

MARCH 2023

# DESIGN SKILLS AUDIT

## 2022/2023

### PLANNING SERVICE

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SNAPE MALTINGS, QUALITY OF  
PLACE WINNING PLAQUE, 2010



# INTRODUCTION

*Embedding quality in place making is at the forefront of both Central Government and East Suffolk Council agendas.*

The benefits and impacts well designed places have on communities, environment, and the climate are unparalleled.

East Suffolk is the most easterly district within the UK comprising of a mix of urban and rural environments, a coastal district where the context of East Suffolk's natural, historic, and built environments is varied.

Securing high quality design and place making is fundamental to East Suffolk Council's aspirations and vision. The strong stance towards design in Local Plan policy, Supplementary Planning Documents, county-wide guidance, the annual Quality of Place Awards and the recently created Design Champion role demonstrates the Council's commitment in creating well considered places. This combined with central Government's drive for 'well-designed places' through the updated National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Design Guide expects Local Authorities to go further in driving this agenda. The role of the Design Skills Audit is to understand what the Council offers and how this can be further improved for the Council and the community.

Turning this national agenda into an action has its challenges for Local Authorities. Understanding the current opportunities and challenges will provide East Suffolk Council with direction and knowledge in where value and resources can be focused.

The drive for quality in place making within Local Authorities requires knowledge, voice, and confidence in questioning, refusing, or celebrating design.

Design is a daily consideration in helping to shape, change and create communities and places, and in particular for the following teams and individuals:

- Specialist Services (Design and Conservation, Ecology, Landscape, Arboriculture and Rights of Way)
- Development Management
- Planning Policy
- Enforcement
- Energy Projects
- Council Development Team
- Regeneration
- Assets
- Economic Development
- Coastal Management
- Community Partnership teams
- Councillors
- Housing

Each team provides influence in the quality and outcome of how places look, feel and work. The recent appointment of East Suffolk's Design Champion role emphasises the Council's aspirations in delivering quality in the natural, built, and historic environments. The role brings the ability to connect both internal and external teams to ensure

RIGHT: SUFFOLK BRICK HOUSE BY NASH BAKER ARCHITECTS

quality and value are delivered to the highest standards throughout East Suffolk.

To drive forward this vision, it is important to understand the opportunities and challenges which currently face the Council. The ability to assess through an audit approach provides a data driven assessment in understanding design.

The Design Skills Audit 2022 was created by the Design Champion to create a benchmark of the understanding and aspirations within the Council. The approach to 'draw a line in the sand' allows a Council to understand, respond and measure quality, ensuring value and quality in placemaking are being delivered.

The Design Skills Audit was created for teams within East Suffolk's Planning Service (Development Management, Planning Policy, Major Sites, and Energy teams – refer to Appendix B for team structure charts). The decision to provide initial focus towards planning was based on the daily level of influence and interaction on design. The aspirations are to include wider Design Audits around other teams to collate both a team-specific understanding, but also a council-wide insight.

To guarantee place making and design are integral to decision making, it is important to ensure teams are suitably skilled to question and push back on poor quality design. Design Skills across Local Authorities in the UK are both under resourced and poorly utilised. [The Design Deficit Report](#) produced







ABOVE: SPECIALIST SERVICES SITE VISIT 2022.

## The Design Deficit Report Place Alliance 2021

### 1 – IN-HOUSE CAPACITY HAS STABILISED BUT REMAINS VERY LOW

- Nationally, the numbers of urban designers and architects in local planning authorities has stabilised, although availability of the landscape expertise has declined:
- two fifths of local planning authorities still have no access to urban design advice,
- almost two thirds no landscape advice
- three quarters no architectural advice
- Sharing of posts, use of temporary staff and coverage by non-specialists hides the true extent of the deficit
- There is a significant increase in the use of external consultants and agency staff to try to fill the gaps, with two fifths of local authorities attempting this. The figure rises to 60% in relation to the production of proactive design guidance and frameworks, and 70% for design codes
- Design review is often seen as a means of filling the design skills gaps, rather than a means to challenge and supplement in-house design capacity

### 2 - FUNDING AND RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES LIMIT AMBITIONS

- There are now, on average, 1.7 design experts per local planning authority across England, an increase from 1.6 in 2017, or some 30 designers across the country
- Over half of that growth has happened in the relatively few authorities that have larger design teams with only 10 local authorities now having design expertise when previously they did not
- Whilst a minority of local authorities have made a strategic investment in a place quality team, many authorities who feel the acute need for design input into their decision-making are unable to secure it because of funding difficulties
- Authorities overwhelmingly describe recruitment of urban design staff as 'challenging', notably regarding their ability to compete with the private sector
- Whilst the employment of temporary staff can help to smooth bumps in workload, on the whole authorities would prefer to build their own capacity, continuity of knowledge and experience in-house

by Place Alliance in 2021 created a detailed picture of design skills and approaches across England's local planning authorities. The report is based on 235 local authorities across England and the research concluded the following results.

As the report clearly states, there is a deficit in design skills across local authorities where the ability to recruit and resource design skills within local authorities is challenging. Given the heightened importance of design from Central Government through the NPPF and National Design Guide, it is expected Local Authorities go further to refuse poor design. With the combined pressures from Central Government and significance for communities within East Suffolk, it is important to ensure officers

within an authority can be skilled in design, ensuring the ongoing conversation around design can be maintained, discussed, and negotiated.

The opportunity to provide officers at East Suffolk Council with the skills and resources to have open discussions around the quality and value of design in development ensures the Council's approach is met, development is scrutinised and the awareness and understanding of design are upheld. The approach is not to replace the role of design officers, but to ensure all development is subject to the appropriate degree of review and scrutiny, either through specialist design input and/or through skilled planning officers where capacity allows. This ensures a consistent

approach and dialogue, clearly promoting the council's aspirations and requirements for well-designed places.

