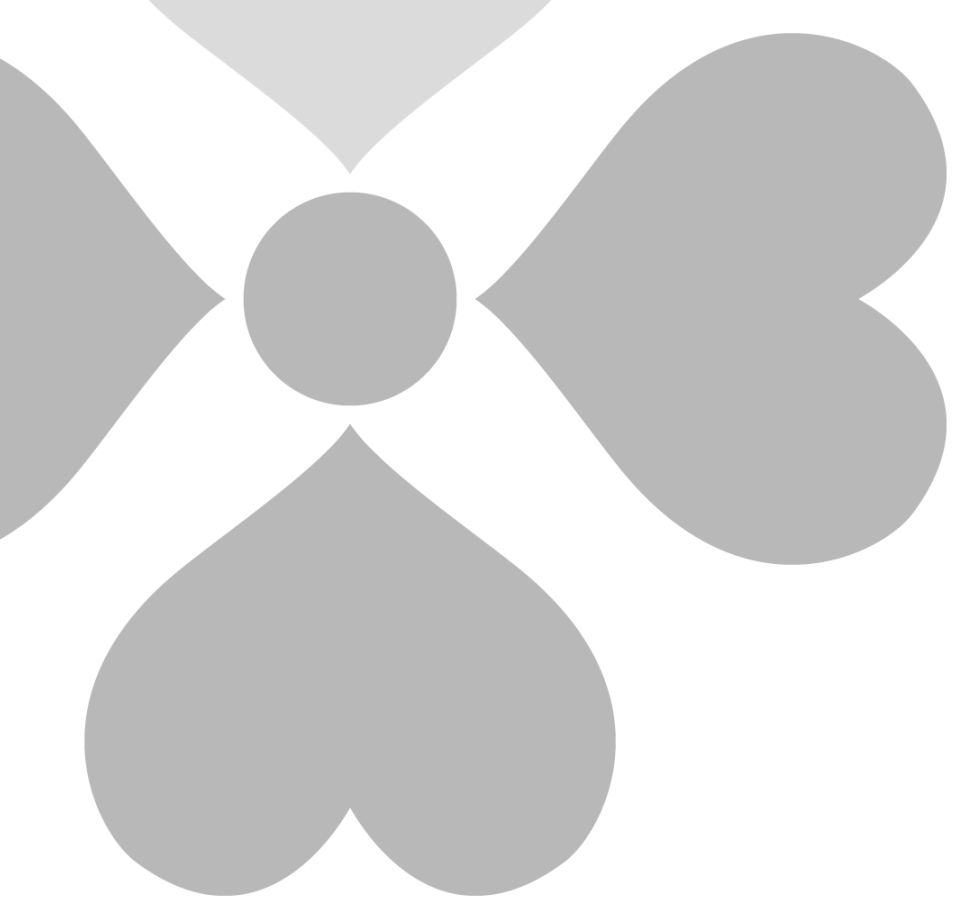




IDENTIFY ISSUES

NORTH HERTS DISTRICT DESIGN CODE
STAGE 1 SUMMARY REPORT



The following report summarises work undertaken by the North Herts Urban Design team during Stage 1 of the District Design Code (between June and May 2024). The main focus for Stage 1 'Identify Issues' was to conduct a place review of sites within the district in order to identify focus areas that the code needs to address. This report is intended for internal North Herts circulation only.

