

Design Commission for Wales: Good Design and the Local Development Plan Process

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1. Introduction

The Design Commission for Wales believes that a well considered Local Development Plan (LDP) is an essential tool for enhancing design quality in Wales.

This brief guide aims to help you identify what should be considered in developing an LDP in order to achieve good quality places. It is not prescriptive, rather it outlines general principles for LDPs, which should facilitate the creation and protection of sustainable neighbourhoods and valued landscapes.

As with planning applications or master plans, DCfW welcomes early consultation with local planning authorities to help provide a background for proposals in an LDP.



2. What is a Local Development Plan?

An LDP is a plan devised by a local authority which sets out a strategy and delivery plan for physical development and change over a 15-20 year period. The plan will be subject to annual monitoring and will be informed by baseline evidence regarding population, growth patterns and expectations, economic, social and environmental data

'The LDP is the required statutory development plan for each local authority area in Wales under Part 6 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. It is a land use plan that is subject to independent examination, which will form the statutory development plan for a local authority area, for the purposes of the Act. It should include a vision, strategy, area-wide policies for development types, land allocations and where necessary, policies and proposals for key areas of change and protection. Policies and allocations must be shown geographically on the Proposals Map forming part of the plan'.

LDP Manual, Welsh Assembly Government, 2006 p7.

The role of an LDP is to tell a story about the future of a place based on analysis of the best available evidence, including input from residents and stakeholders. The plan should set out a vision for the future that should be visible, available and accessible to all.

The Local Development Plan is uniquely Welsh, developed through legislation, regulation and guidance to respond to the needs of Wales. There is a strong emphasis on engaging with communities at the outset, including a requirement for the early publication of a Delivery Agreement (DA) and Community Involvement Scheme (CIS).

Welsh Government documents contain guidance on LDP process and content. The Planning Inspectorate for Wales outlines the criteria for LDP assessment. (<http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/planning/planningsystem/localplans>)

The process includes consultation on two main plan documents:

- + strategic document with options, objectives and a preferred strategy (Pre- Deposit Stage),
- + a deposit document, which incorporates changes resulting from consultation responses on the first document and develops the strategy in more detail ready for submission to the Planning Inspectorate for Examination (Deposit Stage).

Both are very important for engaging with statutory and relevant non-statutory bodies, interest groups, developers/landowners and the public/communities.



3. Approach

Design policy in an LDP should be clear and should cover much more than physical appearance. At a strategic level, design creates the spatial vision for a place and ensures that sustainability sits at the heart of the plan. At a detailed level, it describes how places should work, look and feel. The approach to developing such policy should be comprehensive.

Community Strategies set a foundation for the vision of a place based on sustainable communities and neighbourhoods. An LDP should make that vision visible, locally distinctive and spatial, illustrating and demonstrating how places will change over time. Good visual material and plain language will help to engage residents, workers and developers in early discussion about the future. Clarity and brevity are the essential characteristics of easily accessible documents and plans.

A place does not exist in isolation. When developing an LDP, local planning authorities should be looking outward spatially to understand and balance the potential positive and negative influences that will shape the future. Outward looking authorities will also search for and be able to demonstrate understanding of good practice beyond Wales.

It must be clear that an LDP is set in Wales and that it identifies the unique history, issues and character of an area before it can be a useful planning tool.



4. Pre-deposit stage: The Preferred Strategy

How should a pre-deposit LDP set the basis for good design?

As part of the plan making process, communities and others should be engaged with an LDP long before the first formal consultation document is published at pre-deposit stage.

A pre-deposit plan must outline the aim of the LDP strategy, present a clear understanding of the unique characteristics of the place, and a picture in map and/or graphic form, of its proposed future. Presentation of realistic alternatives for development must allow consultees to consider other spatial choices. Background information, data and analysis, including initial stakeholder discussions and a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) should support a preferred option.