The below approach then focuses on how we as a Council understand the current skill base as well as the engagement from officers on the topic of design. Is design engaging and interesting for officers, how does design fall into their planning discussions and considerations, is design considered important when assessing a planning application, and how do we create a rolling engagement programme for officers?



# DESIGN AUDIT APPROACH



The Planning Design Skills Audit was created to understand the following areas:

1. Perceptions of Design and Place Making
2. Design Training
3. Design Quality
4. Design Review Panel

The Audit was written to allow for data driven outcomes allowing results and outputs to be monitored and responded against. This will allow detailed monitoring of the quality, perception, and levels of training across the Council. The Audit also allowed participants to input and provide written feedback to help gauge understanding on why users answered the way they did and provide additional feedback and input.

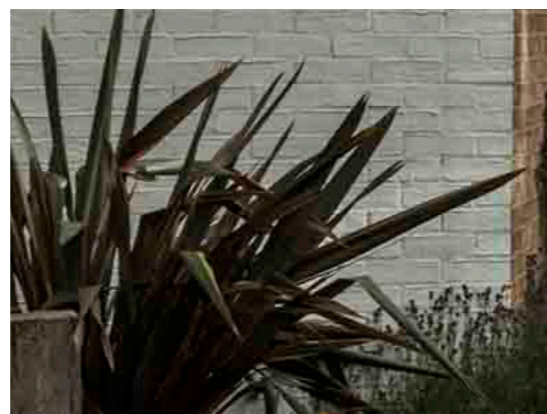
The overarching aim of the Audit is to gauge a base level of understanding across the Planning service, identify gaps in knowledge, understand current challenges, and to identify and address opportunities in training and upskilling.

A short section on Independent Design Review was included in the Audit. This was included to gain further insight to the value and importance this plays within Suffolk. The opportunity to help shape and drive this service is important and the results of the Audit will input into this. The Audit was created on and issued through Survey Monkey and questions were designed to allow all members of the planning teams to input no matter their experience and understanding of design.

The Design Skills Audit survey was concluded on October 21st 2022 across the Planning Service. This includes the breakdown in responses on page 9.

The following sections provide a summative review of the feedback received, highlighting positive results, areas requiring further review, and constructive feedback. The data and a copy of the full set of questions are presented in Appendix A for further reference.

Please note all data has been processed to ensure results are presented anonymously.



BELOW: TIBBYS TRIANGLE, SOUTHWOLD. IMAGE BY ASH SAKULA ARCHITECTS.

## Survey Respondents

- Development Management – 25 Officers
- Planning Policy – 17 Officers

This included:

- Technician – 2
- Trainee Officer – 4
- Assistant Officer – 7
- Planning Officer – 11
- Senior Officer – 6
- Principal Officer – 10
- Manager – 2





## RESULT SUMMARY DESIGN CONFIDENCE

Design is considered an important factor when determining applications. This can range from DM Officer input, through to the use of Design Officers within the Specialist Services Team.

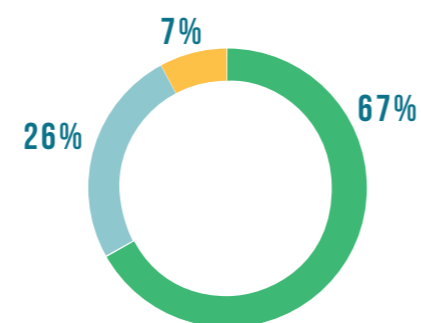
66% of officers throughout the planning service are confident in providing design related advice to applicants, where they find the most challenging obstacles are the relationships with applicants and architects, and the confidence in negotiating design changes. 56% of officers generally considered applicant and applicant teams respected design advice from planning officers. However, the results demonstrated that more junior staff (Trainee and Assistant Planners) considered there to be little or no respect around design discussions. Officer level staff were split, where Senior Officers (Senior, Principal and Manager level) considered their

design input was respected and valued. Negotiating design is related to seniority of Officers, opportunities to enhance placemaking can be compromised around preconceptions of Officers experience and background.

Of those confident in supplying advice, topics of which they are confident in discussing mainly focused on the built environment around residential development and architecture. Topics relating to Green Infrastructure and wider contextual influences come lower in the results. With the Policy team the results were in reverse with more strategic topics being high in confidence while elements such as architectural detailing come lower.

83% of DM Planning Officers are confident in refusing applications based on design matters alone. This result is positive where

officers stated the input and expertise of design officers provides the professional and specialist input to refuse on design matters alone. The 17% of officers who are not confident state that there was little confidence in Planning Inspectors to back design refusal, absence of an adopted Design Guide/Code provides little backing, and capacity of Design Officers providing design input.



**ABOVE: OFFICERS CONFIDENCE IN PROVIDING DESIGN ADVICE TO APPLICANTS.**  
**67% CONFIDENT IN PROVIDING DESIGN ADVICE**  
**26% NOT CONFIDENT**  
**7% NOT APPLICABLE TO ROLE**

## DESIGN OFFICERS

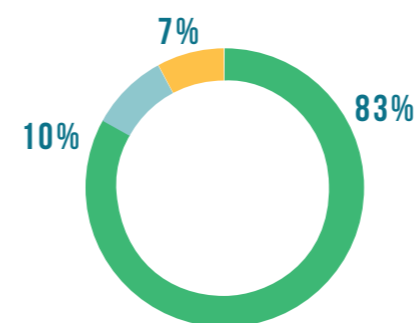
East Suffolk's Design officers (Design and Conservation, and Landscape Officers) are praised in the Audit where there was a strong engagement in the use of their skills. Over 82% of officers have engaged with Design Officers in the past and recognising their input supplies greater emphasis in planning discussions and decisions. It should be made clear that the 82% does not relate to the quantum of applications but engagement in the past with Design Officers.

