

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE NOTE

Strategic Applications

Moving from a Development Team Service to a Design Team Service to deliver good design

Planning Officers Society

POS is the single credible voice for public sector planners, pursuing good quality and effective planning practice. The Society's aim is to ensure that planning makes a major contribution to achieving sustainable development in ways that are fair and equitable and achieve the social, economic and environmental aspirations of the community.

We operate in three main ways:

- As a support network for planners in the public sector
- As promoters of best practise in planning
- As a think tank and lobbying organisation for excellence in planning practice

Where we can, we will work across the sector to craft proposals that have widespread support from the people who operate the planning system at the coalface: landowners, developers, agents, legal, local authorities and politicians. We will be both radical and practical as we look for solutions to tangible problems that will make a real difference to crucial areas. Our objective is to improve the planning system to enable it to deliver its key aim of sustainable development. It is within this context that we have published this guidance so our members can improve what they do.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This Good Practice Guidance Note was originally published in response to Theresa May's Conservative government's policy shift to move good design up the planning agenda.
- 1.2 The 2019 NPPF required the system to achieve well designed spaces¹ whereas in the original 2012 Framework, good design was just a requirement². This signalled a more focused approach from Government towards delivery. The 2019 version of the NPPF changes the overall policy position from "The Government attaches great importance to the design of the built environment"³ to "The creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve"⁴. Subsequent initiatives included the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. It produced an interim report, [Creating space for beauty](#), on 9 July 2019 and its final report, [Living with Beauty](#), on 30 January 2020. MHCLG subsequently produced a [National \(England\) Design Guide](#) that sets out the characteristics of well-designed places and demonstrates what good design means in practice. It forms part of the government's collection of planning practice guidance and should be read alongside the separate [planning practice guidance on design process and tools](#).
- 1.3 The work by government in this area continues and the latest developments come from the combined effects of Local Government Reform and the National Scheme of Delegation. As a result, councils will generally be bigger unitary authorities dealing with higher numbers of large, strategic applications. The operation of their planning committees will be reformed and only able to deal with those cases that meet the Gateway Test. Essentially the guidance in this Note will apply to almost all the cases that will be reported to planning committees after 31 October 2026. Presenting such cases to committee in the pre-application stage, as this Note recommends, should prove beneficial to establishing the significant issues that they raise and the committee's predisposition towards them. The Note has been revisited in that context.
- 1.4 The gauntlet has been thrown down by government: they want the planning system to consistently deliver good design. We need to rise to that challenge.

2 From DTS to DTS!

- 2.1 For many years a Development Team Service approach has been used to speed up the planning application process for complex cases and provide developers with a greater level of certainty following the submission of a planning application. It moves the emphasis of the planning process away from arbitrary deadlines, towards a structured timetable, the involvement of key consultees and negotiated solutions that are agreed by all parties. What is needed now is to ensure that this process is locked into the design process to ensure that good design is a planned and required outcome from the process; we need to move to a Design Team Service approach.

¹ NPPF 2019 Chapter 12

² NPPF 2012 Chapter 7

³ NPPF 2012 paragraph 56

⁴ NPPF 2019 paragraph 124

RIBA Plan of Work

- 2.2 Architects generally follow the stages in the [RIBA Plan of Work](#) in developing a major scheme from inception through to delivery. This eight-stage process, produced by the Royal Institute of British Architects, is an internationally recognised methodology for designing and constructing buildings and other such development. Designing the pre-application process to mirror this approach means that you can get in early in the design process and have the maximum influence on it. The aim is to become part of the design team rather than just be a commentator on it.
- 2.3 As planners we of course are looking at all aspects of the design – not just the building, but then so should good architects. Our job is place making and, as the [Farrell Review](#) mnemonic helpfully reminds us, that means Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering. It is important that good urban design, landscaping, highways etc, as well as architectural input occurs.
- 2.4 A pre-application process should be designed to track the RIBA stages and ensure the right input is provided at each stage of the process. Officers operating the service must understand this, so it will be important that it is articulated and communicated to them. The RIBA stages go from 0 to 7 but it is only the first four stages (0 to 3) that are relevant to the planning pre-app process. These stages are:

RIBA WORK STAGES	CORE OBJECTIVES
Stage 0 Strategic Definition	Identify client's Business Case and Strategic Brief and other core project requirements
Stage 1 Preparing the Brief	Develop Project Objectives, including Quality Objectives and Project Outcomes, Sustainability Aspirations, Project Budget, other parameters or constraints and develop Initial Project Brief. Undertake Feasibility Studies and review of Site Information.
Stage 2 Concept Design	Prepare Concept Design, including outline proposals for structural design, building services systems, outline specifications and preliminary Cost Information along with relevant Project Strategies in accordance with Design Programme. Agree alterations to brief and issue Final Project Brief.
Stage 3 Developed Design (now called Spatial Coordination)	Prepare Developed Design, including coordinated and updated proposals for structural design, building services systems, outline specifications, Cost Information and Project Strategies in accordance with Design Programme.

