to strong identity and legibility in the new housing. The concept statement is not the design solution. It is up to the designer to interpret and refine the concept, within the spirit of the overall quality objectives. Sometimes, in the process of preparing a detailed scheme, the

designer will find new opportunities to add to the quality of the layout. In other instances, constraints will be discovered which mean that the original concept must be adapted to take account of them. The system must be flexible enough to accommodate reasonable changes but robust enough to prevent other development pressures from eroding the quality.

The design process follows a logical sequence, from the site appraisal to the concept and then into the sketch design. It will be important for designers to maintain dialogue with the Planning and Roads Services by

discussing how their sketch proposals have developed from the concept, before drawing up a final scheme. Quality cannot be achieved by preparing a detailed scheme and then trying to draw up a concept statement to justify it.

Developers will be able to show how they have responded to the concept in a written statement supporting their planning application. Schemes that meet the Quality Initiative objectives should then proceed quickly to a planning permission.



To provide the best quality housing environment, it is necessary to understand each other's roles and responsibilities. Housing layouts must balance everyone's objectives and cannot succeed through a biased partial response. In the past, we have not communicated effectively, shared our experiences or tried to accommodate each other's needs. Good design comes from achieving a balanced response to all of the factors influencing a housing scheme, but we have looked at development only from our own perspective.

Developers, planners and engineers  
have up until now focused on their

own concerns and have been satisfied with schemes that meet their own ends, without going beyond that to seek a shared solution. Developers have concentrated on the value of the land and the commercial viability of their investment. The importance of this aspect of development cannot be ignored. It is largely through the significant investment risks of development companies that plans are realised. However commercial considerations, that should run in parallel with quality and sustainability objectives, have been allowed to dominate the developers' thinking, often to the exclusion of other matters. The developer's site

appraisal has been used to fix the market sector but rarely to shape the development itself. Developers must now take a broader view of their activities and of potential demand for more variety in the new house products that are offered to their customers.

Planners and urban designers have looked at the role of the development in its context. They consider how it can be integrated with the wider built environment and with footpaths, cycleways and the public transport network. They identify the appropriate response to local distinctiveness and character, often drawing on traditional building forms,



Even in new housing it is possible to recreate the diverse and interesting spaces of a traditional housing environment. (Illustrative design by Arcus).

materials, colours and textures to guide new development. Sometimes an ideal response which sustains the local sense of place will need to be adapted to suit modern living, for example, in providing for the car or using readily available materials. Planners are more likely to value site characteristics, seeking to retain existing features and planting, which so often seem to be in the most awkward position from the developer's viewpoint. However, planners need to understand enough about development finance to ensure that their ideas are commercially realistic.

Road engineers have in the past approached development thinking of road safety and road maintenance liabilities. This is understandable as it is the road engineer who has the experience of statutory liabilities, residents' complaints and the growing tendency to use litigation. This could lead to a feeling of being outside the creative process. Yet imaginative road design has a key role in creating the quality of housing that we seek. It is important for road engineers and planners to review layouts together as a team and the Departments have now introduced this as standard procedure. This is

one example of the new approach to delivering quality.

Over the last twenty years we have gained much knowledge of how to introduce effective traffic calming into housing road layouts. Slow traffic is safer traffic. Within housing areas, road design that restricts drivers to speeds of 20 mph or less should be a primary consideration. We now understand that traffic calming does not need to rely on unsightly physical devices that are visually dominant.

Traditional images for family houses in Eglinton and Edenderry, or a modern interpretation of tradition in housing for older people in Newcastle. Either design approach can meet Quality Initiative objectives.



Safety will always be the first consideration, but giving undue weight to measures to facilitate vehicle movement can encourage faster driving and may therefore be incompatible with the objective of creating a safe environment for pedestrians and cyclists.

The introduction of 'Creating Places' with revised standards for residential roads offers an opportunity for

planners and road engineers to exercise greater flexibility and professional judgement in supporting high quality housing layouts. That judgement will be based on an overall view of the layout, the design concept and its execution in detail, and its response to the particular circumstances of each individual site. No two pieces of land are identical and therefore an acceptable innovation on one layout may not

necessarily be appropriate in another. Developers cannot pick and choose ideas at random, but planners and roads engineers will rely on developers and their designers to use the new flexibility to push forward the boundaries of good design and grasp this opportunity to create more attractive, imaginative and safe housing environments.



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## Notes



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