

Nottingham: Achieving Design Quality on the Ground

Laura Alvarez outlines the achievements of the Design Quality Framework



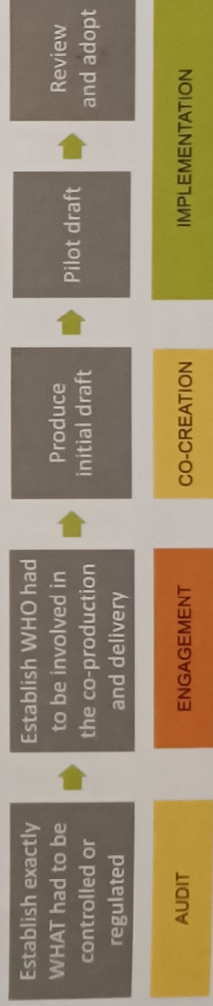
Nottingham Case 3: Arkwright Street – high quality residential development. All images provided by the author

The Design Quality Framework for Nottingham (DQF) was launched in the autumn of 2018, a few months ahead of the publication of the *National Design Guide*. Since then, the framework has been growing a strong reputation as a ground-breaking local authority design tool. Currently, the framework includes 27 guides, 11 of which are being converted into design codes. The guides include upfront

information for applicants, design standard thresholds, design criteria for compliance, appraisal tools and best practice examples.

DELIVERY

Nottingham City Council began the DQF production process with an audit of every planning application submitted in a five-year period (2013-2018). This



Design Quality Framework production process

was crucial in narrowing the focus of the project, helping to tackle critical recurring design issues effectively and with scarce resources at hand.

Nottingham adopted a traditional Quality Assurance Model (QAM), following the ethos of the ISO normative that states that 'Design Quality depends as much on the product as it does on the process followed'. This led the team to appraise and adjust the internal pre-application and planning review processes, and adopt innovative ways of working.

For design guidance to work well in practice, it must be clearly understood by all parties, be of some value to every user and be well known and endorsed by all. It was always clear that the success

OVERALL QUALITY

SOUND PROCESS
SYSTEMS
VALUES AND PRIORITIES
POLICIES AND GUIDANCE

- Pre-app/planning process**
- Number of iterations
 - Level of iterations
 - Number of planning conditions
 - Timeframes and speed
 - Trends and patterns

Process reviews can result in system changes

Quality Assurance Model

GOOD PRODUCT
FUNCTIONALITY
DURABILITY
AESTHETIC QUALITY

- Proposals/built product**
- Design quality overall
 - Streets and public realm
 - Impact on context
 - Façades
 - Layouts

REGULAR AUDITS

Submission reviews can result in design criteria changes

THEMES

VARIABLES

of the framework depended on broad buy-in and shared custodianship of the DQF across sectors. This is why the team opted for a democratic, open and transparent engagement and empowerment process to deliver the framework. Five years on, the authority has found that the advantages of having adopted this approach are immense: from creating new partnerships to adopting a design guide completely researched, evidenced, written and tested by community groups. The process itself empowered communities to deliver appropriate, effective and relevant bottom-up design guidance.

A clear challenge was that, whilst the current planning legislation adoption was slow and change was difficult to implement, the issues to be addressed by policy, like sustainability, climate change and social resilience, changed and evolved much faster than policy. The framework had to deal with this conundrum, and it did so by introducing an intermediate ‘work in progress’ step, with the various sets of criteria adopted as guidance through an online platform; later on, after a collaborative testing and adjusting period, the topic-specific criteria could be elevated to policy status.

This flexible guidance approach allowed the authority to catch up with technological and social advances faster than planning policy ever could, also testing on the ground delivery, potential barriers and public opinion. The implementation of a strong but adaptable framework required in-house skills, not just in terms of engagement and delivery, but also regarding design quality. To produce and implement this long-term design tool would have been very difficult and expensive without adequate in-house skills or relying on consultancy input. At the time, Nottingham City

Council was fortunate to have a highly skilled urban design team that included three urban designers, an architect, a planner, two archaeologists, a conservation specialist and an arboriculturist.