- 2.5 A planning application is generally an output from stage 3 or possibly stage 2/early stage 3 if it's an application for outline planning permission. The remaining stages are:
4. Technical Design – pre-commencement conditions will be discharged and amendments made at this stage

5. Construction – other conditions and further amendments will be dealt with at this stage
 6. Handover and Closeout
 7. In Use
- 2.6 Planning is not normally involved in the last two stages, except perhaps any enforcement issues that might arise.
- 2.7 Many planners (and developers) think that there is no need for DM to be involved until designs are produced (RIBA Stage 2) but this is fundamentally misplaced. It is vital that you seek to work with the developer and their design team at the earliest stage in the process: RIBA Stage 0. This is when the applicant's brief is being formed. The Council also has a brief: its corporate or regeneration plans as well as its development plan and associated guidance. Articulating and aligning these two briefs early in the process maximises the chances of a mutually acceptable development being designed and delivered.
- 2.8 It should also be remembered that the cost of taking a large scheme to RIBA stage 2 will be several hundreds of thousands of pounds. To be involved for the first time when the concept design has emerged is far too late if you have fundamental concerns about it. You not only have to persuade the design team to adopt a different design approach, but also to spend a lot more money in doing so. A much harder proposition than being part of the team and being able to influence the initial design choices.

Pre-application stages

- 2.9 A good Development Team Service will be project managed and the stages that are followed should mimic project management stages: with a Project Implementation Document (PID) to initiate the project and a formal Closedown stage at the end. In this case the PID should be a Planning Statement/Project Plan (templates provided in appendices A & B), and the Closedown is making sure that the proposal is ready for submission by checking that it is complete so that the application can be validated on receipt, but more on those later. This paper recommends that the following five stages should be the framework for any strategic application pre-application process:
- Initiation: strategic input
 - Urban Design: defining the place
 - Community engagement
 - Application preparation: addressing the issues
 - Closedown: finalising the application
- 2.10 They will be expanded on later, but essentially, they are designed to add layers of detail to the design process so that the right inputs can be identified at the right stages and the process moves forward smoothly with issues being addressed at the right time by the right people.

Bringing the two together

2.11 The relationship of the RIBA stages to the pre-app process are as follows:

PRE-APP STAGES	RIBA WORK STAGES
Initiation: strategic input	Scheme moves from Stage 0 Strategic Definition to Stage 1 Preparing the Brief
Urban Design: defining the place	Scheme moves from Stage 1 Preparing the Brief to Stage 2 Concept Design
Community engagement	Finalise Stage 2 Concept Design
Application preparation: addressing the issues	Scheme moves from Stage 2 Concept Design to Stage 3 Developed Design
Closedown: finalising the application	Finalise Stage 3 Developed Design

3 A Design Team Service

- 3.1 The process involves several meetings and workshops, project managed by a senior planning officer – the case officer. It involves in-depth research, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies and comprehensive advice put together by officers from different departments. It should also involve councillor engagement via presentations to Planning Committee. Finally, there is an expectation that there will be active and meaningful community engagement, to be organised and facilitated by the developer’s team, but steered by the Council.
- 3.2 The process will be governed by two documents, which are explained below under “How does it work?”. They are:
- A Planning Statement and Project Plan (appendices A & B)
 - A Planning Performance Agreement (appendix D)
- 3.3 A template for a Programme Tracker, to manage the whole suite of pre-application, application and post-decision projects is included at appendix C.
- 3.4 POS recommends that the Project Plan and Programme Tracker approach should also be used for the preparation of development plan documents.
- 3.5 The pre-application process is structured into five key stages. These are summarised in the tables below, together with what is expected from the developer, what happens at each stage and the expected outcomes.

Stage 1 Initiation: strategic input

What we expect from the developer	What happens	What is the expected outcome
OS map of the site Description of development	Meeting with more senior officers (on large schemes Corporate & Political Leadership) to look at strategic issues Consider and agree strategic issues and the process needed to address them	Planning Statement or a masterplan for very large or multi-site developments Project Plan Planning Performance Agreement Draft community engagement strategy EIA Screening Opinion Ward member input

Stage 2 Urban design: defining the place

What we expect from the developer	What happens	What is the expected outcome
Draft Design & Access Statement including an urban design analysis Draft concept scheme, potentially including options	Understand the site, it's surroundings and the nature of the development and how it can be accommodated Establish urban design principles in one or more design workshops. Discuss consultation methodology & identify relevant consultees	Design & Access Statement Concept scheme, potentially including options EIA Scoping Opinion (if required) Confirmation of required technical studies Consultation Strategy Design Review Panel Presentation to Planning Committee