How Design Officers are engaged varies throughout the teams where DM have high engagement at pre-app and application stage, but these tended to drop away at Reserved Matters or Discharge of Condition stages.

Understanding how to best use Design Officers' time is important while ensuring there is consistency across advice

being provided. It was clear from the Audit that the most impact Design Officers have on certain scale development was focused toward major development, with Major Residential, Mixed Use and Masterplanning. Uses such as transport infrastructure, commercial and household applications seen as areas where Design may not have the most impact or Officers felt able to determine the application without Design Officer advice.

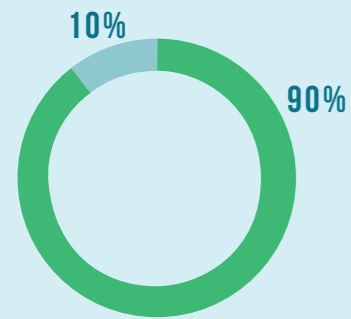
It is clear from the Audit that the reliance on Design Officers is important in supplying specialist input but also providing the confidence in Officers around resisting poor quality design. They are recognised by officers as being a key specialist in promoting well designed places, but access to their time and resource can be challenging when needed given the size of the team and shared role with Conservation.



**ABOVE: ENGAGEMENT WITH COUNCIL DESIGN OFFICERS**  
**83% ENGAGE WITH DESIGN OFFICERS**  
**10% DO NOT ENGAGE**  
**7% NOT APPLICABLE TO ROLE**



## DESIGN TRAINING



ABOVE: INTEREST IN ATTENDING DESIGN TRAINING  
90% BE INTERESTED IN TRAINING  
10% WOULD NOT BE INTERESTED

Design training engagement across DM and Policy is around 65% across the past 12 months, while those interested in attending future training was a 90% response. This could show that opportunities in training may not have been transparent or available across all teams.

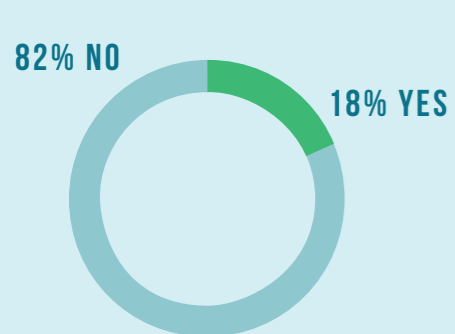
Those who had attended design related training included Lunch and Learns within the Council, Urban Design Learning courses and RTPI events. 80% of the training was externally provided. This highlights reliance on external opportunities being presented to the Council.

Topics highlighted as areas Officers would like to receive training on corresponded with the data received around confidence on certain topics. Most of the topics identified

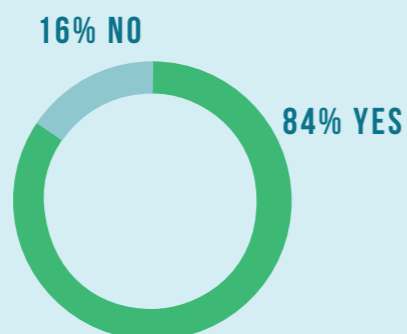
were focused on green infrastructure (stewardship, flooding, open space provision) and sustainability (zero carbon design, solar gain). Other areas included more large scale Masterplanning, highways and historic environment (Conservation Areas and historic buildings).

It is clear there is a drive from DM and Policy to engage further with design to help promote well designed places in East Suffolk. The high response on the willingness to attend future training opportunities and strong feedback on those who attended the Urban Design Learning courses recognises this as a key resource to offer to the planning teams. Officers stated a preference in online training, but a high proportion of officers saw the benefit of in person and on-site training as well.

## DESIGN CODES



ABOVE: HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED WITH REVIEWING A DESIGN CODE?



ABOVE: DO YOU CONSIDER DESIGN CODES PROVIDE FURTHER QUALITY TO A DEVELOPMENT?

Design Codes were a reoccurring theme through the responses on the Design Skills Audit. A high number of officers (82%) have not been involved with either the review or creation of a Design Code.

Design Codes have been recognised through the Audit as an area of uncertainty through knowledge or lack of confidence in providing advice. Despite this lack of knowledge or experience, 85% of officers believe Design Codes provide further quality to development.

Given the high number of officers with limited knowledge or exposure to Codes, this has been raised around opportunities for future training or guidance on. Given the Central Government steer on the importance of Design Codes it is an important theme to embed within the planning service and wider Council.

## DESIGN TOOLS + RESOURCES

The spread of resources used by officers across DM and Policy were relatively high. 100% of officers who responded stated they use local policies and local guidance (Supplementary Planning Documents) to assess what is 'well designed', with 76% considering the Local Plan provides suitable weighting towards design. Design Officers are also a well-used specialist with 73% accessing this resource. National Guidance was not engaged with as much as more 'local resources' with 60% of officers using this tool.

Officers said that opinions of other planning officers were a big contributor to assessing what is 'well designed' in line with the NPPF, whether this was through informal discussions or design related surgeries.

Half of the planning service had engaged with an independent design review panel in the past, whether this was in Suffolk or in earlier roles.

Overall, 80% of those who had engaged with the Suffolk Design Review Panel agreed the process was beneficial and they recognised enhancements in the proposals following engagement.

From the comments received it was clear the panel had only

been engaged around small standalone proposals or NPPF Paragraph 80 schemes. It was found that there were future opportunities to present major/large scale development to the panel. Additionally, it was felt more representation from wider disciplines should be present on the panel and not just architects, as well as diversity in backgrounds. Comments also highlighted challenges around turnaround of panel reports which have wider implications on programmes and determination.

