Islington’s Urban Design Guide:
Revisions to the SPD – a preliminary consultation
December 2014
Islington’s Urban Design Guide: Revisions to the SPD - a discussion paper

1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to set out the scope of, and elicit views on, proposed revisions to Islington’s Urban Design Guide, a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). This preliminary consultation is required by regulation 12 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations (as amended). A draft SPD will be developed for public consultation later in 2015 following an analysis of responses received during the preliminary consultation. Completion for adoption in September 2015 is anticipated.

2 Background

2.1 Islington’s Urban Design Guide was adopted as an SPD in 2006. It provides design principles and standards for the whole of the borough that expanded and provided further detail on the core policies in the council’s then emerging Local Development Framework (LDF), the Islington Unitary Development Plan (UDP) 2002, and the London Plan 2004. The IUDG also built upon Government advice contained in PPS1 and other guidance including Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

2.2 The SPD has been a robust document that has been used to great effect by Islington’s planning officers. However, changes in national planning regulation and guidance, the evolving demographic profile of the borough, and emerging trends in (and pressures on) development, required a new Local Plan and guidance to amplify the policies therein.

2.3 In February 2011, Islington Council adopted the Core Strategy and in June 2013 the Development Management Policies, part of its Local Plan (superseding the UDP), which includes a number of policies which aim to ensure that Islington promotes and secures high quality architectural design. To this end CS9 sets out the approach to the built and historic environment and policies DM2.1 and DM2.3 set out specific requirements (see boxes below). However, without further clarification those requirements are vulnerable to wide ranging interpretation and unnecessarily protracted negotiation. It is the role of an SPD to provide a more objective definition of those requirements and to advise developers on the most effective ways of meeting them. It is desirable therefore to revise the existing SPD and to update the experience it draws upon to provide a clear exposition of our adopted design policies.

Core Strategy Policy CS9 – adopted February 2011

| Policy CS9 |
| Protecting and enhancing Islington’s built and historic environment |

High quality architecture and urban design are key to enhancing and protecting Islington’s built environment, making it safer and more inclusive.

A. The borough’s unique character will be protected by preserving the historic urban fabric and promoting a perimeter block approach, and other traditional street patterns in new developments, such as mews. The aim is for new buildings to be sympathetic in scale and appearance and to be complementary to the local identity.

B. The historic significance of Islington’s unique heritage assets and historic environment will be
conserved and enhanced whether designated or not. These assets in Islington include individual buildings and monuments, parks and gardens, conservation areas, views, public spaces and archaeology. Active management of conservation areas will continue, through a programme of proactive initiatives for the conservation-led regeneration of historic areas, and potential designation of new conservation areas. Archaeological Priority Areas will continue to be defined on the proposals map to assist in the management of these historic assets.

C. Where areas of Islington suffer from poor layout, opportunities will be taken to redesign them by reintroducing traditional street patterns and integrating new buildings into surviving fragments of historic fabric. Reconfiguration based on streets and a perimeter block approach will be a key requirement for new developments, in particular housing estate renewal.

D. All development will need to be based on coherent street frontages and new buildings need to fit into the existing context of facades. Housing developments should not isolate their residents from the surrounding area in 'gated' communities.

E. New buildings and developments need to be based on a human scale and efficiently use the site area, which could mean some high density developments. High densities can be achieved through high quality design without the need for tall buildings. Tall buildings (above 30m high) are generally inappropriate to Islington's predominantly medium to low level character, therefore proposals for new tall buildings will not be supported. Parts of the Bunhill and Clerkenwell key area may contain some sites that could be suitable for tall buildings; this will be explored in more detail as part of the Bunhill and Clerkenwell Area Action Plan.

F. New homes need to provide dual-aspect units with clear distinction between a public side and a quieter private side with bedrooms.

G. High quality contemporary design can respond to this challenge as well as traditional architecture. Innovative design is welcomed, but pastiche will not be acceptable. The council will establish new advisory mechanisms to ensure the highest standards of architecture and environmental design.

H. The Development Management Policies and other documents will provide further policies in relation to urban design and heritage. Detailed guidance on urban design in Islington is provided in the Islington Urban Design Guide (IUDG) Supplementary Planning Document.
## Policy DM2.1
### Design

A. All forms of development are required to be of high quality, incorporate inclusive design principles and make a positive contribution to the local character and distinctiveness of an area, based upon an understanding and evaluation of its defining characteristics. Permission will be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions. **Further details on design requirements in Islington are set out in the Islington Urban Design Guide, Streetbook, Inclusive Landscape Design and other Supplementary Planning Documents.** This policy applies to all new developments including alterations and extensions to existing buildings.