Stage 3 Community engagement

What we expect from the developer	What happens	What is the expected outcome
Illustrative material of proposed scheme, potentially including options	Meaningful engagement with the community affected An explicit feedback session	Draft statement of community involvement Amendments to concept scheme

Stage 4 Application preparation: addressing the issues

What we expect from the developer	What happens	What is the expected outcome
Draft planning application Draft EIA (if required) and other supporting documents Draft heads of terms of S106 legal agreement	Consider and address the comments raised by the local community One or more workshops to understand the details of the development, its impacts on immediate neighbours and the surrounding area	Completed planning application EIA (if required) Agreed S106 heads of terms Ward member input Design Review Panel Presentation to Planning Committee

Stage 5 Closedown: finalising the application

What we expect from the developer	What happens	What is the expected outcome
Final amendments to planning application Final EIA and other supporting documents Final amendments to heads of terms of S106 legal agreement	Address any final comments from members Finalise the application & S106 legal agreement	A valid planning application ready for submission A well-designed scheme that benefits from a fronted loaded process Review of process

- 3.6 For less complex schemes, these stages will be less distinct and potentially combined. Flexibility is key, and the process should be tailored to meet the needs of each development proposal.
- 3.7 These stages do not represent the whole of the service; in between you should continue to communicate with the developer and his team by phone, email or letter.
- 3.8 Depending on the complexity and scale of the proposal, the DTS team may comprise Council officers with expertise in Building Control, Urban Design, Planning Policy, Regeneration, Conservation, Housing, Highways, Education, Environmental Health, Climate Change and Legal. The process may also involve engagement with other agencies, such as Highways England, Historic England and the Environment Agency.
- 3.9 Feedback should be provided throughout the process which will take several different forms: the Planning Statement, minutes of meetings and formal pre-application reports to Planning Committee. At the end of the process, the developer will have a final report and minute that set out the advice of the Planning Service (and any comments made by Members) which should carry weight when any planning application, based on that advice, is submitted to the Council.

4 How does it work?

- 4.1 We have provided a draft Customer Advice Note in appendix F that explains the PPA Service for strategic developments, which should be available from a Council's website.

Stage 1: Initiation

- 4.2 The model set out in this guidance note is focused on a developer approaching the LPA to discuss an application that they intend to submit. It is however the case that developments emerge in other ways. The LPA may be proactive in identifying sites and producing planning briefs or masterplans to kick start the process. However a development materialises, this early initiation stage and the alignment of strategic briefs is arguably the most important part of the process.
- 4.3 During this stage the scheme will move from RIBA Work Stage 0 (Strategic Definition) to RIBA Work Stage 1 (Preparation and Brief).
- 4.4 It is often recognised that applicants might wish to engage in “high level” discussions with key senior Council officers prior to formal engagement in a pre-application service: often called a pre-pre-app. This is the first stage of this process and is, arguably, the most important stage. This is where the project is initiated and where both parties should have that all-important Spice Girls conversation, “tell me what you want, what you really, really want”!
- 4.5 These meetings will not deal with the planning merits of the proposed development. In fact, you must insist that no plans are produced – it is too early in the process to do so. It is an initiation meeting to kick off the design process. This is a high-level meeting, for the very large schemes it should involve the political leadership (Leader & relevant Cabinet Member(s)), to ensure that both the Council and the developer are clear about what strategic outcomes are expected from the process. Both parties are in effect trying to align their strategic briefs. The Council's brief is expressed within its development plan and other relevant corporate strategies and needs to be articulated in the context of the site and the proposed development.
- 4.6 Where a proposal cannot be supported by the development plan, the process can still proceed on that basis so that the other issues that the development raises can be addressed and resolved so that the matters in dispute (that may result in a refusal of planning permission) can be limited.

Planning Statement

- 4.7 A Planning Statement should be a key output from the Initiation stage covering the main constraints and opportunities relating to the site and the key strategic policy and urban design issues raised by the scheme. It is partly a high-level development brief and partly a Project Initiation Document. This is a key document because it articulates the Council's strategic brief. Whilst the Council will collaborate with the developer on its production, ultimately it is produced by the Council and sets out its strategic brief for the site.

