“Context is the character and setting of the area within which a projected scheme will sit... A thorough appreciation of the overall site context is the starting point for designing a distinctive place.”

Urban Design Compendium 1 English Partnerships & The Housing Corporation
2.1 Good Design

2.1.1 Everything that is made is the product of having been through a process of design and the built environment is no exception. However, good design does not just happen by itself, it is the result of a creative process and involves not only good designers but a commitment from key decision makers to achieving it.

2.1.2 High quality places transcend subjective issues of personal taste, style or architectural fashion, with three fundamental principles at the core of design excellence:

- **Firmness**: Is it built to last, easily maintained and able to be adapted over time? Essentially, is it durable?

- **Functionality**: Is it useful, fit for purpose and easy to use? Will it contribute to a good quality of life? Essentially, does it work?

- **Delight**: Is it visually pleasing or even beautiful? Does it engender a sense of pride? Essentially, does it look good?

2.1.3 Ultimately, it is about creating buildings and places that are well built, will work well and that look good. Working on these principles of good design will help deliver successful places and balancing these objectives does not need to add expense to the project (Cabe, Evaluating Housing Proposals Step by Step, 2008). Achieving good design should be the aim of all those involved in delivering residential development.

This set of principles is not new but it can be applied to help everyone recognise a well-designed building or place. This should give us all the confidence to identify and understand the kinds of places that work well and that we want to create.

Applying the three principles, we will know that buildings and public spaces are well designed if:

- They are useful, built to last and easy to care for.
- You can find your way and move around easily, regardless of whether or not you are disabled, in a place in which you feel safe.
- They relate well to the place where they are built; this might mean fitting in quietly or creating new context and new landmarks, depending on circumstances.
- They are flexible and their use can change over time (examples being period terraced housing and mill buildings from the early industrial revolution).
- They are environmentally efficient and will help us all to live and work sustainably.
- The people who use them tell you that they help them to work more effectively and deliver services more efficiently.
- The people who live there tell you that their quality of life has improved, and they continue to say this over time.
- People tell you that they are proud of where they live because their building or place has real identity, character and beauty.

(Source: Cabe, Good design: the fundamentals, 2009)
2.2 The 21st Century House

2.2.1 What should we expect from our neighbourhoods and homes in the 21st century? What types of places should we be creating for people to live in?

2.2.2 The 21st century house is a concept that embodies what is reasonably expected from our new neighbourhoods and homes. They should be ‘fit for purpose’ in the way that they function, attractive and distinctive places that contribute positively to the character of the place and will stand the test of time.

2.2.3 The diagram outlines the key attributes of the ‘21st century house’. These qualities are fundamental to the design and development of successful places. They represent reasonable expectations for any new housing development and are all aspects of guidance contained within the National Planning Policy Framework (2012).

It is possible to design well in a variety of styles. The important thing is that 21st century society has the opportunity to contribute worthy additions to the accumulating pattern that makes up our towns and cities.

Good design: the fundamentals, Cabe, 2009

It is clear that we need to build more homes... But in the rush to do so, we need to think about what we are building.

It’s easy to think about housing numbers, percentages, bricks and mortar. But we should not forget that housing is fundamentally about people.

The Case for Space, RIBA, 2011

Delivering these expectations should be the aspiration of all those involved in the development process.
2.3 The Design Process

2.3.1 Part 02 of this SPD outlines a step by step approach to the design process that is founded on a clear appreciation of the site characteristics and its wider context. This should provide the basis for design-led decision-making and formulating the principles for the development of the site.

2.3.2 The applicants design team should include suitably qualified people with the right skills and experience to deliver a successful place. The range of professions and skills required should be appropriate to the scale and complexity issues raised by the proposal.

2.3.3 Where appropriate, different skills should be brought in to design particular aspects of a project e.g. urban designers for master planning, context appraisal and concept development, architects for building design and creative thinking, landscape architects for public realm design, engineers to advise on ground conditions, drainage and so on. Often the team will need to work collaboratively to create successful places.

