



Chapter 3: Local distinctiveness

3. Local Distinctiveness

The aims of this chapter

- To define and explain the concept of 'local distinctiveness.'
- To explain how the concept relates to national planning policy.
- To explain how 'local distinctiveness' varies within the district.
- To explain how new development, including contemporary design, can achieve or contribute to 'local distinctiveness.'

This chapter should be read in conjunction with:

- Understanding Significance – Chapter 4
- Understanding Context – Chapter 6
- Designing New Development – Chapter 7
- Examples of Best Practice – Appendix L

What is Local Distinctiveness?

- 3.1 The term 'local distinctiveness' brings together all of those features, qualities and details that give different places their unique character and appearance.
- 3.2 The features and qualities of a place may include:
- a) Its topography;
 - b) The presence of watercourses;
 - c) The presence, distribution, type and size of open spaces;
 - d) The layout of a village, town or neighbourhood;
 - e) Spaces about buildings and arrangement of buildings;
 - f) The presence of landmarks, key open spaces or river crossings;
 - g) The way buildings, spaces and routes respond to how hilly or flat the place is;
 - h) Whether buildings are oriented to face south or face the street.
 - i) The heights and shapes of buildings;
 - j) The scale and positioning of buildings and structures;
 - k) Tree cover;
 - l) Whether there are long distance views or whether spaces are intimate and enclosed;
 - m) Whether there is a lot of greenery or expanses of paved surfaces and walls;
 - n) The type and mixture of land uses and building uses;
 - o) Development that results from a particular economic activity (such as farming or industry) or historic or existing land ownerships (such as manorial villages and estates).



Ripon city centre.



Harrogate centre.



Kirk Deighton.



Masham Market Square.

These photographs illustrate a few settlements in Harrogate district, each having its own locally distinctive features contributing to a strong sense of place.

3.3 The details of a place might include:

- a) Building materials;
- b) The mix and application of building materials;
- c) Design detailing of buildings and structures;

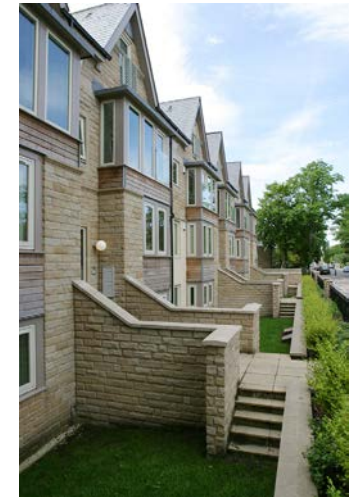
- d) Boundary features;
- e) Street surfaces and street furniture;
- f) The size, shape, positioning and number of openings on buildings;
- g) The skyline and appearance of roofs;
- h) Small details like windows, doors, shopfronts, porches, gateways and so on.

Local Distinctiveness and National Planning Policy

3.4 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) places great importance on achieving high quality design in all new development and for new development to respect local character.

3.5 The importance of local character is of such importance to the government that local planning authorities must by law assess whether there are places in the district of particular historical or architectural interest and designate these places as conservation areas. Conservation areas were introduced in the 1960s precisely because historic settlements and townscapes were being harmed by development that ignored local distinctiveness and the way in which places are valued by the general public.

3.6 Even outside of historic areas, many people, including the government and the council, recognise that without a considered approach to the design of new development of all types and scales, there is a danger of the local and even regional character of places being lost through insensitively designed development. Therefore, the NPPF requires all new development to “function well and add to the overall quality of the area” and to “respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings” (para. 58).



New terrace in Harrogate Conservation Area exhibiting subtle contemporary detail.

3.7 The quality of our built environment is increasingly important to the long-term wellbeing of both places and people. Loss of local distinctiveness makes places less attractive to residents, businesses and visitors. This can lead to people and businesses becoming increasingly more transient and less tied to a particular town or place – the ‘sense of place’ is eroded.