- 4.8 It is important that this document contains the right information. What the developer does not need is a list of the relevant development plan policies; they can read that for themselves. The purpose of this document is to provide an outline planning context and to establish a framework for taking forward the pre-application process by setting out the necessary aims, objectives, timescales, roles and responsibilities. We recommend that the document contains the following:
- An understanding of the site characteristics and any planning history.
 - Clarity around the planning policy framework that is applicable and what are the key determinative planning policies that are relevant to the site and the development, focusing on site constraints and opportunities.
 - An early, high-level list of heads of terms, with details where possible.
 - An initial, high-level urban design analysis of the site that starts to touch on its potential in the context of the proposed development.
 - A preliminary indication of the application documents that will need to be prepared.

4.9 The document will also contain details of the project management framework, performance standards, communication protocols etc.

4.10 See our recommended template in appendix A.

Project Plan

4.11 A Project Plan (Gantt Chart) should be agreed by both parties, with deadlines and a set of commitments on both sides, so that the likely number of meetings and the cost of the service can be estimated. You should also identify relevant consultees and discuss the broad methodology and timings for carrying out effective consultation and build this into the project. This will enable you to estimate the cost of the service.

4.12 See our recommended template in appendix B.

Programme Management

4.13 A DM service will have a suite of projects that need to be managed. These would comprise all the strategic developments at pre-application, application and post-decision stages. It should also include the various projects that comprise the preparation of the LDF. A spreadsheet using a RAG status considered at a regular Programme Board meeting is the most efficient way of managing this.

4.14 See our recommended template in appendix C.

Planning Performance Agreement

4.15 Central Government advice encourages the use of PPAs as best practice. The Planning Statement and Project Plan will form the basis of a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) which together will enable the project management of the pre-application process.

4.16 The first point to make is that despite its name, a PPA is not an agreement in the legal sense – it's much more a Memorandum of Understanding between the Council and the applicant. For this reason, our strong advice is to keep the lawyers away from it.

- 4.17 The PPA sets a realistic timescale for processing and determining the pre-application submission and the subsequent planning application as well as setting out the fee arrangements. It will utilise project management techniques to manage and formalise terms of engagement between the parties.
- 4.18 It will be noted that a lot of the detail about the pre-application process, that often is included in a PPA, is contained within the Planning Statement template that POS recommends (appendix A) and not the PPA itself. The reason for this is to avoid encouraging too much negotiation around these elements. They essentially define the service that is being offered by the LPA and should not be subject to redesign by each developer.
- 4.19 A PPA operated at pre-application stage can be transferred to the subsequent planning application and post decision stages, such as clearing conditions or dealing with amendments.
- 4.20 See our recommended template in appendix D.

Stage 2: Urban design

- 4.21 During this stage the scheme will move from RIBA Work Stage 1 (Preparation and Brief) to RIBA Work Stage 2 (Concept Design).
- 4.22 Your advice at this stage will concentrate on ensuring that the proposal addresses established urban design principles. This includes appreciating the context, creating an urban structure, making the connections, detailing the place and understanding the planning policy requirements of the development (viewed alongside viability considerations).
- 4.23 You should also give advice on whether the strategic policy issues have been addressed, including compliance with land-use and affordable housing policies as well as environmental and transportation impacts. You will start to identify the more detailed local policy and planning issues. Dependant on how far advanced the scheme is, you will begin to identify the relevant consultees and if appropriate, initiate an informal consultation process.
- 4.24 It is at this stage that the Design and Access Statement that will accompany any planning application should be developed. A concept scheme, potentially including options where appropriate, will be produced.

Design Review Panel

- 4.25 At this stage an early presentation to a Design Review Panel should be considered for the very large schemes.
- 4.26 There are different models employed throughout the country. Some Councils have an in-house organised panel; others use locally organised panels (eg Design South East). The [Farrell Review](#) recommended that design review should become Place Review with Place standing for Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering thus enabling the whole design team to be involved.
- 4.27 Whatever model is used, it is vital to ensure that the Panel are properly briefed on the project and are clear about what they are expected to comment on. If some parts of the scheme have been agreed and are not open to change, the panel must know that, as commenting on such matters is of no use in such circumstances.

Presentation to Members of the Planning Committee

- 4.28 To be most effective, this stage should finish with an applicant's presentation of the concept scheme(s) to the Council's Planning Committee members. This should provide clarity around land use as well as design development and should clearly explain the form, quantum and extent of affordable housing delivery, linked to a general understanding of scheme viability and any associated constraints.
- 4.29 See our recommended template in appendix E
- 4.30 Advice on how developers should prepare for this meeting should be given so that the meeting gets the information that they need. Officers should review a developer's presentation prior to the meeting and provide any pointers and advice accordingly.
- 4.31 See our draft customer advice note in Appendix G.
- 4.32 Involving Members in the development of strategic schemes through the planning process is best practice and has been promoted by both the public and private sectors. The key members who should be involved are those who will make the final decision: Planning Committee.
- 4.33 Officers are often faced with the dilemma of how to organise this. It is recommended that it is a meeting in public and not one held behind closed doors. The probity rules are the same whether it is a private meeting, or one held in public, so it is hard to understand what advantages there are to not having the meeting in public with all the benefits of openness that brings.
- 4.34 The next question is whether to have it as part of a Planning Committee meeting or as a separate meeting. The disadvantage of a separate meeting is that attendance can be poor. Having it as part of a planning committee meeting means that you have whole committee attendance. Council's need to decide what suits their particular circumstances best. For ease of drafting, the rest of this guidance note will assume presentation to planning committee, but the principles apply equally to other approaches.

