BUILDING BEAUTIFUL AND THE NPPF 2021

Posted on July 29, 2021

Version 5 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published by MHCLG on 20 July 2021. The changes now form part of national planning policy.

The release of the new NPPF coincided with the widely attended Policy Exchange 'Building Beautiful Places' Webinar with Robert Jenrick (SoS), Joanna Averley (Chief Planner) and Nicholas Boys Smith (Office for Place). This blog post will look at the changes and provide some thoughts to go alongside.

Building Beautiful

"We used to build beautiful, so why don't we anymore?" Was question posed by the panellists at the 'Building Beautiful Places' webinar ("the webinar"). Cleary it has not been an objective of the planning system. Fear not, now the word beautiful has been brought in across the NPPF sitting firmly alongside "well-designed places".

At the webinar one of the key comments made by the panellists was learning from the past to *again* build beautiful, to which it was asserted has not taken place meaningfully since prior to the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act in 1948. That said, modern examples of beautiful were provided, Marmalade Lane in Cambridge were held up, as well as Coals Drop Yard in Kings Cross. Starkly different developments, one being a residential scheme, the other a retail-led centrepiece, but in the view of the panellists', examples of

‘beautiful’.

'***We can certainly all appreciate beauty; however, some key tensions exist. Perhaps not so helpfully it is not a defined term in the updated NPPF’s Glossary, and as can be observed from two of the examples provided of beautiful, it can mean quite different things. What can be said is that we all deserve to live and work in places that are beautiful.***'

There is also the matter of Permitted Development which is often described as lacking beauty - to put it lightly. Those in attendance at the webinar were vocal on this point and questions on how beauty related to Permitted Development were seemingly ignored in the Q&A. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, a group of influential MPs, released a report calling for a halt and review of Permitted Development, partly based on how this aligns with the objectives of the White Paper. What was quite clear is that the vessel to achieve beauty - *not just in the eye of the beholder but in planning terms* - is via Design Codes.

The chair of the newly formed Office of Place, Nicholas Boys Smith delivered a presentation championing consultation and explaining the objectives of the newly formed department. The Office for Place "*will drive up design standards, testing and piloting the National Model Design Code with more than 20 local councils and communities*". It also includes The Advisory Board, experts from the design, planning and development sector to provide input into the implementation of design codes and ultimately delivering high quality design and… beauty.

Design Codes

Whilst it may be a relatively new policy-thrust at a national level, Design Codes are not a new trick. CABE actually prepared a handy guide in 2006 on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government, a fair few ministers ago.

The revamped NPPF sets out that design guides and codes can be prepared for a variety of scales and be included as part of a plan or as supplementary planning documents. One of the cornerstones of the future design codes is that they are based on effective community engagement and reflect what people want to see in their area. Design codes can be prepared by either the local authority or developers and the latter may choose to submit one alongside planning applications. Putting together the steps; design codes are steered by local people via meaningful community engagement which then creates beautiful buildings - that’s how the planning system does beautiful.

Perhaps now if we look at a real example of a Design Guide - the Croydon Suburban Development SPG. Although published in 2019, the Suburban Design Guide is particularly consistent with the guidance in the National Model Design Code. Interestingly however, Croydon’s document has been branded a ‘developers charter’ by locals and has been blamed for eroding suburban character through intensification. Although it has a slightly wider remit than just design (i.e. to support wider policies for growth in Local Plan), it does show the impact design codes can have. Ensuring design codes have a clear design remit will be a key challenge for local authorities.

There are a series of pilots with local authorities on the preparation of Design Codes that comply with the National Model Design Code. It will certainly be interesting to see how these come out, even if the outcomes may be much longer term.

As one astute member of the webinar audience raised, do people really have time to participate in an extensive consultation which is often perceived as a hoop to jump through?

Other Changes

Along the same lines as beauty, a recognition of the value of trees has been added as paragraph 131. Talks of tree lined streets, retaining existing trees and promoting the long life of new ones all filter into the beauty equation. We are certainly supportive of the recognition of the value that trees have on local environments.

Article 4 Directions, where Permitted Development Rights are removed, are a new addition. The addition of paragraph 53 curtails the use and provides specific guidance on the application of Article 4's, they should be only to avoid *wholly unacceptable* adverse impacts in the context of non-residential to residential use, in other cases to protect local amenity or the well-being of the area and in all cases be only apply to the smallest geographical area possible.

Clearly, the message to local planning authorities that Permitted Development is here to stay and is an important one. As Jenrick lightly touched upon in the webinar, the purpose of the PD regime was to give a new lease of life to vacant properties in areas of decay – an admirable objective.

As we know, some parts of London are covered by vast Article 4 Directions, will this require a review or will council's stick to their guns?

Final Thoughts

NPPF V5 has brought some changes, beauty being the headline. The identified route to achieving beauty is via design codes.

'***Clear guidance on achieving acceptable design and beauty is clearly necessary if it is ever to truly be promoted by the planning system (does beauty need an explanation? In planning – yes, it does). Clearly it will come with difficulty and may yet be unachievable, however at least it will create a debate with a wholesome and admirable objective.***'

Design Codes are not new, however such a drive to achieve success and with the support of the Office for Place it is a positive move toward achieving high quality design, as well as beauty. We certainly support this.