

CHOICES IN BRIEF

The various Choices included in this guide have been arranged in the following broad sequence:

1. **Building Blocks:** These are ways of providing the background evidence, assessment and guidelines that can underpin a statutory plan or help to shape development.
2. **Statutory Plan-making:** Just two main formats: Local Plans and Neighbourhood Development Plans.
3. **Concept Statements:** These form a bridge between statutory plan-making and development management.
4. **Development Management** (what used to be called Development Control): This covers two established approaches – pre-application engagement and Planning Performance Agreements, and two more introduced in the Localism Act.

Please be aware that almost all the existing approaches and previous experience come from rural situations – villages, parishes, small towns. But every one of those approaches can be adapted and used in urban settings. If you are from a large town or city, do not be put off by any of the titles!

1. BUILDING BLOCKS

Parish Plans and Town Plans (see page x for details)

Parish and Town Plans are produced primarily by local communities, albeit sometimes with procedural advice, sometimes technical advice. They generally cover almost everything except direct land use planning issues; for example open spaces, health, safety etc., but inevitably overlap at times with land use planning. This is why they are in 'Building Blocks' not in the 'Statutory Plan-making' section (see below) although the link to planning needs to be considered carefully. They focus on generating local action plans and local projects, for example open space maintenance. Parish and Town Plans are very well-established; some 4,500 have been produced in recent years, mainly by rural communities. Some have been prepared in suburban areas, but virtually none in urban areas. *NB. To avoid the rural terminology, these are all now termed **Community Plans**.*

Local Distinctiveness Studies (see page x for details)

As design issues have increasingly become matters of concern for the planning system, so planners in some areas have started to develop approaches, often but not always called Local Distinctiveness Studies. Such studies describe and evaluate key design features of a local area and produce guidelines in a way very similar to that in the more familiar Village Design Statements (see below), but across a broader canvas. To date all have been professionally-led, if sometimes with a degree of community involvement. As semi-formal documents they can carry some weight in decision-making on planning applications

Village Design Statements and Town Design Statements (see page x for details)

Some 600 or so Statements have been produced to date for villages and small towns, mainly by local people themselves. A Statement includes description and analysis of the distinctive aspects of a village or town and ends with design guidelines. Though done by local people, they can be formally or informally adopted into the planning system. Many have been shown to have a positive impact on local design standards. *NB. To avoid the rural terminology, these are all now termed **Community Design Statements**.*

Area-wide Landscape Character Assessment (see page x for details)

Starting from national level work some years ago, landscape character assessments have been produced at national, regional and local authority level, and for National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). They cover history, land use, form of the land, tree cover, views and many other aspects. They have always been a professionally-led

process, although more recent work has included some level of community involvement. Assessments are then used as evidence for strategic plans and in assessing planning applications.

Local Landscape Character Assessment (see page x for details)

As with Local Distinctiveness Studies and Community Design Statements, Area-wide Landscape Character Assessment is balanced with this approach, its local equivalent. These assessments are intended very much as a community-led (indeed often community only) approach through which local people assess the nature and significance of their local landscape. No national guidance exists but models of good practice are beginning to emerge. Partly because of the lack of strong guidance the results of local landscape character work often only have informal status within planning processes.

Conservation Area Character Assessment (see page x for details)

In order to designate a Conservation Area, some initial survey/assessment work has to be undertaken. Once a Conservation Area is formally designated a thorough Character Assessment has to be done to guide decisions about planning applications. Such studies are expensive and have traditionally been done entirely by specialists. As a result, many Conservation Areas do not yet have full assessments in place. Recent practice now includes varying degrees of community involvement in their preparation.

2. STATUTORY PLAN-MAKING

Local Plans (see page x for details)

Local Plans are statutory development plans and this term will eventually replace Local Development Frameworks, Core Strategies etc. They are the responsibility of local planning authorities (LPAs). Although genuinely new planning processes will need to end up with just one such Local Plan, authorities are well underway with the old regime of Core Strategies as part of more complex overall Local Development Frameworks and they are likely to continue with that, perhaps for some time. There are already formal requirements for community involvement in preparing both Local Plans and Core Strategies, supported by local Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs). However, while the Localism Act changes little directly, there is also a general view that far better engagement (not just involvement) will be required in the future.