However, 73% of Officers considered the Council needs further guidance on design aspirations in East Suffolk. Suggestions included further guidance on 'minimum standards' (garden sizes, back-to-back distances etc.), further training opportunities, Design codes or guides, promotion of design consistency through guidance, a Council wide design manifesto and wider coordination between stakeholders and services (Highways, secured by design for example).

It is clear officers use the resources they have on offer but clearly there are aspirations for this resource to go further in helping promote design in East Suffolk.

## DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

BELOW: NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT





# DESIGN BARRIERS

The Design Skills Audit was aimed at highlighting areas of strength and identifying areas for development and resolution. The following areas were consistent in feedback and addressed directly in written responses to the Audit. This includes the following:

## **Applicant Team and Case Officer relationship**

As found above, it was clear from the feedback received that Planning officer's design feedback was often met with little response or respect from Architects and Design Teams depending on the Officers seniority. The ability to receive constructive feedback around design from a planning professional was highlighted as an ongoing challenge when negotiating design. This breakdown in discussions or respect can have large impacts in ensuring constructive dialogue is kept between a Local Authority and applicant.

## **Time and Resource**

Feedback highlighted a clear drive to engage with design and place making, but time restraints in the planning process and caseloads are highlighted as reasons training or further engagement are not pursued by some officers. Additionally, it has been highlighted that there can be a lack of consistency in which applications are reviewed and which are not, as accessing resource in the form of Design Officers, given the limited number, can be an issue due to capacity.

## **Cost and Viability**

These topics were highlighted as the main push back on engaging with design discussions in the planning process. The standard response from applicants was around good design being expensive and this was the main push back on uplifting quality or engaging in conversation.

## **Consistency**

Inconsistency in district/countywide Design Guidance, along with inconsistency in the submission of applications was raised. Lack of Design Guidance in Suffolk is thought to provide varying levels of quality and approaches to development. Additionally, the varying levels of quality and documentation submitted as part of an application was recognised as being a challenge when assessing an application. Throughout the Audit the subject of having consistency in advice has been raised, whether this is around garden sizes or back-to-back distances for example. Without the guidance, feedback can vary between officers and in turn create varying approaches to similar development.

BELOW: EAST POINT PAVILION, LOWESTOFT



# DESIGN AUDIT OUTCOMES



ABOVE: RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT, EAST SUFFOLK, GOOGLE EARTH.

The Design Skills Audit has demonstrated a clear positive approach to addressing design within planning in East Suffolk. The willingness to engage and learn are clearly shown within the results received.

With the positive enthusiasm we must create an approach which will provide officers an opportunity to develop and learn around well-designed places. The following projects and approaches have been provided as an indication of what can be achieved, although will need further consideration prior to taking any actions forward. It will be important that any outcomes can be rolled out to the wider Council and not just focused on officers in the planning service. This wider approach will enforce a collective network ensuring delivery of high-quality places is embedded system wide. The following opportunities have not been listed in order of priority and provide indications of possible approaches.



# 1. DESIGN RESOURCE HUB

The results from the Audit clearly outline that current training is sporadic, with limited service-wide approaches. Those invested in training will seek personal development through training events (normally online events) while others will engage with what is offered. Those who seek training do so by chance through engagement on social platforms such as LinkedIn or word of mouth.

Additionally, the sheer amount of design tools on offer to Officers can appear dispersed, overlapping, and confusing, whether this is in assessing development or self-learning.

The opportunity to create a central online hub, accessible Council wide will provide a 'one stop shop' for all design and place making opportunities and resources. This could be known as a Design Resource Hub.

The Design Resource Hub would hold opportunities for the following:

- Training events – forum of upcoming events (internal and external events) allowing

users to register and attend. These can range from face-to-face events to online sessions. The event forum will be managed/monitored by the Design Champion role and shared across the Council.

- Resources/Tools – Central collection of all place making tools, guides, case studies, studies, and images. This can range from national level guidance through to local and community level. Examples could include, National Design Guide, Building for a Healthy Life, Suffolk Design Streets Guide, NPPF summaries (design focused) to Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan design policies. Managed and monitored by the Design Champion.

The opportunity to ensure the Design Resource Hub is accessible will be important. Restricting access or locating the resource out of sight will go against the aims of the hub in creating accessible and transparent information across a council wide approach. Options in hosting could include SharePoint. This provides an internal Council page for access to all council employees.

The resource will be monitored and managed by the Design Champion. Available training events will be updated and monitored frequently, while guidance and tool updated when required.

Timescale - two month turnaround to implement

# 2. DESIGN ADVOCATES

*“Its about engaging with people with influence and enthisiām. You dont need letters after your name to champion great design.”*

A clear outcome from the Design Skills Audit was the interest and enthusiasm to learn, engage and promote design across East Suffolk Council. This combined with the individual interests of varying Officers who have either had past careers or studied design as part of the qualification, presented many opportunities to use this engagement and interest.

As highlighted in the report, the Design Skills Audit was designed to create an understanding of design aspirations and look to focus training and upskilling across the Council.

The approach to training programmes on offer to Council staff, combined with the Design Resource Hub will provide a good basis for Officers to engage when availability and interest allows. The approach to offer these opportunities provides a central resource but this provides no certainty in engagement.

