

The value of guidance

Taken together, guidance contained within the Compendium relating to both the 'product' and 'process' of urban design provides a comprehensive overview. Yet this is not a tick-box exercise. A note of caution is required. In design guidance, as in other fields, there is a sort of inverse utility rule; the value of new measures diminishing as a function of time. The more they are institutionalised, the less their utility. A classic case is the original Essex Design Guide - a first class piece of work in its time - rapidly adopted by planning departments and then by the development industry. This led to permissions being won on a 'deemed to comply' basis, almost regardless of the actual design quality. They learnt the tune but ignored the music!

For every piece of general guidance produced, there is an excellent place that defies the guidance, or shows other ways of achieving high quality solutions. Genius, or indeed serendipity, breaks the rules.

Important to the spirit of the Compendium is its encouragement of clients and their designers to aspire to the creation of high quality places. Our overall messages are that there is a need for everyone to contribute to a new culture of high quality urban design and that there is no substitute for a good design team.

How to use the Compendium

The Compendium has been constructed in such a way that it can be read as a single coherent narrative, tracing the design of a project from first principles to specific features, but at the same time it can be dipped into on a topic-by-topic basis. There is no prescription in the Compendium but neither does it shirk from giving quantitative advice where this is deemed helpful. Thus, throughout the report, there are many rules-of-thumb and guideline values that should be considered in drawing up design proposals.

Different parts of the Compendium will be relevant to different types of project. In respect of significant area regeneration schemes, town extensions or new settlements, most of the material contained in the Compendium will be relevant. For smaller infill schemes, it will be a case of extracting those items that are relevant in any given case. What is important is that funding applicants do not sell themselves short. Even the simplest infill scheme must, for example, have due respect for its site context and its overall contribution to the neighbouring urban structure.

The Compendium contains a series of tables and checklists. These are intended for practical use, to be employed in real project scenarios by project promoters and evaluators, in testing the robustness of the design approach. In the final chapter there is a particularly important flow diagram that presents all the core elements of the urban design process. All significant area regeneration projects should pass through each of these processes. Smaller projects will need to employ some but not all of the stages.