Probity matters

- 4.35 The challenge is to ensure that the probity rules, that Councillors must comply with, are respected. There is a false perception that Members must not express a view on development proposals prior to their final determination at Planning Committee. This has meant that the introduction of Member involvement in the process has often been discouraged or neutered because of the perceived risk of Members expressing a view and thereby excluding themselves from further involvement.
- 4.36 This concern was recognised by government, and legislative provision was made in the Localism Act that "prior indications of view of a matter [are] not to amount to predetermination"⁵ to deal with the problem. However, the impact of this provision has not been significant because it was in fact essentially the existing common law position and therefore added very little. Nevertheless, the message it sent was that it was OK to express a view provided you took appropriate precautions.

⁵ Section 25 of the Localism Act 2011

- 4.37 The solution is quite simple. The key is to understand the difference between predetermination and predisposition in the context of planning applications:
- **Predetermination** is where the impression is given that a Councillor has made up their mind in advance of the final committee meeting – they have a closed mind and are not open to new arguments.
 - **Predisposition** is the expectation that Members will be predisposed to good design, a safe highway network, the delivery of their affordable housing policies etc. Essentially that is what they are there for – to deliver the Council's planning policies.
- 4.38 In a pre-application meeting, therefore, it is perfectly acceptable for Members of Planning Committee to express their view on the **elements** of a development, provided they do not express a view on the development **as a whole**. They are expressing their legitimate predisposition but are not predetermined. For example, the fact that a Councillor says that they dislike the design and therefore wants the developer to review it, does not mean that if the design is unaltered when the case is finally determined that they will vote to refuse planning permission. Other issues may outweigh the perceived design deficiencies and therefore granting planning permission may be the Councillor's balanced conclusion. The Councillor would not have made up their mind but is merely, and naturally, in the process of making it up and pursuing the issues that are important to them and their organisation.
- 4.39 It is often forgotten that the probity rules that govern what members do and say, apply equally to officers! You are of course predisposed to delivering good design, a safe highway network, your affordable housing policies etc and regularly express your views on these elements of the schemes that you deal with. You do not (or at least you should not) express a clear view on the scheme as a whole that amounts to an impression that you have made your mind up before you are in a position to do so, ie when a committee or delegated decision report is drafted. Members can and should operate in the same way. Training will be important so that they clearly understand their role.
- 4.40 It should be made clear that overriding, in-principle policy objections (eg a development in the Green Belt) should not be discussed at the meeting at this stage because of the greater risk of appearing to be pre-determined when expressing views about in-principle issues. Whilst attention must be drawn to such issues in the officer report and presentation, the committee members should be advised by officers that they should not discuss them; the developer should be told to not raise them either. To ensure appropriate discipline, both clear advice should be provided to the developer in advance from senior officers and the committee chair should indicate at the meeting that if the developer raises such matters, the presentation will be halted and potentially abandoned.

Pre-application committee practicalities

- 4.41 The involvement of Planning Committee Members in the process is scalable to suit a wide range of circumstances. For bigger schemes, Member engagement would typically occur at the end of the urban design stage and close to the end of the stage before the application is submitted. For small strategic schemes or an outline scheme that doesn't contain a high level of detail, a single presentation may be all that's necessary. For very large, complex schemes more committee presentations may be required.
- 4.42 If being reported to planning committee, the agenda should be split between Presentations and Determinations. The order of the agenda should be:
- Presentations
 - Applications for determination
- 4.43 The logic behind this ordering is that the strategic presentations should be dealt with first for the following reasons:
- The length of time presentations take is more predictable than determinations which makes the management of the rest of the agenda easier.
 - Developers are likely to have a larger team of consultants for presentations and keeping them waiting for long periods does not send out the right message.
- 4.44 The order of business for each presentation item should be:
- A brief introduction by officers: usually just where and what the development is. The only exception to this would be where there was a matter of principle about which there were potential LPA objections. These need to be raised so that they are not discussed.
 - Developer presentation – allow 15 minutes.
 - Members' Q&As – generally allow 30 minutes.
 - Officer summing up the main points raised by members, which would form the Minute record of the meeting.
- 4.45 The question of public speaking often arises in the context of pre-application presentations. Given that members are not making a decision and the purpose of the meeting is to enable members to input constructively into the design process, it is difficult to see what benefit there is for members of the public to have public speaking rights. To hear local objections at an early stage in the process when a scheme is evolving would not be helpful to a process that is trying to be constructive. It is therefore recommended that this is not provided for. The public will have the opportunity to comment on the scheme when the applicant engages with them (see next section) and will of course be able to object to the application when it is made and should be able to address the committee when it is set to determine it.
- 4.46 The templates for reports to committee (appendix E) will need to take on board the fact that the committee will generally receive three reports over the period the scheme goes from the pre-application stage to determination. In essence this will be the same report being built up as more detail emerges from the pre-application design and Development Management processes. The report structure needs to take account of this.

