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DESIGN PRINCIPLE 1
RESPECT FOR CONTEXT

New development should respond positively and integrate well with its surroundings, taking full account of site features and local character. New development should be neighbourly and, where appropriate, reinforce local distinctiveness

key design issues

- **Development should never be designed in isolation from its local context.**

- **Responsive design is about taking proper account of the local context, and about tailoring new development to respond positively to its locality.**

- **Responsive design can help to create varied and interesting places that people enjoy because they have a distinctiveness and character with which they can readily identify.**

- **Appropriate responses to local context range from repeating or reinterpreting local building patterns through to deliberate and considered contrast.**
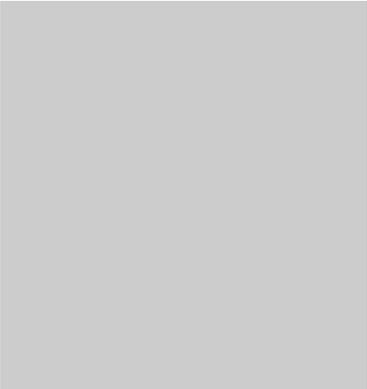
> responsive design

Essentially, responsive design is about taking proper account of the characteristics of a development site and its surroundings, and about tailoring, new development to respond positively to these local characteristics. It requires that new development be designed from the outset as a specific response to its site and location. Development should never be designed in isolation from its local context.

Responsive design means taking account of local building traditions – including typical building forms, external materials and architectural details – to integrate new development into its surroundings and give it a sense of belonging that it would otherwise lack. Reference to the distinctive features of a site and its surroundings can help to ensure that new development does not have that 'could be anywhere' appearance that can easily result from the unimaginative use of 'off-the-shelf' designs and standard house types. Responsive design can help to create varied and interesting places that people enjoy because they have a distinctiveness and character with which they can readily identify.

Responsive design is also about identifying and making the most of the existing assets of a development site, such as a southerly aspect, a fine tree or a pond, or attractive views of the local church. Whilst all places have their own character, some will provide little inspiration for the design of new development. Where context assessment reveals a lack of local identity, a bold response may be required to help create a sense of place. In this way responsive design can help to identify opportunities for change, as well as for reinforcing existing character.

Responsive design also requires consideration to given to neighbours - it can help to ensure that adjacent properties are not unduly overlooked or overshadowed, and that potential conflicts between say new houses and local commercial activities are minimised.

Appropriate responses to local context range from repeating or reinterpreting local building patterns through to deliberate and considered contrast. Whilst new buildings should be compatible with their surroundings, they need not be designed to look just like adjacent buildings or to mimic historic styles. Responsive design is about more than just following the style of adjacent buildings in order to 'fit in'. Maintaining local identity requires a more imaginative and rigorous response to local context if the qualities of contrast and variety that characterise many places are to be retained.

> responding to local context : development patterns

The existing pattern of development within an area – its urban grain – can provide a good starting point for the layout of new buildings and spaces. Incorporating elements of existing local building patterns into the structure of new developments can help to give them a clear identity and a sense of belonging.

Important aspects of urban grain include building lines and set-backs, patterns of plot subdivision, building density and orientation. It is often possible to identify a clear and distinctive pattern of buildings and spaces along a street or road frontage. Where this is the case, the layout of new development should follow this pattern.

Respecting existing development patterns should not rule out different forms of layout, however. Indeed, in many instances, this can help to provide variety, inject character and ensure that land within the established boundaries of towns and villages is used efficiently. Much, of course, depends on the character of the area concerned and the nature of development proposed. Departures from existing street patterns should be carefully conceived, and not be produced by accident.

Urban grain : the pattern of development within an area may be referred to as its urban grain. Important elements of urban grain include local patterns of roads and streets, building lines and set-backs, building types, plot subdivision and open spaces.
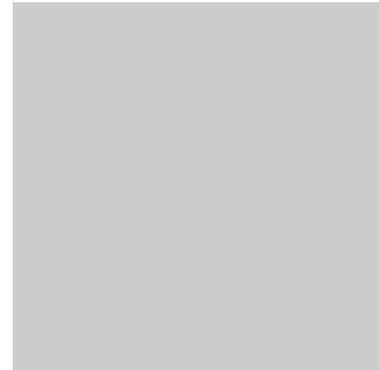
Buildings can be arranged to define and enclose a variety of spaces from urban streets to rural lanes, from town squares to small courtyards.
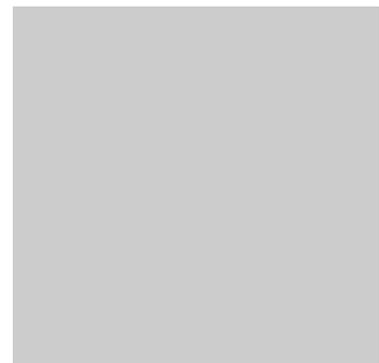
Making a proper assessment of the local context of a development is a vital first stage in the design process. Detailed guidance on how local context may be assessed is to be found in Appendix 1.

