

From: Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Economic Development
Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment & Transport

To: Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee – 12 November 2020

Subject: **Design in Kent’s Built Environment**

Classification: Unrestricted

Electoral divisions: All

Past Pathway of Paper: N/A

Future Pathway of Paper: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee (GEDCCC) – 17 November 2020

Summary: This paper updates Cabinet Committee on activity to raise the quality of design in Kent’s built environment. The paper also addresses how this activity responds to the Government’s proposed planning reforms in relation to design.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to endorse the current approach and timetable to raising the quality of design in Kent’s built environment.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The current Kent Design Guide was published in 2005, and has been used by developers, architects, Local Planning Authorities, and other construction sector professionals to assist the development process. It is a printed document, which now requires updating to reflect changes in planning and design standards.
- 1.2 A refreshed Kent Design Guide in digital format is in development. It will take account of the increased emphasis on design and beauty in the proposed planning reforms outlined in “Planning for the Future” White Paper¹. It is worth noting, however, that the White Paper ‘suggests’, but currently lacks significant detail on how local determination of design codes would work in practice or how local communities will be meaningfully engaged.
- 1.3 The refreshed guide aims to ensure there is a County level framework for design quality in building development. This framework directly follows the ten characteristics of well-designed places outlined in the National Design Guide published by MHCLG.

2. “Planning for the Future” White Paper

- 2.1 KCC has responded to the proposed planning reforms outlined in the “Planning for the Future” White Paper, and draws attention to three key themes that feature consistently in its response that are all vital components

¹ Planning for the Future” White Paper; MHCLG August 2020

to get right in any major overhaul of the planning system:

1. Taking an Infrastructure First approach to growth
 2. Working to a Net Zero carbon emissions future, and
 3. Empowering local communities
- 2.2 The proposed reforms include a substantial emphasis on design in the built environment, but with more focus on ‘beauty’ and aesthetics than placemaking, and with what also appears to be a reduction in opportunities for the local community to engage in the planning process. These concerns have been raised by KCC in its response.
- 2.3 There are three pillars to the “Planning for the Future” White Paper. Whilst the focus of design is primarily set out in Pillar Two, implications of the design reforms are inherent in all three of the pillars, as follows:

Pillar One (Planning for Development)

The White Paper’s proposals include simplifying land use plans by way of land categorisation into three broad groups: ‘Growth’ areas for substantial development; ‘Renewal’ areas suitable for development; and ‘Protected’ areas. The use of design codes is proposed as an integral part of this reform.

Pillar Two (Planning for Beautiful and Sustainable Places)

The White Paper promotes a focus on “beauty” in planning and growth, with a proposal to fast track applications that meet high quality design standards.

Pillar Three (Planning for Infrastructure and Connected Places)

Complete reform of the current developer contribution mechanisms is proposed, with mandatory nationally set rates as part of an infrastructure levy.

- 2.4 The Government’s ambitions set out in these planning reforms are to “bring a new focus on design and sustainability.” However, these ambitions are quite high-level and currently lack detail, so it is not clear how they would work in practice. KCC recently outlined key elements of the proposed reforms to Cabinet on 12th October² before responding formally to the White Paper.

3. Pillar Two – “Planning for beautiful and sustainable places”

- 3.1 Pillar two of the White Paper outlines how the planning system will be used to “actively encourage sustainable, beautiful, safe and useful development”.
- 3.2 The introduction of the notion of “beauty” in the planning system follows conclusions drawn by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission³ published at the start of this year. One significant challenge this pillar presents is how to define what constitutes beauty and how to engage local communities in this effort. High quality design is much more than aesthetics: ‘placemaking’ must be the focus because it is inclusive of everything that makes a well-designed place.

² Cabinet Paper 12th October 2020 - “Planning for the Future” White Paper

³ “Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission” January 2020

- 3.3 The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has published the National Design Guide in October 2019. A National Model Design Code to supplement this Guide is expected later this Autumn.
- 3.4 Whilst KCC has supported in principle the focus on design in the White Paper, we have raised a range of questions on how this will work in practice