2.3.4 The design process diagram (pages 22 - 23) outlines the recommended approach. This should form the basis of a ‘design agenda’ and discussion with the local planning authority when preparing proposals for a site.

2.3.5 The designers first duty must be to study the town, the site, the people and their requirements.

Patrick Geddes, Pioneering town planner

Useful Reference

Building in Context Toolkit
www.building-in-context/toolkit

Founded on the principle that all successful design solutions depend on a thorough site analysis and character appraisal of the context. Although intended as a tool for development proposals in historic settings the 8 key principles are equally applicable to any site.

Note: The following pages outline the recommended approach to the design process. This is based upon first developing a sound understanding of the place and using this to inform the subsequent development of the design.
2.4 Understanding the Place (Step 1)

2.4.1 This SPD sets out a framework to assist developers in demonstrating that they have followed a rational design process. In determining an application for planning permission, the Local Planning Authority will consider how the developer has incorporated the design objectives and the recommended design process into the evolution of the scheme.

2.4.2 The NPPF (2012) states that it is proper to seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness (para. 60) and that permission should be refused for development of poor quality that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions (para. 64). As such, it is essential developers/designers first look at and understand the place where they are proposing to build. Schemes designed without regard to context lack character, distinctiveness and could be ‘anywhere places’, devoid of identity or relevance to their location.

2.4.3 Many development proposals only consider the site in isolation from the place where they will be built. Without a good understanding of the place, its character and how it functions; proposals are more likely to be inward looking and less likely to make a positive contribution to the character and distinctiveness of the area.

2.4.4 Undertaking a context and site appraisal is the process of assessing the physical, environmental, economic and social characteristics of a place. This will involve considering the value and quality of the site, component elements and its surroundings, including areas of particular character, views, buildings, landscape or other features and how they contribute to the character of the place. These all require careful consideration in the design of any future development proposals.
Initial Work...

Site Location: Is it an appropriate location for the proposed use and scale of development?

Design Team: Put together a team with the appropriate design skills and experience to deliver the scheme. A range of professional skills may be required depending on the proposal.

Planning Policy: What are the relevant planning policies and how might they influence development of the site?

Constraints: Are there any major constraints that need to be identified at an early stage?

Community Needs: How have local needs or aspirations been considered and taken into account? (neighbourhood plans, local housing need in terms of accommodation and tenure mix etc)

Design and Access Statement: Start preparing this now - each stage should be recorded and communicated in your design statement.

Context Appraisal

Wider Setting: How would the proposals relate to the wider area in terms of landscape, topography, views, scale, pattern and character of development? Are these constraints that will influence the scheme?

Designations: Do any designations affect the setting? (Green Belt, Conservation Area, ecological designations e.g. SSSI, etc)

Access: Potential connections/approaches and access routes/points? (pedestrian, cycle and vehicular)

Facilities: What facilities are located nearby (shop/school/bus stop etc), how far are they/what are the likely routes?

Public Transport: Is public transport nearby? How far is it? Is it a good level of service or infrequent?

Settlement Character: What is the character of the built environment? (scale, pattern, grain, age, materials etc)

Landscape Character: What is the landscape character of the site and its surroundings? (views in/out, vegetation, edges etc)

Site Appraisal

Constraints: Identify constraints that might affect design/layout? (heritage assets, utilities, ground instability etc)

Amenity: Are there sensitive edges that require a careful response in terms of amenity? (existing/future occupants etc)

Designations: What designations affect the site directly? (ecological or heritage designations, TPO’s, etc)

Access: Are there existing/potential access points, RoW, desire lines or footpath links to surroundings?

Geography: How will the topography influence the scheme? (character, views, layout, drainage, energy etc)

Built Features: Determine the value of any existing structures, buildings or walls in terms of their contribution to character and local distinctiveness.

Natural Features: Determine the value of any natural features in terms of their potential contribution to site character and biodiversity (trees, hedges, water features, habitats, rock outcrops etc)

Evaluate Site Opportunities
Place Making Principles

**Evaluation:** Evaluate the information and issues identified through the context and site appraisal process and formulate the place making principles that will shape the form, layout and character of the development.

