

Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission

UKGBC response

2. Do you consider that securing 'beauty' should be a broad objective of the planning and development process - whether in the natural or built environment?

Yes. UKGBC support the inclusion of beauty as an objective of the planning and development process. The pursuit of beauty is valuable for its own sake, in promoting high quality development people can support and be proud of. Furthermore, it offers a valuable opportunity to address multiple social and environmental concerns around new development, helping deliver progress on related policy objectives.

Consideration of beauty is important for engaging community support around sustainable new development and delivering on wider policy objectives; such as achieving biodiversity net gain, enhancing mental health, providing social value and tackling climate change. Sustainability and beauty are not, and should not be perceived as, conflicting. Truly sustainable places and buildings will need to be beautiful in order to stand the test of time, with features that deliver for public health, wellbeing and biodiversity. The integration of nature is a central component of this in the built environment, with significant cultural resonance and value in both tackling climate change and biodiversity decline. It should be promoted across individual property, neighbourhood, landscape and development site designs.ⁱ This should be reflected in the recommendations of the Commission.

Opposition to development is commonly linked to interconnected concerns over visual and environmental impacts. Previous Government surveys found 73% of people surveyed in 2010 said they would be more likely to support housing if it was well-designed and appropriate for the local area.ⁱⁱ To focus on achieving 'beauty' is therefore welcome, as this will help ensure the delivery of homes, amenities and infrastructure people want, can support and be proud of. This crucially includes the potential to address environmental concerns and deliver on the goals of the 25 Year Environment Plan.

In order to be effective in addressing these issues, any definition of 'beauty' must involve thorough engagement with communities and a sense of co-creation, whilst ensuring beauty is part of encouraging wellbeing, nature and quality of life more broadly through good place design.

Providing social value

Architecturally, evidence of what beauty broadly represents in public opinion has suggested it is possible to quantify common preferences, including an appreciation for 'green' features and high-quality placemaking.ⁱⁱⁱ Further research has likewise suggested that residents' mental welfare is substantially higher in areas and developments that they find beautiful.^{iv} These findings offer significant potential value to the pursuit of beauty, including the opportunity to deliver wider benefits to society through alignment with the mental health focus in the NHS Long Term Plan.^v

The benefits and scope of beauty in the built environment go beyond architectural form and encompass wider landscape design, neighbourhood placemaking and genuinely nature-enhancing green infrastructure. The topic of social value has been rising up the agenda for the built environment industry in recent years. The concept - through the Social Value Act, through local authority requirements and through industry leadership, is one way of helping to drive developments that add value for local communities, including, potentially, beauty. At the heart of this is a drive to make new development work better in the interests of local communities and residents. This means ensuring

developments are appropriate for local landscapes and character, whilst also providing practical, life enhancing design features such as green space, walkability, community assets, well-designed sustainable transport solutions and neighbourhood layouts.

Beauty and nature

Any definition of ‘beauty’ should reflect the fundamental role of nature's beauty in the built environment, which is an idea that has deep roots in culture and society.

There is a substantial body of supportive evidence regarding the benefits of green infrastructure, nature, greenspace and greenery-in-design to both human health and wellbeing. These benefits are often derived from people appreciating such elements visually (i.e. In addition to non-visual benefits such as clean air).^{vi} This is reflected in the willingness of buyers to pay more for properties in greener areas and the importance of ‘greenery’ in research related to attractiveness.^{vii}

Human wellbeing and ecological benefits are often mutually reinforcing. A study by Fuller et al. (2007) found a correlation between the psychological benefits of visiting parks in Sheffield and species richness. Both greater bird and plant diversity increased the wellbeing benefits gained from those visiting the green space.^{viii} A study by Cox et al. (2017) has likewise found that bird abundance and vegetation cover in urban areas reduced residents’ anxiety, stress, and depression.^{ix} Both species-richness and natural genuinely nature-enhancing infrastructure are clearly key to maximising aesthetic appreciation and the associated wellbeing benefits of an environment. A study by Dallimer et al. (2012) found that perceived species abundance exhibited a positive correlation with wellbeing.^x Further studies on flower meadows have indicated that both actual and perceived species richness correlate strongly with wellbeing; notably thriving bird, butterfly and plant species all positively correlated with wellbeing.^{xi} Tree cover has been shown to have a positive relationship with mental wellbeing, the possible explanation being that tree cover acts as a psychological proxy for the perceived “naturalness” of an environment.^{xii}