Achieving Sustainable Communities

- 3.8 The need to provide a high quality of built environment is reflected in the NPPF, where it seeks high quality, well-designed environments in order to achieve sustainable communities. A 'sustainable community' is a place where people would choose to live in the long term due to the quality of the environment and the access to all the things they will need during their lifetime – employment, services, community facilities, open spaces, different types of dwelling and so on.
- 3.9 The places in the district that are the most desirable places to live are locally distinctive environments. These places have well-used and well cared for public and private space and an overall sense of identity that fosters a sense of ownership and community among their residents. People are stakeholders in the area rather than merely residents. This means that people have an interest in protecting the character or appearance of their town, neighbourhood or village.
- 3.10 The design of an area will have a large bearing on the area's attractiveness, how it functions and therefore how it will fare in terms of achieving sustainable communities. Once streets, buildings or spaces are laid out or erected it is often very difficult, expensive, inconvenient and resource intensive to undo or address any deficiencies in the design. The greatest input to how a place will function, feel and perform is made at the design stage. This is why the council seeks well thought out, locally distinctive design that will be valued both now and in the long-term.
- 3.11 The district contains examples of existing, historic development that demonstrate how a sensitive approach to the design of the places has left a legacy which is much valued today and in some respects these places provide a benchmark for today's development. For example, the areas of Harrogate, such as the Duchy and to the south of The Stray, which were created little over 100 years ago. Also, the creation or relocation of villages such as Ripley, Baldersby St. James and Studley Roger. Each of these places has a harmonious built form, high quality streetscapes and open spaces, landmarks, attractive views and vistas and a consistency of tree cover and boundary features that contribute to the appeal to residents and visitors alike.



A property in Baldersby St. James.

Local Planning Policy

- 3.12 The Harrogate district is fortunate to have attractive, high quality urban and rural areas that retain their own identity that is valued by residents, businesses and visitors alike. The council recognises the importance of the district's environment in its Corporate Strategy and the planning policies of its Local Plan of which this Heritage Supplementary Planning Document forms a part.
- 3.13 The district covers a large geographical area with a varied topography, different types and sizes of settlement, different types of farming and different local building materials and traditions. There is therefore no 'one size fits all' approach to the design or suitability of new development across the district; new development should respond to its particular surroundings. If non-locally distinctive development is continually allowed, over time, the unique (and attractive) character of a place will be lost.

How Local Distinctiveness Varies within the Harrogate District

- 3.14 The following three examples are intended as a demonstration of the way in which our built and natural environments, and therefore local distinctiveness, can vary within the district.

Example 1 – Variation across the District

- 3.15 Lofthouse, which is in the northwest of the district, and Great Ouseburn, which is in the southeast, serve to illustrate the distinctive character of two different villages within the district.
- 3.16 Lofthouse stands on a small shoulder of land partway up a valley side. The buildings are tightly clustered together as a result giving the village centre a very intimate character that contrasts with the open pastoral landscape surrounding it. The village street is tightly enclosed by buildings and boundary walls. Bends in the road are sharp and constrained. No one building dominates, but water pumps are important items of street furniture. The robust character of the buildings, typical of the Pennines, is a result of the combination of several factors – the materials used (the local sandstone used for walls and roofs), the scale and form of the buildings and also the type of openings found within them.



Lofthouse.



Great Ouseburn.

- 3.17 By contrast Great Ouseburn is set on the highest part of a fairly flat area of land between two rivers. The linear settlement is stretched out along its principal street. The main street is broad and gently winding with pavements and grass verges. Buildings are often set back from the street behind walled front gardens and buildings and terraces can be well spaced. The landscape is intense arable agriculture punctuated by reed beds and small blocks of woodland. The village church with its tower is a landmark that dominates the skyline. Building materials are brick, cobble and render with a mix of clay pantile and slate roofs. The detailing and openings of the buildings are typical of the Vale of York.
- 3.18 Clearly, a ‘standard’ or ‘archetypal’ suburban house would look out of place in both of these villages, even if the right materials were used. Also, in the same way a Pennine-style house would look right in Lofthouse, it would be alien to Great Ouseburn. These examples demonstrate how local distinctiveness is more than just the materials, size or form of a building – it is about the place as a whole – spaces, landscaping, trees, views, vistas and so on.

Example 2 – Variation in Neighbouring Settlements

- 3.19 Neighbouring settlements, where located within a few miles of each other, still demonstrate differences in local distinctiveness. This is demonstrated in the most urban part of the district – the built form of Harrogate comprises predominantly Victorian and Georgian stone built formal buildings but also the spaces relating to the Harrogate spa waters. In close proximity is the industrial railway village of Starbeck with its brick buildings, a contrast to the centre of Harrogate. Travelling onto Knaresborough, one experiences the medieval core of the town, perched on a crag, tightly packed with key landmarks and vistas. Despite the close proximity, the local distinctiveness of each area is evident and in such areas, development is expected to respond to the prevailing character.



Residential buildings on The Stray.



A residential street in Starbeck.



Knaresborough's medieval core perched on the crag overlooking the viaduct.