For a development proposal to be acceptable it is required to:

i) be sustainable, durable and adaptable;

ii) be safe and inclusive;

iii) efficiently use the site and/or building;

iv) improve the quality, clarity and sense of spaces around or between buildings;

v) enhance legibility and have clear distinction between public and private spaces;

vi) improve movement through areas, and repair fragmented urban form;

vii) respect and respond positively to existing buildings, the streetscape and the wider context, including local architectural language and character, surrounding heritage assets, and locally distinctive patterns of development and landscape;

viii) reinforce and complement local distinctiveness and create a positive sense of place;

ix) sustain and reinforce a variety and mix of uses;

x) provide a good level of amenity including consideration of noise and the impact of disturbance, hours of operation, vibration, pollution, fumes between and within developments, overshadowing, overlooking, privacy, direct sunlight and daylight, over-dominance, sense of enclosure and outlook;

xi) not unduly prejudice the satisfactory development or operation of adjoining land and/or the development of the surrounding area as a whole;

xii) consider landscape design holistically as part of the whole development. Landscape design should be set out in a landscape plan at an appropriate level of detail to the scale of development and address the considerations outlined in **Appendix 12** of this document; and

xiii) not result in an unacceptable adverse impact on views of local landmarks.

## Policy DM2.3
### Heritage

**A. Conserving and enhancing the historic environment**

Islington’s historic environment is an irreplaceable resource and the council will ensure that the borough’s heritage assets are conserved and enhanced in a manner appropriate to their significance. Development that makes a positive contribution to Islington’s local character and distinctiveness will be encouraged.
2.4 At the same time, PPS1 has been withdrawn and replaced by the NPPF and NPPG, which require LPAs to ensure that developments:

- respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation
- are visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping.

2.5 The NPPF also stipulates that design guidance should “avoid unnecessary prescription or detail”. And, “planning decisions should not attempt to impose architectural styles or particular tastes and they should not stifle innovation, originality or initiative through unsubstantiated requirements to conform to certain development forms or styles. It is, however, proper to seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness”.

2.6 The revised SPD will therefore avoid absolute stipulation and will instead set out general principles and precise objectives; it will describe more detailed design considerations and provide illustrative examples of good practice. To provide a comprehensive and holistic reference point, issues around sustainability and inclusion will be integrated within the main body of the document. The structure of the document will also be rationalised to provide a more easily navigated point of reference for applicants and officers alike. It will provide a reference point for development across the borough but will distinguish between those objectives that must be met, and design considerations that should be taken into account, within and outside conservation areas. It is proposed that the revised SPD is simply named *Islington Design Guide*.

2.7 The council recognises that in a dense urban environment, such as Islington, the ability to enlarge and adapt existing homes plays an important part in retaining diverse and balanced communities. At the same time it is essential that the council maintains a strategic view, ensuring that new development is of a high standard; that it protects the interests of the whole community, preserves and enhances the historic environment and is sustainable. The revised IUDG will take this approach to the implementation of the design, inclusive design and heritage policies in the Local Plan.

2.8 Naturally, some of the examples and photographs (in the existing document) need updating and commentaries need clarifying and or expanding. There is also some material that can be deleted because it has already been updated and included in other documents, such as the Streetbook SPD.

3 Proposed New Guidance

3.1 Recent and emerging trends in development that can raise tensions between policy objectives suggest areas where an interpretation of policy is required and design advice is needed.

**Materials**

3.2 The existing guidance does not fully address the opportunities and challenges associated with new materials and building technologies. The materials selected for a development will depend on a variety of factors such as environmental performance, cost and visual appearance. However in all cases materials should be chosen that are robust and appropriate to the local context. Based on their characteristics, certain materials are therefore likely to be more acceptable than others, particularly in sensitive locations.
3.3 Proposed guidance:

Materials should be authentic, of high quality, be robust, sustainable and appropriate to their context.

Traditional materials such as brick are generally encouraged, whilst the use of brick slips is unlikely to be considered sufficiently robust or of appropriate quality. Other materials that are appropriate to the surroundings, such as terracotta or stone, may be acceptable. However, metal cladding and large areas of glazed curtain walling, concrete or rendered surfaces are unlikely to be acceptable, particularly in conservation areas. Rendered surfaces can be acceptable but should be ‘self-coloured’ rather than painted cement, which requires an unsustainable level of maintenance. Similarly, the approval of timber clad solutions will depend on their demonstrable weathering properties.

Contemporary materials and innovative solutions are also welcome but the council has a responsibility to safeguard design quality, require sustainable solutions and contextual probity.

As stipulated in Islington’s Development Management Policies housing design should be ‘tenure blind’ so that affordable and private homes are indistinguishable from one another in terms of design quality, appearance or location on a site. The revised SPD will expand upon and demonstrate how this objective can be met.

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the specification of materials adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?

