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Are well-designed places possible? A model of design governance intervention in the planning, design and development of new neighbourhoods

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Are well-designed places possible? A model of design governance intervention in the planning, design and development of new neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

UK planning policies clearly state that well-designed places support the creation of sustainable places that generate positive economic, environment and social outcomes. Yet, for decades, the design value of 'new build' housing development has remained stubbornly low. Using data from a multiple case study of new housing developments across the UK's four nations, this paper asks why this persists and explores how it might be overcome. It models nine key stages in the planning, design and development process for new housing illustrating where the 'critical points of design governance intervention' lie.

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Introduction: the value of well-designed places

Theories abound on the essence of well-designed places. In a recent review of the literature, Serin et al. (2018) determined that well-designed places have a memorable sense of place characterized by design features that go well beyond appearance. These include: streets and spaces that are easy to navigate and support an active lifestyle; varied housing types and tenures located alongside services such as schools, community centres, medical surgeries, shops and employment space; and, safe and accessible public space that achieves a symbiosis between people and nature. Evidence demonstrates that places with these features attract investment and support the local economy (e.g., RICS 2016), reduce car use and encourage more sustainable ways of travelling (e.g., Barton, Grant, and Guise 2020), and positively impact health and wellbeing (e.g., Kleinert and Horton 2016).

The concepts 'design value' (Serin et al. 2018) and 'place value' (Carmona 2019) have both recently emerged as means of describing the 'design dividend' (Carmona, De Magalhães, and Edwards 2002) that well-designed places can deliver. Serin et al. (2018) argue that 'design value' seeks to counter the bias often attributed to specific values like visual appearance or value for money over the 'physical, spatial and configurational

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characteristics that are the essence of urban design' (Chiaradia, Sieh, and Plimmer 2017, 68). In defining 'place value' Carmona (2019, 4) similarly argues that 'prioritizing a high quality built environment in decision making and associated public and private investments can (in theory at least) positively influence the delivery of a broad range of public policy goals, just as disregard can detract from it'.

Planning and urban design policy in the four UK nations – where land use decisions are a devolved responsibility – are all attuned to the economic, environmental and social values of well-designed places, and national-level plans and associated guidance draw a strong link between design outcomes, sustainable development and 'net zero' (Department of the Environment 2015; MHCLG 2019b, 2021; Scottish Government 2023; Welsh Government 2021). Carmona (2019, 3) argues that '[i]f a higher quality built environment adds value . . . it follows that an intelligent approach to public policy should have a clear place quality dimension at its heart'. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that the design outcomes of new neighbourhoods have shown much improvement over the last decade or so (Hickman et al. 2021; James and Tolson 2020; Place Alliance 2020; White et al. 2020). Moreover, if hitherto anecdotal evidence is believed, design is widely considered to be an 'optional extra' by planning decision-makers and housing developers alike. With well-designed places being a critical part of the UK nations' sustainable development agenda, then this stubborn implementation gap must be addressed.

The aim of this paper is to tackle this problem head on by exploring why this persists and how it might be overcome. Using data from a multiple case study of new-build housing developments in all four nations of the UK, the paper proposes a new conceptual model that identifies nine critical points of design governance intervention in the process of planning, designing and developing new neighbourhoods. In the remainder of the paper, a literature review is presented that summarizes the extant evidence on design governance, neighbourhood design quality and housebuilding, before the research method is detailed. The results and conceptual model are then presented and recommendations for future practice offered.

Design governance tools

Design governance provides an instructive framework for understanding the decision-making environment for new-build housing and is defined by Carmona (2016, 706) as 'the state-sanctioned intervention in the means and processes of designing the built environment in order to shape both processes and outcomes in a defined public interest'. Design governance scholars are therefore interested in the effectiveness of the tools used by planners to shape the built environment (e.g., Punter 2007; White 2015).

Carmona (2017) distinguishes between 'formal' and 'informal' design governance tools. Formal tools are legally-binding and, in the UK's flexible plan-led system, include: design policy and guidance; the granting or refusal of planning permission; and, planning obligations – a 'land value capture' mechanism whereby local planning authorities require developers to provide public benefits, such as neighbourhood infrastructure, open space, and financial contributions for social and affordable housing, in exchange for development permission (Crook, Hennebury, and Whitehead 2016). Beyond the UK, where directly regulated planning systems are more common (Booth 1995), formal design governance

tools also include: municipal zoning by-laws; subdivision plans; and, land value capture mechanisms like development charges and density bonusing (White 2015). In contrast, informal tools are non-statutory but help widen the scope of design governance via skills training, design and conservation awards, 'hands on' assistance from planning officers, as well as urban design review panels – although in some jurisdictions, notably Vancouver, Canada, design review is a formal design governance tool and developers are expected to satisfy its requirements before proceeding with a planning application (Punter 2003).

Sitting alongside these tools is community participation and engagement. Carmona (2017, 30) rightly notes that 'community participation is a separate tool of governance in its own right' but one that also interweaves with the tools of design governance. For example, the public are invited to comment on emerging national and local planning and design policy, usually via formal consultation processes that are often criticized for being tokenistic (Lawson et al. 2022), plus residents can comment on planning applications in their local area (Carmona 2019). Other opportunities for the public to engage in design governance differ from place to place, but might include design charrettes – a form of design-based workshop – instigated by a developer, local authority or community-led organization for a particular site or neighbourhood (Bond and Thompson-Fawcett 2007; Kordas 2020). Community voices might also be heard on design review panels because representatives of local community councils and other interested stakeholders sometimes sit alongside professional architects and designers on a panel, although the 'professional expert' format is most common (Punter 2011).