How has the appraisal influenced the approach to the development and shaped its character? Such as:

- Constraints, such as flood zones.
- Incorporation of positive features such as valuable landscape/built features.
- Respect locally distinctive buildings/traditions.
- Townscape, scale, built character, important views, routes to facilities etc.

**Role:** What role will the development play in terms of place making? Such as gateway/entrance, focal point, landmark, important corner, skyline, settlement edge, creation of frontage etc. N/B it may have more than one role.

**Place Making Principles:** Should be shaped by the context/site specific considerations. **ENSURE:**

- Active frontages.
- Amenity (light, privacy, storage etc).
- Parking/roads do not dominate.
- Features, materials, elevations, details appropriate to context/aesthetic.

Sustainability Principles

**Evaluation:** Evaluate the information and issues identified through the context and site appraisal process and formulate the principles that will contribute to the scheme’s sustainability.

How has the appraisal influenced the development and shaped the approach to sustainability? Such as:

- Proximity to local facilities/transport.
- Positive natural features.
- Meeting local housing needs (type/tenure).
- Links to green infrastructure and routes.
- Opportunities for low/zero carbon energy.
- Incorporate green/blue infrastructure/SUDS.

**Role:** What role will the development play in terms of sustainability? Such as a neighbourhood focus, biodiversity, habitat creation, energy efficiency, equity/affordable housing. N/B it may have more than one role.

**Sustainability Principles:** Should be shaped by the context/site considerations. **ENSURE:**

- Safer streets and spaces.
- Quality of life and well-being.
- Accessible to all users (not just vehicles).
- Character, local distinctiveness/identity, green/blue infrastructure, habitat, recreation.

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**Design Concept**

**Design Concept:** Use the appraisal process and site design principles to develop a ‘design concept’ to underpin the design approach to the scheme.

**Concept Diagram:** Initial design options should be expressed as a simple concept diagram or sketch to convey the key ideas about the proposal, illustrating the basic elements that will shape the scheme in terms of structure and character. (N/B this is not a detailed layout).

**Consider the Options:** Depending on the issues or scale of development it may be appropriate to draw up a number of options that consider the alternatives before reaching a preferred position.

**Reconcile Conflicts:** Where conflicts arise between issues, these should be explained and justified e.g. partial removal of a hedgerow required to create a direct link to local shops harms the hedgerow but has a positive benefit in terms of encouraging local journeys on foot.

**Initial Layouts/Design Work:** Should build upon the concept and site design principles.

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**Pre-application discussions:**

If you have not yet done so, it is at this stage you should approach the LPA for pre-application discussions - before proposals become too advanced and fixed. Supply draft materials.
### 2.5 Context Appraisal (Step 1)

2.5.1 To achieve development that is appropriate to its context first requires an examination and understanding of the wider area beyond the site boundary, as well as the site itself, by undertaking a context appraisal and site appraisal.

2.5.2 The appreciation of context, including historic context (where applicable) resulting from these appraisals should generate creative design ideas for the site, identify positive opportunities to help ‘ground’ the development to the place, as well as highlight constraints or issues for resolution at an early stage in the design process. Where available, local studies such as conservation character appraisals and landscape character assessments can be useful references to help inform this approach.

2.5.3 A summary of the key findings of the appraisals and evaluation should be evident in the Design and Access Statement. However, an appraisal is more than a simple description or photographic record of the surrounding area, but requires an **evaluation** and **explanation** of how they have informed and influenced the scheme. This is a critical stage, but one which is often overlooked.
2.5 Context Appraisal

Successful Places: Delivering Quality
2.6 Site Appraisal (Step 1)

2.6.1 The site appraisal should look in detail at the existing conditions and characteristics of the development site and how it relates to its immediate and wider surroundings.

2.6.2 A site appraisal diagram clearly illustrating the key site characteristics should be provided and used to inform the design.