Example 3 – Variation in the Same Settlement

- 3.20 Even within the same settlement the character can vary significantly and this is why the assessment of a site and its surroundings should be more than a superficial acknowledgement of materials and built form.
- 3.21 Ripon is an excellent example. Its medieval core is made up of tightly packed, narrow plots with tall frontage buildings and a lack of trees and green open spaces with the dominating presence of the Minster. There is a broad range of building materials, styles and ages. To the north, beyond the medieval city, buildings are set back from the street and there are more spaces between

buildings, a more residential character with the large scale Victorian villas and terraces dominating. Further north, the industrial area around the site of the former railway station is reminiscent of a small mill town with long terraces along fairly straight, narrow streets. The houses are of a fairly consistent design and appearance, though many of the historic industrial and railway buildings have been lost. While these different parts of the city share some common features, there are also significant differences in character that any new development would have to take into account if these places are to retain a consistent, harmonious character and appearance.



Two contrasting areas of Ripon showing variation within the settlement (a terrace near the former railway station and the city core around the Cathedral).

Achieving Locally Distinctive Design

- 3.22 This section explores the parameters around achieving local distinctiveness in our built environment. It should be read in conjunction with Chapter 8 of this SPD titled 'Designing New Development'.
- 3.23 Locally distinctive design should be employed in both historic and non-historic areas. With few exceptions, the district's most historically and architecturally significant places have been designated as conservation areas, and a large part of the district is within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); there places that exhibit their own locally distinctive character that are not covered by any particular designation, but are worth protecting from development that would harm their character or appearance.

- 3.24 Similarly, there are neighbourhoods or parts of settlements in the district that are not particularly old but have been carefully and thoughtfully designed to give them a strong sense of place. Such areas are also worth protecting from inappropriate or harmful development.
- 3.25 It would normally be expected for design to be locally distinctive in the following locations:
- In conservation areas, historic parks and gardens, the world heritage site, on sites with listed buildings and within the setting of any of these;
 - In the Nidderdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
 - In Special Landscape Areas and Green Belt;
 - On prominent sites at the edges of settlements or important open spaces;
 - At prominent locations within settlements such as at busy junctions and crossings or along busy routes;
 - At important 'arrival points' such as around railway stations, bus stations and visitor car parks
- 3.26 However, this list is not exhaustive and there are places that do not fall into any of the above categories but that are locally distinctive. In such locations, development should maintain or enhance local distinctiveness.
- 3.27 An assessment of the site, its surroundings and how it sits in the landscape or townscape should be used to inform development proposals to order to ensure that new development is harmonious with its context. Guidance on 'Understanding Context' can be found within Chapter 6 of this document.
- 3.28 Local distinctiveness should apply to all forms of development, from extensions or an individual house, through to major housing sites and employment sites. It is just as important to a new house filling a gap in a streetscene as it is to a large scale greenfield development. Each example offers its own opportunity for creating local distinctiveness. While the design of the former would be guided by the character and appearance of the rest of the street, a large greenfield site, say adjacent to a twentieth century housing estate, offers the opportunity for the new development to forge an area with its own distinctive character that is complementary to that of the wider settlement or locality to which it forms part.



An example of a new dwelling demonstrating traditional, locally distinctive design in Great Ouseburn.

- 3.29 At settlement edges, new development should harmonise with the wider landscape to aid transition from the built form to the adjoining countryside. Where sites adjoin modern suburbs that are not of a locally distinctive design, development should respect the wider landscape and townscape of the settlement.
- 3.30 There are instances where it may not be possible, or desirable, for new development to fully harmonise with the locally distinctive environment around it. Such exceptions must be of high design quality. However, it would not be appropriate for a high proportion of development within a locality to be 'landmarks' or be 'iconic' or to 'make a statement,' otherwise places will have a disjointed, incoherent character. If everything is an exception, there is no cohesion.
- 3.31 Local distinctiveness is not simply an issue of style nor is it a restriction on innovation, evolution and progress. All locally distinctive environments reflect the time in which they were built and have been subject to incremental change since. The aim should be where sites are in places with a strongly defined character, to achieve a high degree of harmony in terms of the layout, scale, massing, built form, landscaping, tree cover and the general appearance of new development. Innovative development is encouraged, provided that the design relates to its context in a genuine and positive manner.



An example of new, locally distinctive buildings displaying contemporary detailing whilst keeping to traditional scale, form and massing on Allhallowgate in Ripon.

- 3.32 In places where local distinctiveness is lacking or has been eroded, proposals for high quality design, whether contemporary or otherwise, should enhance the area's character and appearance.