Scoping *and Options* Report: Design Code and Guidance	
Executive Summary	The purpose of this report is to update Members with the options the Council has in updating the current 2008 adopted Design Guide supplementary Planning Guidance and seek endorsement of the proposed approach.
Options considered	The report considers the options for two work streams that are closely related to each other: **updating the Council's design guide and the potential for the creation of design codes.** The report considers an update to the 2008 Design Guide SPD to be essential to ensure the authority's design principles are up to date with national guidance and the Council's design aspirations following the Production of the new Local Plan, 2024-2040. As part of this work, the report **considers the options**, **including the creation of a new design guide, updating the current design guide, and/or creating a web-based version. Additionally, the design guide could be brought up to date through the incorporation of design codes**. Design Codes are a useful tool to provide a district-wide framework for creating healthy, safe, environmentally responsive, sustainable, and distinctive places, with a consistent and high-quality standard of design. By building on the detailed design principles in the Council's new Local Plan, a design code can also be expected to inform the design vision and design guidance. **The report considers different options in this respect, including the implementation of area-wide design codes or a more specific approach that relates to unique character areas such as the National Landscape or specific growth areas such as Cromer or North Walsham.** There is also an **alternative option** whereby the **Council produces design codes templates for developers to follow and adhere to,** which offers a more cost-effective approach and could from part of a new policy requirement for the future Local Plan review.
Consultation(s)	No consultation has taken place as this is a scoping report to identify the potential work stream that will follow. It would be expected public consultation would be part of the process.
Recommendations	1 - That PPBHWP recommend to cabinet that the following options are endorsed in order to ensure

	the Council has a stronger, long-term influence of design across the district. **Option 2 'Update Existing Design Guide'** which would include, in the first instance, consultants to provide an in-depth review of the design guide and what areas will need updating in the context of national guidance and Local Plan policy, whilst also keeping and updating relevant material. 2 - With regard to design codes, the Council considers the production of a **character specific design codes tailored to the growth locations** within the district where practical, and/or the production of design code templates for developers to adhere to as the most practical options.
Reasons for recommendations	This approach is a suitable and resource efficient way forward in regard to updating the Councils planning design guidance in order to ensure the Council has a stronger, long-term influence of design across the district.
Background papers	**N/A**

Wards affected	All
Cabinet member(s)	Cllr Brown
Contact Officer	Matthew Gutteridge Senior Planning Officer Matthew.gutteridge@north-norfolk.gov.uk

Links to key documents:	
Corporate Plan:	N/A
Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	N/A
Council Policies & Strategies	The Local Plan

Corporate Governance:	
Is this a key decision	No
Has the public interest test been applied	No

Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter	No previous decisions relate to this report.

1. Purpose of the report

This report explores the feasibility and strategic value of updating the current 2008 Design Guide supplementary Planning Document, SPD, and implementing an Area-Wide Design Code for North Norfolk District Council (NNDC). It evaluates existing design guidance, national policy frameworks, comparative approaches across Norfolk authorities, and the potential benefits of adopting a district-wide code and updating the currently adopted 2008 Desing Guide SPD.

2. Introduction & Background

2.1. Design codes are increasingly recognised as essential tools in shaping high-quality, sustainable, and locally distinctive places. While site-specific codes are commonly used at the application stage, area-wide design codes apply across broader geographies, offering a strategic framework for guiding development at scale. This report outlines the rationale, scope, and potential implementation strategy for such a code and design guide update and seeks members endorsement for this future work stream.

3. National Design Policy Context

3.1 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

3.1.1. The NPPF emphasises the importance of good design throughout the planning process. Key principles include proactive planning, community engagement, use of design quality tools, and robust decision-making.

3.2 National Design Guide and National Model Design Code

3.2.1. The National Design Guide (NDG), published in October 2019, and the National Model Design Code (NMDC), released in July 2021, represent key components of the Government's approach to improving design standards across the planning system. These documents provide a nationally consistent framework for achieving high-quality, sustainable, and beautiful places. The NDG sets out ten characteristics of well-designed places, these being: Context, Identity, Built-Form, Movement, Nature, Public Spaces, Uses, Homes & Buildings, Resources and Lifespan. The NMDC on the other hand provides a structured framework for creating local design codes. It includes a four-step coding process (Analysis, Visioning, Coding, Implementation) and detailed guidance notes. Core principles include reflecting local character, engaging communities, providing clarity, and ensuring flexibility.