The effectiveness of design governance

The design governance literature tends to focus on how local/municipal planners construct urban design policy and manage design outcomes through mechanisms like planning permission and development permits. Research indicates that the extent to which planning authorities foreground urban design in their wider approach to development management and planning control varies, and that non-design related concerns, such as market demand or political pressure to support development on economic grounds, influence how robustly it is practiced (Richardson 2023; Tiesdell and Adams 2011; White 2015).

Research also points to the challenges wrought by post-Global Financial Crisis austerity policies that were introduced in the UK after 2008 and have constrained the capacity of local planners by reducing staffing and other design governance resources (Carmona and Giordano 2021; Richardson and White 2021). In this high-pressure environment, the design governance process can sometimes resemble a 'battlefield' where developers' interests are pitted against those of the local planning authority (Bentley 1999) and, as a result, planners feel 'put upon' because they fear being blamed for development outcomes that are poorly received (Sturzaker and Lord 2018).

Despite this battlefield mentality, UK planning and design policy increasingly recognizes that good design outcomes are a shared responsibility between the public and private sector (Carmona 2016; Richardson 2023; Richardson and White 2021) and part of what some term 'placemaking' (Adams and Tiesdell 2013, 13) – 'making better places through conscious acts of intervention'. This holistic conceptualization of design governance necessarily extends beyond the confines of local planning and into the wider

development process, where critical design decisions are made by housebuilders and their planning and design consultants that directly influence the design of new neighbourhoods; decision-making processes that are often shrouded in commercial secrecy and hard to unpack (Adams, Croudace, and Tiesdell 2012).

Housebuilding and development viability

The most significant factor determining housebuilder behaviour is the viability of developing a parcel of land. To achieve a profit – typically between 15% and 20% in the UK housebuilding industry (Savills 2017) – the value generated from a development must exceed the cost of designing, building and marketing it (Crook, Hennebury, and Whitehead 2016). Certain aspects of a housing development, such as location, the external appearance of individual homes and access to open spaces, all add value and contribute to a housebuilder's profits (Ball 2017). Other aspects required as a 'condition' of planning permission or as a 'planning obligation' might add design or place value but reduce profits. These aspects include building or financing affordable housing or producing non-standard house types (i.e., bespoke rather than 'cookie-cutter' homes). If a housebuilder determines that the cost of a condition or obligation threatens profitability, they may seek other ways to generate profit, for example, by pushing back on the local authority's conditions or seeking permission for more houses on the site – both are common tactics of developers operating in the UK's flexible planning system (Foye and Shepherd 2023).

There are various types of housebuilders active in the UK, including large 'volume housebuilders' that operate across the UK, small- and medium-sized regional housebuilders, non-profit housing associations and local authorities that build social and affordable homes, community development trusts and community-led developers, and self-builders (Communities and Local Government Committee 2017). However, it is the volume housebuilders that dominate the industry. The eight largest firms typically produce more than half of the new homes built in the UK each year (MHCLG 2020).

Tiesdell and Adams (2011) argue that the housebuilders' commitments to well-designed places can be measured on a spectrum ranging from 'place-entrepreneurs' to 'non-place entrepreneurs'. The 'place-entrepreneurs' sit towards one end of the spectrum and include community development trusts, small- and medium-sized housebuilders and local housing associations. These housebuilders typically have a strong commitment to design or place value, either because they have a long-term stake in what they produce (e.g., community development trusts, local housing associations) or they place a high premium on their local reputation (e.g., small- and medium-sized housebuilders). At the other end of the spectrum are 'non-place entrepreneurs' (Tiesdell and Adams 2011). They tend to operate at a national or regional scale (e.g., large housing associations and volume housebuilders) and seek to keep unit costs as low as possible by using readily reproducible 'standard house types' and site layouts (Hooper and Nicol 1999, 2000). The volume housebuilders aim to sell their new homes as quickly as possible before moving onto the next site and, as a result, their interest in delivering design or place value rarely extends beyond the aspects of the housing development that contribute to their profit margins (Archer and Cole 2016). This challenge lies at the very heart of the problem this paper seeks to unpack because volume housebuilders produce most new homes and

neighbourhoods in the UK – the one exception is Northern Ireland, where small- and medium-sized housebuilders dominate and the UK's volume housebuilders do not operate (Haran et al. 2019).

This review of the literature reveals a concise body of work on the theory of design governance and the design and development approaches of UK housebuilders. There is, however, a dearth of recent studies on the design practices of the UK's volume housebuilding industry and the role of design governance in shaping neighbourhood design outcomes. In the remainder of this paper these gaps are addressed via a multiple case study that captures design governance and housebuilding practices in all four UK nations and proposes a new model of nine critical points of design governance intervention.

Research design and methods

This research took the form of a multiple case study of five UK local authority areas because, in the UK, local authorities are responsible for producing local planning policy and determining the outcome of planning applications. In each local authority area two recent housing developments were examined. The research focused on one local authority in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and two in England. The decision to focus on two English case studies reflected the fact that England has a much larger population relative to the other nations. Furthermore, one case study was selected in the north of England and one in the south to account for the distinct north-south variations in England's housing market (Meen and Nygaard 2010).