Neighbourhood Development Plans (see page x for details)

A Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) is also a statutory plan, but is prepared by the local community. Neighbourhood Development Plans are concerned only with land use and development issues. They must be '*in conformity*' with higher level plans, i.e. national planning policies and authority-wide Local Plans. This means that aspects such as housing numbers, perhaps even sites, will most often be set by the Local Plan and the NDP must work within those parameters (it can only suggest more development, not less). The NDP, which must be done to demanding standards, can then determine most of the detail for changes in its area (not just for sites) once it has been through examination and has secured support through a referendum. If the referendum shows support, the NDP must be formally adopted by the local planning authority. *NB. The term has already been shortened, in everyday discussion, to Neighbourhood Plan.*

3. CONCEPT STATEMENTS (see page x for details)

A Concept Statement is a form of development brief, outlining the key principles of content, layout, design and viability for a potential development. If done properly they are developed collaboratively with the local community, landowner, developer, other key bodies, elected members and planners and then endorsed by the local planning authority. Concept Statements bridge the gap between broad policy and site specific detail and, when done early, can affect land value and hence enable more locally relevant developments.

4. DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Pre-application Engagement (see page x for details)

Good developers already choose to engage with local communities and others in advance of a planning application because they believe (and evidence backs this up) that a widely supported project is likely to secure planning permission more speedily and easily. The Localism Act makes pre-application engagement a formal requirement but only on larger projects of over 200 houses or 10,000 square metres of development. However, local people can and should still press for pre-application engagement (as appropriate to development scale and type) on all projects.

Planning Performance Agreements (see page x for details)

On larger projects in particular there is a semi-formal process, called a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA). A PPA is normally signed up to by a local authority and a developer to guide all aspects of project development, including community engagement. The Agreement outlines clear procedures and responsibilities for all parties and includes an agreed timetable. There is no reason why a formally established local community should not also be a partner in such agreements, in fact there are strong arguments for this, with the Localism Act in place.

Neighbourhood Development Orders (see page x for details)

Under the Localism Act, 'neighbourhoods' will be able to use Neighbourhood Development Orders (NDOs) to grant planning permission in full or in outline for new buildings they wish to see go ahead. These Orders will be administered in rural areas by Parish or Town Councils and in urban areas by a Neighbourhood Forum. It is not yet clear whether Orders can apply to projects of the scale of new homes and offices or whether they will be limited to only very minor developments such as porches on houses or small building extensions.

Community Right to Build Orders (see page x for details)

Under the Localism Act citizens now have more rights to decide what is built in their communities, including housing, local shops and community facilities. To secure the right to build, any proposal will need to be prepared by a community group such as a community interest company or a community land trust, independently assessed to determine whether the proposals meet specific key criteria (eg. type, size, location etc.) and supported through a local referendum. No further planning permissions would then be needed.

Alternatives, Combinations and Variations

Rather like choosing ingredients for a recipe, there are some combinations that seem perfectly natural, but do not be afraid to vary and adjust approaches to suit your particular situation. Several of the different Building Blocks can easily be combined:

- In Cheshire, for example, quite a few communities have combined a **Village Design Statement** with a **Local Landscape Character Assessment** because the former deals with the built area, the latter with its broader context.
- A group in Bristol, where only part of their neighbourhood is in a Conservation Area, are applying **Conservation Area Assessment** methods to the whole of their neighbourhood and using this to develop a **Design Statement**, also for the whole area.
- Area-wide approaches such as **Local Distinctiveness Studies** or **Landscape Assessment** can link very productively to their local equivalents such as **Village Design Statements** or **Conservation Area Assessments**.

What is more, it sometimes does not matter which comes first; several local studies can be used to speed up an area study or an area study can enable local work to 'hit the ground running'.

An especially rewarding link could be made – again in any sequence – between **Community Plans** and **Neighbourhood Development Plans**. The former can and should cover everything except land use and development, while the latter should focus mainly on land use or 'spatial' issues; each will clearly have implications for the other. Having a wide-ranging community plan in place can have enormous benefits in offering a strong argument for how to spend – locally - any financial benefits from development.

Although the Localism Act suggests a shift to just one single Local Plan for a local authority area, it will still be possible to add in different types of plan. That might be an **Area Action Plan** (an established format), dealing with a size of area and community well beyond just a 'neighbourhood' but smaller than a whole authority area. Equally there might also need to be a 'plan' for a linear corridor or a specially sensitive area, or on a specific topic (eg. design) on which the main plan offers no detail. Most importantly, such alternatives are still possible and can be promoted by local people.

Moving this on, a **Neighbourhood Development Plan** (or a Local Plan for that matter) could easily include within it a **Concept Statement** for a specific, perhaps a particularly important, local site.