Nature-enhancing green infrastructure provisions such as public greenspace, high-quality domestic gardens, street trees and innovations such as green walls, should therefore be a crucial part of considerations regarding beauty. Such features also present vital opportunities to address UK biodiversity decline, deliver net gain and meet wider environmental objectives. These include, for example, the impact of street trees on localised air pollution reduction, as well as their role as microhabitats supporting urban species.^{xiii} Urban areas can hold diverse wildlife populations and in some cases more species than rural areas.^{xiv} Parks and other urban spaces can preserve significant species diversity, although this does depend on their connectedness and habitat quality.^{xv} Built environment green spaces are thus increasingly important for wider biodiversity conservation goals, including Nature Recovery Networks.^{xvi}

One example of where biodiversity-enhancing green infrastructure has provided significant aesthetic enhancement is Kidbrooke Village by Berkeley Group. Working with the London Wildlife Trusts a predominantly concrete, brownfield urban landscape was transformed into a network of biodiverse parks, wetlands and natural habitats, alongside 4,800 mixed tenure homes. At the heart of the green infrastructure network is the 20 acre Cator Park, which connects two existing nature reserves, Kidbrooke Green and Birdbrook, to create a much larger territory for south east London wildlife. This parkland corridor includes native planting, species-rich meadows, grasslands, wetlands and swales. It provides a diverse mix of habitats and food sources, with large areas deliberately left to grow wild so they can support more natural life. This has ensured that Kidbrooke Village has achieved a significant

biodiversity net gain in line with targets set by the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, providing biodiversity rich vistas and a verdant living environment that enhances residents' quality of life.

Further illustrations of the visual appeal of biodiversity-enhancing green infrastructure are visible in the work of Redrow and their garden village design, including the ability to soften and blend with development. This is supported by further case studies provided from Berkeley Group (**both attached with original submission, available on request*).

Addressing climate change

Achieving beautiful design is also compatible with addressing contributions to combat climate change. Whilst low carbon design is clearly not automatically beautiful, it does possess clear potential to deliver beautiful, future-proof designs that deliver value for residents and communities.

UKGBC have recently released a Framework Definition, which outlines the steps required to achieve future-proof net zero buildings. The key components of the net zero framework, higher energy efficiency, demand reduction and renewables usage, can readily be implemented without compromising beautiful design.

The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) has recommended greater use of timber to increase carbon sequestration in building materials.^{xvii} Examples submitted to UKGBC have shown that for development in areas sensitive character areas, such as National Parks or Conservation Areas, clever use of materials, such as sustainable wood, has encouraged local authority and community support for designs. This principal was key to a proposal from Sanya Polescuk Architects for two houses in Horton in Ribblesdale, within the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Hanham Hall by HTA Design and Barratt Developments. Horton in Ribblesdale included extensive use of local, sustainable materials to achieve a non-invasive design, whilst Hanham Hall includes use of wood to soften the appearance of housing adjacent to green belt and notable local views.

We have shown above that integration of nature in development offers win-wins for environment and for beauty, but it might also support further carbon emission mitigation and sequestration, which is an area being actively explored given we need to increase the pace at which we move to a net zero carbon economy.

3. Can you provide evidence of the best ways of creating homes and communities that have achieved a) sustainable and walkable densities b) high levels of public support c) high levels of well-being and d) environmental sustainability?

UKGBC's recent [Social Value in New development](#) guidance discussed the relationship between depth of involvement of local stakeholders and the likelihood of good social value outcomes. It highlighted that the likelihood of good outcomes will increase the deeper the involvement is, with greater empowerment and co-design more likely to achieve positive outcomes. Conversations with the local stakeholders should start during investment and planning. Communication and collaboration should continue through the development lifecycle and throughout operation. Following specific consultation for this response, UKGBC members have indicated several further methods for achieving the desired outcomes.