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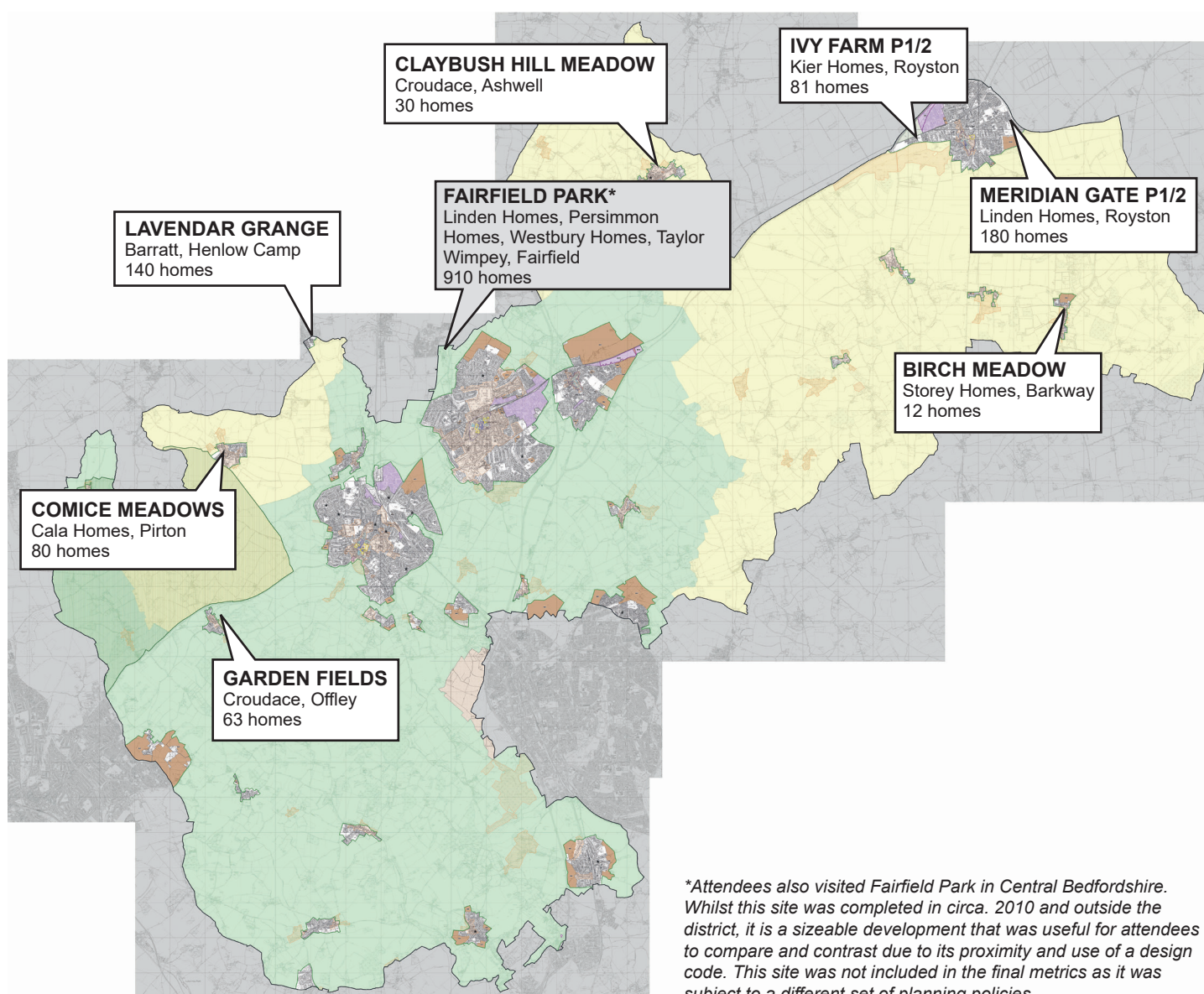
STAGE 1

KEY INFORMATION

In order to shape the strategic direction and focus for the Design Code, the Urban Design team held a series of guided site visits with officers and members to understand what development in North Herts was doing well and what could be improved. This process mirrors national methodology conducted by the Place Alliance, their most recent publication being 'A Housing Design Audit for England' which assessed 142 large-scale housing led developments across the country against good practice criteria.

In North Herts, attendees visited a total of 8 recently completed developments across the district (shown on the map below) of varying scale, character and location over a total of 4 days. At each site, attendees were asked to complete a design questionnaire during that assessed various aspects of urban design across six key categories. Criteria (shown opposite) were based on Buildings For A Healthy Life Guidance (2020), the National Model Design Guide and Place Alliance criteria. The form asked attendees to rate each site against a statement from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. To look at the data, this was then translated into a score which allowed the team to rank the highest and lowest scoring statements. Key objectives from the visits were:

1. To facilitate discussions around what good and bad development looks and feels like.
2. To develop an understanding of what development in North Herts is doing well.
3. To develop an understanding of what development in North Herts is doing less well and needs to be improved.
4. To gather numerical data which will inform priority areas for the code moving forwards.



SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT

The development is legible - as a place it is easy to understand and navigate through as a visitor.

There is a clear hierarchy of routes - for example a primary street feels different to a tertiary one.

The blocks and plots in the development fit in with the settlement structure of the surrounding area and reflect local character.

The development is tenure-blind - moving around, I cannot tell which homes are affordable and which ones are private.

