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Towards an Urban Design Route Map

Some thoughts on Urban Design
aspects of Planning Decision Making

Planning and Design: how it works

- Urban Design - an important material consideration in deciding planning applications - not the same as Architecture
- “Blame it on the planners” – a common cry when the public SEE a development they don’t like the look of – public judge on appearances
- Planners rely on own judgement plus Urban Design guidance ranging from national PPSs to local policies or development briefs to comments from consultees. Much negotiation on design.
- Planning by committee (too many, sometimes under-qualified, cooks) can lead to mediocrity. Prevents the worst but can’t easily promote the best.

What Urban Design Guidance/ Advice?

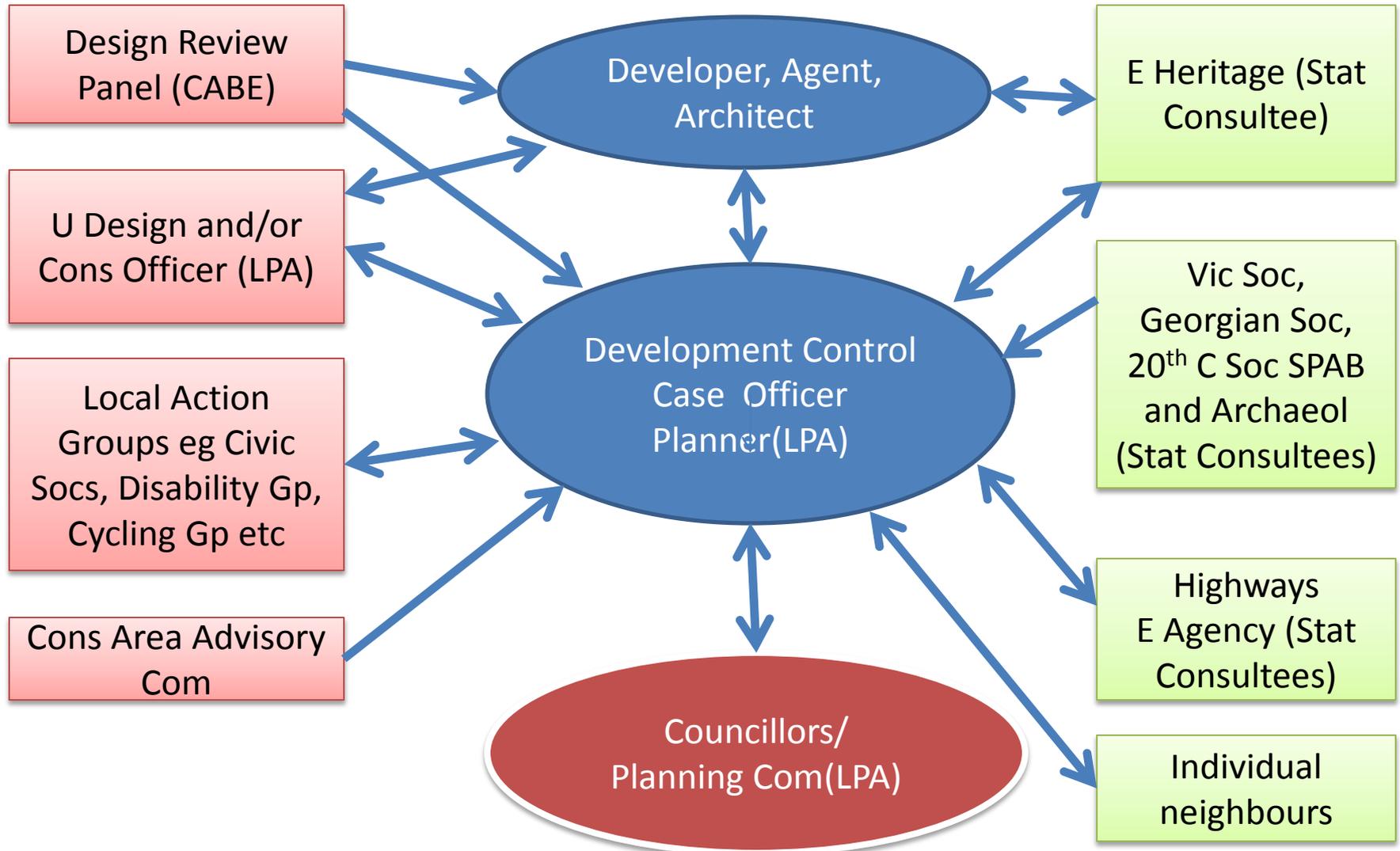
(order of actual influence varies)

