

Core skills for civic leaders – Responses

The qualities of a good place

Good places are prosperous, attractive, distinctive, inclusive, and sustainable. Such places have particular qualities and characteristics. These characteristics can be promoted by influencing the design of new development and maintenance and management regimes.

When people talk about the places they like most the same qualities seem to emerge:

- Well designed and maintained buildings – a good range and mix of homes, services and amenities
- Homes and neighbourhoods designed with older, disabled and younger people in mind
- Well designed and maintained streets and public spaces
- Built heritage treated as an asset
- Good transport infrastructure
- Good range of easily accessible cultural facilities
- Ample high quality green space and green infrastructure
- Good supply and mix of affordable low energy decent homes
- Good mix of local shops, pubs and restaurants
- Local, easily accessible public services
- Good range of local sport and leisure facilities

1. As a civic leader how can you promote these qualities through your overview, inquiry and scrutiny roles and by challenging how far development proposals, policies and programmes succeed in promoting them?

- Review policies and revise to try to achieve the above objectives
- I can't – most of the above are unmeasurable definitions and 'good' means 'works in practice'

Core skills for civic leaders – Responses

1. Creating a legacy of places to be proud of

From your experience, think of three actions or skills to help deliver:

Prosperous places

- Close supermarkets
- Encourage local shops and businesses
- Civic amenities
- Marketing / Aspirations
- Consultation
- Identifying local skills

Attractive places

- Increase Green Belt
- Refuse government housing targets
- Flowers – civic pride – local “in bloom” committee
- Culture
- Quality of homes and amenities – rural / urban
- Gateways

Distinctive places

- Significant green spaces (measured in thousands of metres between settlements)
- Public art
- Avenues / parks / trees
- Heritage

Inclusive places

- Involve local community meaningfully in planning
- Good mix of private / rented houses
- culture . recreation
- All housing must be same quality and details

Sustainable places

- Give leaders (at every level) copies of Mackay’s ‘Sustainable Energy without the Hot Air’
- Green Infrastructure – future planning and adaptability eg.solar panels, low energy glass

- Employment

2. Key ways that your council can improve quality of place includes these main planning functions:

- Policy formulation and preparation of the local development framework (LDF)
- Development control/ management - deciding planning and other applications and dealing with subsequent appeals
- Enforcement - ensuring that planning regulations are complied with and that development is carried out in accordance with approved details
- Providing advice to developers, local people and councillors
- Contributing to wider corporate projects and aims

What skills or advice do you think would help civic leaders improve these functions?

- Lots of common sense
- Hands on experience
- Training the Development Control Board, especially the Chairs
- Open learning forums – lectures – mix officers / councillors / public / community groups = networking.

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What skills or advice do you think would help civic leaders improve these functions?

- Scholastic training
- Understanding the ‘marketplace’
- All levels involved in Local Development Framework – district council to be leader

2. Hallmarks of effective councils

CABE has found that the councils, which are most successful in improving quality of place have some features in common. Their success is due to how people behave, what resources are made available, and what processes are in place.

Hallmarks of a council that successfully and consistently delivers good design:

Behaviour

- Leaders with vision, who know that good design gets better results for local people, strengthens the local economy and helps to deliver better services. Leaders who are prepared to challenge and are able to turn their conviction and commitment into positive change
- Effective multi-agency and multi-disciplinary partnerships internally, and with the right public bodies and private companies
- Knowledgeable, skilled and trained decision makers
- A consistent track record of continuously improving services for citizens
- A learning culture that proactively learns from high performing authorities and acknowledged good practice.

Resources

- Design champions who can influence decisions
- Strong political and public support and appetite for achieving high quality design

- In-house designers and/or a consultant design team with a brief to support the organisation as client or decision maker.

Processes

- Strong published policies and standards
- Decision-making that gives priority to good design
- Robust procurement processes that set absolute minimum design requirements
- Access to design review for key projects
- Learning through scrutiny of decision making
- Commitment to ensuring and checking that what gets built is what was approved
- Post-occupancy review of projects, with group site visits, finding out what went well and what could have been done better.