The development is stitched into its surroundings - I cannot tell where this development starts and the existing context begins.

NATURE, OPEN SPACE AND ECOLOGY

It feels like there is a good balance of open space and buildings in this development.

Open spaces feel inclusive, safe, well used and accessible.

Green spaces have a clear purpose or function - they are not 'grassy patches' that could be used for anything.

Green spaces feel distinctive to the local area in their character, design and planting - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.

Attenuation ponds and swales are well-integrated into the landscape and add to a sense of place.

MOVEMENT, CONNECTIVITY AND PARKING

The development feels like it is designed for pedestrians and cars come second place.

Streets feel safe to use, well-lit and well-overlooked.

Streets feel like places - there are places to rest and linger in the shade and pavements are a suitable width.

Routes, roads and paths are well-connected - there are no dead ends or impermeable private driveways.

Parking spaces are well integrated into the design of the street - they do not dominate the public realm and are contained to dedicated areas.

Streets are designed as places for nature with high quality planting, trees and swales.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EMPLOYMENT

Non-residential uses are appropriately placed within developments to ensure they are accessible and well-used.

Non-residential uses are of a high design quality to instil a sense of civic pride within communities.

There seems to be an appropriate offer of non-residential uses in the development - not too much or too little.

Walking and wheeling routes to schools and nurseries are clear, pleasant and pedestrian-friendly.

CHARACTER, TYPOLOGY AND BUILT FORM

Streets feel well-defined with consistent frontages and regular front doors - it is not haphazard and defined by a range of fronts, gables, fences and backs.

The homes feel distinctive and celebratory of the area's local architecture - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.

Across the development, building heights are appropriate.

Building materials are of a high quality and sensitive to the local context.

Variety in the built form works well - there is enough difference and distinction between homes to create a sense of place.

DELIVERY, MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

Public open spaces (such as parks and playgrounds) are well maintained and clean with thriving planting.

Front gardens, hedges and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.

Streets (including verges, parking bays and street trees) are well maintained and clean.

'Leftover' space where management responsibility is unclear as been designed out.

OFFICER PLACE REVIEW RESULTS

North Herts officers from teams across the Place Directorate were invited to take part in the Place Review site visit days held in June and July 2024. Attendees covered a wide range of specialisms (planning, urban design, ecology, transport, strategic policy, infrastructure) ensuring the results captured a range of views.

In total, 74 officer response forms were tabulated across 7 sites over three days of site visits. Below is a summary of each of the three days including sites visited.

Site Visits Day #1

Attendees: Strategic Planning, Transport, Urban Design

Date: 19/06/24

Sites Visited: Claybush Hill Meadows (Ashwell), Meridian Gate (Royston) and Birch Meadow (Barkway).

Site Visits Day #2

Attendees: Strategic Planning, Transport, Urban Design

Date: 17/07/24

Sites Visited: Comice Meadows (Pirton), Garden Fields (Offley) and Lavendar Grange (Lower Stondon).

Site Visits Day #3

Attendees: Development Management, Urban Design

Date: 31/07/24

Sites Visited: Birch Meadow (Barkway), Meridian Gate (Royston), Ivy Farm (Royston) and Claybush Hill Meadow (Ashwell).



