Suffolk Design

Delivering design quality in Suffolk

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Summary

It is clear that the Suffolk Design project can serve a critical role in supporting the overall aspirations of Suffolk to grow in a way that is of benefit to all. To do this, change in the future needs to happen in ways that support rather than erode the essential character and identity of Suffolk.

The Day

This one-day workshop brought together Suffolk’s planning authorities to reflect on the existing tools in use and to debate, collaborate and collectively develop approaches to promoting and fostering design quality.

The event consisted of short talks, group working and feedback sessions. The morning set the context for the day, explain the governments thinking on design, outline the variety of approaches to the management of design quality, identifying the most effectives tools. The afternoon session focussed on understanding what tools, processes or types of guidance authorities in Suffolk would most value. This will be used as the basis to collectively develop approaches that can be shared across local authorities.

Current approaches to good design

Key findings:

* A range of tools for delivering design quality are already in use across Suffolk, but there is not a consistent framework for how and where.
* Not all of the tools are written; many are about process and engagement.
* Collaboration, trust and transparency are critical in developing the right culture for good design to flourish.
* Suffolk Design should shape the discussion around design rather than simply offer specific design solutions.

Actions:

* Identify the best examples of each of the tools in use so that others can adopt the approach.
* Identify ‘gaps’ in approach across districts, and make sure that the right tools are available everywhere.
* Develop a culture of partnership working across sectors and boundaries.

The first workshop got participants reflecting on what works in terms of delivering good design. This was not limited to things being used in Suffolk; people talked about learning from elsewhere. The groups quickly identified key tools such as robust design policies, design guides and Design Review as being important. Other areas seen as critical were more to do with cooperative working. Developer forums, talking to and working with community groups, and high-quality pre-application advice are all useful in improving design quality.

Another area discussed was the importance of being reflective, both in terms of process and outcomes. Working out where developers and design teams have most benefited from design advice, and undertaking visits of completed schemes can help better understand how the design process can deliver on design quality. The clear message from this session was that whilst many tools are available, and lots of them are already in use, how and when they were used lacked structure and consistency. For design across Suffolk to be of the same high quality everywhere, a more uniform approach to how and when to use the right design tools is needed.

Defining our design quality toolkit for the future

Key findings:

* A consistency of approach for applicants across Suffolk is needed.
* Information about utilities, infrastructure capacity, and demographics would be beneficial to help people make better and more responsive design decisions.
* A less top-down approach to delivering development is needed, with more and better engagement with community particularly important.
* More emphasis on the non-built character of Suffolk is needed, so that landscape, ecology etc is included in the design process.
* Where the right tools are needed should be spelled out.
* Highways and the design of our streets needs to be integral to the design process.

Actions:

* Clearly set out how and when communication needs to occur through the design process, and between who.
* Allow for more bottom-up design, possibly through toolkits around collaborative working and consultation.
* Put the right information for good design decisions in a place that is easy to access.
* Make sure that there is harmony between highways design approaches and the aspirations of Suffolk Design more generally.

The second part of the day asked participants; what does our Suffolk Design end product look like? People talked about the essential qualities that any tool must have, and recurring themes around engagement and collaboration emerged. Again, whilst specific design guidance for common issues would be useful, more important is the process through which good design is generated. Make sure that design decision are not imposed on people, and instead was developed with their input, was recognised as a key part of improving both quality and delivery.

Moving away from design as just the built environment was also recognised as being critical, as much of the Suffolk Character is generated by its landscape and ecology. Putting information into a place where people can get to it would go a long way to solving what is often a lack of understanding of the specific needs of an area, so any Suffolk Design outcome should have this feature at its core.

Finally, identifying and addressing resourcing, knowledge and skills deficits is critical if the design culture in Suffolk is to improve.