3.2.2. Both documents are referenced within the updated NPPF and feature especially in paragraphs, 133, 134 and 138, which emphasise the importance of design in planning decisions. The NPPF encourages local planning authorities to prepare design guides and codes in line with the NDG and NMDC and gives significant weight to development that aligns with the principles set out in both documents. Their implementation is designed to support the Government's approach to promoting beauty in the built environment, improving placemaking and ensuring that new development contributes positively to its surroundings.

3.2.3. For NNDC and the design guide to be considered up to date, this means it should be adherent to the principles as described within both aforementioned documents, alongside the requirements as set out in the NPPF.

3.3 Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act

3.3.1. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA) introduces a shift in the role and status of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). Under the new legislative framework, SPDs will be phased out and replaced by a new category of planning documents known as Supplementary Plans. Unlike SPDs, which previously held limited weight in decision-making, Supplementary Plans will form part of the statutory development plan and therefore carry full legal weight in planning determinations.

3.3.2. This change will have significant implications for local planning authorities. The preparation of Supplementary Plans will be subject to formal procedures, including public consultation and independent examination, aligning them more closely with the process for Local Plans. While this enhances transparency and strengthens the role of detailed policy guidance, it also introduces additional resource and time requirements. Authorities will need to carefully consider the scope and necessity of future Supplementary Plans to ensure they are deliverable within the new statutory framework.

3.3.3. For NNDC, a Supplementary Plan could be used to produce an authority-wide design code and/or an update to the currently adopted Design Guide, with the aim of providing and reinforcing an overarching design vision, setting out high level strategic design parameters to apply to development. In undertaking an update to the adopted Design Guide SPD, the Council will ultimately have a choice on how to proceed, and the status afforded to the updated document.

3.4 Emerging Local Plan

3.4.1. The Council's new Local Plan introduces an updated design policy ENV8 High Quality Design which has a focus on reinforcing and creating a sense of place through implementing requirements for

developments based on key areas of design such as; public realm and open spaces, landscaping and green infrastructure, awareness of special character and an emphasis on accessibility and the environment. It is expected that any potential work to update or recreate the Council's design guide will need to align with the key themes identified in Policy ENV8.

4. Existing Design Guidance

4.1 NNDC Design Guide (2008)

4.1.2. The current Design Guide, adopted in 2008, serves as supplementary guidance to the Local Development Framework – North Norfolk Core Strategy. It supports and specifically refers to the policies within the now superseded Core Strategy and site-specific DPD. However, the policies within the Core Strategy that directly influence the Design Guide included:

- EN2 Protection and Enhancement of Landscape and Settlement Character,
- EN4 Design,
- EN5 Public Realm,
- EN6 Sustainable Construction and Energy Efficiency,
- EN8 Protecting and Enhancing the Historic Environment.

4.1.3. It offers advice in relation to these policies on residential and commercial development, building conversions, shopfronts, materials, sustainability, and landscape integration. Although an earlier review was initiated to modernise the guide, the release of the National Design Guide and its integration into the NPPF shifted the national design context. In the short term, NNDC has opted to retain the existing guide while relying on national guidance for contemporary advice.

4.1.4. With the conclusion of the new Local Plan, a review of the design guide offers the opportunity to bring the guide up to date to reflect the policy requirements of the Local Plan and updated design ambitions. In particular, it is thought the design implications of the following policies could be incorporated:

- Policy CC3 'Sustainable Construction, Energy Efficiency & Carbon Reduction'
- Policy CC8 'Electric Vehicle Charging'
- Policy CC9 'Biodiversity Net Gain'
- Policy CC10 'Green Infrastructure'