Garden rooms and outbuildings

3.4 Applications for these large free-standing structures in rear gardens are proliferating, the individual and cumulative effect of which suggest that a clear interpretation of policy is required to protect the openness of rear gardens, and to preserve local amenity, drainage and ecology.

3.5 Proposed guidance:

Garden rooms and outbuildings should preserve a good proportion of the original garden, be subordinate to the main building, be as low as possible and should maintain a reasonable distance between the structure and the site boundary.

Where garden rooms and studios are acceptable, by virtue of their small scale, low height and location, they will be subject to all other adopted design policies, objectives and considerations.

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the scale and quality of garden rooms adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?
Energy saving measures

3.6 The council is committed to the reduction of fuel poverty, to the reduction of energy consumption and carbon emissions but must balance that with its responsibility to safeguard visual amenity, design quality and historic environment.

3.7 Proposed guidance:

Energy saving measures should be considered at the earliest stages of design and their effectiveness considered alongside their potential impact on the character and distinctiveness of the area.

Where external cladding, the appearance of which can be detrimental to an area, is of demonstrable value, the materials selected and the quality of detailing and finish will be expected to make a positive contribution to the visual amenity of the local area. Alternatives to replacement windows, such as draft proofing existing windows and internal secondary glazing, which may be appropriate alternatives in certain instances, will be encouraged, particularly in conservation areas.

PV (photo voltaic) panels should be carefully sited to minimise the effect on the external appearance of the building and the amenity of the area; proposals to locate panels on exposed pitches that are visible from the public realm, are likely to be resisted. Valley roofs and concealed roof slopes can offer the opportunity for the discreet siting of panels.

The specification of windows should be high quality, robust and sustainable; taking into account their whole life costs. If adequately maintained, timber windows can last for centuries and are ultimately and completely recyclable; whereas, uPVC is a non-renewable resource, not all models can be recycled and, in any event, the recycling process and end of life disposal release toxic substances. Recent advances in the development of uPVC and timber windows and analyses of their performance over time will inform the detailed guidance provided in the revised SPD.

Timber or metal frames also have the potential to deliver a context appropriate and refined profile, unlike uPVC frames that usually have wide, deep profiles and a flat finish. Moreover, the use of uPVC windows is unacceptable when a building is locally or statutorily listed, in a conservation area or within the setting of these heritage assets.

The revised IUDG will set out new guidance limiting where UPVC windows can be installed and the justification that will be required for their installation.

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the installation of energy saving measures adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?
Basements

3.8 A separate SPD dedicated to basement/subterranean development is in the process of being prepared, which takes a holistic approach to the assessment of the complex issues surrounding these types of developments.

3.9 The acceptability of any basement proposal will be subject to the full range of considerations detailed in the Basement SPD, but will also be subject to specific design considerations in the same way as above-ground development.

3.10 As basement development in most instances involves changes to the existing building, or the introduction of new above ground structures, there are impacts on both the character and appearance of a locality. For instance, the inclusion of light-wells, railings, steps, plant, roof lights and other forms of lighting need to be sensitively designed to ensure they do not create visual clutter, or interrupt the prevailing rhythm of the street.

3.11 The predominant Islington townscape is urban and densely developed in character, which underlines the importance of gardens and open space and open aspects; they provide visual and environmental relief. The removal of established vegetation in gardens for the construction of basements will therefore be generally unacceptable.

3.12 The significance of listed buildings includes: plan form (which extends to the location, hierarchy and original function of floors and spaces as well as circulation routes); historic fabric (which incorporates foundations); and their setting (gardens being important verdant open spaces or having that potential).

The addition of a new or additional floor level or an extension of an original subterranean space (such as a cellar or vault) may harm this significance.

3.13 Proposed guidance:

Basement proposals shall be designed sympathetically with the host building and/or its surrounds, respond to the prevailing streetscape rhythm, be sensitively designed to ensure new structures do not contribute to visual clutter, and respect the special architectural or historic interest of heritage assets.

Excavation to form light wells will be expected to respect the architectural character of the host building, not unduly impact upon amenity/garden area, and be designed as congruent, compatible and complementary features within the streetscape.

The protection of the character and appearance of gardens and open space, using suitable soft landscaping and minimising introduction of non-permeable surfaces, will be key considerations when determining an application.

Basements beneath or in close proximity to listed buildings will be expected to conserve their significance.

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the excavation of basements adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?
Shopfronts

3.14 The Council published a stand-alone Shopfront Design Guide in 2003 (produced for the Chapel Market Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme) which has been used to great effect by designers, developers and DM officers across the borough. It would be useful to incorporate that guidance within the IUDG and thereby creating a single point of reference and raising its status. The opportunity will also be taken to:

- inform readers that the removal and or replacement of a shop front is ‘development’ and therefore requires planning approval;
- provide guidance on the treatment of shop fronts where they undergo a change of use to residential purpose.