The role of the Design Champion has created many opportunities across multiple teams to collaborate and to better use resources and knowledge within the Council. This is a single role whose remit spreads widely across all Council services and teams. The ability to embed design considerations further could open opportunities for individuals in the Council and begin to create a

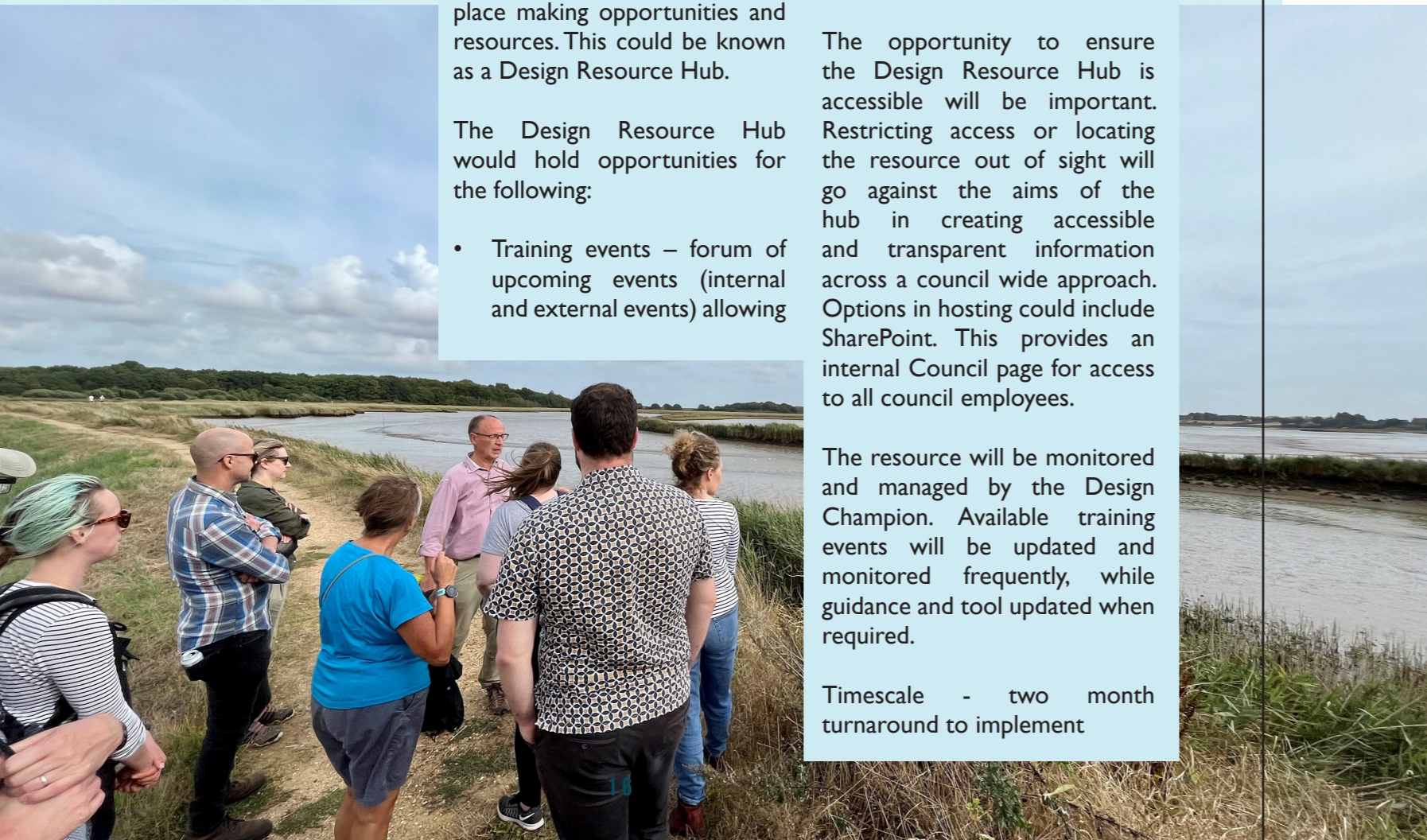
collective approach and discussion on important design related topics.

The opportunity to appoint officers as volunteer Design Advocates across the Council will allow the importance of good design to be embedded within teams across East Suffolk. This opportunity allows individuals to represent, promote and drive the agenda of high-quality place making across East Suffolk. The approach will inspire specific individuals to act as the internal contact and promoter of design within their teams. The opportunity will allow the Council to be more proactive in creating internal networks and communications, while allowing the Design Advocates the opportunity to develop and receive specific training and opportunities.

Expectations of Design Advocates could include:

- Represent - First point of call within their service/team – with the enhanced training opportunities the Design Advocates will be the first point of contact for wider team members to discuss and question design related topics.
- Promote – ensuring design is part of the discussion and being vocal around enhancing and promoting well designed places. The Design Advocate role will be to promote design and not fulfil to role of a Design Officer.

BELOW: STUDY VISIT TO RIVER ALDE, SUFFOLK 2022





- Share and learn – be part of a collective group to share and learn from each other’s experiences and projects across a Council.
- Coordination – creation of a collective group to ensure design vision is shared amongst those who may not otherwise have contact with each other.
- Grow – the ability to input and develop tools, guides, training, and other initiatives to help embed good design within the Council.
- Timely – it is expected that time will be made available for volunteers to undertake this role within their day-to-day work. Volunteers would be expected to manage time around attending training and network meetings much like they would through wider training opportunities. The more the advocates put in, the more they will gain.

The opportunities for Design Advocates could include:

- Specific design training offered to Design Advocates – this allows specific training to be directed to advocates within teams as opposed to the traditional ‘blanket approach.’ More in depth and specific training would be offered. There are opportunities for Advocates to receive recognised accreditation, for example a Foundation Certificate in Urban Design.
- Design Advocate Working Group – ability to meet, discuss and learn as part of a group. Opportunity to meet quarterly. The opportunity to bring together varying teams around a common theme will coordinate a Council-wide approach.
- Opportunities for site visits and tours – specific opportunities offered to Design Advocates.