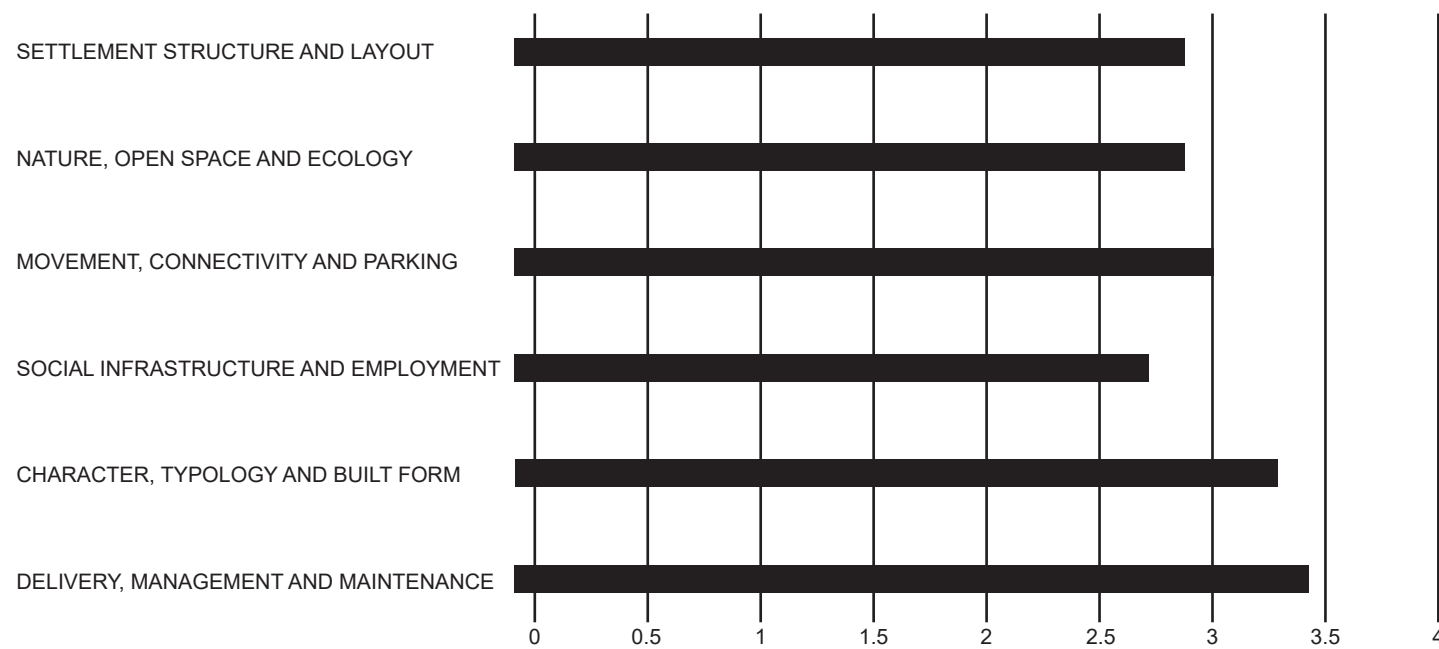
Results from all three days were tabulated and studied to understand what sites were delivering successfully and areas that needed improvement. Looking generally at each of the categories, there was not much discrepancy with all scoring between 2.5 and 3.5 - suggesting that the code will need to cover all areas as there are elements of each category that are doing well and aspects that must be addressed.

Looking more specifically at the individual statements, building heights across all sites were regarded as appropriate. In addition, front gardens were generally well-maintained suggesting a high-level of civic pride with residents taking care of their private spaces where provided. Lastly, streets were regarded as safe with appropriate levels of lighting and passive surveillance - although it must be noted that all assessments were completed during the day.

Areas that were highlighted as needing improvement were the functionality of green spaces. Whilst many sites were reported as providing enough green space, it was the use, planting and identity of the open space itself that was scored very low, with many reports of poorly maintained ‘grassy patches’ that were not well-used and could be anywhere.

Another key challenge highlighted was the integration of sites into the existing context with many reports of poor connections across the site boundary, a lack of visual permeability and a lack of co-ordination between adjacent development sites, illustrated through mismatched active travel corridors and a duplication of play spaces with a lack of interconnectedness.

Tenure-neutrality was also a major concern with affordable and social housing homes easy to spot due to a change in public realm, an over-dominance of car parking, a lack of defensible space to the street (front gardens) and a lack of varied building typologies with the majority of affordable and social housing tenures delivered as terraces. Their placement on the site also meant a lack of parity in access to open space, with many social homes located in less desirable areas of the site such as near railways and/or major roads as noise attenuation features shielding the rest of the site.



Graph showing average scores per topic area across all sites visited

HIGHEST SCORING CRITERIA

- Across the development, building heights are appropriate.
- Streets feel safe to use, well-lit and overlooked.
- Front gardens, hedges and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.

LOWEST SCORING CRITERIA

- Green spaces have a clear purpose or function - they are not ‘grassy patches’ that could be used for anything.
- The development is stitched into its surroundings - I cannot tell where this development starts and the existing context begins.
- The development is tenure-blind - moving around, I cannot tell which homes are affordable and which ones are private.

MEMBERS PLACE REVIEW RESULTS

All North Herts members were invited to take part in the Members Place Review day in October 2024. The day was structured around guided site visits led by the Urban Design Team, to support on-site discussions. At each location, members completed a structured survey to evaluate aspects of the development, followed by a lunch session, reflective group discussion and two further site visits in the afternoon.

