



Neighbourhood Planning Information Sheet 1:

Identifying and promoting local character

1. Character policies help to provide clarity for decision-making and certainty for both the community and developers about what new development in their area should be like. Providing appropriate parameters, such as a limit to or mix of scales, or the most appropriate mix of materials, allows applicants to think innovatively whilst being able to respond to local distinctiveness.
2. When writing a policy requiring development to make a positive contribution to local character, it is important to define what the positive features of local character are, otherwise they may only reiterate the requirements of existing local plan policies and the relevant policy could be removed by the examiner. Instead, Historic England recommends an approach based on establishing consensus and understanding of what is valued through the evidence base to develop locally-specific policy.
3. Whilst at first glance it may appear that an area is typified by the sheer variety of building materials and styles present, careful analysis can help to identify features that are either locally distinct or that reflect the historic character of a village, town or suburban form of development. Considering what either already is or might in future be out of place can be helpful to identify what the essential character of place is that a policy should seek to sustain.
4. As an example a design policy in a rural parish might be enhanced to require new development to sustain the village character of the area within the settlement boundary, including the vernacular cladding and roofing materials, mixture of small cottage and larger farmhouse sized buildings, as well as set back of the building line from the road and use of green front garden boundaries and absence of on-street car parking.
5. Locally distinctive development can be promoted in various ways in terms of materials, scale, layout and views – see the box overleaf.

Preparing design guidance

6. As stated in Historic England's [advice note](#) on neighbourhood planning and the historic environment, a neighbourhood plan should address the development and use of land. It can cover wider community aspirations, but non-land use matters should be clearly identifiable eg in a companion document or annex, or formatted in a different way to avoid confusion.
7. Some neighbourhood planning groups produce design guidance in support of their neighbourhood plan which can be adopted via the local authority as a supplementary planning document. For example, a Building Design Guide has been drafted by Hanley Castle Parish Council to accompany alongside its Neighbourhood Plan; relevant documents are available for download on the Hanley Castle Parish Council [website](#).
8. Whichever route a neighbourhood planning group decides to pursue when promoting local character, it is important to align with the strategic policies covering that area.

Using local materials

9. The [National Model Design Code](#) supports the use of local materials. Historically local materials may have implied locally sourced as well as locally used in existing development. Over recent decades many building stone quarries have closed; hence the suppliers of locally used stone may no longer be available. While stone being specified in a design code (i.e. in an area where stone use dominates) may prompt a welcome discussion around the re-starting of local sources of supply of certain stone types, consideration needs to be given on what to do if that stone type is no longer locally available. Historic England's [Strategic Stone Study](#) project has created the Building Stone Database for England which provides information on the stones used in England's buildings and the sources of these.

Promoting locally distinctive development

Materials

Whilst most settlements exhibit use of a variety of materials, it is often possible to isolate local variations that are distinctive of the neighbourhood or a wider region. Without unnecessarily hindering innovation, design policies can identify a palette of characteristic materials that should be used in new developments to protect local distinctiveness.

Scale

In many contexts the historic uses and pressure for development, available materials and building technology have resulted in a distinctive pattern of building forms and scale. The typical height of buildings varies between rural villages, suburban areas and urban locations.

In areas where thatch, limestone slates or clay tiles were used historically, roofs normally have a steep pitch greater than 45 degrees (where the generally lower pitch slopes on many modern buildings can look incongruous). In such circumstances, if one has the evidence in place, it is reasonable to include a requirement in a design policy that the scale of new development should not exceed a limit or that roofs should not have a pitch below 45 degrees to protect local distinctiveness.

Layout

The density and layout of development also often varies considerably between urban, suburban and rural areas from 'burgage' plots in towns to a mix of small and large plots in rural contexts. It would be possible to include a requirement in a design policy for new development to protect or enhance the historic pattern of development, if supported by appropriate evidence, to protect local distinctiveness. (Burgage plots have survived since the middle ages and tend to be on long, narrow plots. In spite of later phases of rebuilding, they can include characterful passages and lanes leading to back streets. See Policy EG4 of the [East Grinstead Neighbourhood Plan](#) for an example that protects the distinctive pattern of property boundaries revealing the area's medieval development.)

Views

If a view is identified as important, perhaps using a view triangle on a map, it is essential that policy or supporting evidence clearly identifies the characteristics of each view that are desirable to protect, such as the open quality of the rural foreground or the isolated character of a local landmark within a green setting. Stating that the view from X should be protected doesn't provide sufficient clarity for decision makers.