- Policy CC11 'Trees, Hedgerows & Woodlands'
- Policy HC1 'Health & Wellbeing'
- Policy HC2 'Provision & Retention of Open Spaces
- Policy HC5 'Fibre to Premises (FTTP)'
- Policy HC7 'Parking Provision'
- Policy ENV2 'Protection & Enhancement of Landscape & Settlement Character'
- Policy ENV3 'Heritage and Undeveloped Coast'
- Policy ENV5 'Impacts on Internationally Designated Sites: Recreated Impact Avoidance & Mitigation Strategy
- Policy ENV7 'Protecting & Enhancing the Historic Environment'
- Policy ENV8 'High Quality Design'
- Policy E4 'Retail and Town Centre Development'
- Policy E5 'Signage & Shopfronts'
- Policy HOU8 'Accessible & Adaptable Homes'
- Policy HOU9 'Minimum Space Standards'

4.1.5. With particular reference to Policy HC1, its incorporation into the guide is an opportunity to expand on the requirements of health protocol and provide more context surrounding the healthy planning checklist, building for life and 250 dwellings threshold. Moreover, the update provides an opportunity to included updated advice on incorporating renewable energy technologies into development and design with the implementation of technologies such as heat pumps, solar panels etc in line with the expectations of Policy CC3. The Local Plan includes a number of policies that prioritise green infrastructure in development in addition to Policy CC10, including ENV5, HC2 & C11, all of which focuses on similar themes, the design guide can bring together the requirements of each of these policies into clear and cohesive guidance that ensures these requirements are met.

4.1.6. Moreover, such policies offer an opportunity for the guide to provide wider context on areas such as dark skies. Additionally, Policy HOU8 & HOU9 involve a strong focus on ensuring design which the guide can expand upon, ensuring homes are well laid out and practical to live, whilst meeting and supporting the needs of everyone. The current design guide includes references and content relating to sustainable construction however elements are now out of date and this particularly area of the design can be greatly improved upon to help support policies such as CC3 and ENV8.

5. Design Codes vs Design Guides

5.1 Comparison

5.1.1. As referred to above, a design code is a set of precise, visual and measurable rules and requirements for the physical development of a site or area. The expectation with Design Codes is for these to be followed exactly, often forming part of planning policy or a condition of planning consent.

5.1.2. Design Codes usually include specific parameters such as building heights, materials, street widths, boundary treatments and other specific design details. It can also reference bespoke requirements as required by policy or planning consent, and they are a useful tool in ensuring consistent quality in developments, particularly for large-scale schemes. At an area-wide level, design codes could identify key parts of the district that require more sensitive design an identify what requirements should be sought in these areas.

5.1.3. Design Guides are more flexible and are often represented as an advisory tool that outlines principles and best practices for good design. This may include high level masterplans, illustrative plans and reference existing case studies and examples that inform the development's approach to design.

5.1.4. Design Guides are often most useful early in the planning process to influence design at an early stage and can a be a useful tool in pre-application process. Having an up-to-date design guide would be a valuable resource for applicants when drafting their own development briefs, as they provide clear expectations and design principles, and potentially avoiding any issues later in the application process.

6. Case Studies and Best Practice

6.1 National Examples of Design Codes

6.1.1. Examples include Upton (Northampton), known for being one of the earliest and most cited examples in the UK, the code focuses on connectivity and mixed-use developments whilst ensuring high design quality. Northstowe (Cambridgeshire) is a large new town development with a detailed design code guiding each phase of development, there is a strong emphasis on sustainability, connectivity and integration with exiting communities.

6.1.2. More notably, an example of an area-wide design code in the UK is the Dover Design Code currently being drafted by Dover District Council. The Dover Design Code aims to reflect local character and design preferences, providing a framework for assessing the design quality of future development. It aligns with the National Planning Policy

Framework (NPPF), which recommends the use of design codes to set out clear, visual, and numerical design parameters. The code will be used to determine whether planning applications meet acceptable design standards and will support the implementation of the Local Plan. This approach exemplifies the shift towards authority-wide design codes encouraged by the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, which seeks to embed design quality across entire planning areas.

6.1.3. Another example is the Lichfield District Design Code which is an adopted SPD as of December 2024. The code provides clear, practical guidance on what constitutes good design across the district. It covers urban, suburban, and rural contexts, aiming to ensure consistency in design quality while respecting local character. The code is structured to support planners, developers, and communities by offering certainty and reducing ambiguity in decision-making.

