

Design Surrey

Roundtable: Planning in Transition

Thursday 9 September 2021

Synopsis

This roundtable explored the opportunities and challenges of the proposed transformation of the planning system, as set out in the Government White Paper 'Planning for the Future', the National Model Design Code (NMDC) and the 'Living with Beauty' report by the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC). Delivering reform will give new powers to local authorities to ask for beauty and secure high-quality design but will require new ways of working and upskilling. Participants discussed the emphasis on design coding and the questions around who will deliver design codes. This prompted a discussion about skills and resources, and a recognition of the scale of the challenge of delivering planning reform in Surrey.

The roundtable was chaired by Design South East Director, Chris Lamb, using the Chatham House rule.

The discussion opened with a short talk by Adrian Penfold OBE. Adrian sits on the Advisory Board for the Office for Place, supporting the use of the National Model Design Code across selected communities in England. His presentation to the roundtable reflected on the main recommendations of the BBBBC, and. He also introduced the National Model Design Code and framed its importance with a review of design training within the planning system.

Key Takeaways

There are opportunities but also challenges associated with the reforms

Planning reform and the move towards greater emphasis on design quality is welcomed in principle. However, planning departments are already under such pressure that it is difficult to see how they will implement the reforms. Further guidance and support from central government is needed.

Local authority design resources must be scaled up to deliver the ambition in the reforms

Planning departments are already struggling with a lack of resources. Yes, the proposed changes have the potential to result in better design outcomes, but only if the plan-making and compliance processes envisaged by Government are properly resourced.

A new role of Chief Place-Maker is positive, but this will not address the resource issue

The proposition of a Chief Place-Maker in every local authority (as recommended by the BBBBC) could be beneficial, especially if they sit on the senior leadership team. However, a single new appointment will not be enough to deliver design codes and planning reforms in-house, and so must be backed up by further resources.

Greater clarity and certainty is needed about the design coding process

Design codes could be an important tool for securing high quality design. However, there is uncertainty about whether they will be delivered by local authorities or the private sector. There is also uncertainty around the scale of design codes; should they be at the authority-scale or for specific sites? Importantly, the question of who will pay for the process remains unknown. Outcomes from the Phase 1 Design Codes Pilot will be an important learning for others.



Training focussed on capacity building will be needed

Design training for local authority officers often focuses on design principles. If authorities are to deliver design codes a more coherent approach will be needed, one focussed on capacity building, which could include Design Surrey modules and support through Urban Design Certificate and Masters degrees. A forum for sharing knowledge and experience within the County would also be welcomed.

Delegates

Alice Knowles, Waverley Borough Council / Aneta Manto, Elmbridge Borough Council / Chris Lamb, Design South East / Esmé Spinks, Spelthorne Borough Council / Jennifer Margetts, Elmbridge Borough Council / Lizzie Atherton, Design South East / Mike Green, Surrey County Council / Ross O’Ceallaigh, Design South East / Russ Mouny, Spelthorne Borough Council / Sarah Wells, Waverley Borough Council / Sue Janota, Surrey County Council / Tomas Pugh-Cook, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council