Currently, the DQF is in its five-year evaluation period and initial results are beginning to show the reasons for its success. The resources deployed on the DQF give an idea of what it takes to implement effective guidance on the ground. Transitioning some parts of the DQF into City Design Codes is a smooth and organic process, as the piloting of

criteria across five years has informed the final content and structure of the codes.

IMPLEMENTATION

CASE 1 – Façades

This is the case of two similar student accommodation buildings in Nottingham; one before and one after the local authority secured design quality improvements. The criteria in the *Façades Design Guide* were instrumental in delivering an improved outcome.

FAÇADES DESIGN GUIDE CRITERIA

OUTCOME ON THE GROUND

2.1 The proportions of the proposals are informed by the general urban context of the scheme.

Left: square windows are not typical in Nottingham streetscapes.

5.1 The colours & textures of the proposal relate to the palette & textures of the site and its surroundings.

Right: windows follow the proportions of openings in nearby historic buildings.

5.5 Fenestration depths respond to the Nottingham trend of deeper reveals that project shadows onto the framework and glazing.

Left: the orange brick of homogenous colour and texture and the light grey window frames are not typical of this setting, near the railway station and large 18th century warehouses.

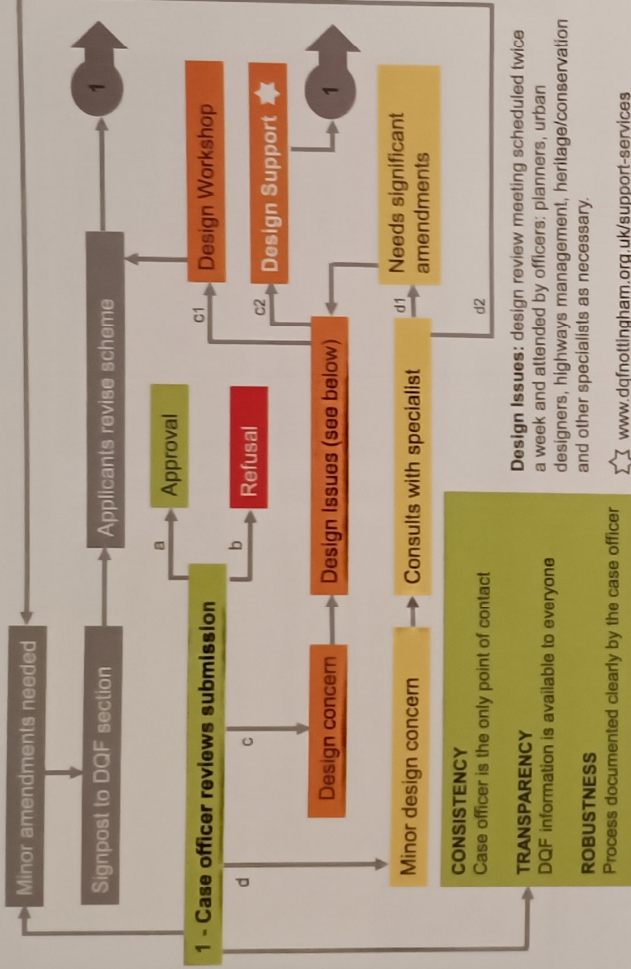
Right: window reveals (depths between the position of the façade brick and the glazing) are deeper; they cast shadows and make the building more elegant and in keeping with the historic setting.

Right: the varied colour and more rustic texture of bricks and the darker fenestrations respond well to the setting.

Left: windows are flat on the brick surface, unlike in traditional architecture.

Right: window reveals (depths between the position of the façade brick and the glazing) are deeper; they cast shadows and make the building more elegant and in keeping with the historic setting.

Some of the Design Quality Framework criteria not met for the *Façades Design Guide* and how it translates into design on the ground



Design Issues: design review meeting scheduled twice a week and attended by officers: planners, urban designers, highways management, heritage/conservation and other specialists as necessary.