A total of 11 members attended from a range of portfolios and wards with 12 member response forms tabulated and analysed below.

In the morning, members visited Merdian Gate in Royston followed by Fairfield Park in Central Bedfordshire before returning to the District Council Offices for lunch. In the afternoon, members visited Lavendar Grange in Lower Stondon and Comice Meadows in Pirton.

The day was an invaluable opportunity for the urban design team to engage with members on what good design means in practice with many useful discussions and debates taking place whilst travelling around the district.



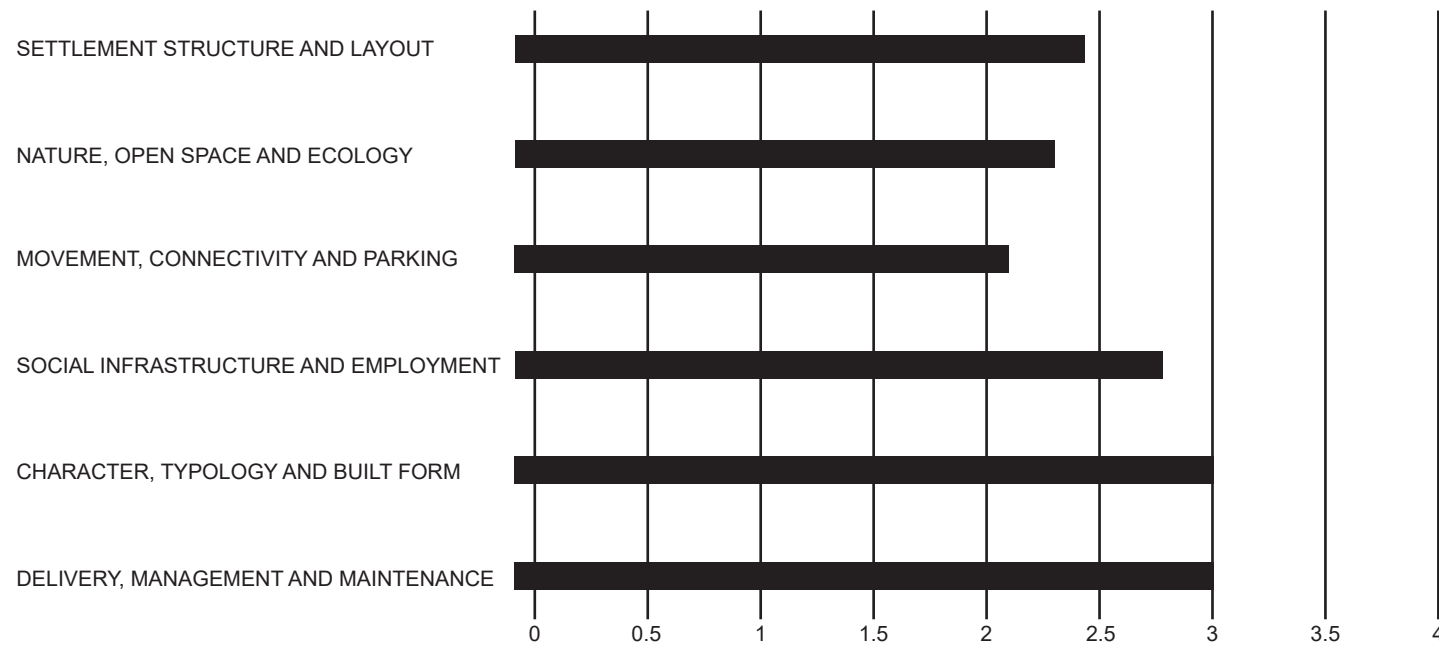
Similar to the officers, average scores across each category were fairly consistent with all categories scoring between 2 and 3 points - suggesting there are elements of each category that need improvement rather than one stand out theme that the Design Code would need to address.

Looking at high-scoring individual statements, there were many similarities with the officer results in that the most sites were reported as having appropriate building heights, well-maintained front gardens and well-defined streets.

A challenge the members picked up on both through the scoring and through discussions on site were spaces on streets where the management responsibility was unclear. In many cases, members pointed out grassy patches on the sides of roads that were not big enough to be mown or provide meaningful visual amenity, not in the private realm and therefore unkempt.

Another important issue that emerged from the day were discussions around built form identity and the challenge of creating a sense of place when the prominent model for delivery is housebuilders with set housing types. Attendees discussed use of local materials and how the design code could help create a sense of identity within these developments.

