

'New housing development of whatever scale should not be viewed in isolation. Considerations of design and layout must be informed by the wider context, having regard not just to any immediate neighbouring buildings but the townscape and landscape of the wider locality.'

PPG 3: Housing paragraph 56

The bigger picture

The successful integration of new housing with its surrounding context is a key design objective, irrespective of whether a site lies on the urban fringe or at the heart of a town centre. A crucial first step in achieving this is to develop a thorough understanding of the context within which the new housing will sit and then of the nature of the site itself and its immediate surroundings. This initial analysis will inform a whole range of subsequent design decisions including, for example:

- scale and massing of development;
- framework for movement;
- mix of dwelling types and sizes;
- landform, landscape and ecology of the site;
- orientation of dwellings;
- mix of uses and provision of community facilities;
- amount and arrangement of car parking.

While contextual analysis has traditionally focused on issues such as landscape, townscape and the use of appropriate materials, the objectives of sustainable development and urban renaissance now require a broader approach. In particular, greater emphasis now needs to be given to the linkages between new housing and:

- local facilities and community infrastructure;
- the public transport network;
- established walking and cycling routes.

Making these linkages is fundamental to achieving more sustainable patterns of movement and to reducing people's reliance on the car. Understanding a site's relationship to local facilities and to the public transport network is therefore not only an important element of contextual appreciation, it is also central to the consideration of the extent to which a site may be appropriate for higher density development in the context of the guidance given in PPGs 3 and 13.

This chapter illustrates the form that contextual analysis can take in a variety of different places. It gives particular emphasis to accessibility on foot to local facilities and the public transport network, but also highlights other contextual considerations¹.



■ Site



New housing sensitively integrated into the established urban grain. Webster's Yard, Kendal



Here the new housing layout is informed by surrounding historic routes and the desire to create good communal spaces. Friars Quay, Norwich

'The Government places particular emphasis on the importance of integrating decisions on planning and transport in order to reduce the need to travel by car. Local planning authorities should therefore...seek to ensure that all housing developments are accessible by a range of non-car modes.'

PPG 3: Housing paragraph 47

Access to facilities

Most urban sites have very rich settings comprising existing communities, historic movement patterns, a mix of uses and activities and many generations of investment in community infrastructure, technical services and facilities.

Having established a site's broad setting in terms of its relationship to a city, town or village centre, a good starting point is to examine the area within 10 minutes (about 800m) walking distance of the site. This can help to identify the range of facilities which residents may access comfortably on foot, as well as opportunities to reach more distant facilities by public transport.