- LDF's and Supplementary Planning Guidance design policy – statutory – *the most imp material consideration (as in s 38 of P and CP Act 2004)*
- Communities and Local Gov (CLG) – PPS 1,3,4,7,15 (1994-2009) - the main national policy - *important material consideration*
- Design and Access Statements (*required by P and CP Act 2004, since 2006*)
- English Heritage – a *statutory consultee* for large new dev in conservation areas and dev affecting Grade 1 and 2* Listed Buildings. Also EH literature/guidance.
- CABE Design Review (since 2002, various pubs) – non statutory docs and as a non stat consultee (*although very influential*)
- Site development briefs and masterplans – detailed/v useful but not always SPG
- CLG/DoT (2007) “Manual for Streets” - non statutory
- CABE (2005) “Building for Life Standard” - non statutory
- DETR (2000) “By Design” - non statutory
- English Partnerships (2000) “Urban Design Compendium” - non statutory
- Victorian, Georgian and 20th C Soc Society – all statutory consultees
- SPAB and AMS – statutory consultees
- Many local bodies as non statutory consultees e.g. civic societies
- And more.....

Whose views/what guidance most important and when?

- No clarity on this – development control officer judgement – or is it?
- Role of Councillors, English Heritage and CABE Design Review panels most influential in decision making in practice but masterplans or development briefs adopted as part of the Development Plan (LDF) should be most influential in terms of 2004 Planning Act – so the nature of governance is integral to the problem.
- The process can be as important as the policies

Governance for design issues in major applications



Design by Committee (a local example): too many cooks?



Westgate House – how did its replacement get consent?

- **Grainger Town Partnership paid for demolition of “worst eyesore” in area. High expectations for quality design replacement**
- **Development Brief produced by NCC – includes design guidelines, but broad – bulk, height, distinctive etc**
- **Some key principles are followed: height, materials, window to wall ratio, vertical emphasis, echo curved neighbour BUT still lacking in detail and insufficient attention to roof level and base. Neither faithful to traditional neighbours or innovative modern. What about local distinctiveness?**
- **Result of design by committee? Not bad enough to refuse but is it good enough to approve? Weak negotiation? No design competition so best architects not secured?**

A Closer Look at Critical Parts of the Process and Guidance

- **Case study approach – Paterson, E (2006) “Quality New Development in English Market Towns: Case Studies Examining the Role of Town Planning” *Journal of Urban Design* Vol 11, no 2, 225-241**
Also published in AESOP Conference proceedings (Vienna) 2005
- **This covered use of policy, governance issues and skills levels and how these contributed to various developments being perceived as “successful” or “unsuccessful” by informed lay local people once completed. Case studies in 4 market towns – 32 interviews.**
- **Concluded that political and senior level support in LPAs and skilled case officers make a big difference to outcome. Use of policy variable but link between successful schemes and use of certain policies and guidance eg CABE and PPG15**

Design and Access Statements

- **“Design and Access Statements: NE case study” forthcoming publication in *Journal of Urban Design and Planning* Sept 2010**
Also published in SUE-MOT conference (Loughborough) proceedings 2009
- **Looks at background of gov intervention in design through planning up to legal requirement for Design and Access Statements (DAS) with planning applications in 2006.**
- **Assesses their usefulness for planners and developers through primary research – 26 interviews over the North East**
- **Concludes that DAS has potential to facilitate negotiation on design, and back up conditions, but needs more pro-activity by case officers in its use. Can also improve comprehension of original designers intention and so communication with consultees and councillors.**

Design Review

- **Subject of current research. Paper presented to Planning Research conference (Chelmsford: Anglia Ruskin University) April 2010 and RTPi event in London May 2010**
- **Another recent tool introduced by CABE (non statutory) - responding to perceived skill shortage in LPAs**
- **9 regional panels + Scotland and Wales**
- **RDAs mostly coordinate/select panel members – tend to be architect dominated (funding now questionable with new gov)**
- **Panel can comment on schemes before or after app submitted – can help in negotiation but can also confuse**

Design Review: some findings

- Primary research – 33 telephone interviews with panel members, developers/agents and planners.
- Findings:
 - Panels useful, make a difference, help planners and architects
 - Architect dominated; planners especially would prefer more balance
 - Better communication needed between panels and customers
 - Role of panels not clear in relation to other urban design advice available to planners; non statutory/weight to attribute to panel comments unclear
 - Panels usually use no criteria against which to assess schemes
 - Panels lack rigour and should be monitored