- 4.47 Members should receive succinct reports that convey to them the information that they need to engage effectively in the pre-application process and to make sound planning decisions at the end of the process. The reports that go to committee during the pre-application stage will need to be carefully written, respecting the predisposition and predetermination rules. However, this will not prevent members from having a clear understanding of what officers think about the elements of the scheme at this stage. They should state their provisional conclusions on individual issues, but not state any definitive conclusions, using language like, “this aspect requires more design development” or “this issue is progressing well”.
- 4.48 It is important to remember that it is not the role of the report to relay the content of the application file, they just need to contain the information that is relevant to enable committee to make a decision. There is a misconception that the more that’s in a report the less likely you are to be challenged successfully. Experience suggests that the opposite is closer to the truth. A long report gives the impression that everything is included and something that isn’t, therefore appears to have been missed. Whereas a report that seeks to deal properly with the main issues and summarises the material, but routine, issues (as an Inspector’s decision on a planning appeal does) is much safer if something is not specifically mentioned.

Stage 3: Community engagement

- 4.49 This model has the community engagement stage occurring before the end of the RIBA Concept Design Stage after input from the LPA’s officers and members. This is generally the optimum time to engage as there is something to show the community that they can comment on, but it is still evolving as a design, and the community’s views can be properly reflected as the design develops. Developers should be encouraged to see the community as a valuable resource to be inputted into the design process.
- 4.50 There will be sites where the community’s involvement at an even earlier stage in the design process is seen as beneficial, such as Neighbourhood Plan designations, and this can easily be accommodated into this model.
- 4.51 During this stage the scheme will move from RIBA Work Stage 2 (Concept Design) to RIBA Work Stage 3 (Developed Design)
- 4.52 For this stage, illustrative material of the proposed scheme, preferably including options, are required. However, it is important that the style of this material gives the correct impression. The scheme is still at an early stage, and the material is effectively a series of sketches. Modern CAD, BIM and illustration software, such as Photoshop, and increasingly AI allows designers to convert these sketches into illustrations that look very realistic. To the non-professional this can convey the wrong impression: that the scheme is more developed than it really is and therefore is a “done deal”. Architects and other designers should be encouraged to remember this when designing and producing their illustrative material; make it look like a work in progress.

- 4.53 This stage should be an engagement, not a promotion exercise. Developers who approach it with an open mind and take on board what the community has to say about their proposals get the most from it. It is the community's neighbourhood, which most of them will know very well. They are a valuable resource that can provide unique insights into the location that the developer is looking to develop. When approached in this way, most developers and their design team find it a highly beneficial exercise that produces valuable design inputs.
- 4.54 There are a wide range of techniques that can be used to enable effective community engagement. The LPA should advise and discuss these options with the developer and provide contact details of local community representatives, including local ward members. What should be encouraged, at the end of the community engagement process, is that the developer facilitates an explicit feedback session where they set out to the community the main comments received from them and how they have addressed these issues, or otherwise, in the scheme: a "you said this" and "we did that" session.
- 4.55 When the developer presents to Planning Committee Members at the next stage, the LPA should expect them to report on the results of this engagement process: to set out what the community said about the scheme and how they have responded.
- 4.56 This stage enables a Statement of Community Involvement document to be prepared and to consider the final amendments necessary to the concept scheme so that it can be developed to the next stage of the design process.

Stage 4: Application preparation

- 4.57 During this stage RIBA Work Stage 3 (Developed Design) will be finalised.
- 4.58 After the community engagement exercise, the LPA should work with the developer to develop their scheme in detail to ensure that it addresses the detailed policies in the development plan and represents good quality design and best practise. The scheme's impact may need to be examined via a full Environmental Impact Assessment, and it is at this stage that it should be finalised. In all cases the external impacts of a development will need to be analysed, understood and mitigated where necessary.
- 4.59 The type of information that may be required in any subsequent application would be set out in the Council's published list of local requirements for planning applications. The developer should be advised during the pre-application stage of what information is needed to accompany their scheme in any subsequent planning application. During this stage of the process those plans, reports and other supporting information will be finalised.
- 4.60 A second visit to a Design Review Panel would be necessary for the very large schemes and a first presentation for the smaller strategic schemes. Again, good clear briefing of the panel is necessary.

