



DEMYSTIFYING DESIGN APPRAISAL

The new emphasis on localism suggests that a wider range of people will become actively involved in decisions about design and development, with direct impact on design quality. The Qualityreviewer toolkit can help stakeholders to make better-informed and more thoughtful decisions.

By **Rob Cowan**

One of the government's first specific announcements on localism in planning has been that land trusts will be allowed to build small numbers of affordable houses without planning permission, if the proposal is overwhelmingly approved in a local referendum. The proposal has been met with some alarm. Will this not mean that people without relevant professional skills will be deciding on the quality of development? Yes, it will. But to some extent that is already the case.

Every year one question is asked of hundreds of thousands of planning applications, ranging from household extensions to new settlements: 'Will this proposal create a well-designed development?' In many cases the judgement is in the hands of planners, councillors and others who have little or no training in, or experience of, design and who are often unable to draw on specialist support. The difference in future may be that many more people will be involved in considering whether a particular development is suitable for their locality. What they will need is some help in demystifying the process of appraising the design quality of development.

This is just what Qualityreviewer has been developed to do. Created for the Homes and Communities Agency, Qualityreviewer helps people to think through the issues. It is not intended to turn every planner, councillor or citizen into a design expert, but it can help them make better-informed and more thoughtful decisions. The Qualityreviewer method assists with getting the best from design and access statements, as well

as helping to determine the planning application or judging the proposal. It supports the development of new skills for planners, councillors, local activists, regeneration professionals, students and anyone else committed to raising standards of design quality.

FOCUSING ON QUALITY

Qualityreviewer can structure pre-application discussions, focusing on quality, and helping planners and applicants to understand one another. It can structure design and access statements, focusing them on the important issues. It can structure planning applications, and provide a clear and simple basis for appraising their design quality. It can provide the basis for a land trust and its local community to communicate with one another about a proposed housing development.

Consider this example of how Qualityreviewer can be used in development control and management. The developer wants to discuss a development proposal. One of the local authority's staff – let us call her the quality champion for this proposal – sees it as her role to help reconcile the developer's own interests with the wider public interest, with the hope of achieving an outcome that is better for both sides.

The first step is to make sure that the developer understands the site and area, and what policy and guidance apply. The developer's short written record of his conclusions is useful at this stage in discussions with the local authority's officers, and will later become part of the design statement.

The planners ask: what is the design concept? In other words: what's the big idea? The developer explains, and the planners begin to understand how he is thinking. Now they are able to consider the likely impact of the proposed development, and to allocate the local authority's resources of time and skills accordingly. As it happens, this is both a sensitive site and a fairly large development.

Sometimes the local authority's officers discuss a development proposal in its early stages by exchanging written comments or by meeting to present individual perspectives. In such exchanges or meetings, the highway engineer explains what road widths and radiuses are specified in the regulations; the planner has figures for minimum overlooking distances; the police liaison officer explains which types of layout he or she objects to on security grounds; and so on.

In this case the quality champion calls for a different approach. The officers consider what qualities the development could create for the place, and how each of their own particular skills and perspectives could help to create a place with those qualities. The design qualities set out in Qualityreviewer, and the related questions, are used as a prompt for this.

The officers start by considering movement and legibility. Who will be able to get around most easily and reach their destinations most conveniently? To whom will the development be easily accessible? How will the proposal