

Spotlight on East Boldon

How neighbourhood planning can secure better design

The importance of design quality has recently been reemphasised by Government with the simultaneous publication of the [National Model Design Code](#), announcement of the creation of an [Office for Place](#) and [2021 updates](#) to the NPPF. Developed in a context where [too many recent developments have been shown to be of poor or mediocre design quality](#), these changes aim to strengthen design requirements and improve the tools available to local communities to secure better design.

While it's still too early to tell how far these changes will influence future development in the long term, it is clear that neighbourhood plans have a key role to play in this context. Their community-led nature makes them particularly well suited to the development of design guidance and codes that are grounded in a detailed understanding of local context and aspirations, history, and character.

This is exemplified with a recently approved major housing development scheme on Cleadon Lane in East Boldon, South Tyneside. Following a first application in December 2021 which triggered numerous objections, the neighbourhood planning group met with the developers to discuss the compliance of the proposed scheme with their neighbourhood plan, which had just been made at the time.

Combined with detailed written comments submitted by the group on the initial application, this early and direct engagement helped to define the expectations of the Neighbourhood Plan. In their recommendations to the applicant, the local planning authority also referenced the [East Boldon neighbourhood plan](#).

As a result of this and the comments from other stakeholders, the revised proposal submitted by the developer a few months later incorporated a number of the suggestions made by the group and the local authority reflecting the neighbourhood plan, particularly with regard to its design code and guidance.



Cleadon Lane Industrial Estate (Source: Avant Homes, Design & Access Statement, 2021).

Some key changes included:

- **A larger landscaped buffer zone between houses and adjacent green belt**

The initial proposal included a timber fence with shrub planting directly adjacent to the Green Belt, which would have affected some key views identified in the neighbourhood plan design code and did not align with several of its requirements.

In particular, the design code requires new development to include “sufficient room for appropriate buffer zones to be proposed” (EB.CC.01); to “seek to integrate with, join up and enhance existing green/blue infrastructure networks adjacent to site boundaries” (EB.CC.02); and to “reinforce views outwards towards the rural surroundings” (EB.CC.03).

In line with these design codes, the revised proposal includes an additional 5-meter buffer zone with retained and improved landscaping, ensuring a soft transition into the Green Belt.

- **A larger landscaped buffer zone at the boundary with a nearby industrial estate**

As the proposal involves the redevelopment of an industrial site combining housing and continued industrial uses on-site, concerns were raised with regard to the impact of industrial activities on the residential area.

The initial proposal addressed this issue with the planned erection of high, physical barriers, without specifying the impact and appearance of these structures.

In line design code EB.H.18 which requires “landscape buffer zones” to be “provided between the residential and the industrial area” (as well as other elements of the neighbourhood plan), the revised proposal specifies the inclusion of a further landscape buffer which should adequately soften noise and visual impacts of the Industrial Estate on new housing.

- **Increased provision of on-site open space and further improved landscaping**

Concerns were raised with the initial proposal because there was a lack of dedicated on-site public open spaces and appropriate landscaping.

In order to align with design code EB.SN.08 which requires all open space to “be of a size (...) appropriate for the intended use” and “located within walking distance from their intended users”, the revised proposal integrates more open spaces within the centre of the site and improved landscaping features, including tree-planting.

It is also interesting to note that the inclusion of larger buffer zones and more on-site open spaces was facilitated by the reduction in the total number of dwellings, from 245 in the initial proposal to 202 in the revised scheme. This revision better reflects the neighbourhood plan’s policy on housing delivery, supported by robust evidence on local housing need.

- **Improved road layout, parking provision and pedestrian access**

Another key aspect of the initial proposal which did not align with neighbourhood plan policies and codes related to the provision of pedestrian routes and overall road layout, including parking.

As required by Policy EB10 and EB12, development proposals involving housing provision need to include details of “pedestrian linkages through the site”. Design Code EB.CC.05 also specifies the importance of having streets connecting with each other and creating different travel options and routes, which includes minimising the use of cul-de-sacs. In terms of parking provision, policy EB21 and its associated design code and guidance also set out specific standards to ensure adequate residential parking is provided.

As part of their revised application and in line with these neighbourhood plan policies and codes, the developer is now proposing a much better connected road network, with appropriate footpaths and cycle routes as well as a reduction in the number of cul-de-sacs to allow for better permeability. In curtilage car parking provision has also been amended so it reflects the neighbourhood plan requirements.



Cleadon Lane Industrial Estate, Amended proposed site layout (Source: Avant Homes, 2022).

This revised development proposal was approved at committee in February 2023. Not all policies in the neighbourhood plan could be reflected in the final decision on the application, especially as the local planning authority did not have a sufficient supply of land available for development, which tilted the planning balance in favour of approving the development proposal, unless its adverse impacts would “significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits”.*

However, it is worth noting that despite this context, the neighbourhood plan was still able to strongly influence the design and overall quality of the development scheme. In addition to changes to the design of the initial proposal outlined above, 25 out of the 27 conditions subject to which the scheme was approved referenced specific policies in the neighbourhood plan. For example, these conditions include the need for the agreed play area to have been provided on site before the majority of dwellings are occupied, in the interest of wellbeing and community cohesion in accordance with policy EB1 of the neighbourhood plan.

To find out more about how to achieve well-designed places through neighbourhood planning, take a look at our toolkit: <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/good-design-neighbourhood-planning/>. You may also be interested in our technical support packages available to eligible facing more complex issues in

developing their neighbourhood plan, including the production of design guides, codes and masterplans.

*This is in line with the “presumption in favour of sustainable development”, which kicks in when the local plan is considered out of date, as defined in paragraph 11d of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 14 of the NPPF can protect made neighbourhood plans from this policy and allow its relevant policies to still carry weight in the decision-making process even if the local plan is out of date, but only if certain conditions are met. As explained in [our article on recently proposed changes to the NPPF](#) published in the January edition of this newsletter, if these changes are implemented, more neighbourhood plans like the East Boldon neighbourhood plan might be able to carry full weight in the decision making process for longer.

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