

*Demonstrating our commitment to supporting local planning officers, the Office for Place recently funded Urban Design Learning to run two design code schools. This funding will support one hundred local planning authority officers to attend a code school.*

*The code schools are a five-day intensive training programme where, alongside hearing from experts in the sector, attendees benefit from peer-to-peer learning and direct mentor support. This is all intended to give attendees the skills and knowledge to write, adopt and use an exemplar design code.*

*The first Office for Place funded code school took place during May 2024, and the second will take place in September 2024. Esther Kurland, Director of Urban Design Learning and a member of the Office for Place's board, offers her reflections on this code school below:*

“This was Urban Design Learning’s fourth code school, and for me personally it was the best yet. Each school has tracked the development of design code thinking and practice, with the first being more an exploration into the concept, and this latest a much more practical and pragmatic look at what the idea means for different local planning authorities. Delegates were wonderfully energetic, engaged, inquisitive and creative.

This school focused on authority-wide design codes, rather than more traditional site codes or those written for a specific town centre or estate. This meant a steep learning curve for almost everyone.

Two key ideas helped the learning. First, that an authority-wide design code does not have to cover all design issues, for all types of development across all parts of a local authority area. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act makes this clear, but traditions regarding production of both character appraisals, local plans and design guidance meant thinking this way was a bit of a challenge for some. We used the idea of a *design tree* policy hierarchy to help explain the idea of an Authority Wide Code approach, and how things a local planning authority might create or do could fit together.

We also looked at the National Model Design Code, and discussed the pros and cons of structuring authority-wide design codes using the 10 elements of the wheel included in this and the National Design Guide. There was general agreement that these 10 elements were a very good starting point; a checklist to ensure key design issues are considered. But any particular authority-wide design code might focus on just some of them, and organising the codes using the 10 headings could lead to some confusion and overlap. Some of the 10 relate to desired outcomes from good design, so more appropriate for policy or guidance, while a code is setting requirements for physical form – that is, things that can be drawn. Delegates were encouraged to think independently about what focus would work best for

them, rather than feeling that they had to follow the structure and content of the National Model Design Code to the letter.

This led to a very important question and learning point, which developed with the help of the delegates throughout the school. The first task in the assignment was to think about what your code should aim to achieve, and what specific problems it should look to solve. To do this, people were encouraged to talk to their development management teams and discuss what common problems they saw time and again in applications, what were the most common design issues discussed at pre-app meetings, the most written about objections to schemes from residents and statutory consultees etc. The same could be done with regeneration, housing, ecology, highways etc. colleagues. Then it was suggested they consider if a code requirement could be drafted to help solve these common problems and issues, so they don't have to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. That is, that the council's position on them is clearly and firmly expressed so developers and designers know what is required from before they draw up plans.

This approach seemed to resonate with a lot of delegates, who could see that it could be done simply and cheaply, in-house, and could support ownership and so use of the code by planners and others. We discussed the reasons for having a code in the first place; to provide certainty, speed up and slim down approval processes, and ensure better quality outcomes. By focusing on the main issues that caused disagreement between applicants, planning authority, communities and/or stakeholders, and making it clear what would, and would not be acceptable regarding these issues up front, delegates could see how much more effective and efficient a system based on clear codes could become. Of course there were concerns about the practicalities of achieving this situation, but the logic was clear.

Another approach discussed was to look at growth areas, or where the council or its partners had significant land holdings, and focus on coding for these places specifically. This could lead to site specific or typological requirements – for example, how to design infill within 1960's social housing estates across the area. Place or typology specific codes like this would be derived from looking holistically at the whole local authority area and understanding where change would be most likely to take place and focus on these issues.

Other delegates thought about starting by looking at the design guidance and policies they already had and seeing if elements could be updated or translated into codes. Many design guides, or even policies, have coded elements within them, for example back-to-back distances, car parking numbers, 1m to boundary separation requirements or angles from neighbouring windows to extensions. We discussed whether the aims of such requirements were always clear. They tended to be adhered to through development

management quite forcefully, but did they always create the desired outcome, even if that was fully understood?

Whatever the approach to deciding what your code would focus on, what its objectives would be, the school helped people consider how they would deliver their work. This included advice on community and stakeholder engagement, tendering out and managing precured work, presenting the code and ensuring it is used appropriately.

We discussed how much evidence and information gathering would be needed, and there was a general feeling that evidence gathering should be proportional. Gathering reams of background information was not advised. Instead, focused work relating to the codes objectives was suggested.

Ensuring the code will deliver what local communities want is important, and their views should guide the process. It is also important that those with the power to affect a code's delivery either through investment or regulatory processes, such as highway adoption also feel ownership of it. Lastly, the school spent some time discussing approaches to both digital codes and code graphics. There was advice that even if delegates could not set up their own code website now, they should write the code requirements into a spreadsheet (or database), and not as a pdf. Drawings, photos, dimensions, background information and very importantly information on where and to what type of scheme the requirement applies could all be added. This will allow for bespoke lists of requirements to be created for sites, places or types of development. It will allow appropriate compliance checker lists to be created for individual applications and will help check for and prevent duplication or inconsistencies across requirements. If required, each requirement can be tagged against one of the NMDC circle headings. This approach is very much about creating the code for the user, not the writer. It is different from how the industry is used to creating planning and design tools and so might take some working through with council IT teams and consultants (if used).

When considering graphics to explain requirements, advice was given on making sure they are to scale, can be measured from, don't include information made up by the drawer and so on. The difference between example photos, computer generated graphics that depict an idea or feel for a place and actual form drawings was explained. It was suggested that delegates think carefully about what they really need before commissioning graphics.

I am sure I have forgotten many of the excellent points made during the school – apologies for anything left out! But overall, the five days were pragmatic, interesting and allowed for frank and open conversations about where the world of design coding is heading.”

*This is an edited version of a longer blog first published on the UDL website.*