The experience of members has illustrated that, for larger sites, all these aims are best achieved through comprehensive incorporation into masterplans at the initial planning and design stage, with accompanying community engagement plans and partnership working. These plans should include the principles as core to their approach to placemaking, with examples highlighting comprehensive

technical briefs from Homes & Communities Agency (now Homes England), SWERDA and Local Authorities.

Many members have already made such criteria central to their placemaking values, as part of a sustainable approach to high-quality design. Further standardization and requirements for such features through policy, design guidance, design codes and master-planning requirements, would build on and complement the growing role such considerations already have in the industry. A specific example of application would be Redrow's approach to garden villages, which already incorporates extensive consideration of sustainable transport and improving walkability through master-planning guidance.

The most crucial means identified for ensuring public support was to develop and incorporate high-quality design principles and community engagement strategies from the outset. These should include strong commitments in key areas including: respect for local architectural heritage and landscape character; maximising greenspace, property sustainability credentials and environmental enhancement. Such commitments pre-emptively address common concerns with development, and are currently enacted through organisational guidance principles, such as Berkeley Group's "Nine concepts of Beauty" which specifically emphasize the pursuit of green infrastructure, biodiversity enhancement, walkability and local built character.¹ Further national government policy could build on and encourage such industry trends across the country. Bolstering guidance, including through legislation, would provide welcome clarity, aligning with current industry efforts whilst encouraging support for development. This should also be encouraged further through Local and Joint Spatial Plans.

The Kidbrooke Village Biodiverse Landscape Strategy was accompanied by a major community engagement programme, to encourage local people to get involved with the management and stewardship of beautiful, biodiverse open spaces. The parkland is also home to a regular programme of volunteering activities and community events, encouraging people to come together and enjoy all the benefits of nature. The Kidbrooke Village masterplan also incorporates green roofs, sustainable urban drainage systems and wildlife features such as swift nesting bricks and bee hotels.

The Elephant Park development by Lendlease included contextual brick banding in Trafalgar Place, to ensure the modern development was in-keeping with the existing area in terms of colour scheme. Likewise, the 360 new homes in the South Gardens Area were designed to complement the adjoining Georgian and Victorian conservation area. The site was originally home to 406 mature trees that had been planted in the 1960s and 1970s when the estate was built, early masterplans did not envisage retaining any of these trees. A local campaign to save the trees resulted in Lendlease re-drawing the masterplan to retain over 120 of the mature trees on the site. On top of that, a CAVAT study was completed to value all the trees and also project what the value of those trees would have been if they had stayed in the ground until the whole project completes in 2025.² Lendlease then committed not only to replace that CAVAT value but actually to increase it by 5%. This has meant that as well as ensuring every tree on-site is replaced, Lendlease has planted over 900 trees in a 1km radius around Elephant & Castle, including communal gardens, greenspace and insect hotels in the development to maximize biodiversity.

¹ https://www.berkeleygroup.co.uk/media/pdf/0/k/The_Nine_Concepts_-_Making_space_for_nature_and_beauty.pdf

² <https://ltoa.org.uk/resources/cavat>

A further example of the aesthetic suitability of sustainable design and materials is Hanham Hall development, South Gloucestershire.³ Barratt Developments, HTA Design LLP and HCA worked in partnership with South Gloucestershire Council and Sovereign Housing to provide 186 homes for sale and rent, ranging from one-bedroom apartments to five-bedroom houses 65% private, 35% affordable. The nine-hectare site adjoins the greenbelt and so included green space to prevent obstruction of local views and to suit the setting, such as wildflower meadows, a pond communal orchards, greenhouses and allotments. The ecology of the site was doubled to add value to the open spaces and to meet the requirements of the sadly now-defunct Code for Sustainable Homes. Exterior timber shading of natural wood blends in with the landscape of the countryside. Hanham Hall achieved the 2016 'zero-carbon' standard and is one of the flagship Carbon Challenge schemes promoted by the HCA. The standard is achieved by using a very efficient building envelope constructed using Kingspan TEK Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs) and roof-mounted photovoltaics. Roads are linked to cycle paths to encourage people to drive less and walk and cycle more. The homes also meet the Lifetime Homes and the Building for Life standard. The scheme was designed with in the requirements of an existing masterplan and a very challenging technical brief from Homes & Communities Agency. Residents will all have a share in a Community Interest Company set up to manage and maintain the buildings and grounds.