☆ www.dqfnottingham.org.uk/support-services

Nottingham's pre-app and planning review processes

Product: the 'after' design is undoubtedly of better quality, more in keeping with its setting and as a result, the street scene benefits from a more refined built form.

Process: Typical elevations submitted as part of the planning application were insufficient to secure design quality. In order to arrive at the improved design, planning officers requested 1:10 elevations and sections to negotiate reveal depths, and full specifications with material sample boards. Details were conditioned and discharged after planning was granted. The details were checked by a qualified architectural technologist working on design quality within the authority.

Learning: the process required expertise beyond the standard skills provision within local authorities. The submission also exceeded national planning submission requirements. Although amongst applicants, the authority remains strong on understanding the detail early on in the process; it is that detail that often makes the difference between a mediocre façade that decays and ages badly and a robust, high quality façade with longevity.

CASE 2 – Housing Masterplan

This housing scheme, located in a former school site in Nottingham, comprised two areas of development

adjacent to a portion of the site ring-fenced for recreational uses. The local authority had put a land release brief together, which included a concept design as an indication of how development on the site would be best achieved in terms of quality and land efficiency.

The proposal submitted for pre-application followed the principles of the design brief, but the highways hierarchy, parking and pedestrian movement were not resolved to the expected standards. In this case, it was the developed design that was substandard and could result in poor placemaking and long-term function and maintenance issues.

Product: the revised proposal delivers better place quality, more functional, practical and amenable spaces.

Process: the process was slow due to the lack of skills in the applicants' team. Initial design reviews were managed with a standard pre-application approach; the first feedback was given as a written report. Revisions submitted in response to the feedback were tokenistic and failed to address the issues raised. A workshop took place where the problems were explained by urban design and highways officers working together, and a concept sketch was handed over to the applicants showing how the issues could be addressed. This process required several iterations and various meetings, and design solutions had to be explained to the applicants

with examples and sketches. Sadly, this type of scenario is not uncommon. Although poorly designed schemes are costing Nottingham City Council time and resources on a regular basis, the cost of poor design in the long term would be much higher. We have learnt that delivering schemes that require retrofitting or demolition (like many of our 1960s and 70s schemes) are ultimately more expensive and highly unsustainable. In other words, investing in design quality at the right time ultimately means savings.

Learning: the process required urban design and placemaking expertise beyond the standard skills of the applicants' team. The DQF provided a suitable framework for raising design quality through the pre-application process, especially regarding the specific design criteria that was not met and the best practice examples available online. The DQF was in this case a useful tool to take a step forward, translating the proposals into real places to show applicants the main issues with their designs. In other words, the DQF became an upskilling tool for everyone involved in the process: decision-makers, officers, designers and communities.

CASE 3 – Tree-lined Avenue

This housing scheme, located in Nottingham and on local authority owned land, comprised a development area with a capacity of circa 500 homes and several green spaces arranged as a green-blue infrastructure network. The local authority had produced a site-specific design code to accompany the bidding documents, adding more detail to the DQF design criteria. Details on placemaking were included, for example the minimum number of trees required for a tree-lined avenue along with the committed sums that these would incur. The proposal submitted for pre-application



Nottingham: Student accommodation buildings; left: before the application of the *Façades Design Guide*, right: after

followed the principles of the design brief, but the highways hierarchy, parking distribution ratios and park edge treatments were not resolved to the expected coded standards.

The local authority kept highlighting the errors, especially the omission of trees along the avenue which were considered a serious loss. Despite their efforts, trees failed to make an appearance following each iteration. As frustrations were building, all departments within the authority worked together to specify a detailed solution: a tree-lined avenue of adoptable standards. The authority also worked on adjusting the rest of the plots to accommodate the housing numbers that the client required. The new layout was indeed in line with the parameters of the design code for the site and delivered the tree-lined avenue. The reluctance of developers to include the 22 trees along the avenue was such that the scheme suffered a delay of about three years. Subsequently, the authority revised the *New Street Design Guide* to add more detail regarding parking, footways, car-rangeways, radii, trees in highways and traffic calming measures, but highways negotiations still remain the main cause of delay for housing schemes.