The design of streets was also a key concern amongst members, with many feeling that they were designed for vehicles rather than pedestrians with a distinct lack of planting, priority at key junctions and places to rest.



Graph showing average scores per topic area across all sites visited

HIGHEST SCORING CRITERIA

- Across the development, building heights are appropriate.
- Front gardens, hedges and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.
- Streets feel well-defined with consistent frontages and regular front doors – it is not haphazard and defined by a range of fronts, gables, fences, and backs.
- Streets (including verges, parking bays and street trees) are well maintained and clean.

LOWEST SCORING CRITERIA

- 'Leftover' space where management responsibility is unclear as been designed out.
- The homes feel distinctive and celebratory of the area's local architecture - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.
- The development feels like it is designed for pedestrians and cars come second place.

STAGE 1

KEY CONCLUSIONS

The results from both the officer and member site visits have been summarised below with the lowest ranking statement presented first. These statements will form the basis of future visioning work in Stage 2, setting a clear focus for areas that need the most attention through the District Design Code.

1

DEVELOPMENTS SHOULD BE STITCHED INTO THEIR SURROUNDINGS WHERE ONE CANNOT PERCEIVE SITE BOUNDARIES.

Feedback showed that this was the lowest scoring statement with many respondents feeling that new development sites were not well-integrated into their surroundings. Buildings pulled away from site edges with little or no connections through creating disconnected and fragmented communities on either side.

5

STREETS SHOULD BE DESIGNED AS PLACES FOR NATURE WITH HIGH QUALITY PLANTING, TREES AND SWALES.

Both officers and members highlighted a distinct lack of planting and street trees on many of the development sites - drastically lowering the quality of the street and making them unwelcoming for pedestrian use - especially true on a hot sunny day. There was much discussion around the importance of greenery on streets, particularly within the North Herts garden city context where nature and planting should be a major factor in place-making and identity.

6

GREEN SPACES SHOULD FEEL DISTINCTIVE TO THE LOCAL AREA IN THEIR CHARACTER, DESIGN AND PLANTING - NOT LIKE THEY COULD BE ANYWHERE.

Whilst both officers and members agreed that the quantum of open space being delivered on most sites was sufficient, concerns were raised about their design, with a reported lack of functionality or programming. Many open spaces lacked imaginative play and were mono-cultural, not contributing to biodiversity or visual amenity.

7

STREET SHOULD FEEL LIKE PLACES WITH PLACES TO REST AND LINGER IN THE SHADE AND SUITABLE PAVEMENTS.

Feedback showed that this was the lowest scoring statement with many respondents feeling that new development sites were not well-integrated into their surroundings. Buildings pulled away from site edges with little or no connections through creating disconnected and fragmented communities on either side.

2

'LEFTOVER' SPACE WHERE MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY IS UNCLEAR SHOULD BE DESIGNED OUT.

Feedback highlighted concerns around ambiguity of management responsibility especially around streets and front gardens. The delineation between private and public realm in many cases was not clear, leaving some space unkempt and poorly maintained. In addition, feedback reported a preference for the meaningful provision of green space on streets with planting and trees rather than 'slivers' and 'grassy patches' which could not be mown and did not provide any ecological or amenity benefits to users.

3

THE HOMES SHOULD FEEL DISTINCTIVE AND CELEBRATORY OF THE AREA'S LOCAL ARCHITECTURE - NOT LIKE THEY COULD BE ANYWHERE.

Many forms highlighted a lack of identity and differentiation between and within the sites with each site recognisable by the developer rather than the host town or village they were a part of. Both members and officers expressed a need for homes and buildings to reflect and respond to the local context, with some discussion and debate around the appropriateness of contemporary architectural approaches.

4

ROUTES, ROADS AND PATHS SHOULD BE WELL-CONNECTED - NO DEAD ENDS OR IMPERMEABLE PRIVATE DRIVEWAYS.

Private driveways particularly at the edges of sites were highlighted as a key issue for officers who felt that they frustrated pedestrian movement and created disconnected and illegible routes, often next to linear green spaces that could be used more successfully as leisure spaces. In addition, dead ends and convoluted street patterns within developments were reported as confusing for visitors and undesirable.

8

GREEN SPACES SHOULD HAVE A CLEAR PURPOSE OR FUNCTION - NOT 'GRASSY PATCHES' THAT COULD BE USED FOR ANYTHING.

