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ABSTRACT: The National Planning Policy Framework: an opportunity for an Urban Design Routemap

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Through the Localism Bill (2010) the current UK government intend to fundamentally change the balance of power in town planning decision making. Power will shift significantly towards local communities and away from central and certainly regional government. The Bill reiterates the purpose of Planning as promoting sustainable development and retains the 2008 Planning Act definition of this as “mitigating and adapting to climate change and achieving good design”. But without careful guidance local communities, now charged with producing neighbourhood plans, may struggle to fulfil these aims. It is the urban design purpose that is the focus of this research.

Neighbourhood plans will set a vision for a local area as well as being used in determining planning applications. They must generally conform with statutory Local Development Frameworks (LDF) produced by the Local Planning Authority (LPA) and the proposed non-statutory (probably) National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which intends to consolidate all existing national planning guidance by April 2012.

LPAs have had difficulty for some time interpreting the plethora of urban design guidance available at various levels of government and from government related bodies such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. In particular it is unclear what guidance should take priority and in what circumstance.

The proposed NPPF presents an opportunity to make some sense of various strands of design guidance, in the form of a route map, as well as clarifying and perhaps elevating the importance of design issues in so doing. A difficult balance will need to be struck between setting out sufficient detail and requirements, in a user friendly way, for local communities and allowing enough freedom for communities to exercise their new found powers. The LDFs may contain a greater level of detail on all locally relevant issues than the NPPF, but the NPPF can set the benchmark nationally.

The research will examine some theoretical approaches to planning policy as well as collecting primary opinion based data from key urban design players. Finally a proposed model of the optimum level and extent of urban design policy at national level will be recommended.