



Government National Model Design Code (February 2021) Members' briefing

Introduction

On 30 January 2021, the Government set out its response to the recommendations of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, making several announcements, some of which are subject to public consultation. The Government announced:

- **Revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** to place greater emphasis on good design and beauty in planning
- **A National Model Design Code**, with guidance notes and pilot schemes
- **The intention to create a new Office for Place**
- **22 areas to receive funding for 'local heritage listing'**
- **£4million for community-led housing**

The press release for the announcements is available [here](#).

The proposed revisions to the NPPF and the new draft National Model Design Code (NMDC) are subject to an 8 week consultation, closing on **27 March 2021**. You can view the documents and respond to the consultation here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-and-national-model-design-code-consultation-proposals>.

A summary of the key documents and proposed changes is provided below. Please note that we haven't summarised every change, just the key points, that we think are of interest to civic societies. Do refer to the consultation documents themselves for more information.

Civic Voice will be preparing a response to the consultation, with Civic Voice members. Please get in touch with us at info@civicvoice.org.uk to let us know what you think.

1. Revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

Various changes to the NPPF are proposed, not just on design, and a helpful tracked changed version of the document is available to [view](#).

Key proposed changes include:

- Making government planning policy on beauty, placemaking and environmental protection including references to addressing climate change, stronger.
- Expecting local authorities to produce design codes or guides with community involvement.
- Putting a greater emphasis on approving good design and refusing development that is 'not well designed'.
- Making it harder for local authorities to implement Article 4 Directions.
- Making changes to planning policy on managing flood risk, including new emphasis on 'all sources' of flooding and using 'green infrastructure' to reduce flooding. A new flood risk vulnerability classification is proposed (Annex 3).
- Expecting all 'new streets are tree-lined' to improve place quality and help address climate change.

2. New National Model Design Code (NMDC)

Introduction

The Government has published a draft National Model Design Code (NMDC) and is seeking views on the content. You can respond [here](#).

It is also seeking expressions of interest from local authorities keen to pilot design codes, with up to £50,000 funding each. The deadline to apply is 22 February 2021. More information here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-model-design-code-testing-programme-expressions-of-interest>

The NMDC is expected to be used by local authorities as a guide for developing their own local design codes and guides. The Government's ambition is for every area to have a design code in place. Local design codes will be expected to reflect local character and make clear the design standards for new developments. Emphasis is also placed on genuinely involving the local community in their development so that local residents have a say in the design of new developments.

Purpose of the National Model Design Code

The NMDC provides detailed guidance on how to produce design codes, guides and policies to promote successful design. It covers the process involved, the design themes/parameters to be considered and provides illustrated examples to show the level of detail expected.

Following on from the Planning White Paper, which proposed allocating areas or 'zones' through Local Plans with accompanying design codes, the NMDC sets out the Government's ambitions for what a design code or guide could look like and the process to be undertaken by local authorities. The document '*sets a baseline standard of quality and practice which local planning authorities are expected to take into account when developing local design codes and guides and when determining planning applications*' (Para. 11).

The NMDC forms part of a package of design policy and guidance, which collectively, set out the Government's design framework. The other documents are:

- **National Planning Policy Framework** (policy – proposed updates subject to consultation)
- **National Planning practice Guidance** (guidance)
- **National Design Guidance** (guidance – recently updated)
- **Manual for Streets** (guidance - due to be updated)
- 'Other forthcoming guidance relating to the natural and environmental characteristics of development'.

The document makes clear that the NMDC '*is not a statement of national policy, however, the Government recommends that the advice in this guidance on how to prepare design codes and guides is to be followed*' (Para. 6)

Content of Design Codes and Guides

The document does not prescribe what constitutes 'good design', recognising that this varies between areas depending on local character. The content of codes and guides should be

determined locally (Para.18). It does go further than the NPPF and National Design Guide, showing, practically, the design themes and parameters that a design code or guide, could or should cover (codes are not expected to include all of these elements) with helpful diagrams/illustrations showing how to communicate local guidance/coding elements.

