

Quality of place has been identified as crucial to establishing a stronger, knowledge-based economic platform to drive regeneration in North Staffordshire. The conurbation of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent suffered from the post-war loss of much of its traditional economic base, and quality of proposals for new development declined accordingly, not helped by a degree of competition between local authorities for new development and for jobs.

In recent years, public sector agencies have adopted a coordinated approach to economic regeneration and housing market renewal. This extended to include planning policy, with cross-boundary working successfully producing a Joint Core Spatial Strategy. Renew North Staffordshire, the HMR Pathfinder, recognised that Urban Design Guidance, with the status of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), had a key role to play in raising the quality of new housing across the area.

#### AREA-WIDE GUIDANCE

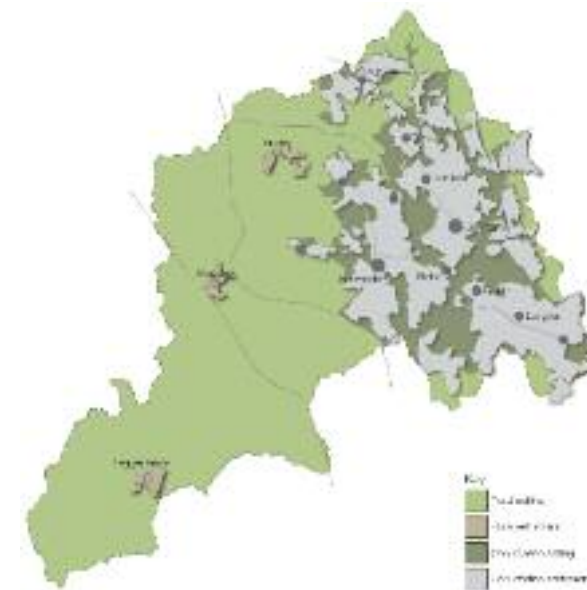
The guidance outlines area-wide urban design guidance, not something that is commonly produced, says Mick Downs, executive director of Urban Vision North Staffordshire (UVNS). UVNS produced the project brief, acting for a client group comprising Renew North Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, with support from CABE, English Heritage and the Homes and Communities Agency.'

Urban design guidance is normally created for a master plan area or a town centre, but not for a whole city area with multiple centres, suburbs and industrial developments, mixed use projects and more than one local authority,' says Downs.

Each member of the client group had their own priorities, reflected in an all-encompassing and ambitious brief. The document was to be promotional yet regulatory, and include design guidance at all scales (from sub-regional to detail). Its preparation 'needed to' raise design awareness and the skills of stakeholders. It 'had to' cover character areas (such as town centres, canal and river corridors); topics (such as residential, public realm); the importance of good design; and how design and procurement processes can promote good design. The aim was to set a common benchmark for urban design quality across the whole area.



A wide range of environments can be found across the conurbation



#### STRATEGY AND CHARACTER

The brief made clear that generic design guidance would not meet local aspirations – a place-based approach was required to respond to distinctive local character. The guidance includes a strategic urban design vision and design principles for the area as a whole. This adds character as another dimension to the spatial vision set out in the Joint Core Spatial Strategy. It is based on a sub-regional character assessment, and is among the first occasions such a holistic approach has been used.

This recognises the vital importance of the conurbation's rich and unique heritage to local distinctiveness, which derives as much from the historic pattern of development as from the appearance of places. The area's topography and geology supported the development of industries such as coal, iron and potteries, with the central valley of today's conurbation, in particular, becoming a concentration of industry. A number of towns grew up to serve these industries. The form of development was polycentric, based around the six centres of Stoke-on-Trent, Newcastle (already an established market town) and Kidsgrove. Today the