Oldham and Rochdale

Public Realm Design Guide

A guide to creating good streets and spaces

**Consultation Draft
February 2007**

Foreword

The contribution that high quality design can make to urban regeneration is now widely recognised. Good design can bring economic, social and environmental benefits; add to quality of life; attract business investment; and reinforce civic pride. In partnership with Tibbalds, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council and the Oldham and Rochdale Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder, we have prepared a series of documents that set out the key principles of urban design and provide guidance on the creation of high quality buildings and places.

Its joint preparation has meant that we have been able to pool resources, knowledge and explore design solutions to the problems we struggle with in different parts of Rochdale and Oldham. The draft guidance is now out for consultation and we would welcome your views on its content, usability and appearance. We want to get it right, so tell us if we've missed an opportunity or got it wrong. We want this to be your guidance, not just ours.

Councillor Hibbert
Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

This guide is a great example of how Councils and their partner agencies can work together to ensure that through quality design we can protect and improve our towns and villages. We have listened to what all the stakeholders have said and we have focussed on those areas where design guidance can make a real difference, i.e. the design of new residential development and the public realm. With this guide we aim to bring in a local agenda that protects, enhances and sustains local communities and their distinct characters. The design guidance provides us with a vital tool to help developers and investors deliver what our local communities want and it will allow Planning Officers and Planning Committees to judge applications against the principles set out in this guidance.

Councillor Hobhouse
Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council

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1   Introduction

The 'public realm' is the collective term for all the spaces between buildings in towns and villages to which the public has access. This includes streets, squares, greens, parks and footpaths.

The quality of the public realm within our towns and villages can make a positive contribution to the lives of people who live and work in them. Poor public space contributes to crime and reinforces negative perceptions of a place. High quality public space engenders a sense of pride in a place, discourages crime, promotes biodiversity and healthy living, and increases land values. Too often, however, the public realm is simply forgotten as the space 'left over' between buildings.

Good design need not cost more - a creative approach and careful planning at the outset can create good places that are easy to maintain.

This Public Realm Design Guide forms one part of a series of Design Guides produced jointly by Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council, and the Oldham Rochdale Partners In Action Housing Market Renewal. Its aim is to assist all those involved in the process of designing and constructing streets and spaces create good quality places.

Rochdale Planning Policy

Oldham Planning Policy

OLDHAM MBC
LOCAL
DEVELOPMENT
SCHEME

Issue 3
2006 – 2009/10

Prepared under Section 15 of the
Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004.

September 2006

Oldham and Rochdale
Urban Design Guide

Public Realm Design Guide

Design and Planning Process

Residential Design Guide

The Boroughs of Rochdale and Oldham intend to adopt the series of urban design guides as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD). This formal adoption process requires consultation with local stakeholders, and this document is a Draft for Consultation. It may be amended in response to consultation before being adopted by the two Boroughs.

The detailed Design Guides all sit beneath the 'umbrella' of the Rochdale and Oldham Urban Design Guide, which sets design principles for all types of development within the two Boroughs. The overall Urban Design Guide sets out ten urban design principles, and these are listed opposite.

The way in which the first seven principles contribute to good streets and spaces is described in Chapter Two: What makes good streets and spaces?

Chapter Three sets out the design principles that should inform the design of streets and spaces within new development. The emphasis is on residential development, as this is the most common form of new development within the two Boroughs.

Chapter Four sets out the challenges that need to be addressed in improving existing streets and spaces.

Chapter Five provides design principles for improving existing streets and spaces.

This document is not intended to be a technical guide to highway design. Instead, it sets out the key principles that should underpin the design of streets and spaces. In doing so, the guide aims to help multi-disciplinary teams in the complex task of designing, constructing and maintaining the public realm.

Informed by these are local planning policies set out in the Chapter Two adopted Unitary Development Plans (UDPs) and the emerging Local Development Frameworks (LDFs).

The principles

- **Character**
  enhancing identity and sense of place

- **Safety and inclusion**
  ensuring places are safe, secure and welcoming for all

- **Diversity**
  providing variety and choice

- **Ease of movement**
  ensuring places that are easy to get to and move through

- **Legibility**
  ensuring places that can be easily understood

- **Adaptability**
  anticipating the need for change

- **Sustainability**
  minimise the impact on our environment

- **Good streets and spaces**
  creating places with attractive outdoor places

- **Good sustainable buildings**
  constructing environmentally friendly buildings

- **Designing for future maintenance**
  designing buildings and spaces so that their quality can be maintained over time

2 What makes good streets and spaces?

Character

Good streets and spaces have a distinctive character and create a 'sense of place' that makes us feel that we are somewhere with its own character. The character of a street is created by the way the buildings, landscape and street come together. Character is not a product of just one of these elements, but is a culmination of these features, as can be seen from the many examples throughout this guide.