The more of these features that a local authority can demonstrate, the better it is likely to be at achieving well-designed buildings and public spaces.

2a Do you agree with this analysis?

- Behaviour is most important – working on an overall framework together
- Resources – partnership working – beneficial to all levels of the council
- Councillors / Officers should visit successful AND unsuccessful sites to learn

2b Can you improve it from your experience?

- Should aim for long-term planning.
- Try to take politics out of decision making
- Educate councillors in principles of design – use ideas from other councils
- Aim to employ officers with a wider range of knowledge, not just town planners eg. conservation officers

Core skills for civic leaders – Group E

The best performing councils focus on improving things that are important to communities and service users, and make sure that services provide good value for money.

Civic leaders have an essential role to play in delivering a planning system that can serve the needs of current and future local communities in a democratic way.

CABE's advice supports the Local Government Association's national improvement and efficiency strategy for local government, concerned with improving quality of life and public services.

The Improvement and Development Agency has identified six core skills for civic leaders as part of the national political skills framework; these skills are the essential ingredients of improving quality of place:

Local leadership Civic leaders with vision, who know that quality of place improves outcomes, who can build a common understanding of priorities, influence planning decisions positively and be more effective representatives of the electorate.

Partnership working Civic leaders who support good design by recognising the importance of effective partnerships, and working across interests and disciplines for an integrated approach, both internally and externally.

Communication skills Civic leaders who are aware that design quality can be objectively assessed, and are confident in using the language of urban design.

Political understanding Civic leaders who are consistent about design quality when communicating values or representing views in decision-making or actions.

Scrutiny and challenge Civic leaders who use design information confidently to scrutinise planning decisions objectively and constructively.

Regulating and monitoring Civic leaders who balance public needs and national, regional and local policies concerned with planning and development.

Source:

How can we support civic leaders to leave a proud legacy of good quality of place and to:

1. Help identify what needs to be done to achieve what is wanted

- Turn this question round – start by identifying what is wanted and put the emphasis on listening.
- Give examples of how to do it: parish plans, village design statements
- Tap the enthusiasm of young people

- Toolkit
- Building for life
- Tailor support to suit

2. Be good at exploiting external funding streams to enhance its capacity to support improvement

- Grant application windows are often narrow (and tailored to current fashion eg youth) so be ready with the evidence to submit as soon as the scheme opens.
- Match funding often applies, so be ready with other sources of funding
- Research to show benefits
- deal with undertakings
- Toolkit – support for applications
- Access to funding streams
- Advice on funding streams

3. Address the aspirations of the community

- Start by raising aspirations first
- Continual programme of community engagement – education based
- Facilitate the consultation process
- Questionnaires
- Citizens panels

4. Give a clear message to developers about expectations for high quality design

- Cambridge quality charter for growth:
- Four C's Community, Connection, Climate,...
- Be consistent, establish precedents and yardsticks
- Lead by example
- Set standards

5. Help everyone understand the goal and direction for the area

- We seem to be bad at communicating outside the usual suspects.
- Almost everyone is “hard to reach”.
- We must be willing to enter the lion's den
- Invite people to participate in improving the design “charrette”.
- SWOT analysis: emphasis on treating challenges as opportunities not problems.

6. Explain the benefits that can be derived for existing and new communities

- New communities are pretty well cared for. It's the existing communities, and the impacts on them, that tend to get short changed.
- Opportunity for open spaces and recreation facilities is a very positive side.
- New communities bring fresh thinking and pioneer spirit

7. Send a positive message about the future quality of development

- Stop harking on about past disappointments.
- Even Cambourne is now getting a good press (and it's not out of the question for Orchard Park too)
- Even the things we got wrong in the past can be put right today eg Ballymunn in Dublin. Urban Splash has made a business of it eg. Park Hill (?) in Sheffield.
- And people love living in Milton Keynes!
- Emphasise the human scale.

8. Show local authority leadership for prioritising high quality places

- You have to be tough enough to say "NO" to poor quality design
- Don't be intimidated by high power consultants
- Set a good example
- Give political support to specialist officers
- Member training
- Officer training