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## Delivering great places to live: 20 questions you need to answer

Guidance notes for use with residents,  
community groups and stakeholders

**BUILDING  
FOR LIFE**

For Community Use/ Beta Version | work in development



### Notes:-

This version of the Building for Life 20 questions is being developed by the Architecture Centre Devon and Cornwall. It is designed to provide a plain English version of the questions for use with residents, community groups and stakeholders.

There are minor alterations to the language used, additional prompt questions, tips on what to look for and issues which would benefit from interactive exercises or more detailed workshops. Illustrated examples should accompany the presentation of the questions. .

The way in which Building for Life is used should be described with an introduction to the importance of design in the context of making a great place to live.

All the questions should be explained and the relevant context provided as to how the questions would be answered in an assessment.

These cards are designed to be used in conjunction with the standard guide and can be inserted as supporting guidance.

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**Does the development provide (or is it close to) community facilities, such as a school, parks, play areas, shops, pubs or cafes?**

● **NOTE**

Local knowledge very useful to answering this question. 'Close to' would normally mean within comfortable walking distance.

Are any new facilities located in such a way that they are easy to find and are well connected to the wider neighbourhood?

▶ **TIP**

Is there a plan with community facilities highlighted to see how the new development locates new or connects with existing facilities? This is very useful for understanding drawn proposals and for site visits.

Environment & Community

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**Is there an accommodation mix that reflects the needs and aspirations of the local community?**

● **NOTE**

Accommodation mix includes types of houses and flats with different numbers of bedrooms and which targets particular sections of the community, e.g. older people.

Local knowledge very useful to answering this question.

▶ **TIP**

Is there a drawing which shows which house and flat types are located where in the site?

Has the local authority carried out a local needs assessment?

Environment & Community

3

**Is there a tenure mix that reflects the needs and aspirations of the local community?**

● **NOTE**

Tenure mix includes properties which are available for social or private rental, for sale on the open market or through schemes like shared ownership.

Local knowledge very useful to answering this question.

▶ **TIP**

Is there a table which shows which house and flat tenure types are included and a drawing of where they located in the site?

Has the local authority carried out a local needs assessment?

Are the different types of tenures mixed within the site e.g. in small clusters?

Environment & Community

4

**Does the development have easy access to public transport?**

● **NOTE**

This needs to be answered relative to the local context. Easy access would normally mean within comfortable walking distance.

Local knowledge very useful to answering this question.

▶ **TIP**

Is there a plan which highlights where bus stops and other transport hubs are?

Are they well connected with routes that are easy and safe to use?

Environment & Community

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**Does the development have any features that reduce its environmental impact?**

● **NOTE**

This question is looking for features which are for the whole development rather than on individual buildings.

Examples would include energy generating technology for the whole site, landscaping which designed to deal with surface water drainage or encourages wildlife, water recycling or where the housing layout responds to the path of the sun- also called passive design.

▶ **TIP**

Look at illustrated examples of sustainable technology like biomass boilers. The principles of passive design, roof orientation/insulation/ modular construction would be a useful subject of a design workshop

**Environment & Community**

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**Is the design specific to the scheme?**

● **NOTE**

Has the design made an effort to fit the proposal into surrounding area or does it feel like it could be in any place, in any town?

Does it make good use of the land available and the features of the site as a whole?

▶ **TIP**

Hold a workshop which explores the principles of urban design using drawing techniques looking at street and building layouts, different types of development drawing the scale of local streets and familiar places to use as a reference.

**Character**

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**Does the scheme make the most of existing buildings, landscape or the way the site slopes?**

● **NOTE**

Has the design incorporated features which already help make the site special, existing buildings or trees. Does it make connections with views to landmarks within and outside the development?

If the site is sloping how are the streets laid out relative to the slope? Which way is the slope facing? This will be important for environmental design.

▶ **TIP**

Discuss what the important features of the local area? Can the key views be identified these are especially important on sloping sites but also help you navigate a place.

The roofscape will be important on a sloping site.

**Character**

8

**Does the scheme feel like a place with a distinctive character?**

● **NOTE**

How do you know you have arrived in this place? Can you describe in a positive way what it looks like which would help someone else find it?

▶ **TIP**

Hold a brief discussion or workshop around providing someone with directions into the development.

What is the character of the local area? A workshop exploring or using photographs to look at the architecture, landscape and the clues which would help the scheme integrate or be distinctive.

**Character**

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**Do the buildings and layout make it easy to find your way around?**

● **NOTE**

Imagine moving around the development, is it clear which are the main routes and where the development connects to its surroundings? Are there features or ways that the buildings are designed especially at junctions which might help you find your way around?

▶ **TIP**

Hold a brief discussion or workshop around providing someone with directions into the development.

Look at illustrated examples of buildings turning corners at junctions and other ways that street patterns are reinforced by design.

**Character**

10

**Are the streets defined by a well-structured building layout?**

● **NOTE**

Is it easy to tell from looking at the plans or on site what is public and private space? Is it clear what are the front and backs of buildings? Are the public spaces used in a positive way and is there natural surveillance?

▶ **TIP**

Hold a brief discussion or workshop around providing someone with directions into the development.