Parks and open spaces are important contributors to local distinctiveness, offering opportunities to reflect elements of the local landscape, culture and heritage through design concepts, materials, topography and planting. In many situations the greenspaces themselves may identify the place, standing out as proud icons of an area.

A strong character is not just reserved for old places: well designed new places can create positive new characters for streets and spaces (below).

What gives this street its distinctive character?

- the repetitive design and consistent red brick of the terraced houses;
- the location of the houses right on the pavement, giving the street a very enclosed feel;
- the slope of the street - this is a hilly area;
- the strict geometry of the roads: straight lines meeting at right angles; and
- the view out to the chimney - this is an urban place.

What gives this space its distinctive character?

- the generous width and substantial buildings, along with materials, lighting, tree planting and street furniture gives a 'civic' character to this town centre high street;
- a restrictive and distinct range of materials tell us about the natural, industrial and geological heritage of the area; and
- public art feature promotes and reflect cultural identity and aspirations of the local community.

Safety and inclusion

Good streets and spaces are safe and accessible. This means that:

- they are overlooked by the fronts of buildings (which incorporate windows and doors), so that there are 'eyes on the street' and people in the public realm feel safe;
- the rear boundaries of properties do not back onto streets and spaces, where they are vulnerable to criminals as well as creating a negative 'dead' edge to the street;
- there is a mix of uses, so that areas are not completely empty at night - e.g. town centres have flats as well as shops and offices (see also diversity below);
- views along streets and through spaces unfold as pedestrians walk along, so that people can see what lies ahead of them;
- where appropriate, vehicle speeds are kept low to provide a safer place for pedestrians and cyclists;
- streets and spaces are free of clutter that makes access difficult;
- changes in level are carefully designed to provide access for all - e.g. steps and ramps integrated with one another; and
- good management and maintenance of green spaces is obvious to users, helping to give a feeling of safety.

Good streets have buildings facing them (above), not backing onto them (below).

Good open spaces clearly 'belong' to the buildings around them (above) rather than being left over spaces between buildings (below).

Good streets and spaces are accessible, with clutter kept to a minimum.

Good streets and spaces are accessible to all.

Oldham and Rochdale

Diversity

A range of different uses along a street or surrounding a space can give it liveliness and vitality. This is especially important in the centres of towns or neighbourhoods, which form the focus for community activity. Large areas of just one use are monotonous and do not give people what they need for their day-today lives - e.g. the traditional corner shop provide diversity in an otherwise residential area.

By providing spaces of different sizes, characters and functions, the public realm can provide stimulating environments for a wide range of users. Diversity may be a combination of uses within one space (e.g. sports facilities, play area and quiet garden) or a series of single use spaces along a route.

Diversity of building design and landscape can give a street interest. However, a strong character often comes from a consistency of materials and appearance, and so variety often works best where it has a clear role in the streetscape, for example, creating a landmark on an important street corner.

Above left: Cafe and retail mix brings life to the street.
Above right: Flats above shops ensure the town centre does not 'die' in the evening.
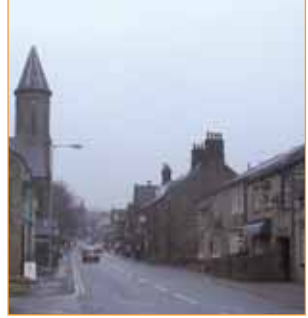
Above/ left: Variety within the street scene gives visual interest, but needs to be carefully balanced with creating a coherent character. Older places often get this balance right by using just a few materials and buildings of similar scales, with the occasional contrasting building.

Right: Clearly marked, integrated and safe routes for travel on foot or by bicycle.

Ease of movement

Good streets and spaces allow people to move around easily by:

- connecting to other streets and spaces, so that people have a choice of convenient routes to get to their destination;
- providing pedestrians with enough space to move around, with pavements of an adequate width and avoiding clutter (such as light columns, litter bins and bollards);
- linking routes with green spaces, so that pedestrians and cyclists can travel along attractive, enjoyable routes;
- accommodating natural desire lines across spaces, connecting destinations together; and
- slowing down vehicles, where appropriate, so that pedestrians feel safe.

Legibility

Good streets and spaces help people to understand where they are in the town or village. The appearance of the street will let you know whether it is a main route leading to the town centre, a quiet residential street, a major neighbourhood park, or an informal green space for local children. This quality of being easily understood is 'legibility'.