7. Norfolk Authorities

7.1. NNDC is the only local authority in Norfolk not to have undertaken work in regard to updating their design guidance and expected changes to the planning system in the near future will potentially expose NNDC as an area of Norfolk with limited design expectations in comparison to other local authorities. Below is a brief overview of the current status of each local authority in relation to their work on providing design guidance.

7.1 Breckland District Council

7.1.1. A Design Guide[1] was produced in 2023/2024, in conjunction with the Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment, with the two being used as companions to each other. The guide focuses on local character, local community planning and developments in sensitive locations. There is also a more specific design guide for Breckland Market Town Shopfront.

7.2 Broadland & South Norfolk District Council

7.2.1. Broadland & South Norfolk[2] are creating a join district wide Design Code which is currently in development. This has already been through three stages of consultation, the latest being in June this year. This Design Code will then become an adopted Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) later this year.

7.2.2. This Design Code will apply to most new residential development, especially those under 500 dwellings. Its main focus is on:

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[1] Breckland Design Guide - Breckland Council
[2] South Norfolk and Broadland Design Code Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) | Broadland and South Norfolk

- Building height, form, and materials

- Landscaping and green infrastructure

- Parking and bin storage design

- Street layout and public realm

7.2.3. A character assessment supported the Design Code by identifying local distinctiveness and includes an assessment toolkit to help developers and planner evaluate their proposals against the Design Code.

7.3 King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council (Areas of Opportunity)

7.3.1. As part of their Local Plan Review, King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council identified Areas of Opportunity. These are strategic locations earmarked for regeneration, enhancement, or targeted development to support the borough's spatial strategy and growth objectives.

7.3.2. Areas of Opportunity include strategic sites within King's Lynn and surrounding areas that have the potential to deliver significant improvements in urban quality, connectivity and land use. They can also include Brownfield land. Within these Areas of Opportunity, bespoke design guidance or codes to ensure a high-quality development is achieved. Within these Areas of Opportunity, the Local Plan encourages design excellence, sustainability and heritage sensitivity.

7.4 Great Yarmouth Borough Council

7.4.1. Have an adopted Design Code SPD which was adopted in January 2024[3], which supports existing design-based policies in the Local Plan. This covers both urban and rural area and provides detailed design principles and character area guidance. Its main focus is on:

- Building form and massing

- Street layout and connectivity

- Materials and detailing

- Public realm and landscaping

7.4.2. This Design Code is available as an interactive online document for ease of use. Their guidance also separates into area specific design requirements which offers detailed guidance based on different areas

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[3] [Great Yarmouth Design Code](#)

and housing types across their district, whilst also separating Great Yarmouth itself into different categories.

7.5 Norwich City Council

7.5.1. Norwich City Council[4] uses supplementary planning documents for design guidance as part of the Greater Norwich Local Plan which was adopted in March 2024. Norwich City Council do not have a standalone Design Code.

7. Proposals and Options

7.1 Areas of Opportunity

7.1.1. King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council are taking an alternative approach to others in identifying Areas of Opportunity instead of an area-wide design code. This approach ensures high-quality design however, it is only highly effective in neglected areas of a settlement that could benefit from new development, such as brownfield land of which NNDC has a lack of in suitable locations for development. Therefore, this approach would not be feasible with the more rural setting of North Norfolk.

7.2 North Norfolk Design Guide update

7.2.1. As mentioned above, NNDC's adopted design guide is now considerably out of date within the context of national legislation and the Government's intention to ensure design is better implemented through the NPPF and national design documentation, it is considered imperative that that the Council's design guide is updated and brought in line with up-to-date national guidance and reflects the new Local Plan and the policies therein. This would involve reviewing the existing design guide and identifying areas where legislative and policy updates are necessary, it would also require review of the supporting evidence base, if any local character assessment, landscape assessments and appropriate Neighbourhood planning policies etc have been produced since the adoption of the Council's design guide then these will need documenting.

