

Character, Appearance and Design



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Key legislation and policy

Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Planning (Wales) Act 2015• Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
National policy and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning Policy Wales, Edition 11, Chapter 3• Future Wales, The National Plan 2040, Policy 2• Technical Advice Note 12: Design, 2016• Site and context analysis guide: Capturing the value of a site, 2016• Design and Access Statements in Wales, 2017• Planning for Sustainable Buildings, 2014• Other relevant WG practice guidance, Manuals etc.• Active Travel Act guidance, 2021
Judgments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•
Other guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design Commission for Wales: Placemaking Guide 2020• Charterdcfw.org/placemaking/placemaking-charter/

Introduction / Summary

1. Planning Policy Wales, Edition 11 (PPW) places a strong emphasis on Placemaking. Placemaking considers the context, function and relationships between a development site and its wider surroundings. Crucial elements to understand what a place is include:
 - a. **Character** - The particular combination of qualities in a place that makes them different from others. It evolves out of rich and complex interaction between people and their built and natural environments.
 - b. **Appearance** - The way a place looks to other people. Appearance of a place has significant impacts on the way people operate within their environment, how they perceive their environment, and what types of people and businesses are drawn to a place over time.
 - c. **Design** - The way in which something is arranged or formed. Design shapes the overall character and appearance of an area.
2. *“Everyone engaged with or operating within the planning system in Wales must embrace the concept of placemaking in both plan making and development*

management decisions in order to achieve the creation of sustainable places and improve the well-being of communities.” (PPW Paragraph 2.1)

3. When approaching decision writing try to weave the reasoning on the proposal in with a description of your assessment of the character and appearance, rather than setting out that assessment as a freestanding statement. Namely, analyse the existing character and appearance, understand the proposal, assess the impact, relate this to national and local policy, and reach a conclusion on placemaking.

Placemaking

Introduction

4. Sustainable places are the goal of the land use planning system in Wales and achievement of this should maximise contributions towards all of the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. A placemaking approach is not just about the public realm or large scale developments. The conditions that determine the success of a place are established by the considerations of a number of factors such as site selection, density, and mix of uses, green infrastructure and accessibility.
5. In this chapter Character, appearance and design elements of placemaking will be introduced and how these can be tackled when writing a decision. There are many factors that come together to make a ‘place’. These relate to, amongst other matters, the uniqueness of the landscape, the buildings and structures on and around it, the people who inhabit and use the buildings and spaces, and the way they move to and through the site. Good design then responds to these features. Whilst the amount of detail provided within an Appeal application may be dictated by the scale of the proposal, there are key factors to be considered.
6. Broadly defined, place is a location. The word is used to describe a specific location, such as the place on a shelf, a physical environment, a building or locality of special significance, or a particular region or location. The term can be used for locations at almost any geographic scale, depending on context. Place also includes descriptions of a site’s features and environmental conditions. The physical and human characteristics of a place make it unique.
7. Additional information about Placemaking can be found on the Design Commission for Wales’ website: [Placemaking - Design Commission for Wales \(dcfw.org\)](https://www.dcfw.org).

Site Visit Preparation

8. Prior to the site visit remember to review the documents on file to make sure you understand the proposal. The plans may provide you with some idea of the area surrounding the appeal site, such as the pattern of streets, density of development and design of buildings. Design and Access Statements can be a

useful guide to the character of an area and may give some analysis of how this has informed the design, as do Landscape Visual Impact Assessments.

9. Do the Council refer to any development briefs, local plan policies or design guidance that may require details to be checked on site? Remember the differing statutory duties regarding conservation areas, the setting of listed buildings, National Parks and AONBs, covered in other ITM Chapters.
10. Remember to read any 3rd Party representations as these may offer an insight as to what local residents think is special about the area or how it is used by the community.
11. Following your review of the case file have you given yourself enough time on site to facilitate an assessment of the character and appearance of the area? Depending on the scale of the development you may need to view the site and its environs from many different vantage points.
12. A check list to use on your site visit may be useful. The notes you make could form the basis for your decision.