> responding to local context : landscape

New development should respond positively to existing local landscape features, including established patterns of fields or gardens, trees, hedgerows, ponds and ditches. These features can provide a framework for new development, that will help to integrate it into its surroundings. Landscape features such as ponds and trees can provide attractive focal points for new development, and give a feeling of maturity. In some cases development may take advantage of landscape features beyond the site itself by, for instance, framing an attractive view out across open countryside. In Breckland's generally low undulating landscape, even relatively small changes in level are noticeable. New development should generally follow existing topography, with buildings and roads following existing contours where possible.

Trees and hedgerows are an important feature in both towns and villages. In order to ensure the long-term future of trees to be retained, it is vital that new development is sited sufficiently far away to both minimise disturbance to rooting systems, and to avoid amenity problems for future residents, like overshadowing, which could lead to their premature removal. Early in the design process, important trees should be identified and tree protection zones established. British Standard 5837 'Trees in Relation to Construction' provides further guidance on this matter.

Well designed landscaping and new planting, together with the retention of existing landscape features can do much to lift the visual quality of new development. Retaining existing trees and hedges, together with new planting, can help to integrate new development with its surroundings, maintain locally distinctive landscape features and soften the visual harshness of new buildings.

> responding to local context :
building design

The general scale and shape of buildings is a major factor in determining the visual character of an area. If local character is to be maintained, it is important therefore that the design of new buildings should take into the scale of neighbouring development.

New development should generally respect the scale and massing of existing buildings nearby, and should not dominate its neighbours. The aim of the designer should be to create a sense of harmony and visual continuity between new and old.

The basic proportions of a building – its height, width and depth, the shape of its gables and the pitch of the roof – can all be varied to suit the local context. These elements establish the general scale of a building, and thus how well it relates to its neighbours.
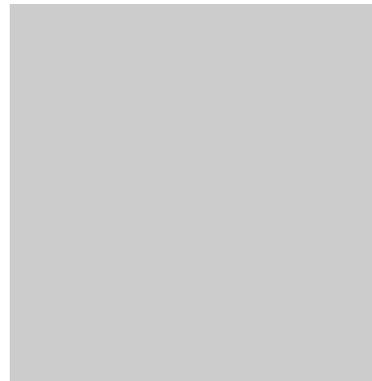
building scale & shape

What matters most when considering the scale of new development is not so much the absolute size of a building, but its size *relative* to its surroundings, and how apparent the scale of a building will be.

Dividing a building into visually distinct elements can also have the effect of reducing its apparent scale. This is a useful architectural device that can be used to integrate relatively large buildings with smaller neighbours. Wings and bays may be used to add floorspace without significantly affecting the overall visual bulk of a building.
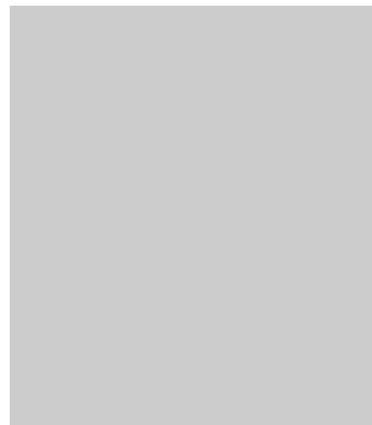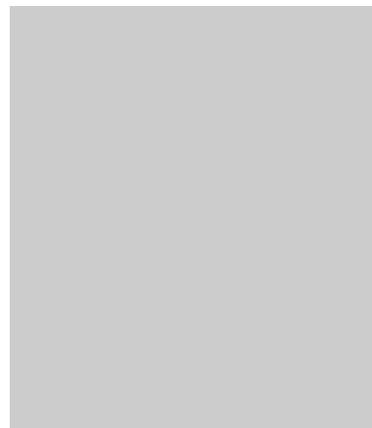
For this approach to be effective, it is important that there are clear visual breaks between the main body of the building and its various subsidiary elements. These breaks may be achieved by changes in building height, rooflines and pitches and by stepping forward and back elevations. Starting with a larger building volume and subtracting elements from it is generally less effective in reducing visual bulk, as it is often possible to perceive the original outline.

For infill developments the scale and shape of local buildings, particularly immediate neighbours, can provide a good starting point for determining the form of new buildings.

vernacular buildings

A study of local vernacular building forms can be a useful starting point for designers wishing to reflect an element of local character in new development. Vernacular forms vary across the District, reflecting the historic availability of building materials and local traditions. Relatively narrow gables and steeply pitched roofs are characteristic features of many, though not all, traditional buildings in Breckland. Designers are encouraged to develop vernacular building forms in a variety of ways to produce distinctive buildings of both contemporary and traditional design.

building height

In order to maintain local character, new developments should respect the height of existing buildings. Where existing buildings are of consistent height, new buildings should match existing levels closely. Where existing building heights are varied, as is often the case, it is not essential generally to match existing levels exactly, provided that overall scale of development is followed. In fact, some variation in heights may be desirable for groups of new buildings where the surrounding roofscape is irregular. Often, the silhouettes of buildings produce lively and interesting outlines at roof level. Varied building heights, and roofs punctuated by chimneys and dormers, all add visual interest. In this sort of context, local character can be maintained by designing the silhouettes of new buildings to reflect this pattern.