Feedback showed that undefined green areas often became underused and neglected, offering little benefit to residents or ecology. Well-planned multi-functional green spaces were seen as opportunities to bring people together and add long-term value to communities, while poorly considered 'grassy patches' were felt to create a sense of leftover land rather than meaningful public realm.

9

DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE TENURE-BLIND - MOVING AROUND ONE SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO TELL WHICH HOMES ARE AFFORDABLE AND WHICH ONES ARE PRIVATE.

Feedback stressed that visible differences between affordable and private housing created stigma and division. Respondents valued schemes where tenure was indistinguishable, with shared design, materials, and landscaping. A tenure-blind approach was seen as key to fairness and inclusivity, helping communities feel cohesive.

10

DEVELOPMENT SHOULD FEEL LIKE IT IS DESIGNED FOR PEDESTRIANS FIRST AND CARS SECOND.

Feedback showed that many new developments prioritised car access over pedestrian comfort, creating environments dominated by parking. Respondents highlighted that safe, attractive walking routes, active frontages, and human-scaled streets were key to fostering healthier, more social neighbourhoods. Designing streets with pedestrians in mind was seen as essential for encouraging walking and cycling, reducing car dependency, and creating welcoming, people-focused places.

APPENDIX I OFFICERS RESULTS (FULL)

RANK	STATEMENT
1	Across the development, building heights are appropriate.
	Front gardens, hedges, and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.
2	Streets feel safe to use, well-lit and well-overlooked.
3	Streets (including verges, parking bays and street trees) are well maintained and clean.
4	Streets feel well-defined with consistent frontages and regular front doors - it is not haphazard and defined by a range of fronts, gables, fences and backs.
5	Variety in the built form works well - there is enough difference and distinction between homes to create a sense of place.
6	There is a clear hierarchy of routes - for example a primary street feels different to a tertiary one.
	The development feels like it is designed for pedestrians and cars come second place.
7	It feels like there is a good balance of open space and buildings in this development.
	Building materials are of a high quality and sensitive to the local context.
	Public open spaces (such as parks and playgrounds) are well maintained and clean with thriving planting.
8	The development is legible - as a place it is easy to understand and navigate through as a visitor.
	The blocks and plots in the development fit in with the settlement structure of the surrounding area and reflect local character.
	Parking spaces are well integrated into the design of the street - they do not dominate the public realm and are contained to dedicated areas.
	'Leftover' space where management responsibility is unclear as been designed out.
	Open spaces feel inclusive, safe, well used and accessible.
9	Non-residential uses are appropriately placed within developments to ensure they are accessible and well-used.
	Non-residential uses are of a high design quality to instil a sense of civic pride within communities.
	Walking and wheeling routes to schools and nurseries are clear, pleasant, and pedestrian-friendly.
10	Street feel like places - there are places to rest and linger in the shade and pavement are suitable width.
11	There seems to be an appropriate offer of non-residential uses in the development - not too much of too little.
	The homes feel distinctive and celebratory of the area's local architecture - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.
12	Green spaces feel distinctive to the local area in their character, design, and planting - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.
	Attenuation ponds and swales are well-integrated into the landscape and add a sense of place.
	Streets are designed as places for nature with high quality planting, trees, and swales.
13	Routes, roads and paths are well-connected - there are no dead ends or impermeable private driveways.
14	The Development is tenure-blind - moving around, I cannot tell which homes affordable and which ones are private.
	The development is stitched into its surroundings - I cannot tell where this development starts and the existing context begins.
	Green spaces have a clear purpose or function - they are not 'grassy patches' that could be used for anything.

APPENDIX II MEMBERS RESULTS (FULL)