The Site Visit

13. At the site visit look at prevalent building forms, architectural character, boundary treatments, road layouts and building materials. Dominant local building materials and building forms should be identified.
14. Think about:
 - Is the site isolated, on the edge or in the middle of a settlement? Is the settlement linear or more cluster shaped? Is it urban, sub-urban or rural?
 - Whether there are aspects of the local built character that could inform local distinctiveness, such as layout, scale, building lines, density, garden sizes, roof forms, window shapes and symmetry.
 - Whether there are aspects of soft landscaping that could inform local distinctiveness, such as mature hedgerows, trees, woodlands, rivers and topography.
 - Are there significant open spaces that the development would impinge on, i.e. corner plots?
 - Are there important cultural or historic areas such as landmark buildings, frontages, entrance locations and scheduled ancient monuments?
 - What are the surrounding uses, do these pose any limitations?
 - Is there a very strong palette of local materials, details like brick bond patterns or use of street furniture?

- Are there opportunities to improve biodiversity?
- How would the proposal be interpreted in relation to the local building context?
- How accessible is the area by non-car modes? Note where bus stops, cycle lanes etc. are located.
- Is the area busy, heavily trafficked, industrial, urban or quiet, isolated and rural?

Writing up the findings on Character and Appearance

15. From what you have seen on the site visit you should be able to:
 - Describe the character of the appeal site and its locality;
 - State whether there is anything about the character and/or appearance of the area that makes it distinctive; and
 - Describe what gives the area a sense of place.
16. Your reasoning should demonstrate an understanding of the character and appearance of the area in relation to any development plan policies and supporting documents. If provided, other evidence such as Landscape Visual Impact Assessments or Landscape Character Assessments may support your approach. However, take time to compare the methodologies applied and the scope of their assessments, including the identified viewpoints. Also consider the magnitudes of effect identified and the number and type of 'receptors' in such reports and then calibrate these against your own assessment based on what you saw on site.
17. Everyone's perception is slightly different. All development will alter the appearance and/or the character of an area in some way. Whether that's positive, negative or neutral is nearly always subjective. However, it is important to try and remain objective in your reasoning about character and appearance of an area, rather than making an assessment of how attractive an area is which is more subjective. This forms the starting point for the analysis of the proposed design and how it relates to relevant development plan policies.

Informing Design

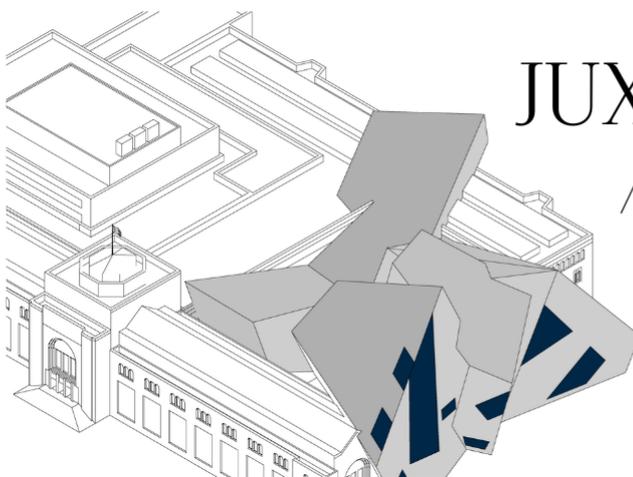
18. *"Good design is fundamental to creating sustainable places where people want to live, work and socialise. Design is not just about the architecture of a building but the relationship between all elements of the natural and built environment and between people and places."* (PPW 3.3). Accordingly, it is clear that 'design' should go beyond aesthetic considerations. It should take into

account the way that an area functions and how the proposal would relate to those functions, as well as what a scheme may look like.