The ten design themes that could be included in a design code or guide are: Context, Movement, Nature, Built Form, Identity, Public Space, Uses, Homes and Buildings, Resources, and Lifespan. There are design parameters/sub-headings for each of these themes (see Fig. 2 and the Guidance Notes for Design Codes for full details).

The Process

A large part of the NMDC focuses on the process of how to prepare a design code or guide, outlining the three stages (Analysis, Vision, Code) and seven steps required. There is emphasis on consultation with the local community at each stage of the process.

The NMDC clarifies that preparing a design code must include the following stages: **Scoping** the extent of the code; establishing a **Baseline**; setting the **Vision**; producing a **Coding Plan** showing graphically where the code(s) apply; **Master planning** for large development sites; producing design codes/guidance for **Area Types**; producing **Code wide design codes/guidance**.

Public consultation on codes

The NMDC highlights that consultation with the local community should be undertaken at each stage of the process, starting with developing a consultation strategy at the Scoping stage of the code. Consultation is also required to aid the Visioning process and in the Code content (although this could be made clearer in the latter stage). The document highlights that a separate consultation will be required for master planning of large development sites.

The Guidance Notes for Design Codes provides detailed guidance for designing the consultation strategy (pp. 87-91 of the document). Emphasis is placed on consultation being proportionate to the scale of the area to be covered by the Code and the level of development. A key quote is, '*At each stage, it should be easy for participants to engage with the process and see how their inputs have been used to develop the next iteration.*' (Para. 209).

A range of physical and digital engagement tools and techniques are highlighted, and it is stressed that using a combination of tools is best to reach the widest audience. It highlights that 'independent facilitators' and 'community planners' can be beneficial to the process.

Measuring community support (for the code) needs to be considered, although guidance on this is loose. It states that, '*those leading engagement will need to consider how they can demonstrate measurable community representation and support*' (Para. 218). Reference is made to Enquiry by Design, BIMBY, Planning for Real and emerging techniques but this section is not prescriptive.

Helpful details

The NMDC clarifies that design codes can apply to: the whole Local Authority; an Area Type e.g. High rise city, Outer Suburbs, or Villages etc; Development Sites e.g. those coming through Local Plans; or Building Plots.

Who is responsible for preparing codes? In the main, it appears to be local authorities but developers and landowners are able to prepare codes as part of a planning application. Neighbourhood planning groups are also able to prepare design guides or codes through the neighbourhood plan process.

The NMDC has two parts:

- **The NMDC** introduces the purpose and objectives of the NMDC, explains the process and the seven steps involved in preparing a design code or guide, and provides detailed guidance of the design themes/parameters expected for Area type codes e.g. Town Centre, Urban Neighbourhood, Suburbs and those relevant for all areas/development within a Code.
- **Guidance Notes for Design Codes** provides detailed guidance for all of the ten design themes and their parameters/sub-headings with checklists of things to consider at the end of each theme. It also provides guidance for how to carry out consultation at each stage of code/guide preparation.

Summary

The NMDC appears to be a positive piece of MHCLG guidance to clarify the role of design codes in the planning system and shows what they could look like in practice. Whilst we need to examine the detail of guidance, it is pleasing to see the importance of public consultation at key stages of the process and a role for community groups such as civic societies in shaping design codes locally.

3. A new Office for Place

The Government wants to create an 'Office for Place' which will pioneer design and beauty within the planning system. An interim Office for Place will be established within MHCLG this year, with a transition board chaired by Nicholas Boys Smith. Early focus for the interim Office for Place will be to drive up design standards now, piloting the National Model Design Code with 20 local authorities this year.

4. Local heritage listings

The Government is also encouraging communities to nominate historic buildings and other heritage assets such as memorials and plaques for their council's local heritage list - helping to protect the historic buildings and heritage of community value.

Responding to the level of interest, the funding has been increased to £1.5 million and 22 areas (mostly counties) have been selected to pilot the new local heritage lists or improve existing ones. Full details available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-heritage-list-campaign-call-for-expressions-of-interest/local-heritage-list-campaign-guidance>

5. Community-led housing funding

The Government has made £4 million available to help Community Land Trusts (CLTs) bid for funds to support them to prepare bids for the £11.5 billion Affordable Homes Programme. The intention is that this will help to provide up to 180,000 new affordable homes.