- Role would be a volunteer position where the opportunity to receive further training and knowledge will be offered.
- Design Advocates would be encouraged to promote their roles to ensure visibility and design focus across the Council.

Expected services and teams to engage:

- Development Management
- Planning Policy
- Energy Projects
- Regeneration
- Assets
- Coastal Management
- Council Development
- Housing

The remit of a Design Advocate will not be limited to the visual appearance of a building, but it would be focused on place making and the elements which draw this together. This could include, but not limited to:

- Architecture
- Urban Design
- Landscape Architecture
- Sustainability
- Conservation
- Biodiversity
- Community
- Health and Wellbeing

Timescale - four month turnaround to implement subject to approval as appropriate across the Council

## 3. DESIGN OFFICERS

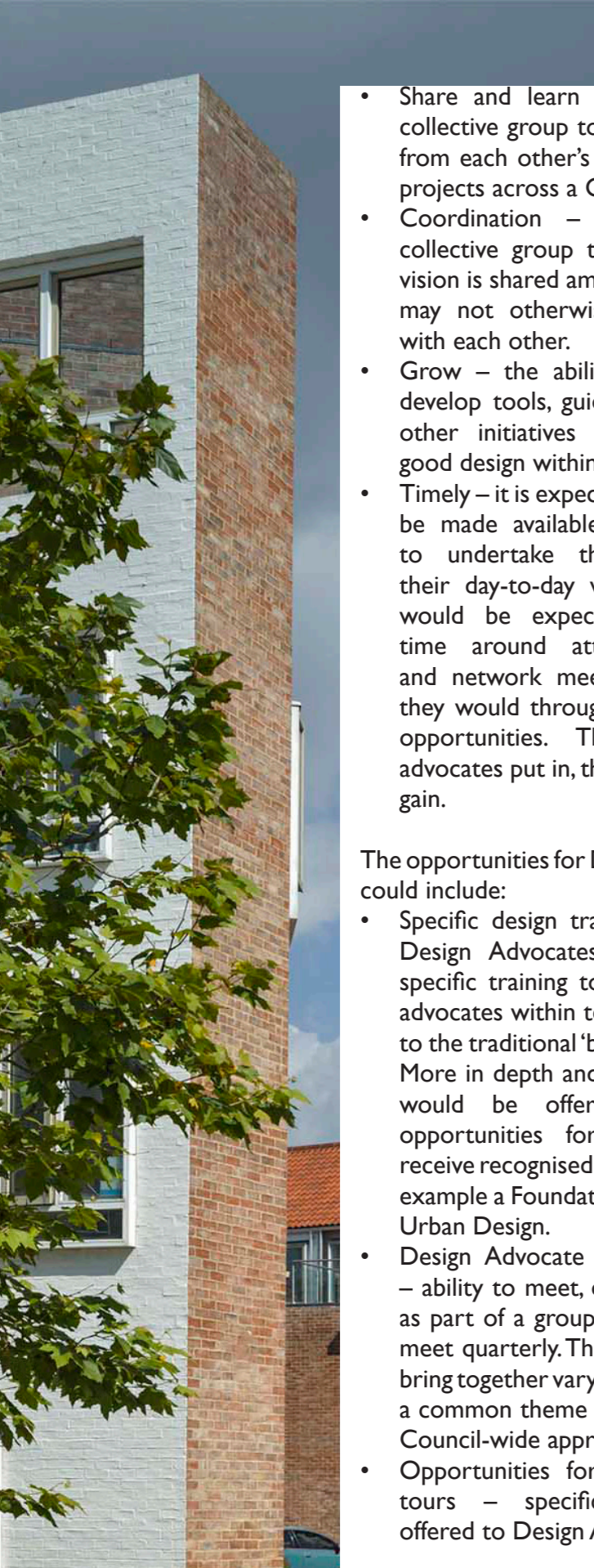
The Audit was clear around the value of Design Officers’ input into planning applications. The access to specialist input was well regarded and was highlighted as a critical resource in enhancing design and quality in the planning process, however the number of applications reviewed by Design Officers has remained low due to the size and shared role of Design Officers.

The current structure of the Design and Conservation team provides much greater weighting towards Conservation given both planning and project demands. Specific design input is resourced where capacity allows, and this is managed by the team.

With regards to the Place Alliance Design Deficit Report referenced at the beginning of Audit document, the reliance of in-house design expertise provides value and quality to a Council and its community.

It is considered there may be benefits in providing further dedicated Design Officer resource to support the planning service, as well as reflecting the increasing prominence of design in national policy where increasing duties are being placed on authorities. The role would be to provide dedicated support to Development Management and Planning Policy, as well as providing input across the Council. The dedicated role would ensure consistency in design across the council and ensure all projects of a certain scale would be subject to design input allowing a consistent expectation of quality in place making across East Suffolk.

Timescale - 6 month review subject to approval as appropriate across the Council



LEFT: TIBBYS TRIANGLE, SOUTHWOLD. IMAGE BY ASH SAKULA ARCHITECTS.



# 4.

## DESIGN TRAINING PROGRAMME

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Training opportunities were a key point raised within the Audit. There was a low response for officers engaging with design training, but a high response (91%) willing and interested to attend and engage with future design related training.

Some of the reasoning provided around challenges with design training included, ad hoc opportunities, often offered at short notice and centred around repetitive topic areas. Capacity was an area referenced, where Officers felt they had little capacity to attend events due to high volumes of work. The recent Urban Design Learning programme provided some officers with a series of training over a set period providing the ability to plan and accommodate.

The opportunity to produce a Design Training Programme for East Suffolk Council will create a set structure covering an array of topics and interest areas. The Audit provides key indicators in areas officers wish to engage with and where there is limited knowledge on certain subjects.