The aim was to pick five typical authorities where every day practices could be examined, rather than pick examples of best practice which are already well-versed in the literature. For each country, and the north and south of England, the local authorities were ordered by the number of homes delivered in the authority area. Comparisons were then drawn between the local authorities on each shortlist using population size and density data, house price data and open-source political control data.[1] This allowed for a qualitative assessment of the shortlists and led to the selection of five broadly comparable authorities that did not have especially unique socio-spatial, geographic or political characteristics. The five local authorities are listed in Figure 1.

Next, two recently completed housing developments were identified in each local authority using online planning application data alongside advice from local authority officers solicited via email. The selection was based on the following criteria: (1) completed as close to 2017–19 as possible; (2) comprising 30 or more housing units with different house types and tenures; (3) led by housebuilders that deliver among the highest number of units in the area; (4) a mixture of greenfield and brownfield sites; and (5) developments near to the median in terms of the number of units developed and/or average sale price in the local authority area. The housing developments selected and key information on each development are also listed and described in Figure 1 and a selection of images of the housing developments are provided in Figure 2.

Having selected the housing developments, primary data collection was conducted during 2019 and 2020. The research incorporated a suite of three qualitative data sources – documents and archives, semi-structured interviews and direct observations – and ultimately provided a detailed design history and assessment of each housing development in the sample (see: White et al. 2020). The findings presented in

Region/Nation	Local Authority	Development	Location	Size	Permission Granted	Completed	Land	Main Developer	Developer Type	Unit Count	Housing mix	Part of masterplan
South-East of England	South Oxfordshire District Council	Great Western Park, Phase 2a	Didcot	7.23ha	2011	2015	Greenfield	Taylor Wimpey	Volume Housebuilder	250	174 market 75 affordable	Yes
		Sycamore Rise	Thame	21.7ha	2016	2020	Greenfield	Persimmon	Volume Housebuilder	175	105 market 70 affordable	No
Rest of England	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council	The Banks, Waverley New Community	Rotherham	2.95ha	2012	2013	Brownfield	Taylor Wimpey	Volume Housebuilder	89	94 market 9 affordable	Yes
		Sky-House, Waverley New Community	Rotherham	0.45ha	2017	2020	Brownfield	Sky-House	Small Developer	44	44 affordable *(for families and first-time buyers)*	Yes
Scotland	East Lothian Council	Dovecot	Haddington	6.7ha	2015	2019	Greenfield	David Wilson Homes*	Volume Housebuilder	113	85 market 28 affordable	No
		Gateside West	Haddington	4.07ha	2016	2019	Brownfield	Persimmon	Volume Housebuilder	97	73 market 24 affordable	No
Wales	Bridgend County Borough Council	Parc Derwen, Phase R19	Bridgend	1.97ha	2018	2020	Greenfield	Persimmon	Volume Housebuilder	77	77 market only	Yes
		Ysgol Bryn Castell, Phases 1 and 2	Bridgend	5.5ha	2015 (Phase 1); 2020 (Phase 2)	2018 (Phase 1); Phase 2 under construction	Brownfield	Barratt Developments (Phase 1); Persimmon (Phase 2)	Volume Housebuilders	194	181 market 14 affordable (Phase 1 only)	No
Northern Ireland	Belfast City Council	Peter Pan Complex	West Belfast	1.12ha	2015	2019	Brownfield	Pan-Residential (for Radius HA)	Small Developer	90	90 affordable	No
		Portland 88	Belfast City Centre	0.3ha	2016	2019	Brownfield	Barnett Developments	Small Developer	88	88 market	No

Figure 1. Local authority case studies and housing developments.
Note:*David Wilson Homes are a subsidiary of Barratt Developments.

Great Western Park, Phase 2a, Didcot, South Oxfordshire

Sycamore Rise, Thame, South Oxfordshire

The Banks, Waverely New Commuity, Rotherham

Sky-House, Waverely New Commuity, Rotherham

Dovecot, Haddington, East Lothian

Gateside West, Haddington, East Lothian

Parc Derwen, Phase R19, Bridgend

Ysgol Bryn Castell, Phases 1 and 2, Bridgend

Peter Pan Complex, Belfast

Portland 88, Belfast

Figure 2. Housing development case studies.

this paper principally rely on the semi-structured interview data. A list of interview participants was identified during the process of collecting and analysing the documents and archives for the wider study, principally from the online record of planning applications at each local authority. These records contain correspondence that identifies the key actors involved and their contact details. Additional contact information was sourced from the websites of the developers, architects and other consultants identified in the planning files and was later supplemented using snowball sampling with interview participants.

Potential interview subjects were recruited via email or telephone and invited to take part in an interview lasting no more than 60 min. 54 participants (approximately five per housing development) were interviewed. The research team spoke with at least one planning officer or local authority design official, a representative of the housebuilder or landowner, and at least one planning consultant for each housing development studied. A design consultant or architect was also interviewed for every case study, except for those in Bridgend, Wales, where no amount of effort could elicit a response from the relevant participants. In two of the local authorities, we also spoke to elected officials and a community activist.