Use drawings to identify the front and backs of buildings and spot what might be 'active frontages.'

**Character**

11

**Does the building layout take priority over the streets and car parking?**

● **NOTE**

Look at the spaces between the buildings, has the layout been designed for the movement of cars or to make an attractive overall environment?

▶ **TIP**

Look at some illustrated examples of 'over-engineered' roadways and good examples of spaces where pedestrians have priority.

Is there a movement diagram which shows or can you describe how different users will get around the development and connect outside it?

**Streets, Parking and Pedestrianisation**

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**Is the car parking well integrated and situated so it supports the street scene?**

● **NOTE**

How is the parking designed to work? If there is on-street parking are parked cars likely to dominate the street scene? If there are parking courts, are they overlooked – will they feel safe?

Have trees and planting been incorporated into the parking areas.

▶ **TIP**

Look at some illustrated examples of good and bad parking arrangements in plan and as photographs.

Hold a brief discussion or workshop about the merits of different parking arrangements, on street, on plot, garaged, parking courts and how they use up the available space. What are the pressures on land and parking and how do you get the right balance?

**Streets, Parking and Pedestrianisation**

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### Are the streets pedestrian, cycle and vehicle friendly?

● NOTE

Does the layout or the design suggest that it is a pleasant environment for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists? Does the design look like it will encourage people to drive slowly?

▶ TIP

Look at examples of successful shared surface schemes and why they work.

Holding a street design workshop could be helpful in learning about why certain materials, features and layouts influence driving speed.

Streets, Parking and  
Pedestrianisation

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### Does the scheme integrate with existing streets, paths and surrounding development?

● NOTE

Does the layout make it convenient to move around particularly on foot. What are the 'desire lines'? – the routes between important destinations like schools and shops and does the layout help make direct connections?

▶ TIP

Is there a movement diagram which shows- or can you describe- how different users will get around the development and connect outside it?

Hold a drawing workshop on strategies for movement and making connections

Streets, Parking and  
Pedestrianisation

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**Are public spaces and pedestrian routes overlooked and do they feel safe?**

● NOTE

Will the streets, paths and public spaces feel safe in the day and at night? Are they well lit?

Do the buildings have windows which allow natural surveillance?

▶ TIP

Look at methods of creating opportunities for natural surveillance such as the positioning of doors and windows to create active frontages. Also look at examples where spaces are not overlooked and/or are poorly managed.

Streets, parking and  
Pedestrianisation

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**Is public space well designed and does it have suitable management arrangements in place?**

● NOTE

Is it clear who might use public spaces and how? Are there any public spaces where it is unclear who would be responsible for looking after it?

Are there clues about how the public space is managed or evidence that it isn't working or won't work?

▶ TIP

Look at illustrated examples where parts of the landscape, often triangles of space, are leftover after positioning parking spaces.

Other clues might be well placed and maintained signage, bins and street furniture.

Design and Construction

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## Do the buildings exhibit architectural quality?

### ● NOTE

Has the development- the buildings and spaces in between been? Do they function well, are they designed to last and designed to please?

Are there aspects of the design which show that thought has gone into how elements such as bin stores, cycle parking, meters etc have been integrated?

Are there any signs that the design is not co-ordinated e.g. untidy rainwater pipes, complicated junctions on the roof, or poor choice of materials where the building meets the ground which will weather badly?

### ▶ TIP

Look at examples which explain proportion and quality of detailing. It is important to understand the difference between architectural quality and style.

Design and Construction

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## Do internal spaces and layout allow for adaptation, conversion or extension?

### ● NOTE

Can the buildings be adapted for changes in lifestyle or different occupants such as for people getting older or families getting bigger?

### ▶ TIP

Sometimes this issue is hard to judge both on site, especially if you can't get inside the buildings, and in drawn proposals. You also won't necessarily know how the buildings are built which affects the adaptability.

Things to look for are:

Level entrances, generous corridors and footpaths for people with buggies or people in wheelchairs.

Large accessible toilets on the ground floor. Enough room for a lift or chairlift to fit. Roofs where it looks like the loft space inside might be adaptable, gardens which would allow extensions.

Design and Construction

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### Has the scheme made use of advances in construction and technology?

● NOTE

The materials, technology or methods of construction used can help improve the performance of the building and make it look better. The way a building is put together especially if parts are manufactured in a factory and assembled on site can be very efficient, reduce waste, produce a better finish and make the buildings safer to construct.

It is very difficult to answer this question without the drawings and a technical explanation.

▶ TIP

Look at examples of modular and off site construction and the key advantages over conventional building methods.

Holding a workshop on sustainable housing design would be useful.

Design and Construction

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### Do buildings or spaces not only meet building regulations but do better?

● NOTE

Building regulations cover the technical performance of buildings and cover things like how much heat a building loses, how energy is used and/or generated, how water is used and sound is transmitted. These regulations have to be met but does the development exceed the requirements?

It is difficult to answer this question without the drawings and technical explanations about the performance of the building.

▶ TIP

Some clues are if the spaces and ceiling heights are generous. If you can see that the windows are triple glazed or there are solar water heaters and solar energy collectors on the roof it could be that the building regulations are being exceeded.

Hold a workshop on sustainable housing design.

Design and Construction