7.2.2. The design guide will also need to be restructured to take into account its support of National Design Principles as set out in the NDG and NMDC, ensuring the updated guide is supportive rather than counter intuitive. There are two options for updating the design guide:

- *Option 1 – Start Fresh:* Given the work required to update the guide to current standards and practices, the Council could

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4 Document downloads - Planning policy | Norwich City Council

disregard the current design guide and conduct a full restart. This would be easier but could take a long time to produce

- *Option 2 – Update existing Design Guide:* The Council could use the existing adopted document and re-write elements that need updating but retain parts that are still relevant. In addition, the design guide will need to be updated to reflect the policies in the Local Plan that would have an impact on site design. The Design Guide could also include any Council wide projects or initiatives that can be incorporated which may be relevant to the purpose of the guide.

- *Option 3 – Review web-based Design Guide:* The Council could revive the desktop version of the design guide that was consulted on but never progressed passed this first stage. This would help digitise the guide in a more interactive way and improve accessibility but would require new content and a new webpage and design, and then future and ongoing monitoring which would be time consuming and costly. However, this option could be adopted at a later date, utilising in-house expertise after the design guide and code/s have been produced. Great Yarmouth have digitised their design guidance and is a good example of how this can be achieved.

7.2.3. It is likely that all the aforementioned approaches will be undertaken on a project management basis and implemented through the use of appropriately commissioned third-party specialists.

7.3 Area-Wide Design Code

7.3.1. An area-wide design code offers broader coverage across the district, ensuring consistent design quality and supporting strategic objectives such as enhancing local character and promoting sustainable development. NNDC has a diverse range of local character e.g. coastal settlements and those situated along the Norfolk Broads, or the area identified within the National Landscape and larger urban areas like North Walsham.

7.3.2. An area-wide code could provide specific expectations and requirements for design that the Council would want to see new development adhere to, and this could be achieved by identifying different character areas adjusting design requirements to match. However, whilst this approach would ensure consistent design principles across the district, it is important to balance this with the need for development and the Council's housing targets, therefore an area-wide design code should not be restrictive but rather supportive of new growth. It may therefore be more cost effective and less restrictive to produce design codes tailored to specific features or characteristics relating to sensitive landscapes or features.

7.4 Character Specific Design Codes

7.4.1. Rather than creating an area-wide code which would need to take into account all areas of North Norfolk and produce curated coding for each, the design guide could include character specific design codes which reflect areas of the district that require specific attention. However, this approach would need to be informed by further scoping work to identify which locations would be the most suitable and in the most need of a design code to ensure sensitive design. As an example, these could be separated into the following locations:

- Area covered by the Norfolk Coast National Landscape designation
- Main transport corridors such as the A140
- Norfolk Norfolk's coastline and coastal settlements
- Areas sensitive to nationally significant heritage assets.

7.4.2. This approach would streamline the area-wide design code process and possibly quicken overall timescales for completion. This approach could also incorporate elements of design codes from strategic sites to ensure their delivery. This option would, however, leave parts of the district without specific design principles in place which could encourage developers to direct growth aspirations to those areas where design guidance is less stringent. The update can also provide the required context and expected structure and detailing the Council would expect to see in site-specific design codes to provide a standardised template that meets our expectations. This would then benefit both developers and potentially neighbourhood plan groups.

7.4.3. Although a significant number of allocations are now coming forward, including the North Walsham West Urban Extension which already includes the requirement for a design code, and the allocation for Fakenham, F01 already has outline planning permission, this approach may be too late to inform much of the larger sites, nevertheless it would put in place codes which could be linked to the higher levels of future growth expected/Local Plan review.

7.5 Design Code Templates

7.5.1. There is an additional option whereby the design guide update could also provide required context and expected structure and detailing what the Council would expect to see in site-specific design codes to provide a standardised template that meets our expectations, which could then support future Local Plan policies. This would then benefit both developers and neighbourhood plan groups who may go on and create their own local codes.

8.   Financial and Resource Implications

8.1. Internal team: Senior Planning Policy Officers, alongside cross department working between senior planners and senior CDI officer(s) in addition to GIS support. External support: Specialist consultancy to draft and update the design guide and coding.