- 4.61 The developer should have a further opportunity to present their scheme to Planning Committee Members to ensure that they are fully aware of the impending planning application, to allow the developer to report on the outcome of the community engagement process, to provide further clarity around affordable housing delivery (including quantum, mix and tenure splits), to further determine the extent to which the scheme has been amended or further developed to reflect previous comments made by Members and to give them a further opportunity to engage in the process. Again, overriding, in-principle policy objections should not be discussed at the meeting.

Stage 5: Closedown

- 4.62 The Planning Statement and officer's Committee Report(s) will be a material planning consideration in the determination of the subsequent planning application. The LPA should also provide minute notes of the meetings held throughout the process so that the developer is clear about the advice given.
- 4.63 The LPA should make sure that the proposal is ready for submission by checking that it is complete, so that the application can be validated on receipt. Reviewing a "dummy" or "ghost" planning application (prior to formal submission) to ensure that the various issues and considerations have been thoroughly assessed and considered in accordance with previous conversations is an effective way to do this.
- 4.64 You should also ensure that the heads of terms of any s106 Agreement are acceptable in principle and you should provide general advice as regards the likely CIL liability. The PPA should be finalised to properly timetable the post-application submission process and deal with any residual funding issues.

Review

- 4.65 It is good practice for projects generally to review performance and outcomes. This should be done both at the project level (ie reviewing individual pre-app processes and development outcomes) and at the programme level (ie reviewing the overall process and outcomes). This will ensure that lessons are learnt, and continuous improvement is built in. The programme level review could be published in the Authority's Monitoring Report.

Consultee input

- 4.66 It is important to recognise that statutory consultees, such as Historic England and the Environment Agency, do not have a duty to respond to pre-application consultation requests within a given deadline, prior to the submission of a planning application. However, every effort should be made to involve them early in the process to ensure that they have the correct information necessary for them to provide a timely and meaningful response. Applicants will need to recognise that these statutory consultees may also charge for their services as part of their own pre-application process. LPAs should facilitate joint meetings.

Involving the local community

- 4.67 Developers should be expected to engage meaningfully with the local community on their pre-application submission. It is important to include local communities early in the process and this is strongly supported by the National Planning Policy Framework. Objections are often based on a lack of information or a fear of the unknown; this process should help to reduce such risks. Guidance should be offered to developers on how they should carry out their own consultation processes to complement those of the Council's, so that developers can be satisfied that their responses are robust, including "hard to reach" communities.

The role of Councillors

- 4.68 Given that large-scale applications will often be determined by Planning Committee, it is desirable that Councillors and other key elected representatives (such as the Leader and relevant Cabinet Members) are introduced to proposals early in the process so that they understand them and can contribute to the design and engagement process.
- 4.69 The DTS is designed to facilitate scheme presentation by the applicant to Planning Committee Members, followed by a Q&A session with the members. Generally, this will be done once the initial plans have been discussed and evolved, prior to engagement with the local community, and a further presentation after engagement and subsequent scheme amendments, prior to application submission. This process is designed to enable councillors to comment upon the elements of a scheme (eg design, highway impact etc) without holding or expressing a view on the acceptability of the scheme as a whole, thus complying with probity requirements. In summary, in these pre-application meetings members are there to challenge the scheme, but not to pass judgement on it.
- 4.70 This will be a new role for many Councillors and training will be very important. In addition to the usual staples on the basics of planning and general probity, specific training around the differences between predisposition and predetermination as set out in section 4 above under Presentation to Members of the Planning Committee will be needed. An appreciation of urban design and development viability should also be delivered as a key training sessions.
- 4.71 Due to probity issues, the views of the Planning Committee Members on the acceptability or otherwise of a scheme as a whole cannot be solicited and officers should always advise Members of the need to remain impartial. For this reason, overriding, in-principle policy objections should not be discussed at pre-application presentations. Whilst attention can be drawn to such issues in any officer presentation, members should be advised by officers that they cannot discuss them. Developers should also not raise them.
- 4.72 Developers should be advised not to lobby Members of the Planning Committee nor seek to meet them outside of the framework of a pre-application advice service, as this may be perceived by the public to be prejudicing Members' impartiality.