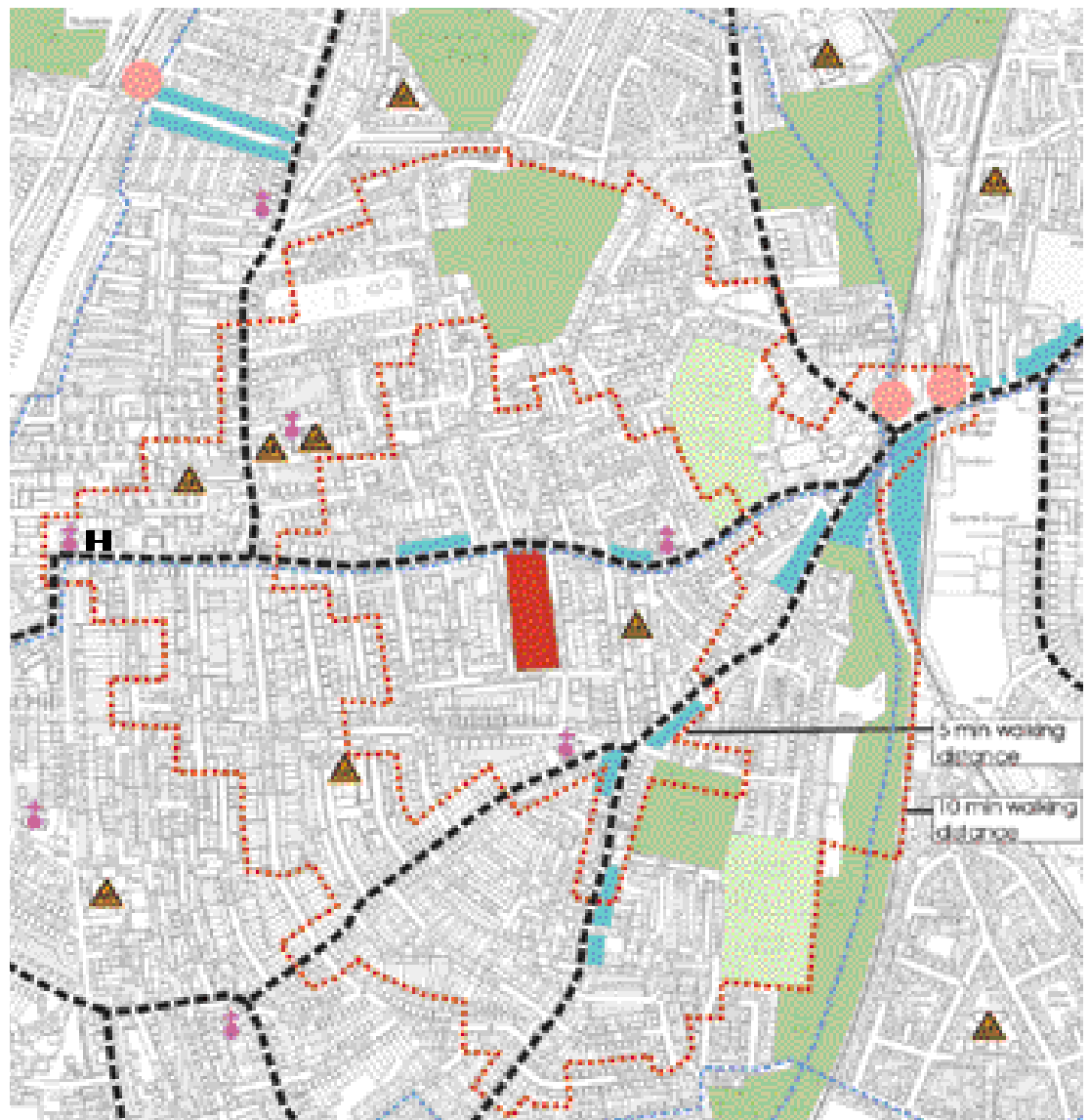
The diagram of the Stanstead Road area below illustrates how such analysis can be applied to one of the case study areas in a mature inner suburb. Quality of access should be assessed in terms of distance and routes to local services, including shops, schools, general practitioners' surgeries and so on.

In practice, this would be supported by analysis of the frequency of bus and train services and an assessment of the quality of pedestrian routes to all local destinations in terms of their safety, quality, gradients and crossing points. The study *Sustainable Residential Quality: exploring the housing potential of large sites*² includes case study analysis illustrating aspects of such appraisal.

Analysis of the provision of local facilities and services in the area around a site is also an important first step in considering the opportunities to provide new community facilities as part of the development. These issues are considered further in Chapter 4.

Contextual analysis of this type is simple and straightforward, but it can alter significantly perceptions of the development potential of a site, for example by demonstrating that it is much better served by facilities and public transport than may have been apparent from a cursory inspection.