The Training Programme has opportunities to provide a mix of learning sessions from face

to face, on-site visits, and virtual seminars. The approach will be to focus training to Suffolk requirements as opposed to feeding into more national training programmes. It would utilise in-house expertise, local and national professionals, as well as potential opportunities with the University of Suffolk.

Furthermore training can be provided wider across the Council with opportunities in incorporating Town and Parish Councils.

The Programme will also focus on specific training for Council Members ensure design knowledge and understanding is embedded at all decision-making stages. Member training will be explored further post elections.

Training has opportunities to be rolled out across Local Planning Authorities in Suffolk, building on the joint working established through Suffolk Design, to ensure value can be provided through shared budgets, development, and venues.

Timescale - potential for September 2023 roll out to deliver 6-month program for 2023/2024.

# 5.

## APPLICANT DESIGN AUDIT

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The Design Skills Audit raised a series of key challenges Officers face when discussing and negotiating design as a Planning Officer. One area which was clearly represented was the relationship between Planning Officers and Applicant consultants. Depending on seniority of Officers, it was considered respect and willingness to engage around design related topics was low and in-turn restricts open discussion.

The Design Skills Audit is purely focused on East Suffolk Council officers across DM and Policy. To both gauge a better understanding and to understand the approach from the applicant perspective it is proposed to undertake a private sector Design Audit to consider and coordinate challenges from both sides.

The Audit will be focused on

understanding the challenges and positive experiences they have when discussing and negotiating design with East Suffolk Council. To ensure design is well considered and championed, it must be understood from an applicant perspective.

Further review and timings around engagement will need to be considered. It is considered engagement through Suffolk's professional branches (RTPI, RICS, RIBA, LI) and re-engagement of the East Suffolk Developer Forum will be key to gaining contact to key applicants and consultants in the private sector. Additionally, the approach and ability to listen and understand can create more positive discussions and outcomes when considering design and place making.

Timescale - four month turnaround to implement



# APPENDIX

# APPENDIX A

## DESIGN AUDIT RESULTS

1.

Generally, how important is design quality when determining an application?	Response
The most important priority	19
A priority, but not the most important	22
Not important at all	0
	41

2.

On average, how often do you consider design when determining a planning application?	Response
1 - Never	2
2	0
3 - Occasionally	5
4	12
5 - Always	21
This is not applicable to my role	1
	41

3.

Are you comfortable in providing design related advice to an applicant and their team to help uplift and promote quality in placemaking?	Response
Yes	26
No	10
This is not applicable to my role	3
	39

4.

What do you find most challenging about communicating your design thoughts with agents, architects and applicants?	Response
Confidence	13
Terminology	7
Being able to negotiate design changes	14
Agents, Architects and Applicants not respecting a planners views on Design matters	20
This is not applicable to my role	3
Other	11
	68



5.

Generally do you consider Design professionals (Architects etc) acting for applicants respect your opinion on design?	Response
Yes	23
No	16
This is not applicable to my role	2
	41

6.

Do you engage with the 'Councils Design Officers' on Design related matters?	Response
Yes	34
No	4
This is not applicable to my role	3
	41

7.

Are you confident interpreting and communicating a 'Design Officers' response to applicants?	Response
Yes I understand the responses provided and happy to engage with applicant on matters raised.	31
Yes I understand the responses provided and happy to engage with applicant on matters raised.	6
No I don't normally understand comments provided. I trust the Officer and support their input	1
No, I don't have time to engage with design related comments.	0
This is not applicable to my role	3
	41

8.

When do you engage with the 'Councils Design Officer' on Design matters? (Multiple Selection)	Response
Pre-application	22
Application Stage	24
Reserved Matters / Conditions	18
Monitoring and Enforcement	9
No Engagement	1
Supplementary Planning Documents	11
Local Plan Review	9
Allocation of sites	3
Development Briefs	7
Neighbourhood Plans	10
This is not applicable to my role	3
Other	5
	122

9.

Why do you engage with a 'Council Design Officer'?(Multiple Selection)	Response
Requires specialist input.	36
I do not feel confident engaging with Design.	9
Provides greater emphasis or weighting in planning discussions/decisions.	27
I have been instructed to.	8
I consult all Specialist Services consultees when considering an application.	8
I do not engage with a design officer as I can lead design discussions myself.	0
I do not see the need for design input.	0
This is not applicable to my role	3
	91

10.

What scale of developments would you consider a 'Council's Design Officer' to have the most impact on?(Multiple Selection)	Response
Householder Application	10
Major residential-led mixed use	19
Major Residential (10+ dwellings)	20
Minor Residential (fewer than 10 dwellings)	12
Energy / Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects	11
Commercial (e.g. office, retail)	10
Public Buildings (e.g. education, health, sport)	14
Other Mixed Use	6
Public Realm	16
Transport Infrastructure	3
Masterplans and Place Strategies	17
Design Codes	14
Other	5
	157



11.

Please select which topics you would be confident in providing Design advice on:(Multiple Selection)	Response
None of the above	5
Masterplanning	11
Site Appraisal (Opportunities and constraints)	16
Design and Access Statements	11
Design Codes	4
Layout design	16
Architecture (Housing)	13
Residential extensions	22
Materials	18
Elevations	20
Fenestration	18
Character Areas	9
Open Space (Including play provision)	6
Density	15
Height	21
Streetscape	17

12.

Are there any reoccurring topics relating to design which come up repetitively in applications? E.g. connectivity, materials, architectural details etc - free text
Materials
Design
Parking
Scale
Housing
Connetivity
Neighbourhood Planning
Context
Open Space
Design Quality
Lighting
SuDS
Trees

13.