5 What are the outcomes?

- 5.1 The two key outcomes of this process should be a well-designed planning application and the final pre-application committee report, which will be a material consideration in the determination of any subsequent application. However, there are some additional benefits which include:
- Early identification of any “show-stopping” issues
 - Earlier decisions on applications
 - Avoiding incomplete applications
 - Higher level of certainty
 - Reduced confrontation
 - Cost savings
- 5.2 The main benefit is that by providing the necessary time within a generally co-operative framework, the development stands a better chance of meeting policy objectives and the expectations of the local community. Room is also created for the architect to respond to their brief within a sound urban design and planning policy context, to develop the scheme to strengthen its relationship to that context and to create places of lasting quality.

6 Funding the service?

- 6.1 Fees should be set at a level that reflects the cost of providing the service, including the commitment to formally engage with elected representatives⁶. The aim should be that the developer will receive an efficient, professional and tangible return for their investment.
- 6.2 The approximate number of meetings required for each scheme should be agreed at the Initiation Meeting in the Project Plan and included in the PPA. The Project Plan will look at ways in which issues might be considered in meetings. Therefore, you should be able to estimate the likely overall cost of the pre-application process by applying a range of standard charges to the different elements of the process. The template in appendix B is designed to do this.
- 6.3 An alternative approach is to determine, through empirical research, the average cost of providing the various different services that make up the overall service and charge on a modular basis.
- 6.4 Whichever approach is adopted, an LPA must comply with the requirement in s93(3) that “The power [to charge] is subject to a duty to secure that, taking one financial year with another, the income from charges under that subsection does not exceed the costs of provision”.

⁶ Section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003

- 6.5 Timescales for providing the service should be set out in the Project Plan. Planning officers engage in pre-application processes alongside other work duties. As such, applicants need to appreciate that the priority afforded to pre-application engagement will be aligned and managed alongside the officer's other work commitments. However, LPAs can lawfully provide a Dedicated Planning Officer Service, for schemes where the applicant wants a greater level of priority to be given to their scheme. This is generally where a developer pays additionally for that officer's time so that he is dedicated to that project and it therefore gains a priority in the officer's workload.
- 6.6 We recommend adopting up-front fee payment arrangements rather than invoicing. The whole fee in advance would be too much, so the following breakdown of fees is a recommended approach:
- Prior payment of a fee covering the Initiation Meeting(s).
 - As part of the initiation stage, the preparation of a PPA and Project Plan, the full cost of the service will be estimated. The Council should require payment of 50% of the fees upfront before further meetings take place.
 - The rest of the fees will become due at the mid-point of the pre-application process (as determined by the Project Plan);
 - Towards the end of the process, the service will be reviewed and any adjustments necessary to the final cost of the service will be identified.
- 6.7 If a fee is due and has not been paid, no further meetings or presentations will take place until such time as the outstanding fees have been paid.
- 6.8 The PPA should make it clear that the initial fee proposal is an estimate based on the number and type of meetings expected at that stage. Adjustments to that figure will need to be made towards the end of the process.

7 Conclusions

- 7.1 The approach to pre-application for strategic developments set out in this guidance note is aimed at delivering better quality developments by integrating the design process into the pre-application process. By working together from RIBA stage 0 the two teams (the developer's and the council's) are more likely to align their briefs at an early stage, work collaboratively on addressing issues and be focused on producing a quality development. The community should be seen as an important input into the design process rather than an inconvenience to be worked around. The members of the planning committee, who will ultimately determine these applications, must play an active part in the process so that they can both understand the journey that the design of the scheme has taken, but also so that they can input into that process. It is unreasonable if a planning committee are unsighted on a scheme and disenfranchised in the process but are then expected to approve it at the end of the process because they are told it's fine!

- 7.2 We are required to “approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way”, “work proactively with applicants to secure developments that will improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area” and to “seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible”⁷. This guidance will help you do that.

⁷ Paragraph 39 of NPPF 2024

APPENDICIES

These appendices contain the templates needed for the strategic application pre-application service recommended in this POS Good Practice Guidance Note.

They are provided as separate Word and Excel documents to ease their implementation. Before implementing them, [Highlighted text] should be customised by the LPA.

A. APPENDIX A: PPA Planning Statement

A template for a PPA Planning Statement

B. APPENDIX B: PPA Project Plan (Gantt Chart)

A template for a PPA Project Plan

C. APPENDIX C: PPA Programme Tracker

A template for a PPA Programme Tracker

D. APPENDIX D: Planning Performance Agreement

A template for a Planning Performance Agreement

E. APPENDIX E: PPA Report

A template for a Report to Planning Committee in the pre-application stage – it is based on the template that POS produced as part of the Good Practice Guidance Note it published to assist with the Planning Committee Reforms in June 2026

F. APPENDIX F: Customer Advice Note – the PPA Service

A draft Customer Advice Note on the PPA service

G. APPENDIX G: Customer Advice Note – Presenting to Committee

A draft Customer Advice Note on Presenting to Planning Committee