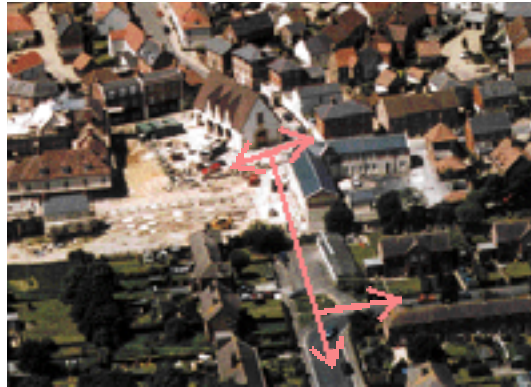
Simple but informative analysis of a site's relationship to local facilities and the public transport network. This analysis of a site in a mature inner suburb used 1:10,000 scale mapping and was conducted as a desk exercise with a follow-up site visit. The analysis points to a site which is better served by local facilities and public transport than may have been apparent from a more instinctive analysis. Stanstead Road, Lewisham



| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Site | ■ |
| Local shops | ■ |
| Public open space | ■ |
| Open space | ■ |
| Bus route | --- |
| Place of worship | + |
| Railway station | ● |
| School | ▲ |
| Health Facility | H |
| Cycle route | --- |

Housing development on the edge of an urban area can present particular challenges. The issue is how to knit new development into the existing urban fabric, which may not have been planned with future expansion in mind. Even where it has, developers and local authorities may come under pressure from local residents to propose access arrangements which are neither sustainable nor suited to the new development. These problems can be difficult, but a positive approach is needed if long-term issues of sustainable movement are not to be sacrificed for short-term convenience.

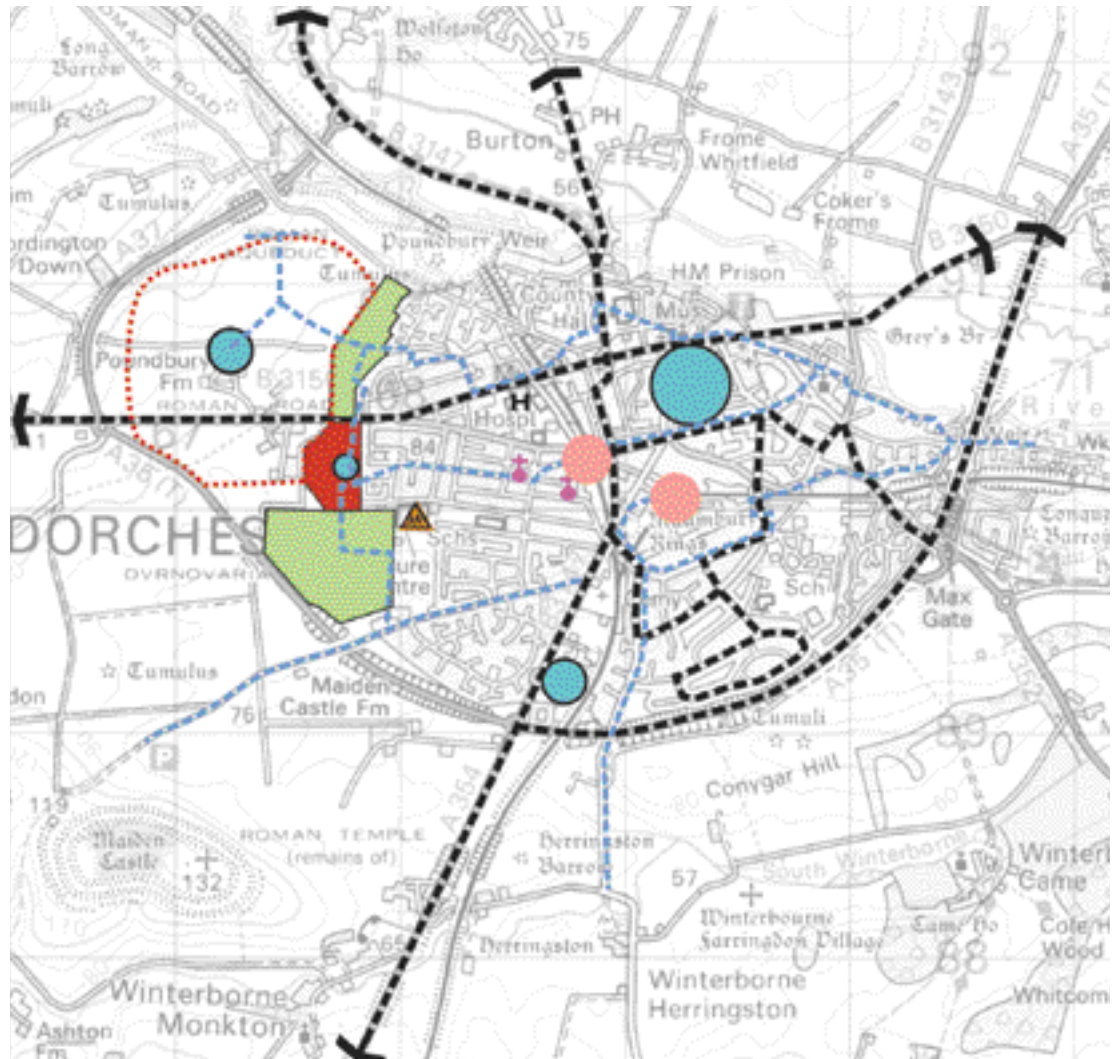
Issues of a more strategic nature arise where housing is being planned as part of a major urban extension. Here the issues are not only to do with direct connections, but also with ensuring that the new development is complementary in scale and function to the existing settlement. In particular, planned urban extensions can provide opportunities to enhance the quality and frequency of bus services to and from the town centre. Such improvements will benefit not just new residents, but all those living and working along the route³.