Interview participants were asked a standard series of questions organized in a semi-structured format. The questions were informed by the findings of an earlier evidence review conducted by members of the research team (Serin et al. 2018) and focused on: participants' understanding of design value; the local planning policy and real estate development context; and the participants' involvement in different stages of the design governance and/or delivery of the housing development case studies.

A desk-based content analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel. This was completed in four stages: (1) a thematic analysis of the coded interview data for the ten housing developments using themes drawn from the literature review; (2) a synthesized thematic analysis of the coded interview data across the five local authorities to identify common findings; (3) mapping of the common findings on a skeletal framework of the planning, design and development process drawn from the extant literature on the actions of developers (Syms 2002), designers (Tunstall 2006), and planning and design regulators (Punter 2007; White 2015); and, (4) the iterative refinement of the mapped findings into the new conceptual model presented in this paper.

The research received ethical clearance from the University of Glasgow School of Social and Political Sciences (No. 400180239). Participants are not directly named in the paper to protect anonymity. Instead, to provide context, generic job titles are used ('local authority officer', 'housebuilder', etc.), and to ease the flow of the text, in-text references have only been included when participants are quoted directly. A key limitation of the research, in addition to failing to reach the designers and architects involved in the two Bridgend case studies, was the lack of post-occupancy interviews with the residents of the housing developments. This was beyond the scope of the funded fieldwork.

Findings: modelling the critical points of design governance intervention

From the analysis and mapping of the data, a sequence of nine 'critical points' for design governance intervention was constructed. This sequence, while sometimes overlapping,

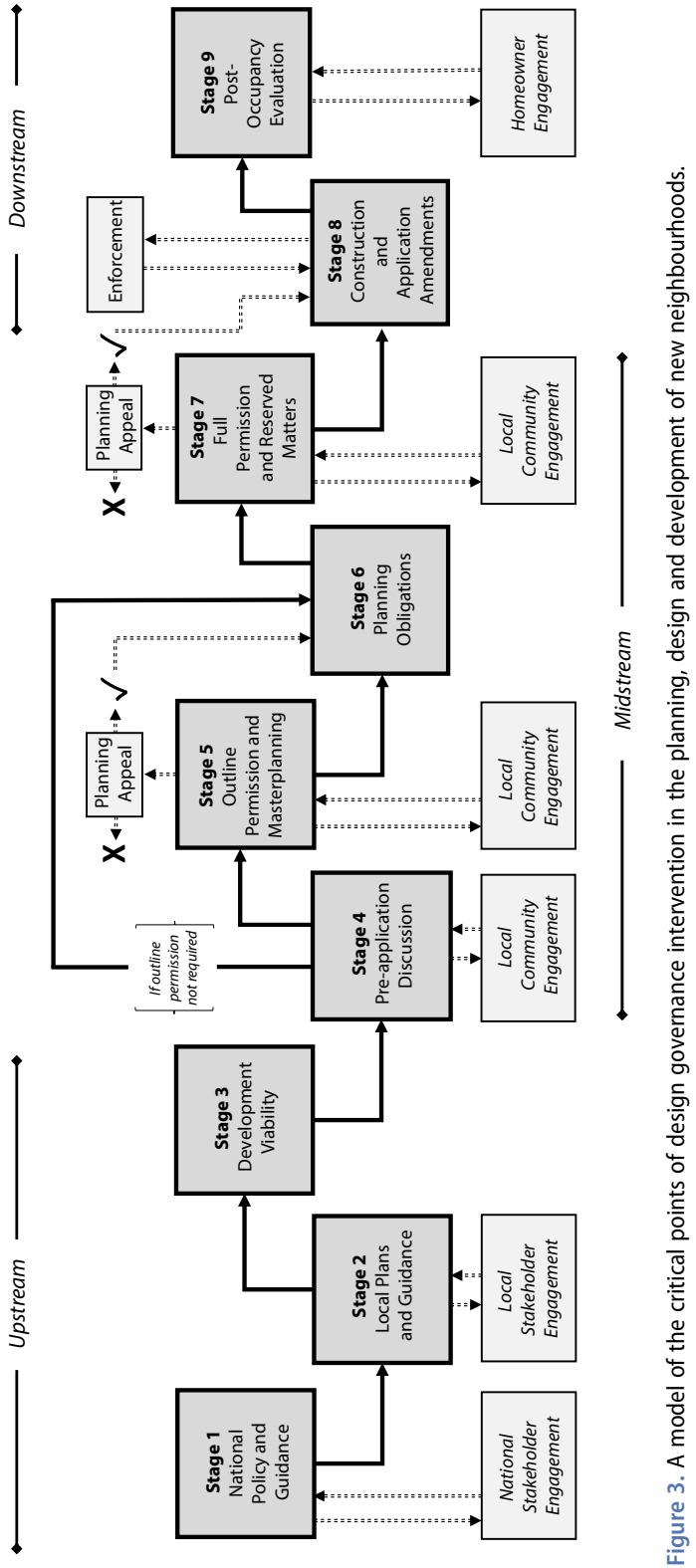

Figure 3. A model of the critical points of design governance intervention in the planning, design and development of new neighbourhoods.

demonstrates how decisions taken at certain points eventually impact neighbourhood design outcomes. It also reveals where key moments for stakeholder, community and resident engagement lie, and where opportunities for delivering design or place value are often missed. Using the metaphor of a river, the nine points of intervention are characterized as being 'upstream', 'midstream' or 'downstream' in the often meandering and braided process of planning, designing, and developing new neighbourhoods. The sequence is presented as a model in Figure 3.