Would you be confident in refusing an application based on Design matters alone?	Response
Yes	20
No	4
This is not applicable to my role	17
	41

Please select which topics you would be confident in providing Design advice on:(Multiple Selection)	Response
Massing	20
Context appraisal	12
Connectivity/Movement	16
Sustainability/Renewable Energy	6
Parking	18
Privacy	19
Sustainable neighbourhoods (e.g. walkable neighbourhoods, densities etc)	11
Green Infrastructure	10
Garden Community Principles	9
Modern Methods of Construction (MMC)	1
Secured by Design	6
Maintenance and Management (Stewardship)	5
National Policy	9
Local Plan Policy	10
	374

14.

What tools help you to assess what is 'well-designed' in line with National Planning Policy?(Multiple Selection)	Response
National Guidance (National Design Guide, Building for a Healthy Life)	26
Local Guidance (SPD's and Local Plan Policy)	41
Opinion as a Planning Officer	29
Design Officer	30
Design Review Panel	10
Other	3
This is not applicable to my role	3
	142

15.

Do you hold a qualification in a Design? (e.g. Urban Design, Architecture, Landscape Architecture)	Response
Yes	5
No	36
	41

16.

Have you received design training in the past 12 months?	Response
Yes	14
No	27
	41

17.

Was the training in-house or externally provided?(Multiple Selection)	Response
Not Applicable	25
In-House	3
External	8
Both	5
	41

18.

Are there any specific areas of design you would like to receive training on?	Response
Yes	26
No	15
	41

Open Space / Stewardship / Materials / Landscape Details / Sustainable Construction / Flooding / Solar Gain / Medium to large Layout Design / Masterplanning / Listed Buildings / Design Refresh / Modern Additions to Historic Buildings / Highways / Planting Design / Design Codes / Design negotiation / Parking Design / Zero Cardon Design / Green Infrastructure / Negotiations



19.

Did you attended the recent Urban Design Learning courses (April - June 2022) offered to the team (focused on the subject of Design Codes)	Response
Yes	14
No	27
	41

20.

If yes, did you consider them to useful?	Response
Yes	37
No	4
	41

22.

What is your preference to training events?(Multiple Selection)	Response
Online (Teams, Zoom etc)	34
In-person (on-site)	27
In-person (venue based)	24
Self Taught (book reference, video training etc)	10
Other	4
	99

23.

Have you engaged with a Design Review Panel in the past?	Response
No	20
Yes	19
Not come across a Design Review Panel before	22
	41

24.

If you do have experience of a Panel, which Panel were you involved with? (e.g. Suffolk Design Review Panel, Design Council Review Panel, Design South East)	Response
Suffolk Design Review Panel	All

25.

Subject to being involved in a Panel, do you consider the process to have enhanced the proposals presented?	Response
Yes	10
No	2
N/A	12
This is not applicable to my role	17
	41

26.

Again, if involved, how many applications have you recommend to an independent panel?	Response
N/A	12
1-5	8
6-10	2
11-20	0
21-50	0
51-99	0
100+	0
This is not applicable to my role	17
	39

27.

Any comments on the Suffolk Design Panel or Review Panels in general?
Council and Panel use only.

28.

Do you consider Local Plan Policy provides suitable weighting to promote high quality place making and design aspirations?	Response
Yes	29
No	8
N/A	1
	38

29.

Do you consider Members recognise and support good design?	Response
Yes	26
No	11
N/A	1
	38

30.

Do you consider the Council requires further guidance on design aspirations and place making?	Response
Yes	28
No	9
N/A	1
	38



**31.** Generally, how do you rate the quality of new residential development across East Suffolk (within the past 15 years)

	Response
Poor	0
<b>Average</b>	<b>28</b>
Good	10
Excellent	0
	38

**32.** Which developments do you consider to be of exemplar design within East Suffolk?

Council use only.
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**33.** Which developments do you consider to be of poor design quality within East Suffolk?

Council use only
------------------

**34.** Are there any developments which you consider to be of exemplar design from around the UK? If so please state

Council use only
------------------

**35.** Have you been involved with reviewing a Design Code?

	Response
Yes	7
<b>No</b>	<b>31</b>
	38

**36.** To your knowledge, do you consider Design Codes provide further quality to a development?

	Response
<b>Yes</b>	<b>32</b>
No	6
	38

# APPENDIX B

## TEAM STRUCTURE CHARTS





# DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Team structure during Audit period.

Planning Manager (Development Management,  
Major Sites and Infrastructure)

Principal Planner x 3      Principal Planner (Major Sites) x 2

Senior Planner x 7

Planner x 6

Assistant Planner x 5

Trainee Planner x 2

# PLANNING POLICY & DELIVERY

Team structure during Audit period.

Planning Manager (Policy, Delivery  
and Specialist Services)

Principal Planner (Policy and  
Delivery) x 4

Senior Planner (Policy and  
Delivery) x 2

Planner (Policy and Delivery) x 5

Trainee Planner      Assistant Planner  
(Policy and Delivery)      (Policy and Delivery)

Policy and Delivery Assistant x 2

Planning Technician x 3



# SPECIALIST SERVICES

Team structure during Audit period.

Planning Manager (Policy, Delivery and  
Specialist Services)

Design Champion & Specialist  
Services Manager

## Design and Conservation

Principal Design and  
Conservation Officer

Senior Design and  
Conservation Officer

Design and Conservation  
Officer x2

## Landscape and Arboriculture

Principal Design and  
Conservation Officer

Strategic Landscape Advisor

Arboricultural and  
Landscape Officer x2

Rights of Way Officer

## Ecology

Senior Ecology Officer

Ecology Officer

Note: Specialist Services were not part of the Audit

# ENERGY PROJECTS

Team structure during Audit period.

Energy Projects Manager

Energy Projects Transport Lead

Senior Energy Projects Officer

Planner – Energy Projects