Some members have further experience with specific tools, such as the Beauty In My Back Yard (BIMBY) Toolkit, which assists communities in engaging with developers to achieve the development they want to see, including local building styles. The '5 essential qualities of place matrix' offers a potential means to engage with, and to a degree quantify, beauty in relation to local planning and community sentiment, promoting a sense of co-ownership.⁴

For smaller sites, examples provided also highlighted competitions run on behalf of councils, for sensitive sites such as in AONBs. An example attached includes a competition run by RIBA for Craven District Council (lead authority), South Lakeland District Council, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, and Lake District National Park Authority.⁵ The clear, well-written brief, with a high expectation of quality design by the organisers, was considered effective in encouraging sustainable communities, in conjunction with national park visible form guidelines. It also provided a greater degree of control for the local authority, helping expedite the final development once selected.

4. Can you provide evidence of ways of creating homes and communities in other countries, which have been successful in achieving a) to d) in question 3?

No comment

5. Do you consider that collaborative community and stakeholder engagement processes (such as planning for real, enquiry by design, charettes) are effective in securing more publicly accepted development? If so, at what stage of the planning and development process are they most effectively used?

From the experience of members, UKGBC consider that collaborative community and stakeholder engagement processes are effective in securing more publicly accepted development. These are best implemented early and throughout the development process to ensure a sense of co-ownership.

An illustrative example is by igloo Regeneration, Dundas Hill, Glasgow.

³ <https://www.barrattdevelopments.co.uk/showcase/hanham-hall-bristol>

⁴ <https://www.bimby.org.uk/toolkit>

⁵ <http://ribacompetitions.com/gpld/index.html>

Dundas Hill is a former distillery site in the Port Dundas area of Glasgow, on the banks of the canal. The 600-home masterplan provides high density urban and custom-build housing focused on the creative design identity of the city. Dundas Hill is a useful example of the use of community design charettes, to engage local people in the development process right from the start. This sense of co-ownership helped the application go through planning with no objections.

Community engagement can also support custom-build and other forms of community-led development, which can result in good social and environmental outcomes.

6. Can you provide evidence on the benefits and problems associated with introducing, and enforcing, design methods such as master-plans, design briefs and design codes, in the creation of homes and communities?

UKGBC members consulted reported positive experiences with design briefs, codes and master-plans.

As indicated in Question 3 above, it was felt master-plans and comprehensive design codes helped to encourage high-quality design features and address public concern, in conjunction with working closely with local authorities and community groups.

On the smaller scale, design briefs were also considered beneficial in promoting high-quality design. However, concerns were raised that the promotion of sustainability could suffer through both perceived and actual conflict with local styles. This included concern over the reputational damage to sustainable projects in and across communities, where specific projects favoured more radical aesthetic designs justified on the basis of sustainability innovations which were at odds with local character and stylistic concerns. As discussed below, we believe that further clarity should be provided to ensure no adverse trade-offs between sustainability, aesthetic quality and suitability in design guidance or policy. Beauty and sustainability should not be seen as conflicting.

7. How ideally, could the planning and development process in England foster higher standards in design, over the long term?

Whilst certain UKGBC members have incorporated provision aesthetic considerations into their design principles, a common concern for the industry was how to apply the concept simply and practically. Any future approach to beauty could benefit from further work to ensure simplicity and ease of application for the concept in practical terms.