Stage 1: national policy and guidance

National planning policy and guidance is the first 'upstream' point of intervention. Like many countries in Europe, planning policy in the UK is established at the national level and, as outlined in the introduction, the four UK nations share a commitment to well-designed places in their respective plans and guidance. Policy is directed by a government minister and produced by civil servants in the responsible ministry or government department. The public and other stakeholders, including the house-building sector, can submit written feedback on draft policies and guidance and respond to calls for evidence issued by the parliamentary committee that oversees the governance of the planning system. These engagement mechanisms are mostly consultative in nature and focus on 'big picture' planning and design issues, although for its recent *National Planning Framework 4*, the Scottish Government undertook a more comprehensive nationwide engagement exercise with in-person and online events held across Scotland for a wide-range of stakeholders and community groups – the latter supported by a funding scheme aimed at facilitating community-led workshops (Scottish Government 2021).

The local implementation of national planning policy and guidance can be murky. Some of the local authority officers interviewed were clear that national policies play a critical role in shaping the formal design governance tools produced by their local authority (e.g., design policy, guidance, etc.) and directly influence how planning permission is determined. For example, a local authority officer in Bridgend (Wales) explained that the Welsh Government's wellbeing objectives (Welsh Government 2016) give planners the power to make bolder design-aware decisions and reject affordable housing that is poorly located for public transport.

In contrast, a development agent interviewed in East Lothian (Scotland) described the frustrating disparity between aspirational national design policies and mediocre implementation at the local level. Planners working across the UK stated that one of the most significant roadblocks to well-designed places at the local level were nationally set housebuilding targets which encourage local authorities to accelerate the delivery of new homes over other policy priorities, including design. As evidence of this, in South Oxfordshire (England), East Lothian (Scotland) and Bridgend (Wales) local authority officers stated that they felt under pressure not to reject planning applications on the basis of poor design because the decision would likely be overturned if the developer sought to appeal the decision at the national level.

Stage 2: local plans and guidance

Local plans (England), local development plans (Scotland and Wales) and development plans (Northern Ireland) are the principal mechanism for translating national policies into local policy and guidance. Broadly the same in each of the four nations, local plans are produced by the local authority and set out context-specific planning and design objectives. Local plans thus sit 'upstream' as the second point of design governance intervention. All the housing developments examined were determined under the auspices of a local plan, except for the two sites in Belfast.[2] Many local authority officers stressed the critical role that local plans play in identifying strategic design concerns and more than one stated that local plans provide a clear basis upon which to practice design governance. Some added that supplementary planning guidance, such as an area design guide, is an important mechanism for establishing the authority's more contextual design expectations. For example, an officer in East Lothian (Scotland) noted that their *Design Standards for New Housing Areas* (2018) offer clarity on the minimum standard they expect developers to meet on the massing and frontages of buildings, garage typologies and parking, etc. In contrast, a frustrated local authority officer in Bridgend (Wales) lamented the fact that their authority's design guidelines were both out of date and a virtual facsimile of a near-by local authority's guidance.

Local authorities are responsible for engaging local people and other stakeholders when drafting a local plan. Engagement tends to be consultative but can become politicized, especially when decisions are being made about land that might be allocated for housing in the plan. Housing land allocations are not too dissimilar from the process of zoning land for housing, as occurs in many other planning systems, although much less information is typically provided about the site layout and anticipated volume and massing of buildings than might be found in a zoning by-law. Various stakeholders, including community groups, housebuilders, landowners, planning consultants and land promoters,[3] seek to influence the housing land allocation process by lobbying for particular sites to be included/excluded in the local plan before it is 'adopted' by the local authority and becomes the legally-binding planning policy framework. A South Oxfordshire design consultant argued that housebuilders tend to be more proactive than local authorities in identifying potential housing sites, while a housebuilder emphasized how powerful the housing land allocation process can be at 'locking in' certain strategic design decisions, including the distribution of future development and the expected number of dwellings on each allocated site.

Stage 3: development viability

For housebuilders, 'development viability' is critically important and is the third 'upstream' point of intervention because it influences many later decisions about the design and delivery of new neighbourhoods. Viability is also linked to the housing land allocation process and is used to determine whether a site should be put forward as a suitable location for housing or not.

A land promoter explained that housebuilders look for ways to balance a site valuation against the cost of securing planning permission, with the aim of maximizing the return on their investment. This view was shared by the representative of a housebuilder in East

Lothian (Scotland), who explained that their land buying teams always keep an eye on design costs when they bid for land to ensure that a site remains viable well into the future. This balancing act means housebuilders constantly look for ways to 'value engineer' aspects of an emerging scheme. Value engineering, the process of modifying a development proposal to save costs, can result in less money being spent on design. High-quality landscaping and premium building materials are invariably the casualties. More than one participant stated that local authorities are often beholden to developers' viability calculations because developers use them as an excuse to drive down costs yet keep their calculations secret. This is particularly challenging in places like Bridgend (Wales), Belfast (Northern Ireland) and Rotherham (North of England) because land values are low, however, the cost of materials is roughly the same as it is in more affluent parts of the UK. A housebuilder we interviewed explained that this means 'the emphasis [is] on really squeezing that land as much as possible . . . ' (Bridgend 4 Housebuilder interview).