19. TAN 12, paragraph 2.5 states that “*Good design is not inevitable. It requires a collaborative, creative, inclusive, process of problem solving and innovation – embracing sustainability, architecture, place making, public realm, landscape, and infrastructure.*”
20. PPW and TAN 12 both provide extensive information about the importance of good design and how this can be achieved. It is not the intention of this ITM chapter to repeat this information, but to assist you in the application of it in casework. However, as with most areas of casework, articulating the arguments in a comprehensive and well-reasoned manner will assist the decision-writing process. Understanding and utilising design terminology and applying it correctly can often assist this process and a number of key terms are set out as an annex to this chapter.
21. In terms of character and appearance achieving ‘good design’ includes:
 - Sustaining or enhancing local character
 - Promoting legible development
 - Promoting a successful relationship between public and private space
 - Promoting quality, choice and variety
 - Promoting innovative design
22. However, as Inspectors we can only focus on the evidence before us. Therefore, do you understand: the design of the proposal and its form and function; how it relates to the site; and how it would improve the quality of the site/area? In order to assist in this process, it may help to break the proposal into distinct elements, namely:
 - **Layout** is the framework of routes and blocks of development that connect locally/more widely, and the way development is arranged to create streets, open spaces and buildings and how these relate to one other.
 - **Landscape** is the character and appearance of land, including its shape, form, ecology, natural features, hard and soft landscape, and the way these components combine.
 - **Form** is the three-dimensional shape and modelling of buildings and the spaces they define. The form of a building or a space has a relationship with the uses and activities it accommodates, and also with the form of the wider place where it is sited.

- **Scale** is the height, width and length of each building proposed within a development in relation to its surroundings. This relates both to the overall size and massing of individual buildings and spaces in relation to their surroundings, and to the scale of their parts.
- **Appearance** is the aspects of a building or space which determine the visual impression the building or space makes, such as its architecture, building techniques, decoration, colour, texture, and lighting.
- **Materials** used for a building or landscape affect how well it functions and lasts over time. They also influence how it relates to what is around it and how it is experienced.
- **Detailing** affects the appearance of a building or space and how it is experienced. It also affects how well it weathers and lasts over time.

23. Sometimes an architectural dictionary can be useful to help explain different architectural terminology and styles which may be used in supporting information.



JUXTAPOSITION

/jəkstəpə'ziʃ(ə)n/

Juxtaposition does not refer to an architectural element but it is a common word used to describe an architectural idea. In architecture, juxtaposition is when two opposite things are placed next to each other to emphasize the contrast.

24. Once you have grasped the proposed design you can then go on to assess the effect of the proposal on its surroundings that you have already described. Consider how the character or appearance of the place might be changed were the proposal to go ahead and whether this change would: be material; be harmful to the character or appearance; or improve the quality of the area? Indeed, the effect of design upon the character and appearance of an area comes down to context and how a proposal relates to what is around it. It's equally valid to have a contrasting architectural style as one which reflects the surrounding architecture.

25. Matters to consider include:

- How would the proposal relate to its context?

- How are public / private spaces defined?
 - Would the chosen design promote or reinforce local distinctiveness?
 - How would the proposed development relate to patterns of buildings or gaps?
 - Is the development legible i.e. where is the front door, does it acknowledge landmarks or key buildings?
 - Is the development well-articulated?
 - Would the proposal sit comfortably/ be inclusive towards the public realm/ create a pleasant place?
 - How would views be affected?
 - Would the proposed materials blend/contrast?
26. Design and Access Statements can be uninformative as to why a development has been designed the way it has been. They do not generally look at the design process itself and what principles were adopted, but rather just describe the proposal. If it is being argued that the proposal is appropriate to its context and there is no information in the Design and Access statement that analyses the context and explains how that has led to the design of the proposal, it is quite legitimate for the decision-maker to say that.
27. Where a project is large or complex there may be specialised input from a range of consultants. It is important that specialist input is well coordinated and follows any design brief for the site. For example, do acoustic mitigation measures, such as fencing, follow the design principles for the site.
28. Given the policy direction set out in PPW it is important to take a robust approach to poor designs. Even inoffensive buildings may not be adequate if they fail to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions. Moreover, local and/or detailed design principles for an area can provide a clear indication of the types of development that will be allowed in an area, especially where they link to detailed local design guides, masterplans or codes.
29. In particular, Local Development Plan Policies can include specific design considerations, such as:
- New development proposals must have regard to important elements of local heritage, culture, landscape, townscape, views and vistas;
 - New development proposals must sympathetically integrate with the surrounding natural and built environment, taking into account the unique

rural character of the village and the quality of the surrounding landscape and seascape;