Legible streets and spaces tend to:

- form part of a clear hierarchy of different routes – from wide arterial roads connecting to the town centres, to small residential streets, from small-scale pocket parks to open parkland;
- incorporate views to landmarks – these may be of town-wide importance (e.g. Rochdale Town Hall) or of local relevance (a place of worship);
- be punctuated by a series of 'events' such as opening up to form a small square; and
- have clear functions – that is, they are designed for particular users and uses.

Views of landmarks help to make legible places. Landmarks may be of local importance (such as the kiosk above) or of town-wide value (Rochdale Town Hall, right).
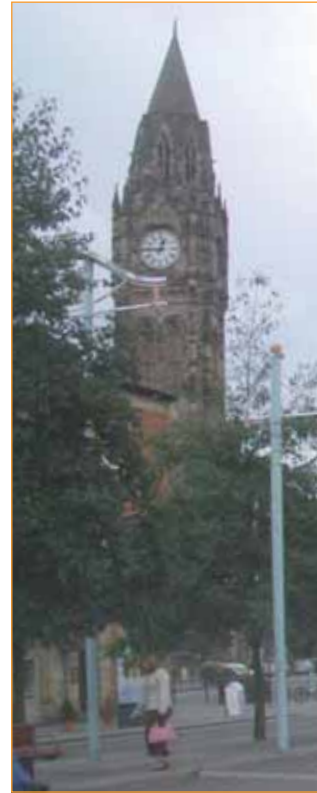
At New Hall, Harlow, streets are designed so that it is easy to understand which are more important - that is, there is a clear hierarchy. The main street (above) with its trees and grass verges and 3-4 storey buildings contrasts with the more intimate scale of the more simply designed streets and mews (below).

The scale and character of open spaces should relate to their role in the town small, local space outside a primary school (below); Exchange Square in Manchester - an important focal point for the city as a whole (below right).

Adaptability

Good streets and spaces are able to accommodate changes in the ways in which we live, work, travel and play - a quality called adaptability. Streets and spaces that are designed to be used in only one way (e.g. ring roads for moving vehicles quickly) are not adaptable, and are difficult to change.

Adaptable streets and spaces tend to:

- include informal places for people to sit. These allows many different things to occur: watching street entertainers, taking a break from work to eat a sandwich, meeting friends or simply resting;
- accommodate a range of users, avoiding completely pedestrianised areas (except for small parts of town and neighbourhood centres) and avoiding areas designed solely for traffic;
- locate services (gas, water, electricity and telecommunications) so that they allow for future flexibility;
- where they are designed to accommodate cars, be designed to look good both with and without cars in them;
- be linked to other streets and spaces, so creating a network of routes that can be used in different ways over time.

Places to sit allow a range of activities to take place in streets and spaces.

A street designed to give pedestrians priority, but also allowing flexibility of use by providing vehicular access and temporary market stalls.

Good streets and spaces can accommodate a range of users and uses.

This street has been adapted to become a pedestrian-only link.

Sustainability

Adaptability is one quality that helps to make sustainable places. In addition, sustainable streets and spaces:

- are oriented to maximise access to sunlight and minimise the chilling effects of cold winds;
- use durable materials, sourced from local areas where possible;
- are designed to make maintenance as easy as possible, and budgets are allocated for that maintenance;
- incorporate features to conserve water - ranging from porous paving in urban areas to ponds and swales in green spaces;
- incorporate trees and other types of greening that give a place a positive appearance whilst simultaneously promoting local biodiversity, improving air quality, filtering noise, screening roads and cooling adjacent buildings; and
- bring together and balance sustainability objectives. For example, new flood control measures can also be designed to create attractive environments that support local habitats.
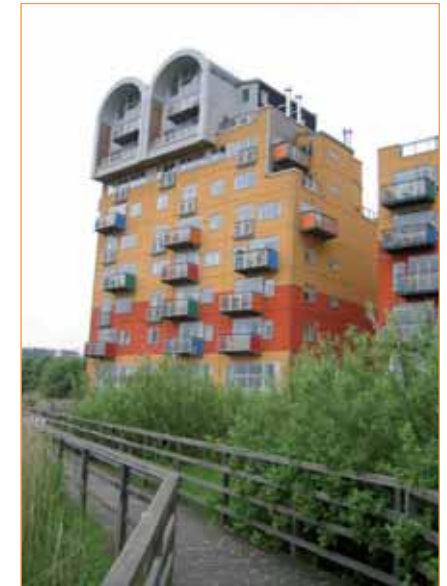

Integrated water management - sustainable environments as play opportunities.

Sustainable drainage systems.

Greening streets with permeable paving.

Living in harmony with the local ecology.

Preserving and enhancing the local environment, utilising sustainable energy.