New housing on the urban edge making the connections (shown by arrows) with existing movement patterns. Poundbury, Dorchester

The forthcoming publication *Planning and Sustainable Access* (DTLR 2001) provides more detailed consideration of both the strategic and detailed issues to be addressed in planning for access by a range of travel modes.

Poundbury has been designed as a mixed community of 5,000 people on the outskirts of Dorchester. The intention is to complement rather than compete with the existing town centre, where the major facilities (the market, hospital and principal shops) are located. The new development has a variety of facilities, including workplaces and shops for everyday items, but for many of their needs residents travel the short distance to the traditional centre.



| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Site | ■ |
| Proposed expansion | □ |
| Local shops | ■ |
| Open space | ■ |
| Bus route | — |
| Cycle route | — |
| Place of worship | + |
| Railway station | ● |
| School | ▲ |
| Health Facility | ■ |

The site and immediate surroundings

Understanding the opportunities and constraints presented by the site and its more immediate surroundings is a well established aspect of development appraisal.

The analysis of a site's immediate surroundings will include an assessment of:

- landform and ecology;
- established building heights;
- landmark buildings or important landscape features;
- pedestrian desire lines around and through the site;
- views into and through the site;
- orientation of the fronts and backs of buildings adjoining the site;
- hostile edges, 'bad-neighbour' uses and areas of positive aspect;
- availability and capacity of utilities and other services.

In addition, Crime Pattern Analysis can help ensure that the layout and design of new housing are informed by analysis of criminal activity in an area and contribute to crime reduction objectives⁴.

The analysis of the site itself will include considerations such as:

- landscape structure and the presence of mature trees;
- important views out from the site;
- physical constraints such as ground contamination, overhead power lines or steep slopes etc;
- potential open space areas.

Fuller consideration is given to these and other aspects of contextual analysis in *By Design*⁵.



~~~~~ Railway line      → Front aspect



**Here orientating the fronts of dwellings away from a dominating railway line is an important structuring element in the design. Isledon Village, Islington**



~~~~~ Railway bridge  
----- Major traffic route



A robust design response to an environment dominated by elevated railway lines, roads and substantial buildings. Deansgate Quay, Manchester

Integrating new housing with a mature urban landscape



The canopies of trees have an impressive relationship to the roof line of houses



Tree trunks are seen as part of the building elevation



New planting has been introduced to soften building elements



- Dwellings
- Open space
- Pedestrian routes
- Mature trees

Highsett demonstrates the quality of environment which can be created when the relationship between mature landscaping and new housing is considered in detail. The site was previously a backland area within a large urban block containing mature deciduous trees, open space and an orchard.