4. Kent Design Guide

- 4.1 KCC organised two workshops in 2018 with a range of partners involved in planning and building. The workshops considered the question of how the county's public and private sector could deliver higher design quality more consistently, particularly in housing development.
- 4.2 Collectively, local authorities, developers, housebuilders, agents, consultants, and statutory consultees concluded that there are several ways to achieve meaningful design guidance for Kent's built environment. Four specific suggestions were made:
- (i) Define clear, consistent expectations for design quality to set a benchmark for the county and a kitemark for new developments.
 - (ii) Develop county wide design guidance.
 - (iii) Planning authorities should proactively promote the design guide's principles.
 - (iv) Engage the public.
- 4.3 The revised Kent Design Guide seeks to address the first and second of these suggestions. Feedback from the workshops, whose attendees included developers, architects, Local Planning Authority and highways infrastructure officers, and County and District Members, emphasised that a county wide design guide was only part of the solution to raising design quality. Other tools were also required such as design review panels and local design codes. It was acknowledged any new design guidance should focus on the technical aspects of design and be less concerned with the vernacular of design across different sub-regions of Kent, which should remain a matter for determination at a local level. The new guide responds directly to this feedback, ensuring it is fit for purpose without extraneous content that is better articulated at a more local level. The new guide's primary audience is developers, architects, planners, and highways infrastructure engineers, but it should also be a resource for all those with an interest in the design of the built environment.
- 4.4 The Kent Design Guide is also relevant to many aspects of Kent County Council's own activities. For example, it will be important for design quality to be considered in the Council's own schemes. The Guide should also consider preventative health measures that can be designed into new developments to respond to the public health agenda such as tackling obesity as well as possible future pandemics. The revised guide also aims to incorporate the ambitions of the Kent Environment Strategy and the Kent Energy and Low Emissions Strategy.

- 4.5 This approach ensures there is a County level framework for quality that is built on the ten characteristics of well-designed places outlined in the National Design Guide published by MHCLG: the National Guide allows for local determination of design codes with involvement from the community.
- 4.6 Kent’s revised guide complements guidance with local case studies that illustrate design good practice in Kent. For example, the characteristic “Movement and Connectivity” includes Kent’s revised parking standards.
- 4.7 At a high level only, the table below summarises how the refreshed Kent Guide can address the Government’s current design proposals within Pillar Two.

Planning Proposal	Kent Design Guide
Set clear expectations for the form of development which we expect to see in different locations.	Use website to set out visual expectations Use case studies from across Kent to illustrate how standards can be achieved Link directly to National Design Guide and any subsequent codes to ensure consistency across 10 key characteristics: Context Public spaces Identity Uses Built form Homes and buildings Movement Resources Nature Lifespan
A fast-track for beauty Where proposals come forward which comply with pre-established principles of what good design looks like (informed by community preferences), then it should be possible to expedite development through the planning process.	Kent Design Guide establishes principles of what good design looks like in Kent, alongside Districts, Boroughs and Kent communities Web based format ensures accessibility and able to reflect changes at both national and local levels
Planning system should play a proactive role in promoting environmental recovery and long-term sustainability	Set Kent specific standards for sustainable development to support delivery of net-zero carbon Ensure sustainable development (and reference to KES and ELES) runs throughout Kent Design Guide, linking across the 10 characteristics

- 4.8 The new guide will be entirely digital. Much of the new website has now been populated with content from a range of KCC services and external stakeholders including Kent Police and Kent Planning Officers Group representing the Districts’ and Boroughs’ Planning Authorities. This engagement will continue throughout the life of the Guide. Some of the imagery used is taken from shortlisted entrants and category winners of the

annual Kent Design and Development Awards. The flexibility of the website's design also allows new content to be uploaded and presented when required. This provides the opportunity to update the site once the new National Model Design Code is published, and reference other new national requirements.

- 4.9 A selection of screen shots from the new website will be shown at the ETCC meeting.

5. Timetable

- 5.1 This report to ETCC will also be considered at the next Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee (GEDCCC) meeting on 17 November.
- 5.2 Further engagement with Kent's planning authorities (the 12 Districts, Medway Council and Ebbsfleet Development Corporation), developers and other building sector professionals will then run in parallel with discussions with officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government responsible for planning and design. This should enable us to open access to the proposed Design Guide website to test public opinion early in the New Year.
- 5.3 It is anticipated that this will be followed by a formal public consultation after the local elections, with a view to adoption by Kent County Council and Medway Council by Summer 2021. Kent's other local Planning Authorities will be able to form their own view as to whether to adopt the Guide either wholly or in part.

6. Risks

- 6.1 The following risks have been identified:

Risk	Mitigation controls
Delay to provision of content	Majority of content for first release now received, and copywriter appointed to moderating all content. Project Manager has regular contact with colleagues with role in content production.
Content contributions do not align with new strategic priorities esp. regarding ELES and Natural Capital	Ensure there is read across in content that appropriately threads sustainability messages through content
Reaction of Districts to proposed design guide	LPA officers already engaged and contributing to production of design guide content through the Kent Planning Officers Group.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 The cost of developing the design guide web site, including design, development, and copywriting support, have been met by the Economic Development Division's core budget. It is estimated that this cost will be

approximately £55,000. A further £7,000 per annum is likely to be required for future web site support, development, and content production.

8. Recommendation

- 8.1 The Cabinet Committee is asked to endorse the current approach and timetable to raising the quality of design in Kent's built environment.

Contact details

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