



PLANNING SYSTEM

Respecting and enhancing local character in the planning system

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Stepping up planning and designing for better places: respecting and enhancing local character

This circular provides advice on how the NSW planning system will deliver development that both meets the growing needs of NSW and is contextual, local and of its place, to make better places for everyone. Growth in NSW will continue and it is the role of the planning system to guide how growth will be managed, including by setting strategic targets for new housing to meet the needs of future communities. Character is a critical element of local areas and neighbourhoods and needs to be carefully considered in future planning. The circular provides guidance for local councils and other relevant planning authorities, state agencies and communities about the tools available to them to incorporate consideration of local character into strategic planning and detailed planning for places.

What is local character?

Character is what makes one neighbourhood distinctive from another. It is the way a place 'looks and feels'. It is created by the way built and natural elements in both the public realm and private domain interrelate with one another, including the interplay between buildings, architectural style, subdivision patterns, activity, topography and vegetation.

It is important to ensure that consideration of character is understood to be distinct from considerations of heritage and conservation. Compatibility is different from sameness, as it allows for many different features to coexist together harmoniously.

All places have character and what is important in one area might be very different in another. Good planning should ensure all places have a future desired character and once this has been established the planning framework can be used to guide the degree of change needed to achieve that vision.

Where major growth is planned, such as in growth areas or precincts there are opportunities to enhance the future character of these areas through the planning system to ensure the places we create become the much loved suburbs of the future.

In other areas where the existing character is highly valued by the community, there are opportunities to plan for the enhancement of that character for the enjoyment of existing and future residents.

Respecting character does not mean that new development cannot occur, instead, it means that a design-led approach needs to be implemented which builds on the valued characteristics of individual neighbourhoods and places. Built form, bulk, scale and height as well as landscaping and good design all play a part in ensuring the character of an area is maintained while still allowing for new development to occur.

Good design in the built environment is informed by and derived from its location, context and social setting. It is place-based, relevant to and resonant with local character and community aspirations. It contributes to evolving and future character and setting.

A new approach to include the role of character in the NSW planning system

NSW is rapidly growing and, respecting and enhancing local character are important considerations in planning for the growth of our cities, towns and regions.

While a growing population can bring the benefits of greater housing diversity and choice, more job opportunities closer to home and investment in infrastructure, facilities and services. Communities are also concerned that new development can impact the local character and amenity of their neighbourhood.

Local character should be considered at every stage of the planning and development process in NSW. With the use of guidance and tools prepared by the Department and the Government Architect NSW, all stakeholders can play their part in ensuring that, as our communities grow, they become better places.

How can character be considered in the NSW planning system?

Local character needs to be considered as part of strategic planning and when detailed plans for places are prepared.

Local communities play an important role in defining what character is in their local area.

Consultation is essential throughout the plan-making process to ensure that character is planned for and consistent with the community's view of the desired future character of their area.

Strategic Planning

Regional and District Plans

The regional and district plans set the strategic vision for communities across NSW. The plans are developed to manage our future needs for housing, jobs, infrastructure, and the environment, in a way that recognises our shared economic, social, and environmental values and heritage.

Regional plans prepared for the whole of NSW, and district plans prepared for metropolitan Sydney, recognise and support local character by:

- Acknowledging that areas with a strong sense of local character are desirable places to live and work and support strong communities, and that this should be an objective in planning for all communities;
- Identifying that areas that build on existing local character contribute to the vitality and viability of centres;
- Emphasising that new development should respond to and reflect the existing character of an area; and
- Demonstrating how investing in local character can drive economic development and opportunity, particularly in regional areas.

Local Housing Strategies

When district plans are finalised, councils must prepare a Local Housing Strategy. The Local Housing Strategy will identify any areas that have already been identified as having cultural or environmental significance and aim to identify areas of exceptional local character. Local Housing Strategies will need to find a balance between respecting and enhancing the local character of an area and identifying and accommodating the community's future housing, infrastructure and social needs.

Detailed Plans for Places

Planned Precincts

The Department of Planning and Environment will lead the planning process of designing for planned precincts. These are areas that have been identified for renewal and investment. In planned precincts, a place-based approach will be taken, starting from considering the feel, aesthetic, form, history, and culture of an area, and recognising that existing local character can be reflected and strengthened in planning for the future.

In consultation with local communities a local character statement will be developed at the commencement of all planned precinct initiatives. This process allows the community to identify the great qualities of a place, and to use the planning process to develop more value and attraction.

It also ensures that opportunities for new infrastructure, open space, green canopy, and social and community facilities can be identified and planned to complement the existing character of the place and the community.

Critical to this approach is engagement with the community both at the earliest stages and ongoing throughout the planning process. The Department is committed to improving the engagement process so that a vision is developed early in close collaboration with the local community.

Clear design principles, values and strategies for critical urban elements like open space, green canopy, public domain, built form, local character, movement and connections, and mixed land use will frame collaboration about the future of these precincts.

The development of a local character statement as part of the planning process also enables communities to participate in the conversation and decision making around future housing needs for communities. Providing diversity of housing accessible to young people, seniors, people with a disability and key workers supports stronger communities, allows people to stay a part of their community through different life stages, and encourages the maintenance and strengthening of local character as new homes for these growing communities are constructed.

In this way, the planned precinct process will enable meaningful engagement with local communities to ensure everyone provides input into shaping the future character of their neighbourhoods and places.

Local Environmental Plans (LEPs)

LEPs are the statutory interpretation for local strategic planning. They are informed by regional plans, district plans, state and local policies, Community Strategic Plans.

Character can be reflected in a LEP in its aims (Clause 1.2 of the Standard Instrument LEP) where a council can describe the characteristics of the LGA, through zone objectives, in principal development standards (such as height and FSR controls), additional local provisions and requirements for design excellence.

The Department will prepare amendments to the Standard Instrument LEP for consultation to establish overlays for additional consideration of local character in areas of significance. Character overlays will only be permitted in exceptional areas as part of LEPs where the council has:

- demonstrated the character of a local area is significant in accordance with guidelines to be issued by the Department; and
- ensured that the local government area will meet the dwelling targets for future growth as established by the relevant regional or district plan.

Development Control Plans (DCPs)

DCPs are a key document for inclusion of more detailed guidance about implementation of LEP controls relating to design of development and consideration of local character.

Local character considerations can be included by councils in DCP provisions that relate to particular types of development or certain zones. DCPs can contain locality specific provisions, where local character considerations could be introduced via desired future character statements that build on the strategic vision contained in the council's Community Strategic Plan.

Better Placed and other design guidance

Better Placed: An integrated design policy for the built environment of NSW is a policy prepared by the Government Architect NSW to deliver a strategic approach to the design of the places in which we live work and play, to ensure that as our cities and towns grow bigger they get even better.

The policy provides useful guidance for communities, local councils and Government agencies about designing and building better places that are a '*Better Fit: Contextual, local and of its place*'.

Better Placed can be accessed here:
<http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/About-Us/Office-of-the-Government-Architect>

State Environmental Planning Policy No 65 - Design Quality of Residential Apartment Development and the associated Apartment Design Guide also contain useful guidance for all stakeholders in the planning system on the importance of design excellence in the built environment, and identifying local character and context in a range of local settings.

The **Apartment Design Guide** can be accessed here:
<http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Policy-and-Legislation/Housing/Apartment-Design-Guide>

Further Information

For further information please contact Service NSW at info@service.nsw.gov.au or [13 77 88](tel:137788).

Department of Planning and Environment circulars are available at:
planning.nsw.gov.au/circulars

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