Product: the revised proposal now includes the 22 trees and maintains the initial house numbers.

Process: the process was slow due to the applicant's reluctance to meet the design code standards. There was a tacit assumption that applicants could negotiate the avenue out. Several workshops took place where the problems were explained by urban design and highways officers working together, one lasting more than six hours.

Learning: although the design code and DQF set extremely clear design thresholds, the process was slow due to the developers' attitude to the design



Nottingham Case 2: Trent Basin redevelopment

quality and placemaking agenda. Both the design code and the DQF were instrumental in giving the authority the means to refuse poor design. So far, there have been no appeals against the DQF although it is fair to say that applicants do not always need to comply with all the criteria to achieve planning consent. Instead, schemes are evaluated against the DQF criteria proportionally and on their own merit. The various criteria are weighed up differently

according to the importance attached to each one for the scheme in question.

EVALUATION

Five years after the first DQF guide was released, this flexible, digital framework has grown organically, reaching a good level of maturity and stability, with new content added gradually upon request by the authority, industry and



Nottingham Case 3: Green Street, The Meadows

communities. Officers, community groups and local practices are fully aware and informed about both the content and the use of the tool.

So far, the DQF has proven to be an exceptional resource for the local authority, aiding officers in their daily struggle to pursue high quality, sustainable design. At least 30 other authorities and organisations have contacted Nottingham seeking advice on how to develop and implement similar tools and how to adopt bottom-up engagement processes following the Co-PLACE ethos which was applied to create, test

and deliver the DQF. (See www.dqfnottingham.org.uk/coplacengagement). The DQF evaluation demonstrated very clearly that tools are only as good as their users and how they utilise them. No matter how good a design code might be, if those implementing it lack the skills and experience to interpret it and appraise against it, or to negotiate design quality outputs, the tool will fail to deliver. Therefore, with present technologies, any automation of design quality seems very difficult to achieve. Appraisals on design quality and aesthetic value require inputs beyond the

scope of the current planning system and certainly beyond the current skills in all fields of expertise, especially regarding housing masterplanning.

NEXT STEPS

Audits are scheduled to take place every five years to inform the validity of design criteria and content in the DQF, and to enable the identification of successes and gaps.

The local authority sees the value of having adopted the QAM format. Therefore, both the process and the product will continue to be appraised with a view to refining custodianship and the scrutiny of design quality determinants.

The success of the approach is being transferred to other schemes. Consultations are still necessary, especially regarding statutory processes, but they are more often than not a small part of a larger, more inclusive process of engagement and empowerment. The DQF *Community Engagement Guide* and its vehicle Co-PLACE describe the ethos and approach that the authority aspires to.

Since the first guide was launched back in 2018, the DQF has continued to grow organically, with local authority officers, industry and communities suggesting new topics and content. The next step, which is currently in production, is the adaptation of design guides and their adoption as design codes.

We anticipate that the DQF will remain an open and public digital resource that is flexible, adaptable and expandable, as we found this approach to be of great value to respond to an industry that is shifting fast to address the issues of our times. ●

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RANKING	WHAT	WHY
S1	Adopting the Quality Assurance Model (QAM)	The model assumes quality to depend on both the product and the production process; in planning terms this translates in appraising the planning application and the planning review process.
S2	Beginning the process with a Planning Audit	Although a full audit was a huge resource-consuming task, it was a critical step to focus on the areas of major concern instead of attempting to over-code design.
S3	Democratic co-creation delivery process and participants involvement in the test-drive	Co-creating the guides alongside communities and industry made it possible for the authority to produce a tool that everyone could understand and endorse.
S4	Producing a flexible and easy to adapt tool	A digital platform managed entirely by the DQF team is much easier to revise. Users are advised to consult with the tool directly as it appears during their design stages.
S5	Upskilling everyone involved	Seminars for officers, decision-takers, communities and industry are regularly put in place

Key Design Quality Framework successes