The purpose of a strategy is to integrate themes and places to form a comprehensive and positive approach to the future. This requires a holistic approach to design.

An LDP strategy should focus on what is special about a place, which areas need to change and which should be protected. It should illustrate how the character of a place will evolve during the plan period. Design policy should be sufficiently detailed at this stage to assure residents and others that change will not lead to a decline in the quality of an area but that it will improve over time.

This approach should enable informed discussion of the numbers and locations of new homes, amenities or infrastructure and other development sites, through which the economic, social and physical aims of a plan will be implemented. However, numbers and sites alone must not drive a spatial vision. If they alone become the focus it is unlikely that sustainable communities will result.

Quality places can be achieved only if relevant LDP design policy is applied at different scales, from defining the character and identity of a whole place to the future feel of each neighbourhood or community. A preferred strategy should concentrate on the former, including outlining what is special about a place and indicating how it will be enhanced and protected during a period of change. This could include a design framework such as requiring master plans for strategic sites or ways in

which development should respect valuable landscapes and respond to topography. The LDP strategy should also identify local communities and neighbourhoods (rural and/or urban) and the overall approach to making them more sustainable.

There is a fine line between leadership and dictatorship when undertaking a development plan. This is the stage in the plan process when strong leaders need to make tough decisions and set priorities. This must however be matched with genuine ownership of a preferred strategy by the whole community, in order to ensure that the next stages of plan making are fruitful.



5. The Deposit Plan

How does a deposit LDP further the cause of good design?

A deposit plan is the final draft of a statutory LDP, which will be examined by an independent Planning Inspector from the Planning Inspectorate. It is a cumulative document, which should contain adjustments, iterations or an alternative to the preferred strategy, in response to feedback from the pre-deposit consultation. It should set out a sound, clear case for the strategy, or the proposed alternative.

A deposit plan should outline in greater detail how quality places will be achieved over the fifteen-year plan period. Most places are composed of communities, whether urban or rural. The community is normally the best place to begin and is of a scale which allows for meaningful engagement with residents, building up and/or elaborating on the plan design strategy.

Design policy at this stage should show how communities should function, ecologically, socially and economically, and be improved through the process of change. Describing proposed changes in local transport, waste, energy and water and other resource management; community/ neighbourhood structure and infrastructure, rural land use, urban green spaces and the character and mix of new building are important for showing how communities will become more sustainable over the plan period. It is also important to outline how the unique assets of a place, such as conservation areas, will be protected and enhanced through these changes.

A deposit plan should also include such detail as the broad design principles for master plans of each key site, and general design requirements for specific locations like town centres and for uses such as new housing development. These principles and requirements should send out a clear signal that high quality urban design and architecture will be required.

Deposit plan policy should promote quality places by including such topics as:

- + accessibility/movement/linkage
- + key infrastructure to improve energy, water, resource and waste efficiency
- + social and cultural requirements
- + physical appearance including density
- + access to and improvement of open spaces

Within this framework, an LDP should be designed to be adaptable to new circumstances. Site-specific policies that prescribe density, building materials and similar details have no place in an LDP but should be contained in master plans or adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance.

An LDP should contain indicators of design quality and the standards expected. These should be subject to evaluation and analysis, and should be reported upon through annual monitoring processes, to allow assessment of how changes are improving the quality and sustainability of a place.

What does an LDP mean for the Planning Application Process?

Applications submitted before an LDP is adopted, will normally be judged against an earlier adopted plan (usually a Unitary Development Plan) or national policy in Planning Policy Wales and associated documents. An LDP at an advanced stage may also be a relevant consideration.

Once an LDP is in place, anyone who proposes new buildings or wishes to change the function of land or buildings should submit a planning application that meets the requirements and guidance of the LDP. A Design and Access Statement, which may often accompany an application, should outline how it meets the relevant LDP policies. If a proposal conflicts with LDP principles, there is a higher risk of refusal.