UKGBC's recent [Social Value in new development](#) guidance, discussed the limitations of the current planning system for encouraging social value and wider public goods. Industry sentiment indicated current measures under the NPPF, including Section 106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy, are not fully capitalising on the opportunities to deliver social value and wider public goods. The patching together and negotiation of various planning obligations and conditions was considered not to provide a holistic approach to maximising the opportunities of development and could result in unhelpful trade-off situations. Likewise planning conditions and obligations were highlighted as typically delivering quite a narrow selection of interventions which benefit the public good.

A number of leading local authorities are looking at integrating social value into their planning process, although with different approaches. Some practical opportunities include:

- For the local authority to stipulate a financial contribution which sits alongside the other planning obligations, such as a percentage social value add. While this is an approach taken by some local authorities, it doesn't address the limitations highlighted in the previous section.

- For the local authority to propose planning obligations and conditions which encourage social value outcomes. These could be specific to a particular outcome, but a more effective approach might be a requirement for a social value strategy.
- One of the most favoured approaches is the emergence of ‘dual conditions’. This is a planning condition that requires the developer to provide a social value strategy for the proposed development both before construction can start and before occupation is permitted. Currently Both Coventry City Council and Manchester City Council are looking into this option.

The Government should adopt and build upon the recommendations of the Letwin Review in relation to design and go further through discussion of principles in relation to smaller sites. If implemented, this package of recommendations would give local authorities a greater influence on design, with more powers to masterplan sites. This would help encourage high quality design, whilst also speeding up build out rates. However, a greater role for local authorities, in providing the essential scrutiny to ensure good design, should consider resourcing and capacity concerns.

A degree of commonality across the core principles of beautiful design underlying any new legislation or design code requirements should be encouraged. This should aim to ensure reliable consideration and integration of core aesthetic principles across developments, fostering a degree of consistency in approach whilst permitting flexibility to reflect local characteristics. Principles should, as discussed, include the importance of sustainability and nature enhancing green infrastructure.

The relevant recommendations from the Letwin Review include:

- *Introducing a power for local planning authorities in areas with high housing demand to designate particular areas within their local plans as land which can be developed only as single large sites, and to create master plans and design codes for these sites which will ensure both a high degree of diversity and good design to promote rapid market absorption and rapid build out rates.*
- *Giving local authorities clear statutory powers to control the development of such designated large sites could be achieved through either of two structures. A) The local authority could use a Local Development Company (LDC) to carry out this development role by establishing a master plan and design code for the site, and then bringing in private capital through a non-recourse special purpose vehicle to pay for the land and to invest in the infrastructure, before “parcelling up” the site and selling individual parcels to particular types of builders/providers offering housing of different types and different tenures. Or B) the local authority could establish a Local Authority Master Planner (LAMP) to develop a master plan and full design code for the site, and then enable a privately financed Infrastructure Development Company (IDC) to purchase the land from the local authority, develop the infrastructure of the site, and promote the same variety of housing as in the LDC model.*
- *The Government should adopt a new set of planning rules specifically designed to apply to large sites. The purpose of these rules should be to ensure that all sites in areas of high housing demand whose size exceeds a certain threshold are subject to an additional form of planning control that requires those owning such sites to provide sufficient tenure diversity and design quality on the site, which are able to address the various categories of demand within the local housing market. This, in turn, should ensure that houses can be built at a greater rate than at present on such sites, because the absorption rate for each category of housing will be complementary, yielding a greater absorption of housing by the local market as a whole in any given period.*

These new rules could include a new planning policy document that could be annexed to the NPPF and would deal exclusively with planning policy in relation to large sites in areas of high housing demand.

A new planning policy document should set out:

“Good design both of housing itself and of streetscape and landscape should be a feature of all new development on large sites. To diversify the site offer, large sites should deliver varying design styles, in accordance with local design codes.”

8. What first steps do you think the Government should take towards fostering higher standards in design through the planning and development process?

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Design Guidance, currently being produced, could include specific guiding principles on beauty in the built environment. This should reflect the crucial role of nature-enhancing green infrastructure in publicly appreciated beautiful design; both in individual property and larger place-making developments.

These principles should subsequently be reflected in Local Plans and given sufficient weight in the planning process.

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