RANK	STATEMENT
1	Across the development, building heights are appropriate.
2	Streets feel well-defined with consistent frontages and regular front doors - it is not haphazard and defined by a range of fronts, gables, fences and backs.
3	Front gardens, hedges, and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.
	Streets (including verges, parking bays and street trees) are well maintained and clean.
4	Streets feel safe to use, well-lit and well-overlooked.
5	Open spaces feel well-used and accessible.
6	There is a clear hierarchy of routes – for example a primary street feels different to a tertiary one.
7	The development is legible - as a place it is easy to understand and navigate through as a visitor.
8	Public open spaces (such as parks and playgrounds) are well maintained and clean with thriving planting.
9	It feels like there is a good balance of open space and buildings in this development.
10	The blocks and plots in the development fit in with the settlement structure of the surrounding area and reflect local character
11	The development is tenure-blind – moving around, I cannot tell which homes are affordable and which ones are private.
12	Building materials are of high quality and sensitive to the local context.
13	Variety in the built form works well – there is enough difference and distinction between homes to create a sense of place.
	Green space have a clear purpose or function – they are not 'grassy patches' that could be used for anything
14	Parking spaces are well integrated into the design of the street – they do not dominate the public realm and are contained to dedicated areas.
15	Routes, roads and paths are well-connected - there are no dead ends or impermeable private driveways.
16	Streets feel like places – there are places to rest and linger in the shade and pavement are suitable widths.
17	Attenuation ponds and swales are well-integrated into the landscape and add a sense of place.
18	Green spaces feel distinctive to the local area in their character, design and planting – I don't feel like I could be anywhere.
19	The development is stitched into its surroundings – I cannot tell where this development starts and the existing context begins.
20	Streets are designed as places for nature with high quality planting, trees and swales
21	The development feels like it is designed for pedestrians and cars come second place.
22	The homes feel distinctive and celebratory of the area's local architecture – I don't feel like I could be anywhere
23	Leftover space where management responsibility is unclear has been designed out.

APPENDIX IV PLACE REVIEW FORM

DISTRICT DESIGN CODE

Site Visits and Observations Pro-Forma



Name:

Organisation and Job Title:

Date:

Study Location/Project Name:

Number of Homes:

Date Completed:

SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
The development is legible - as a place it is easy to understand and navigate through as a visitor.					
There is a clear hierarchy of routes - for example a primary street feels different to a tertiary one.					
The blocks and plots in the development fit in with the settlement structure of the surrounding area and reflect local character.					
The development is tenure-blind - moving around, I cannot tell which homes are affordable and which ones are private.					
The development is stitched into its surroundings - I cannot tell where this development starts and the existing context begins.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:

NATURE, OPEN SPACE AND ECOLOGY	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
It feels like there is a good balance of open space and buildings in this development.					
Open spaces feel inclusive, safe, well used and accessible.					
Green spaces have a clear purpose or function - they are not 'grassy patches' that could be used for anything.					
Green spaces feel distinctive to the local area in their character, design and planting - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.					
Attenuation ponds and swales are well-integrated into the landscape and add to a sense of place.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:

DISTRICT DESIGN CODE

Site Visits and Observations Pro-Forma



MOVEMENT, CONNECTIVITY AND PARKING	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
The development feels like it is designed for pedestrians and cars come second place.					
Streets feel safe to use, well-lit and well-overlooked.					
Streets feel like places - there are places to rest and linger in the shade and pavements are a suitable width.					
Routes, roads and paths are well-connected - there are no dead ends or impermeable private driveways.					
Parking spaces are well integrated into the design of the street - they do not dominate the public realm and are contained to dedicated areas.					
Streets are designed as places for nature with high quality planting, trees and swales.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EMPLOYMENT	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Non-residential uses are appropriately placed within developments to ensure they are accessible and well-used.					
Non-residential uses are of a high design quality to instil a sense of civic pride within communities.					
There seems to be an appropriate offer of non-residential uses in the development - not too much or too little.					
Walking and wheeling routes to schools and nurseries are clear, pleasant and pedestrian-friendly.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:

DISTRICT DESIGN CODE

Site Visits and Observations Pro-Forma



CHARACTER, TYPOLOGY AND BUILT FORM	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Streets feel well-defined with consistent frontages and regular front doors - it is not haphazard and defined by a range of fronts, gables, fences and backs.					
The homes feel distinctive and celebratory of the area's local architecture - I don't feel like I could be anywhere.					
Across the development, building heights are appropriate.					
Building materials are of a high quality and sensitive to the local context.					
Variety in the built form works well - there is enough difference and distinction between homes to create a sense of place.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:

DELIVERY, MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Public open spaces (such as parks and playgrounds) are well maintained and clean with thriving planting.					
Front gardens, hedges and railings in front of homes are well maintained by residents - there is a clear sense of pride.					
Streets (including verges, parking bays and street trees) are well maintained and clean.					
'Leftover' space where management responsibility is unclear as been designed out.					

Additional comments on the statements above including ideas for improvement or what is being done well:



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