- Proposed extensions must be subservient to adjoining/adjacent buildings;
- New development proposals must be well proportioned in itself and in the spaces it creates; and
- Ensure new developments have active frontages onto streets and spaces to provide natural surveillance and character.

30. These development management policies are often generic and whilst planning applications must be determined in accordance with these policies material considerations such as particular aspects of the character and appearance of the area may lead to a design, contrary to the policy, being acceptable. Moreover, PPW points out, at paragraph 3.16, that decision makers should not attempt to impose a particular architectural taste or style arbitrarily and should avoid inhibiting opportunities for innovative design solutions. Accordingly, a contextual approach should not necessarily prohibit contemporary design.

Outline Planning Permission and Design

31. An applicant who proposes to carry out building operations may choose to apply either for full planning permission, or for outline permission with one or more matters reserved by condition for subsequent approval. However, design is often considered at outline stage in order to assist community engagement, inform an environmental impact assessment or design and access statement (where required) and provide a framework for the preparation and submission of reserved matters proposals. It should be noted that design quality cannot be achieved through an outline planning application alone. Outline planning applications allow fewer details about the proposal to be submitted than a full planning application.
32. Where an appellant has chosen to submit design details as part of an appeal application and has not indicated that those details are submitted "*for illustrative purposes only*" (or has otherwise indicated that they are not formally part of the appeal/application), an Inspector must treat them as part of the development in respect of which the appeal is being made.

Writing about design in decisions

33. Addressing design matters as part of the decision-writing process can be challenging. However, as with most areas of casework, articulating the arguments in a comprehensive and well-reasoned manner will assist the decision-writing process. Understanding and utilising design terminology and applying it correctly can often assist this process and a number of key terms are set out in Annex 1 to this chapter. There's no one way to objectively assess design quality and whilst there will necessarily always be a degree of

subjective judgement, a useful assessment method is to consider the design cues of the surrounding area, such as:

- roof forms;
- horizontal or a vertical emphasis of the buildings;
- window shapes and forms;
- solid to void ratios;
- height and width of the buildings around the site;
- any distinctive design rhythms (e.g. uniformly designed terraces; consistent spaces between buildings; dominant materials); and
- small details such as brick bond patterns.

34. Good design will usually:

- Demonstrate an understanding of its context and shows how it has learnt from it (the design is rooted in place).
- Respond favourably to a good environment.
- Aim to lift a poor environment.
- Promote or reinforce local distinctiveness

35. Take a robust approach to poor design. Even inoffensive buildings may not be adequate if they fail to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions. For example, when considered in isolation, the design of a building may not be fundamentally bad, but the design may not have taken cues from the surroundings and, as a result, won't integrate well. If a contemporary design incorporates similar design elements as the existing buildings around it then it is more likely to successfully integrate into the surrounding area.

The Use of Planning Conditions in Design

36. The appearance of a proposal and its relationship to its surroundings are material considerations as set out above. Nevertheless, Inspectors should not attempt to use conditions simply to impose matters of taste. However, there may be circumstances where it is important to secure a high quality of design in a proposal if this is to make a positive contribution to a site and its surroundings and show consideration for its local context. In such cases, the use of conditions may be acceptable.

37. In such cases think about whether conditions are needed to secure key aspects of the design: building materials, window details, external colour scheme, hard and soft landscaping. If it is a key matter in the design of the building, then a feature or material may need to be the subject of a specific condition.