2.6.3 Considerations and characteristics will vary between sites but are likely to include:

Key site considerations:
- Linkages to the wider area
- Existing entrances, desire lines and routes through the site
- Views into, across and out of the site
- Topography, levels, ground conditions and land instability
- Drainage issues and land liable to flood
- Heritage assets – listed buildings, conservation areas, archaeology as well as non-designated heritage assets
- Existing buildings and their potential for retention and incorporation into the scheme
- Landscape features - watercourses, trees, hedges and woodlands
- Potential ecology/wildlife habitats
- Orientation and micro-climate
- Orientation and views into/out of the site
- Boundary treatments and edge conditions
- Sensitive edges
- Amenity issues – light/privacy/noise/smell

Above: The site appraisal should examine and understand the assets and constraints of the site. A thorough understanding of the site will reveal key issues and determine the area of developable land once these have been taken into account.
2.7 Design Principles and Concept (Steps 2 & 3)

2.7.1 The site appraisal process provides an understanding of the site to inform the design process. This should establish design and sustainability principles around which the scheme will be developed e.g. key buildings and frontages, focal points, views in and out, main routes/connections etc.

2.7.2 Positive features should, wherever possible, be retained and incorporated into the scheme, to connect it to the place and strengthen its distinctiveness.

2.7.3 Initial design options should first be explored and expressed in the form of a simple concept diagram or sketch to convey the key ideas about the proposal, illustrating the elements that shape the form and layout of the scheme; N/B this is not a detailed layout.

2.7.4 It will often be appropriate to look at a range of potential development options and consider the alternatives, not just focus on the first idea. This may require reconciling conflicting issues. Where such conflicts occur this should be explained and justified as part of the Design and Access Statement.

2.7.5 This stage of the process is an appropriate point at which to approach the local planning authority to discuss the design approach, prior to the development of detailed layouts and plans.

2.7.6 Depending on the scale, nature and sensitivity of the proposal the developer may be advised to consult with the community before progressing to a more detailed design.

Above: The design concept diagram should underpin the scheme and establish the design parameters and principles that will shape and inform the design approach to the development.
2.8 Preparing Your Application

2.8.1 Design and Access Statements
To support the delivery of good design, Design and Access Statements (DAS) are now required to accompany most applications for development.

2.8.2 They must set out the design rationale behind an application, explain how it has responded to local context and how it addresses crime and disorder and the fear of crime. The information gathered through the context appraisal and site appraisal stages and the development of a design concept should all be incorporated within the DAS to demonstrate a reasoned approach to the development and how the scheme has evolved.

2.8.3 This tool is often underused or dealt with as an afterthought. Rather, the DAS represents an opportunity to present schemes positively and demonstrate that proposals are underpinned by a sound design concept based on an understanding of the place.

2.8.4 However, they are only as useful as the quality of information that goes into them. The inclusion of diagrams, annotated drawings, sketches, cross sections, maps, and photos to illustrate the proposals, will greatly increase the understanding of a scheme far better than pages of detailed text.

2.8.5 Where appropriate, the local planning authority will ‘fix’ important details or principles identified within the DAS to a planning permission, using conditions to ensure that any key elements are binding. It is therefore an important document and its preparation should begin at an early stage rather than written post-design to justify a pre-determined scheme.

2.8.6 The Development Team Approach
Where appropriate and feasible the local planning authority will adopt a development team approach for managing proposals for residential development. An appointed officer will coordinate with the appropriate departments and partners. This will draw on both the Council’s own in-house expertise but could also include external organisations such as the County Council, Environment Agency, English Heritage, Police Crime and Design Advisor, Natural England and others as appropriate.

2.8.7 The nature of the development team will be adjusted to reflect the scale, complexity or sensitivity of the proposal or other relevant issues.

2.8.8 Pre-application discussions
To assist in the planning application process developers are encouraged to discuss their proposals with the local planning authority at the pre-application stage. This will help identify any planning issues early on, so these can be addressed. Sufficient time should be allowed to enable any such issues to be resolved prior to the submission of a planning application.

2.8.9 The guidance in this document should be followed closely to ensure that sufficient consideration has been given to the context and the appropriateness of the scheme to a particular site before entering into discussions. At this preliminary stage, it would be unwise to have developed the design beyond concept diagrams.

