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PLANNING FOR SAFETY



The safety of women on our streets has come under long-overdue scrutiny following the appalling events of last week. The abduction and murder of Sarah Everard is an absolute tragedy, bringing a sombre tone to events marking International Women's Day and prompting a renewed drive to improve women's safety on the street and in the home. Many factors are being rightly examined – not least attitudes, education and culture – and the built environment profession needs to ask itself questions too. In the most literal sense, we make the streets.

Planners, developers, architects and other built environment colleagues all have a role to play, and if there is the slightest hint of a positive to come out of this tragic case, it is that the situation has been brought sharply into focus. This is not just about women – it is about better safety for all. Creating safe environments in our buildings, streets, parks and footpaths is already embedded in planning policy and the planning process with Secured by Design reviews and police consultation on many major planning applications.

But now is the time to examine if we could go further. The question should not be "have we done enough?", but instead "what more could we do?". As schemes progress through the design process, we need to seize every opportunity to avert possible tragic events. The last week has made me think even more about how we as an industry can embed best approach into all new development using the frameworks and policies that are already in use.

NPPF – THE OPPORTUNITY

Section 8 of the NPPF is about promoting healthy and safe communities. Paragraph 91 (b) explains that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve places which are safe and accessible “so that crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion.” We have heard this week how the fear of crime is impacting the lives of many women (and no doubt men as well) who do not feel safe on the streets of our cities and towns. The statistics are horrifying. We know this is not a new thing, but recent events have encouraged people to speak out about how they feel, and the voices have been heard.

Creating a “safe built environment” already forms part of the NPPF’s Social Objective for achieving sustainable development. But this could go further, with safety explicitly prioritised throughout the framework and the word “safe” included in key paragraphs (such as 124, 125 and 127). A similar approach was seen with the inclusion of the word “beauty” to increase its prominence in the framework; this opportunity to put safety at parity with beauty – or even more important – must not be missed.

DESIGN CODES – THE OPPORTUNITY

The production of local design codes, which is now being encouraged for areas across the country, is another timely opportunity for local communities to focus on safety and to embed specific security objectives into local design codes. The newly published National Model Design Code and the Manual for Streets set a strong framework for this in terms of “safe streets”, but the production of local codes will enable local communities, local planning authorities and developers/landowners to capture exactly what that means to them in a particular local context. This might result in codes applying to legible and overlooked pedestrian routes, effective lighting, and spatial plans that encourage active and continual use of public areas etc.

Effective community engagement will be a key component of design code production and this was made clear in the White Paper – Planning for the Future. A challenge for us all will be ensuring that these consultation activities reach, hear and respond to the voices of those sectors of the community who live with fear as they use our cities, towns and villages. Possibly some of these people may not have previously responded to planning consultation exercises.

The rapid development of digital consultation platforms and virtual engagement that has resulted from the COVID pandemic, has enabled a great step forward in gathering thoughts and opinions from much larger and more diverse groups and will be a powerful tool in this process.

TOWN CENTRES – THE OPPORTUNITY

The impact of COVID and shifts in retail trends are having a dramatic effect on our town centres and much work is being undertaken on re-imagining their role. We can anticipate a growing number of shops will become vacant leading to dead frontages over the coming months. In the short term, enabling these to be brought into alternative uses quickly, providing active ground floor frontages and contributing to footfall at different times of the day and night, will help create natural surveillance. This is one of the benefits of the new Class E where vacant shops can change to other uses such as yoga studios and cafes without the need for planning permission. In the longer term there is an opportunity to deliver more significant changes and a mix of uses that will create activity at all times of day.

Maintenance and management of town centres also has a role in delivering environments where people feel safe (or safer). This often largely (though not exclusively) falls upon the Local Authorities and is an important consideration in a world of dwindling Local Authority finances. Creating a safe environment should be one of the key considerations as part of the debate for the future of our town centres.

Everyone has the right to use our streets without fear, something that will require huge shifts in society’s attitude to the abhorrent behaviour and actions we have this week heard so much about. But the design of the public realm is a key factor too. That means greater – and earlier – collaboration between architects, developers, authorities and communities to build space that is as safe as it can be. As the people who make the streets, the built environment industry has a vital role to play.

Should you have any further queries in relation to Planning for safety or have any current or new proposals you wish to discuss in relation to this update, please do get in touch with one of the planning leadership team: [Lisa Webb](#), [Nick Brindley](#), [Neil Henderson](#) and [Graham Oliver](#).

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