These challenges make it difficult for local authorities to gauge how much they push developers to invest in design, especially if local authority officers have a limited understanding of property markets (Adams and Tiesdell 2010). In contrast, and as found in one of the Belfast case studies where affordable housing was the primary tenure, there is often more clarity around the funding and viability of affordable housing because it tends to be subject to grant funding and design regulations/space standards that require greater transparency.

Stage 4: pre-application discussion

The pre-application stage is the first 'midstream' point of intervention. It occurs when developers or their agents first engage in a dialogue with local authority officers and, depending on the size of the scheme, the local community too. Application discussions give developers a chance to demonstrate what a 'viable' scheme might look like and affords local authorities with an opportunity to establish their design priorities for a site and set out other expectations, such as future contributions for affordable housing and infrastructure, that might later be applied to planning permission as a condition of approval or an obligation.

A local authority officer in Rotherham (North of England) stated that 'pre-app' was the most important point in the design governance process for raising the overall standard of design. The same officer explained that agreeing changes is often easier at this stage because the proposals have not been fully developed. Furthermore, early dialogue can also foster a sense of goodwill between stakeholders. This view was shared by one of the local authority officers interviewed in South Oxfordshire (South of England) who explained that it was important for the local authority to demonstrate to the housebuilder that 'we've thought about the way that design works' (S. Oxfordshire 3 Planning Officer interview).

In East Lothian (Scotland) the local authority offers a free weekly pre-application advice service. A local authority officer explained that this encourages some developers to hold off submitting a speculative application and instead engage in a pre-application dialogue with the local authority because the service is free. The officer added that it is important to encourage these discussions at an early stage and *before* the developer has fully appraised the viability of the site to avoid what is colloquially termed 'design freeze', i.e., that the housebuilder has effectively spent all the money they budgeted for design.

Depending on the size and complexity of a future housing development, national planning policy encourages engagement with local residents during the pre-application process and, in Scotland and Wales, it is mandatory on larger schemes. Housebuilders might decide to share their initial ideas for a site with local residents at a community meeting in an effort to gauge local opinion or they may use structured engagement tools, like a design charrette, if they wish to engage in more collaborative design. This is, however, quite rare and does not tend to happen unless it is instigated by the local authority or by a proactive landowner (MacLeod 2013). Indeed, many of the participants in this study downplayed the role of community engagement in shaping design outcomes, both at 'pre-app' and during the latter stages of the planning process. For example, one participant suggested that engagement tends to be relatively light touch, stating that discussions with residents remains largely 'top-down' and tokenistic. In another case, a participant noted that community engagement events are used to provide 'information' rather than offer people an opportunity to take part in the design process.

Stage 5: outline planning permission and site masterplanning

Housing developments are often large enough to require 'Outline Planning Permission' (England, Wales, and Northern Ireland) or 'Planning Permission in Principle' (Scotland).[4] This is the next 'midstream' point of intervention. Outline permission establishes whether development is acceptable and, among other things, describes the anticipated neighbourhood design language. As noted earlier, planning permission is typically subject to conditions and/or financial obligations and these can be attached to both outline and full permission or reserved matters, i.e., those more detailed elements of the planning permission, such as building facades and landscaping, not decided at the time of the outline application. An application for outline permission can either be approved or refused and, if the latter, the housebuilder can appeal the decision (see Stage 7 for a discussion of the appeals process).

Outline permission is increasingly sought by land promoters that prepare sites for development before selling them to housebuilders. This happened on several developments examined in the research. In some instances, housebuilders paid 'over the odds' for land with outline permission, while in others, the actors involved in securing outline permission were not involved in taking the project through to a full application or reserved matters. This puts a scheme at particular risk of being 'value engineered' between the different stages of the planning and design journey. Examples were also found where the planning officer overseeing the outline permission was not involved in the subsequent full application. This occurs because the time lag between applications is often long and officers move on to other roles. The result is that the oversight of many schemes is quite fragmented and design considerations can be easily overlooked.

The alteration or 'value engineering' of design ambitions is easier to avoid on larger sites where design governance tools like a site masterplan are used, although their quality and the method of implementation varies. Officers in South Oxfordshire (South of England) explained that a site masterplan and detailed design frameworks for each phase of a large development in Didcot helped establish a clearer design vision than

might otherwise have been achieved. Similarly in Rotherham (North of England), a site masterplan was used to deliver a large scheme on a brownfield site. The site in question was split into various 'character areas' that were phased over several years. As each character area was brought forward, a more detailed design code was produced that updated the basic design parameters in the masterplan with further illustrations and granular details on building height, massing, appearance, and materials.

Another tool used by local authorities is a 'design brief'. On small- or medium-sized sites where a full masterplan may not be necessary, a design brief can offer a more flexible overview of the anticipated form of development. A local authority officer in East Lothian (Scotland) explained that design briefs help establish a minimum standard and ensure that housebuilders are clear about what conditions will be required and what obligations will have to be met if permission is granted. The officer noted, however, that East Lothian only produces design briefs for sites allocated for housing in the local plan. Numerous other sites, including the two examined in this research, were brought forward by developers on a speculative basis and thus did not have a design brief. This makes it harder for the local authority to insist on context-specific design standards.