The layout and articulation of buildings have been heavily influenced by the location of established trees. For example:

- buildings are arranged parallel to lines of trees;
- special trees are organised to become a set-piece within small informal greenspaces;
- pedestrian routes are organised to follow lines of established trees.

In particular, new planting has helped to soften edges of some parts of the architecture, such as where creepers have been introduced along end gables as well as helping to define the front boundaries of houses.

It is interesting to note that while, in general, guidance on the siting and design of open spaces (including that given in Chapters 4 and 5) emphasises the importance of buildings overlooking open space to provide good surveillance, Highsett shows that it is possible to depart from such principles.

However, it is important to appreciate that the open spaces at Highsett work within the context of a small and intimate development which is enclosed within a larger block. Hence the spaces are not subject to intensive use or general public access. As always, much depends on the skills of designers and in tailoring the design to the particular characteristics of the site and its surroundings.

The very close proximity at Highsett between some buildings and trees also requires very careful attention. In such cases great care is needed throughout the development process to ensure that trees survive the building phase and have enough space to spread their routes and branches over time⁶.

Within the context of established trees, new planting has been introduced to renew the stock of larger species and to provide a contrasting scale of landscape.

A joined-up approach

Most experienced designers will undertake contextual analysis instinctively, building it into the design development process in an intuitive way. However, there can be real benefits in recording this analysis so that the emerging design approach can be related back to the initial appreciation. This can enable the wide range of people with an interest in the development to understand the design approach and to contribute to its development and refinement.

The purpose of contextual analysis is to make a positive contribution to the process of design development. For this to be effective it is important that the different elements of analysis are conducted in an integrated and informative way, rather than commissioned as discrete packages at different stages in the development process.

Design reviews, bringing together expertise from a range of different disciplines (as well as representation from local community groups, local authority access officers and other stakeholders), can play an important part in developing an holistic approach to the design process and ensuring that new housing is properly integrated with its surroundings. In this way contextual analysis can inform design development at all levels, from the orientation of routes for movement (see Chapter 3) to issues of detailed architectural treatment (see Chapter 7).

Some key points

In terms of the particular issues examined in this chapter, the following key points should be considered:

Access to facilities and public transport

- Has an adequate analysis been carried out of the site's relationships to public transport and local facilities?
- How has this analysis informed the design of the development? For example, in terms of density, car parking provision and pedestrian routes and entrances?
- Does the development accommodate important pedestrian desire lines through the site?
- How does the provision of facilities relate to existing provision in the surrounding area?

Townscape and landscape

- How does the development respond to its context in terms of building heights, setbacks, use of materials and the established urban grain?
- Has the potential of landform and local ecology been reflected in the layout?
- Does it maintain important views of prominent buildings or landscape features?

Endnotes:

- 1 Indicator 1 (Location) of The Housing Quality Indicators can provide a helpful tool for conducting this part of the contextual analysis.
- 2 See pages 65 et seq.
- 3 Sustainable Urban Extensions: Planned through Design (September 2000), a joint publication by the Prince's Foundation, English Partnerships, DETR and the Council for the Protection of Rural England, provides further advice on designing urban extensions. See also the example illustrated on page 28.
- 4 Crime Pattern Analysis is carried out by the Police and is available through liaison with the Architectural Liaison Officer/Crime Prevention Design Advisor.
- 5 See pages 36-40. The Urban Design Compendium also has useful material and readers may also wish to refer to the Urban Design Alliance's Placecheck as an approach to contextual analysis.
- 6 Further guidance can be found in BS 5837: Trees in Relation to Construction.