

From: Derek Murphy, Cabinet Member for Economic Development
Simon Jones, Corporate Director for Growth, Environment & Transport

To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee 24 September 2021

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

Classification: Unrestricted

Electoral divisions: All

Past Pathway of Paper: Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee – 12 November 2020, Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee 17 November 2020

Future Pathway of Paper:

Summary: This paper updates Cabinet Committee on development progress of the refreshed Kent Design Guide and the next elements of activity to launch the guide.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet Committee is asked to endorse the current approach and timetable to deliver the Kent Design Guide.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 A refreshed Kent Design Guide in digital format is in development to replace the 2005 printed version. 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.¹
- 1.2 A Cabinet Committee paper was presented to GEDCCC on 17th November 2020 to advise on the wider aspects of Design in Kent's Built Environment² and the steps that were being taken to promote and progress the subject.
- 1.3 Government announced its intention to incorporate good design practice into National Planning Guidance in its August 2020 White Paper³, with a stated intention to promote a framework of design codes that Local Planning Authorities will be tasked to deliver. However, the programme has been significantly delayed and a copy of the Bill that has been promised to Parliament is still awaited.

¹ [National Design Guide – October 2019 – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government](#)

² [Design in Kent's Built Environment - Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee 17 November 2020](#)

³ [Planning for the Future" White Paper; MHCLG August 2020](#)

- 1.4 Much is still unknown about the scope and resource impact that these mandated design codes will have on Local Planning Authorities. The Kent Design Guide, which was in development before the Government's White Paper, means that the Kent Design Guide web site could sit as a useful repository to enable benchmarking of design codes in Kent, both from cross county design codes and those that relate more at a district level. It is certainly possible that the Kent Design Guide becomes the Kent Design Code in the fullness of time.
- 1.5 In practice, this would require the significant input of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), in particular to assemble detailed design codes for their neighbourhoods and / or for specific development sites in their districts. This is expected to be very resource intensive for LPAs, and potentially very costly unless Government is willing to provide funding support. It is also apparent that some Kent LPAs may be in a much better position than others in resource terms to develop design codes. Equally for KCC, there could be substantial resource implications and specialist advice required to adapt existing design guidance across service areas to become design codes. The emerging design guide does, however, represent a strong platform upon which design codes for the county and districts could be presented.

2. Kent Design Guide

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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. The suggestions made in these discussions have been incorporated into the draft guide.
- 2.3 The new guide is 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 as they come forward.

3. Soft testing

- 3.1 A two-week period of soft testing of the web site by KCC colleagues and some external stakeholders took place in early September 2021. This process invited general comments and observations about the web site, but also suggested feedback around the following:
 - Comments on how well, or otherwise, the web site can be navigated;

- The readability of the content – whether the subject matter is clear and easy to understand;
 - Assistance to identify any suitable quality images that could be included against areas of content on the web site
 - Any specific dislikes about the web site
- 3.2 The soft testing process was also an opportunity to test the site's rigour, with specific colleagues at KCC looking to 'break' the web site.
- 3.3 Officers are currently in the process of reviewing the comments received and making amendments to the web site where these are required.

4. Wider engagement

- 4.1 A process of wider and more formal engagement is proposed to take place for an 8-week period from 1 October to 30 November 2021. Direct engagement will be made predominantly with professionals working in the built environment such as planners and local government officers, developers, architects, construction engineers and local and parish councils. The engagement process will also be publicly available via KCC's web site.
- 4.2 Much like the soft testing process, the focus of the formal engagement is to receive feedback on an individual's experience of navigating and understanding the Kent Design Guide's content so that this can be considered and amended if required. This will ensure the Guide's use is maximised going forward. It is not about the specifics of the technical guidance that has been developed in the guide, for example on issues such as KCC's expectations on the design standards of street lighting or parking, or the technical standards expected for sustainable drainage. If this type of feedback is received, this will be relayed to the individual teams at KCC or the design guide's wider stakeholders to consider and to address separately.

5. Timetable

- 5.1 The aim is to have the web site publicly available and ready for use by Spring 2022. Once the engagement process concludes, responses will be collated, and work will get underway to further amend the web site early in the New Year.
- 5.2 Further engagement with Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee and Growth Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee is currently planned for the 17 March 2022 and 22 March 2022 meetings respectively. There is the opportunity also to reengage with the Kent Chief Executives' Group at an appropriate meeting, at which 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. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.1 A screening assessment has been undertaken and will be kept updated as the project progresses.

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. The cost of this to date has been approximately £60,000. A further £7,000 per annum is likely to be required for future web site support, development, and content production.

8. Data Protection Implications

- 8.1 There is no processing of personal data associated with this project.

9. Recommendation

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

10. Contact details

Report Author

Richard Kidd, Project Manager (Area Lead - Infrastructure), Growth, Environment and Transport
03000 414176
richard.kidd@kent.gov.uk

Relevant Director

Stephanie Holt-Castle, Director for Growth and Communities
03000 412064
stephanie.holt-castle@kent.gov.uk