Consultation with residents is required as part of the process of gaining outline permission and, latterly, full permission and reserved matters. It is the responsibility of the local authority to advertise and consult on the planning applications they receive and local residents, and indeed anyone else, can comment. In some cases, more thoroughgoing public engagement might take place, however, in the cases examined for this paper, this was not the case. The participants interviewed mostly had negative views on public engagement. A land promoter in South Oxfordshire (South of England), for example, parroted the widely accepted view that local communities are 'anti-development' and thus disinterested in design. One of the local councillors interviewed in Bridgend (Wales) noted that it is often left to elected representatives to explain the design principles of a scheme to the community. They complained that planning officers make little effort to engage with members of the public, beyond placing notices in the local newspaper or online. There was no evidence that the local authorities or housebuilders involved in the housing developments studied in this paper were engaged in co-design or other forms of innovative, bottom-up engagement with communities, nor that the local authorities sought feedback from local experts, for example, via an urban design review panel.

Stage 6: planning obligations

As discussed in the literature review, planning obligations are a form of 'land value capture' and are attached as conditions to both outline and full permission. Obligations are the penultimate 'midstream' point of intervention because they establish concrete financial commitments and are used to ensure that new development provides wider public benefits and contributes towards the functioning of the surrounding area. In the UK, developers enter into an agreement with the local authority under Section 106 of the planning act in England and Wales, Section 75 in Scotland and Section 76 in Northern Ireland, although it is only recently that Section 76 has begun to be widely used in Northern Ireland due to changes to affordable housing policy requirements in local

development plans (Bryson and Nesbitt 2022). In England and Wales, a new Community Infrastructure Levy or 'CIL' was introduced in 2014 as a further means to fund local infrastructure (MHCLG 2019b).

For larger masterplanned sites the list of planning obligations can often be extensive. Planning obligation agreements can also be altered over the lifecycle of a development as priorities or market conditions change. For example, on the larger of the two developments examined in Bridgend (Wales), a bigger school than originally anticipated was required. Negotiations with the developer on this issue meant that an extra 15 housing units were permitted in exchange for the contribution. A Bridgend local councillor argued that the process lacked transparency, however, and complained that *quid pro quo* negotiations occur too early in the pre-application or outline permission stage between developers and officers. Noting his frustration, the councillor stated that 'there's no discussion between planners and the local elected councillors prior to when an application comes in' and, as a result, councillors are prevented from offering a community perspective on the negotiations (Bridgend 7 Local Councillor interview).

Stage 7: full planning permission and reserved matters

Gaining full planning permission or agreeing reserved matters marks the final 'midstream' point of intervention, although opinions among the research participants differed over the extent to which design outcomes were impacted during the final stages of the planning process and the conclusion of any reserved matters. The main distinction identified was that urban design considerations – site layout, connectivity, integration, etc. – are usually finalized as part of the outline permission, while more detail-orientated design decisions – house typologies, material palette choices and landscaping, etc. – tend to be 'reserved matters' and therefore part of the final permission. Many of these latter design considerations nevertheless impact design or place value and significant changes do occur between outline and full permission.

This often happens because the landowner changes. In this research, for example, a small scheme in South Oxfordshire (South of England) was granted outline permission partly on the basis of an award-winning design brief and guidelines produced by the land promoter that owned the site at the time. Although the local authority intended to translate these documents into supplementary planning guidance for the site (i.e., a more detailed design framework) this did not occur as planned and, when the site was subsequently purchased by a volume housebuilder, many of the award-winning design ideas were compromised as reserved matters were finalized.

Elsewhere, the results showed that local authority officers can sometimes be under considerable pressure from senior officials and elected local councillors to recommend that a scheme be approved, even if it is poorly designed. This is often due to the fear that the housebuilder will launch an expensive planning appeal. An appeal can be lodged by an applicant if outline or full permission is rejected or if the local authority has not made a decision within a prescribed period of time. Appeals are determined at the national level by professional planning officers employed by the Planning Inspectorate (England), the Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (Scotland), Planning and Environment Decisions Wales, and the Planning Appeals Commission (Northern Ireland).[5]

The spectre of an appeal thus looms large over the planning and development process. In East Lothian (Scotland), for example, the fact that the local authority's 2008 *Local Development Plan* (East Lothian Council 2008) failed to allocate sufficient land for housing meant that speculative schemes on land not allocated in the plan, and therefore lacking design briefs or masterplans, were successful when appealed. The knock-on effect was that subsequent speculative applications that officers deemed to be poorly designed were granted consent by elected members seeking to avoid an appeal.

Stage 8: construction and amendments

With full planning permission secured a housing development moves into its final stages and construction begins. This is the first 'downstream' point of intervention. Although most of the major design decisions have been taken by this point, there are still numerous decisions which impact design or place value. These are either made by project/site managers or emerge in the architectural/engineering construction drawings. To save costs, these drawings are often produced by different architects or architectural technicians with lower design fees and, as a result, the parties involved might only have a partial understanding of the wider design vision.

A planning consultant interviewed noted that there is often 'a dilution of the design' just before or even after permission has been granted meaning that materials choices, surface treatments and landscaping specifications are pared back as the project moves on site – an example of the 'value engineering' described in Stage 5. A housebuilder explained that, where possible, they try and avoid making any significant design decisions after the conclusion of reserved matters, unless a specific problem arises. Nevertheless, changes did arise on various housing developments in the sample. Several participants mentioned, for example, that landscape plans are often reworked to reduce costs, while others pointed to labour and material shortages creating design problems. A local authority officer in Rotherham (North of England) noted that, in one case, the developer had faced trouble securing the correct bricks and had to be asked to make changes to better reflect the drawings submitted with the planning application.