2.8.10 The context and site appraisal work should form the basis of a dialogue with the local planning authority, to agree the issues to be addressed and establish the design principles by which the site should be developed. Subsequent design work should then be informed by the appraisals and agreed design principles.
2.9 Benchmarks and Review Processes

2.9.1 The design quality of proposals for residential development will be assessed using a number of methods. These may vary according to the nature of a particular development. However, the review processes will provide the benchmarks against which a scheme will be judged on design grounds. They will include:

2.9.2 Design Consultation: Where the service is available, the Urban Design Officer or equivalent, will be consulted on proposals for residential development and will provide a design consultation response. This will provide an opinion on the acceptability of the design aspects of the scheme. This may also be accompanied by, or in the form of a Building for Life 12 appraisal (see 2.9.7 below).

2.9.3 Regional Design Panel: Some schemes may be requested to be referred to the East Midlands Regional Design Panel, known as OPUN. Typically these may include large scale developments, or those of a strategic or particularly sensitive nature, although any scheme could potentially be referred if this is considered to be appropriate.

2.9.4 Applicants whose schemes are referred will normally be requested to attend a design meeting and to present their proposals to the review panel. The panel’s comments will be used to inform the progression and refinement of the scheme.

2.9.5 Schemes may be referred to OPUN at the pre-application stage and in many cases this will preferable before the design of a proposal becomes too advanced or fixed. There is normally a charge for this service.

2.9.6 Local Review: The partner authorities will engage in a local quality review process. This will involve referring selected proposals for residential development to an internal review group comprising of officers from each local planning authority. The group will undertake a design review of each case. This will also serve as a benchmarking process to assess how each Council is applying and using the Guide and to check for consistency of approach and allow for ideas and suggestions to be exchanged.

2.9.7 Building for Life 12 (BfL12): Is a national standard for well-designed homes and neighbourhoods and is about creating good places to live. Proposals are assessed against 12 questions under three headings:

- Integrating into the neighbourhood
- Creating a place
- Street and home

The 12 questions reflect a vision for what new housing developments should be; Attractive, functional, sustainable places.

2.8.11 In order to maximise the benefit of pre-application discussions, as part of the initial approach the developer will be expected to provide the following information:

A site appraisal plan: Identifying the location of the site within its wider setting, identifying existing areas of character, showing how it connects with and relates to adjoining parts of the settlement, character, local centres, transport, services, views, local geography etc - see 2.6;

A site analysis plan: Showing an understanding of the site characteristics [constraints and assets] - see 2.7; and

A concept sketch/diagram: To illustrate the abstract idea and communicate the key design principles by which the site is proposed to be developed - see 2.8.

(Note: this is not a detailed design layout at this stage).
Building for Life 12 questions

Integrating into the neighbourhood

1. Connections
Does the scheme integrate into its surroundings by reinforcing existing connections and creating new ones; whilst also respecting existing buildings and land uses along the boundaries of the development site?

2. Facilities and services
Does the development provide (or is it close to) community facilities, such as shops, schools, workplaces, parks, play areas, pubs or cafes?

3. Public transport
Does the scheme have good access to public transport to help reduce car dependency?

4. Meeting local housing requirements
Does the development have a mix of housing types and tenures that suit local requirements?
Creating a place

5. Character
Does the scheme create a place with a locally inspired or otherwise distinctive character?

6. Working with the site and its context
Does the scheme take advantage of existing topography, landscape features (including water courses), wildlife habitats, existing buildings, site orientation and micro-climates?

7. Creating well defined streets and spaces
Are buildings designed and positioned with landscaping to define and enhance streets and spaces and are buildings designed to turn street corners well?

8. Easy to find your way around
Is the scheme designed to make it easy to find your way round?

Street & Home

9 Streets for all
Are streets designed in a way that encourage low vehicle speeds and allow them to function as social spaces?

10 Car parking
Is resident and visitor parking sufficient and well integrated so that it does not dominate the street?

11 Public and private spaces
Will public and private spaces be clearly defined and designed to be attractive, well managed and safe?

12 External storage and amenity space
Is there adequate external storage space for bins and recycling as well as vehicles and cycles?