When considering the visual relationship between new and existing buildings it is important not to focus just on the overall height of a building. In streets where buildings follow a more or less common building line, the eaves level of buildings can be an equally, if not more, important point of reference. Eaves levels are determined both by the number of floors within a building and by the floor to ceiling heights adopted. Respecting the height of existing traditional buildings will sometimes require new buildings to adopt lower than normal ceilings heights at least for the upper floor rooms. In some instances extending the overhang of a roof can also give a low eaves line without compromising internal space.

In some situations, it is desirable for new buildings to be taller than their neighbours. On corner sites, for instance, taller buildings can be used to give a strong sense of enclosure to the surrounding spaces and to provide local landmark. Similarly, buildings that face onto areas of green open space may need to be higher to give a reasonable level of visual enclosure. Where this is the case lower wings can be added to step down to adjacent smaller scale buildings.
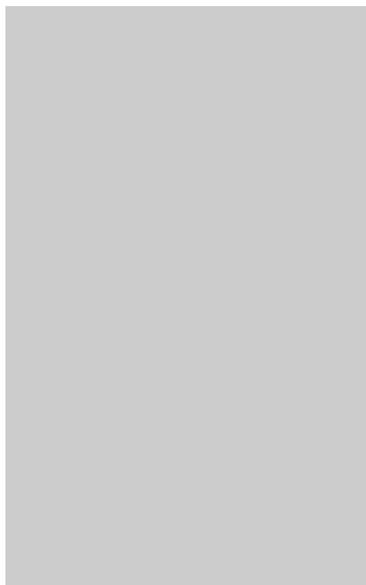
respecting traditional buildings

Many traditional buildings in the District, especially in the rural areas, are relatively small in scale. As a result, in a typical village street, ensuring that the scale of modern infill developments is appropriate poses particular challenges for designers. Modern eaves heights and gables widths in excess of 6 – 7 metres, when combined with typical roof pitches, will produce buildings that have a scale and bulk that is quite different from that of traditional cottages. Adopting a lower roof pitch to reduce visual bulk will often result in gable shapes that relate poorly to traditional forms.Sometimes one-and-a-half storey buildings are proposed to match traditional low two storey cottages. This rarely produces satisfactory results, however. Whilst the overall height of such buildings may be the same the eaves levels and the overall shape are quite different.

Designing buildings that are in scale with traditional buildings often requires the use of narrow plan forms. These can adapted to provide additional accommodation by adding wings to create L and T shaped plan forms. Narrow plan forms also have advantages in terms of

building elevations

New development can reinforce local distinctiveness by adopting locally typical building materials and design details.

Across the Breckland District, variations in traditional building materials are important in defining local character, even in areas that have seen much modern development. Accordingly, the selection of external materials and finishes is often a critical factor in determining how well a new development relates visually to its surroundings. By adopting the local palette of materials, and the ways that are combined and detailed, new development can reinforce local distinctiveness.

Other important aspects of local building design that should be considered by designers include the pattern and proportions of the windows in nearby buildings, and the ways that elevations are divided horizontally and vertically. These elements can give a street scene a particular visual rhythm that new development should generally maintain.
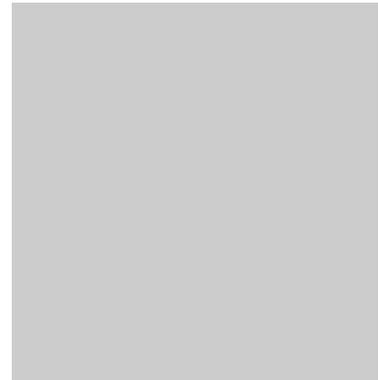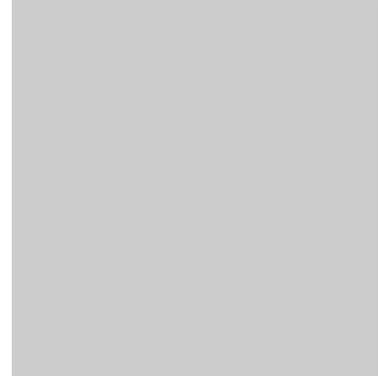
DESIGN CHECKLIST

> Has a thorough assessment of the local context of development been undertaken? (see appendix 1)

> What are the essential characteristics of the local context?

> In general, how does the development proposed respond to its context—does it seek to complement or contrast with its surroundings?

> Specifically, how does a new development respond to the layout of nearby buildings and to local settlement patterns?

> To what extent are local landscape features incorporated and reflected in a new development?

> How does a new development respond to the scale, shape, materials and architectural design of local buildings?