Depending on the extent of the alterations, a material or non-material amendment should be made to the planning application, however, oversight can sometimes be weak as several participants interviewed in South Oxfordshire (South of England) admitted. Tight local authority budgets mean that the process of requiring developers to correct changes they have made after getting permission, known as 'enforcement action' in the UK, do not always take place because local authorities have very few enforcement officers on staff. To address this problem in Rotherham (North of England), the conditions attached to the outline permission included funding for a design officer to steward the development through its various phases – a novel approach to successful design governance.

Stage 9: post-occupancy evaluation

Noticeable for its absence in most of the developments examined was post-occupancy evaluation. Nevertheless, it is included as a critical 'downstream' point of design governance intervention that has the potential to provide a crucial feedback loop to earlier

stages in the process. Only three examples were found in the sample and there were no instances where a local authority or housebuilder proactively commissioned an evaluation. In the first example, at a site in South Oxfordshire, a post-occupancy evaluation only occurred because the original urban designer, appointed by the land promoter, chose to undertake an independent assessment. It concluded that the site achieved several of the design objectives envisaged in the outline planning application but was let down by the housebuilder's use of standard house types. In the other two examples, in Bridgend and Belfast, post-occupancy evaluations were conducted independently by the Quality of Life Foundation as part of a wider study undertaken in the wake of the community lockdowns introduced to curb the transmission of COVID-19 (see: Mosteanu 2020).

Conclusions

This paper began by arguing that persistently poor design in new-build housing development is a pervasive policy challenge and one where a clear implementation gap exists between policy and delivery. Despite long-standing evidence on the value of well-designed places, design outcomes remain poor (Place Alliance 2020; White et al. 2020). The aim was to examine why this persists and explore how it might be overcome by constructing a new model that maps nine critical points of design governance intervention in the housebuilding process.

The research reveals that the four national governments in the UK, local authorities, housebuilders, and their planning and design consultants are all accountable at different stages of the process for allowing poor design outcomes to persist. It was also found that, despite differences in policy emphasis and articulation between the four UK nations, housing design outcomes were no better or worse in one country versus another, and that local authorities faced similar challenges, not least the pressure to approve new housing and meet housing delivery targets set down by central government. This makes it difficult for local authorities to foreground design as an issue of genuine local importance and, as result, local authorities often lack the confidence to refuse a planning application on design grounds. This weakness is well-understood by the housebuilding industry who use it to their advantage when calculating the viability and potential profit of a new housing development. The lack of genuine opportunities for public engagement on housing design issues in the case studies examined only serves to reinforce the perception that the design impacts of new places for local people are not a priority.

In the early 2020s, new urban design policy abounds in the UK, not least in Scotland and Wales, where recent design-aware policies foreground the role that design can play in delivering healthy and sustainable places and supporting the wider 'net zero' agenda (Scottish Government 2023; Welsh Government 2021), but also in England under the renewed, if controversial, focus on 'beauty' (MHCLG 2021, MHCLG 2019a). Despite this, design governance practice at the local level seems unlikely to change anytime soon, and the implementation gap between upstream national design priorities and downstream delivery of well-designed places seems more tenuous than ever.

Such a grim assessment is evidenced by the perpetually chronic lack of resourcing and scarcity of skilled designer officers in local authorities that makes it very difficult for local authorities to meet their local plan design ambitions, let alone new and ambitious national policies. Moreover, there is often a lack of scrutiny by local authorities over

decisions taken on-site after planning permission has been granted to a housing developer. Formal 'downstream' design governance tools like enforcement action are not afforded the same attention by regulatory actors as 'upstream' tools that are associated with awarding planning permission (see Hickman et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, the inflationary pressures and wider economic instability of the early 2020s does not bode well for future investment in urban design at the local level, as local authorities across the UK continue to face significant budgetary challenges. Many are raising council tax (property taxes) just to keep basic services afloat (Edgington 2023). Yet, if the design of new homes and neighbourhoods is a genuine national priority for the four UK governments, as policy purports, then the continuing prioritization of housing delivery targets over and above other planning and design concerns, particularly at appeal, should be addressed. At the same time, providing local authorities with the funding necessary to practice effective design governance remains an urgent challenge and reinforces the implementation gap between policy and delivery. The model introduced in this paper seeks to lay down an initial roadmap and spark further research on how well-designed places can be become the norm and not the exception. Undertaking post-occupancy evaluations of the types of new neighbourhoods discussed in this paper is arguably the critical next step and could be a vital tool for informing future design governance practice and its direct impact on lived experience.

Notes

1. For detailed information on how this data was sourced see White et al. (2020, 24–25).
2. At the time of the research Northern Ireland was only just beginning to adopt development plans and planning applications were still determined on the basis of the 2015 *Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan*.
3. Land promoters are agents that work with landowners to get planning permission for a piece of land in exchange for a share of the profits.
4. Planning Permission in Principle is also used on certain housing sites in England (after 2017).
5. Appeals that are considered to be nationally important or particularly controversial are sometimes determined by a government minister after taking advice from officials.

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