

Royal Institute of British Architects

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design
Code: Consultation proposals
March 2021

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

The RIBA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on reforms to the planning system through the introduction of a National Model Design Code (NMCC) and amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework. (NPPF)

The RIBA welcomes the Government's determination to improve the quality of design of new and refurbished buildings in the UK. Too many buildings in the UK fail to meet the needs of their users because of they have not been designed or built well.

The built environment is the source 40% of the UK's carbon emissions and the UK has some of the least energy efficiency housing in Europe. The RIBA is concerned that the latest proposed reforms to the NPPF and the NMDC place too much emphasis on external visual appearance and do too little to address improving the overall design quality. Without significant changes to the NPPF, NMDC and the wider policy framework, we do not feel that these reforms will do enough to address quality, safety and sustainability concerns.

The RIBA strongly believes that the NPPF should be amended to provide greater guidance to applicants on the importance of professional advice. To this end, we would urge the Government to promote the use of suitably qualified professionals as the best route to achieving good design outcomes through the inclusion of text in the NPPF similar to that below. We would envisage that similar guidance could helpfully be adopted to promote the use of other professional experts at relevant stages of the design, construction and operation of a building. We would welcome further discussions with MHCLG on this issue.

“Developers are advised to obtain good advice and to recognise the benefit of employing skilled, knowledgeable professionals at an early stage in the project. They are reminded of the importance of obtaining good design advice from a qualified architect.”

With regard to the wider consultation the RIBA recommends that the Government takes the following actions to improve the effectiveness of these reforms in driving wider goals which advance the quality, safety and sustainability of the built environment:

- Makes further amendments to strengthen environmental policies
- Include further clarification on inclusivity within community engagement
- Amends the NPPF to ensure that Article 4 directions are not made harder for Local Authorities to implement
- Increase clarification on functionality over beauty within the National Model Design Code
- Increase clarification on resources and funding for Local Authorities

1. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 2: Achieving sustainable development?

Yes.

However, whilst we welcome the amendments to paragraph 11 (a), we recommend that clarity should be provided on the importance of climate change within the context of sustainable development, and to explicitly set the 2008 Climate Change Act at the centre of the planning system.

Further, this chapter should be updated to reflect the role of local government in meeting the net zero target, as envisaged in the government response to the future Homes Consultation.

2. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 3: Plan Making?

Yes.

We recommend that there should be guidance on funding for Local Planning Authorities to commission local design guides.

3. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 4: Decision Making?

No.

The proposed amendments that are set out in this consultation would limit the operation of Article 4 directions. Despite the burden placed on local authorities in implementing the existing Article 4 directions, they have been essential for protecting areas from existing PDRs.

We do not agree with amendments that make it more difficult for local authorities to maintain existing Article 4 directions or to secure new directions. This proposal would increase the time and resource costs for Local Authorities in developing Article 4 directions. With resource costs being a primary concern raised by RIBA members, we do not support any amendments to the NPPF that create additional strain on Local Authorities.

We do not find either of the options in paragraph 53 appropriate, as both would more strictly limit the situations in which a Local Authority could adopt a new Article 4 direction. If one of the options must be applied, we recommend that the first option is selected.

Further, we recommend that the NPPF is further amended in chapter 7 to encourage and support local councils to produce local and neighbourhood plans that set out a clear and positive vision for the future and prioritise retaining non-residential use at street level.

4. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 5: Delivering a Wide Choice of High-Quality Homes?

No.

Whilst we welcome the change to paragraph 73 (c) emphasises the use of masterplans and design codes to secure a variety of 'well designed and beautiful homes to meet the needs of

different groups in the community. We would suggest that the need for inclusive design be introduced to this paragraph to demonstrate that inclusivity is a feature of good design.

We are concerned by the removal of the word 'innovation' from paragraph 80. A major concern that has arisen from the amendments to the NPPF centring 'beauty' is that design will not drive innovation rather than reinforcing the status quo. We would recommend an inclusion of the value of architects within chapter 8. Further, we recommend the re-introduction of paragraph 60 of the 2012 NPPF in which it is emphasized that planning policies should not attempt should not 'attempt to impose architectural styles or particular tastes and they should not stifle innovation'. This would act to reduce the ambiguity surrounding the word 'beauty'.

5. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 8: Promoting healthy and safe communities?

Yes.

However, we would suggest that the more emphasis should be placed on the inclusiveness of new places. This is particularly important where proposals of new cycling and walking routes are brought forward as we know that attention to design is critical so as not to disadvantage disabled or older people seeking to safely use public spaces. This would be achieved by the addition of the word 'inclusive' within paragraph 92 and a stronger emphasis on inclusive design in paragraph 93.

6. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 9: Promoting sustainable transport?

Yes.

However, we would suggest that an emphasis on inclusivity should be made in paragraph 111(c).

7. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 11: Making effective use of land

N/A

8. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 12: Achieving well-designed places?

No.

We do not think that the emphasis on ‘beauty’ alone will deliver the quality of accessible and inclusive places that the population will need.

The amendments to paragraph 125 and 127 place a high value on the concept of beauty however beauty is not a basis for good design. We recommend that there is an amendment to include accessibility within these paragraphs minimise the need for future construction or adaptive intervention.

We welcome the direction in paragraph 128 that. ‘all guides and codes should be based on effective community engagement.’ However, we believe this should go further to ensure the involvement of disabled people in consultation and engagement processes.

We strongly support the continued reference in footnote 48 to the optional technical standards for accessible and adaptable housing, however this should be revised following the government’s response to the recent consultation on increasing the supply of accessible homes.

The RIBA has proposed that the accessible and adaptable standard M4 Category 2 is established as the regulatory baseline for all new homes, and a national minimum is given for the proportion of new homes that should be developed to wheelchair user standard (M4 Category 3). If this proposal were put into action footnote 48 should be rewritten to clarify the new national policy which should be applied via all plans. If the Government decides not to amend national policy as a result of the accessible housing consultation this footnote should be expanded to explicitly name the building regulations referred to in order to emphasise the desirability of accessible and adaptable homes and wheelchair user dwellings as part of a local housing strategy.

We welcome the provision of street trees on all new streets, however with the manual for streets due to be amended next year we question whether there will be further edits to the NPPF to align with this.

9. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 13: Protecting the Green Belt?

N/A

10. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 14: Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change?

Yes

11. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 15: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment?

Yes

12. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 16: Conserving and enhancing the natural environment?

N/A

13. Do you agree with the proposed changes to Chapter 17: Facilitating the sustainable use of minerals?

N/A

14. Do you have any comments on the changes to the glossary?

We welcome the updated definition of 'green infrastructure.'

15. We would be grateful for your views on the National Model Design Code, in terms of a) the content of the guidance b) the application and use of the guidance c) the approach to community engagement.

RIBA strongly endorse the proposal to appoint a Chief Officer for Design and Placemaking in every local authority. Both zoning and coding system can work well for new developments, but without appropriate resourcing and supervision, there is a danger that they will further erode local influence over design.

Overheating in homes has been identified as a significant health risk and one that is likely to increase in the future. Therefore, we recommend that it is included in the table on page 7 to highlight its importance as a design factor. Further, we recommend that the code is amended to include the need to design current and future predicted overheating risks.

The Code currently shows a prioritisation for car ownership within the example diagram and there should be an inclusion of how the document will evolve in line with longer term challenges and how Local Authorities should create plans that incorporate large adaptations to some suburban models in order to maintain connectivity whilst addressing climate change. We recommend that there is further guidance on how local authorities can reconcile the tension around car ownership within their local plans.

As previously mentioned, we recommend that there should be further guidance on the role of the Office for Place in supporting Local Authorities who require funding as the strain on Local Authorities to develop a planning model is going to require significant government funding. Further, there should be additional guidance on the role of architects within placemaking and place shaping.

We note that layout illustrations failing to reflect the true situation with regards to vehicular movement and car parking. We recommend that alongside the emphasis on the appearance of places, there must be a greater emphasis within the code on functionality in relation to transport.

Page 7 sets out Design code coverage with a table (Fig2). It's welcome that code M.2.iii refers to inclusive streets. The RIBA would suggest that the section on Public Space should similarly reference the inclusivity of design.

We note that U.2.i 'Housing for all' is not covered in the Code. We recommend that this should be strengthened to emphasise the requirement that Local Plan sets out housing policies using the accessible and adaptable standards set out in Part M of regulations.