8.2. The average cost of an Area-Wide Design Code can range from £75,000 – £160,000, however a specific design code tailored to a more defined location will be more cost-effective. Updating a design guide can cost up to £50,000 depending on content and length of the design guide, if the Council were to consider implementing a web-based version then the cost will be potentially higher. The actual cost will depend on the final tender, which will undergo a competitive tendering process in line with Council procedures.

Provisional Project Timeline	
Tender Consultation	February 2026
Contract start date	March 2026
Inception meeting	March 2026
Scoping/analysis (third party) stages & consultation	April – July 2026
Visioning stages & consultation	April – September 2026
Preparation of coding guidance	October – December 2026
Publication of Final Draft Design Code	January 2027

Comments from the S151 Officer:

The S151 Officer (or member of the Finance team on their behalf) will complete this section.

9. Legal Implications

9.1. It is considered there are no specific legal implications associated with this report. However, the production of an updated Design Guide would help the Council maintain up to date guidance and adherence to national policy expectations.

Comments from the Monitoring Officer

The Monitoring Officer (or member of the Legal team on behalf of the MO) will complete this section. They will outline any legal advice provided.

No specific legal issues arise from this report, but the introduction of design codes will help to ensure compliance with national policy and statutory requirements.

10.   Risks

10.1. The Council's current Design Guide is already out of date with national policy and guidance, and with the production of the new Local Plan delaying an update to this document will exacerbate this issue further, creating more uncertainty and the potential for less influence in design at the application/pre-application stage going forward.

10.2. As other local authorities update their own design guidance, not updating ours will leave the Council in a weaker position with regard to enforcing appropriate design principles in future developments, potentially leading to higher levels of growth eroding the distinct urban and rural design characteristics as developers prioritise the district for their own growth aspirations because there are less restrictions surrounding design. With the other Norfolk authorities already updating their design guides, should Local Government reorganisation go ahead, the district would be left without appropriate planning guidance in relation to design.

11.   Net ZeroTarget

11.1. This report has not been assessed against the Net Zero 2030 Strategy & Climate Action Plan.

12.   Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

12.1   There are no direct implications on equality within this report.

13.   Community Safety issues

13.1.   The Local plan design policy ENV8(e) includes references to reducing opportunities for crime and antisocial behaviour, creating safe, secure and accessible environments. Any review of the Councils design guidance would be expected to include detail in relation of this policy consideration.

14.   Conclusion and Recommendations

14.1. With regard to the implementation of design codes, an Area-Wide Design Code presents an opportunity to improve design standards across North Norfolk and ensure consistency which might become more essential as the Council looks to support its new housing targets. An area-wide code would help to ensure design aligns with national policy, complements the emerging Local Plan, and addresses gaps in existing guidance. However, this approach would include producing more detailed guidance for areas in rural areas where, realistically, development will not come forward and is likely the least cost-effective approach to take.

14.2. If there are concerns regarding time scales and cost with the above approach, then character specific design codes would be a suitable alternative that would provide more specific design principles in the more sensitive or uniquely identified parts of the district such as the Council's growth locations. However, identifying which suitable areas require design coding and should be focussed on could be time consuming, costly and requiring additional internal decision-making process and delay the overall timeline. Therefore, it may be more prudent and cost-effective to provide a template for design codes at a site-specific level for developers to follow and adhere to, ensuring the Council has control over the quality and content of design codes across the district and could from part of a policy requirement for the future Local Plan.

14.3. With regard to updating the design guide, Option 3 detailed would be a positive step in modernising the guide but would require producing a brand-new webpage which raises some concern regarding its monitoring and potential cost. Therefore, Option 2 is most likely the quickest and most cost-effective approach with Option 3 being implemented at a later date to ensure the design guide keeps up to date with accessibility requirements for the future Local Plan if required.

Recommendation

14.4. 1 - That PPBHWP recommend to cabinet that the following options are endorsed in order to ensure the Council has a stronger, long-term influence of design across the district.

Option 2 'Update Existing Design Guide' which would include, in the first instance, consultants to provide an in-depth review of the design guide and what areas will need updating in the context of national guidance and Local Plan policy, whilst also keeping and updating relevant material.

2 - With regard to design codes, the Council considers the production of a character specific design codes tailored to the growth locations within the district where practical, and/or the production of design

code templates for developers to adhere to as the most practical options.