38. During the decision-making stage, where limited design documentation has been prepared as part of the outline planning application, an Inspector can consider using conditions to ensure that fundamentally important principles are respected in detailed design and to set out if there are further detailed design

requirements to make a scheme acceptable. Conditions on design can be identified at the outline planning application stage allowing for the details to be submitted for later determination as part of a reserved matters application.

39. A scheme which is reliant on conditions to make it acceptable should be examined very carefully. Would it meet the fundamental objectives of good design which go beyond style or ornament?

Other relevant Manual chapters

40. Other Manual chapters which may be relevant, include:

- Conditions
- Conservation areas
- Green Belts and green wedges
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment

ANNEX 1

Glossary of design terms

Authenticity - The quality of a place where things are what they seem: where buildings that look old are old, and where the social and cultural values that the place seems to reflect did actually shape it.

Background building - A building that is not a distinctive landmark.

Bay – vertical subdivision of a building elevation.

Block - The area bounded by a set of streets and undivided by any other significant streets.

Bonding pattern – the way in which bricks or blocks are laid i.e. Flemish, English, English Garden Wall, Stretcher bond, stack bonding etc.

Building element - A feature (such as a door, window or cornice) that contributes to the overall design of a building.

Building line - The line formed by the frontages of buildings along a street.

Building shoulder height - The top of a building's main facade.

Bulk - The combined effect of the arrangement, volume and shape of a building or group of buildings. Also called massing.

Context - The setting of a site or area and the features of a site or area (including land uses, built and natural environment, and social and physical characteristics).

Desire line - An imaginary line linking facilities or places which people would find it convenient to travel between easily.

Enclosure - The use of buildings to create a sense of defined space. **Facade** - The principal face of a building.

Fenestration - The arrangement of windows on a facade.

Figure/ground diagram - A plan showing the relationship between built form and publicly accessible space (including streets and the interiors of public buildings such as churches) by presenting the former in black and the latter as a white background, or the other way round.

Fine grain - The quality of an area's layout of building blocks and plots having small and frequent subdivisions.

Height to width ratio – determines the degree of enclosure of a street or space, the height of the buildings compared to the distance between buildings facing each other.

Landmark - A building or structure that stands out from the background buildings.

Legibility - The degree to which a place or building can be easily understood by its users and the clarity of the image it presents to the wider world.

Live edge - Provided by a building or other feature whose use is directly accessible from the street or space which it faces; the opposite effect to a blank wall.

Local distinctiveness - The positive features of a place and its communities which contribute to its special character and sense of place.

Massing - The combined effect of the arrangement, volume and shape of a building or group of buildings.

Node - A place where activity and routes are concentrated. Perimeter block – a block with the buildings situated around the edges which may or may not be continuous.

Permeability - The degree to which a place has a variety of pleasant, convenient and safe routes through it.

Plot ratio - A measurement of density expressed as gross floor area divided by the net site area.

Proportion – the relationship of two or more elements in a design and how they compare with one another. Good proportion adds harmony, symmetry, or balance among the parts of a design.

Rhythm – in design, rhythm is the regular, harmonious recurrence of a specific element, often a single specific entity coming from the categories of line, shape, form, colour, light, shadow, and sound.

Solid to void ratio – the proportion of a building elevation that is wall compared to the proportion that is windows or other openings.

Uniformity - defined as the state or characteristic of being even, normal, equal or similar. Uniformity and consistency help users extract meaning from the design of an application, keeping them focused on the tasks and not distracted by design ambiguities. Elements such as visual hierarchy, proportion, alignment, and typography play major parts in the uniformity of a design.

Urban grain - The pattern of the arrangement and size of buildings and their plots in a settlement; and the degree to which an area's pattern of street-blocks and street junctions is respectively small and frequent, or large and infrequent.

Urban structure - The framework of routes and spaces that connect locally and more widely, and the way developments, routes and open spaces relate to one another.

Vernacular - The way in which ordinary buildings were built in a particular place before local styles, techniques and materials were superseded by imports