3.15 Proposed guidance:

New or refurbished shop front design should respect the local street scene, the building as a whole and its design detail.

Questions

Is the proposal to incorporate the council’s guidance on the design of new and refurbished shop fronts within a revised IUDG SPD acceptable?

Should additional guidance be provided?

4 Enhanced and Updated Guidance

4.1 There are development types where the existing interpretation of policy and guidance is insufficient to respond to the scale and nature of current and anticipated aspirations and applications.

Gated communities

4.2 The current IUDG provides guidance on the configuration of large scale residential developments and under ‘alternative layouts’ (page 82) presumes against the concept of ‘gated communities’. The principle is now enshrined in Islington’s Core Strategy (CS9) ‘All development will need to be based on coherent street frontages and new buildings need to fit into the existing context of facades. Housing developments should not isolate their residents from the surrounding area in ‘gated’ communities. The revised SPD will expand upon and demonstrate how that objective can be met.

Roof extensions, dormer windows and roof lights

4.3 Until now the council has presumed against roof extensions anywhere along an unbroken roofline, in or outside a conservation area. This is now considered overly restrictive and a revision is proposed.
4.4 In conservation areas rooflines will still be protected and specific guidance on the criteria to be met for any roof extension will continue to be provided within individual Conservation Areas Guidance notes. Outside conservation areas, only the front view of unbroken rooflines will be protected.

**Question**

Are the designated protected rooflines adequate and sufficient?

4.5 This marks a revision of the Council’s previous strong presumption against roof extensions anywhere along an unbroken roofline and there are risks attached. A wholesale easing of the council’s objection to roof extensions might mean that:

- Valuable terraces that do not fall within conservation areas are damaged
- Significant detrimental impacts on the architectural integrity of the urban form due to the high level of interest in such domestic extensions.

4.6 It should also be noted that the quality of roof extensions is hard to control, architects are rarely employed and the construction rarely matches the drawings approved. However, the extent to which they fall short is rarely sufficient to justify enforcement action and yet enough to undermine the appearance and value of the property and its surroundings.

4.7 It is proposed therefore to condition the revised approach on design considerations that uphold existing principles and are defined by clear objectives and illustrated by good practice examples. Those clear objectives might include the use of suitable materials and appropriate detailing, establishing a positive relationship with its surroundings and enhancing the unity and coherence of the street.

4.8 Illustrative examples of what can be achieved or should be avoided will span a wide range of roof configurations and circumstances, including butterfly roofs where the appearance of any roof extension would necessarily be subordinate to the prevailing roofline.

4.9 Proposed guidance:

Where the roofline is not protected, applications for roof extensions, dormers and roof lights will be assessed on merit, giving due considerations to: the quality of design, materials and construction proposed, and the cumulative effect on visual amenity.

**Questions**

Is the proposed guidance on the design and construction of roof extensions adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?

Rear extensions
4.10 The current IUDG provides extensive guidance on the configuration and design of acceptable and unacceptable rear extensions – Section 2.5 page 60. However, there are some areas where the guidance should be expanded, in the light of experience since the last guide was adopted, taking a strategic view of the impacts individual proposals have on the integrity, rhythm and visual amenity of the street scene.

4.11 Additional proposed guidance:

**Rear extensions, both above or below ground, should respect the integrity, rhythm and visual amenity of the street scene.**

Examples of good practice will demonstrate how this is achieved by, for instance:

- locating an extension on the staircase side of a terraced dwelling;
- maintaining a good proportion of rear garden space and enhancing its potential for planting; and
- ensuring that the extension is subordinate to the original building (i.e. no higher than one full storey below eaves)

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the design and construction of rear extensions adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?

**Balconies and roof terraces**

4.12 The current IUDG provides some guidance on the design and construction of balconies – Section 2.3.2 page 41. However, that guidance needs strengthening with particular reference to roof terraces and the impact the design of balconies and roof terraces can have on a building’s thermal performance and the accessibility of its facilities.

4.13 Proposed guidance:

**Balconies and roof terraces should generally:**

- be integral to the building’s structure rather than hung off its elevation, and
- not compromise the thermal performance or accessibility of the facility.

Balconies and terraces provide valuable amenity space for flats that would otherwise have little or no private exterior space but they can also cause nuisance to neighbours and appear visually incongruous. When considering a roof terrace, the main considerations should be:

- The scale and visual prominence;
- The impact on the established townscape and architectural style;
- The impact on neighbouring properties (overlooking and visual amenity).

Questions

Is the proposed guidance on the design and construction of balconies and roof terraces adequate and sufficient?

Should additional guidance be provided?
Overall question for discussion

Are there any further changes to the guidance provided by the Islington Urban Design Guide would you like to see?