Design Review: some recommendations

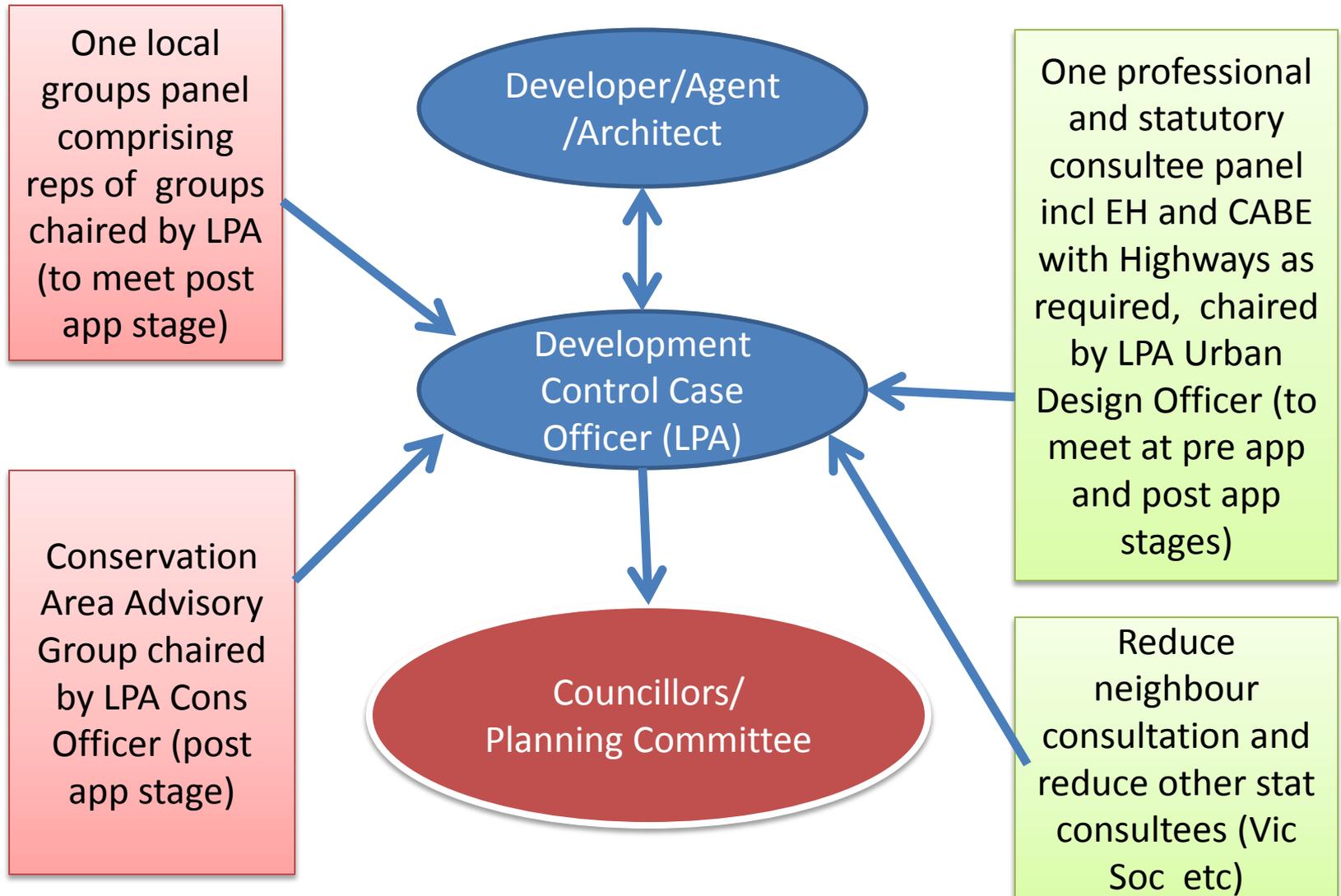
- **Panels should use some criteria against which to assess schemes e.g. Building for Life (CABE, 2006)**
- **Panel comments should be submitted with/integrated with Design and Access Statements**
- **CABE and EH should merge, at least as a statutory consultee on design and conservation (as a simplification)**
- **Panels should have an input to LPA design policy (following role clarification)**
- **Create an Urban Design Route map through a dedicated Urban Design PPS and/or a website such as RUDI**
- **Route map could include Urban Design policy typology, as put forward by Punter, J and Carmona, M (1997), plus an Urban Design governance framework**

A Route Map for Urban Design

some principles

- **Simplification required**
- **A hierarchy of guidance required**
- **National guidance to set out hierarchy**
- **New PPS consolidating key quango guidance and existing PPS/G guidance on design issues**
- **Roles of key players set out in new PPS and key players reduced**
- **Limit lines of negotiation (this would help with speed too)**
- **Implications for urban design training for planners – compulsory training for all DC planners could justify fewer consultees and/or less negotiation**

A possible new governance for design issues in major applications



Barriers to Change in UK

- Power relations especially EH vs CABE
- Professional silos especially Planners vs Architects
- A public demanding more involvement (and encouraged by government in 2004 Planning Act)
- Lack of widespread use of urban design language
- The Urban Design Alliance, set up in 1997 as a network for all professionals involved in urban design, could help break barriers

A More European System?

- British Planning System has greatest discretion of any world wide. Its complexity derives largely from this
- Greater complexity can make for poorer and slower decisions
- Comparisons of UK with design decisions in Germany and Netherlands (e.g. Freiburg and Almere) shows more powerful LPAs with better skilled staff and firmer development plans/less negotiation/less political involvement all help
- Extensive literature on lessons from Europe but UK government lacks political will to act on this and fails to grasp complexity and reality of daily decision making