Handbook
Designing for physical activity

Think of the environment. Please avoid printing this A4 document unnecessarily
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"Concepts, ideas and practical examples are based on the principles of Active Design"
Overview

From initial ideas to developing the brief, community engagement is essential to fully understand needs, requirements and expectations.

Introduction

The aim of many organisations, clubs, schools, community groups and local authorities is to get more people physically active in their local area.

The best place for any project to start is to think about your local community. Who will benefit? How will people use it and when? And how can you include as many people as possible?

This first stage gives an opportunity to understand the underlying needs for local provision, whether it be additional secure cycle storage, accessible walking, key destinations which co-locate important facilities like toilets, changing, storage, cafes. The creation of a community hub can influence and support behaviour changes and help people to be more physically active.

This handbook considers a range of concepts and ideas based on the principles of “Active Design”, the considerations covered in “Designing for Physical Activity” suite of documents and the practical examples given in the case studies.

https://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/facilities-and-planning/design-and-cost-guidance/active-design
Consulting and engaging with your community

Many successful projects are delivered by a small, dedicated group of people brought together by a shared commitment, knowledge and understanding of how their community operates. Although not essential, it is often useful if there are skills, knowledge and experience in areas like business planning, building design, funding, operation or construction within this group.

This core team should be able and willing to see things through from start to finish and be able to dedicate enough time to the project. To help spread the load, it might be prudent to co-opt other members to focus on a specific task related to their specific knowledge or expertise. As community engagement and ownership is at the core of any successful project, a key task for the project team is to ensure the community is regularly kept informed, particularly in these early stages.

Your initial idea could be to get more people walking or to create more inclusive cycling facilities. Improving local pathways or increasing the appeal and sustainability of well-loved facilities can encourage ‘active travel’ with people walking, jogging or using their bikes as their means of transport.

Whatever your vision is, it is always helpful to engage with your community at the earliest possible stage.

So who is your community?

A community could be described as ‘a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common’. However, the very nature of many communities is the diverse mixture of ages, backgrounds, interests and opinions – so it is important to cast the net as wide as possible to gather information and collect and collate views. In terms of a project, community is perhaps best considered as ‘every person involved in or impacted by a proposal’.

In some consultations, problems may occur because conversations are limited to people with either very similar or strongly opposing views. The result can be that other views of a large section of the community are not heard at all.
Community involvement

People in a community can be involved in, affected by, input to and benefit from a project in many ways. Equally, people can also be unintentionally excluded unless careful thought is given to how and when to ask for opinions. Recognising the concerns, hopes and aspirations of different groups of people is important as it enables the collection of more tailored information. The process can encourage people to be involved in a targeted and effective way.

Having thought about where people might be travelling from and how this could influence their viewpoints, the next step might be to think about what type of information is needed to allow discussion. It is also important to provide enough information but not so much to appear there is a foregone conclusion.

It may be best to start by simply summarising the key facts and setting the scene and scope of what is possible. This will help establish a vision and what the project could do for the community. Expectations can be managed by emphasising the potential opportunities and benefits, and also stating what is simply not possible due to limitations such as funds or space available.

Recording and collating ideas

Early design ideas can be helpful but can also be misleading if they suggest a foregone conclusion. Therefore, it may be better to stimulate and maintain discussion of ideas with the use of images and concepts that are more generic.

Throughout any consultation, it is important not to challenge or dismiss early ideas out of hand but rather to record and collate them. Ideas could be considered and prioritised based on criteria such as:

- The common good and benefits to more or the most people
- Fulfilling specific needs of some members of the community
- Realistic and achievable objectives based on the known scope and constraints of the project
- Outcomes that can be maintained in the long term.

Scoping the project

The process above can help to establish the initial ‘statement of requirements’ (SOR) and a more detailed project brief to take matters forward.
**Hubs**

A hub is a space, place or facility that encourages people to meet, generates footfall, is a focus for activity and is understood and recognised by the local community.

**Concept**

The idea of the community hub is nothing new and many places such as seating and shelters in public parks, village halls, sports pavilions and places of worship serve this purpose extremely well. The key issue is the ability of a space or place to attract people to meet and enjoy common interests. In the best examples, a simple mix of facilities often reflects the needs of the local community and the various ways people wish to use them.

**Meeting basic needs**

Research can provide essential information on the needs of particular user groups but also insight to the things that are common to everyone. Not surprisingly, everyone wants to feel welcome, feel safe, and do their activity when they want at a price they can afford. What is perhaps more surprising is how often...
these basic points are overlooked! We also know that getting more people more active as part of their daily routine has considerable benefits including improved physical and mental health. Other wider benefits include improving air quality and tackling the effects of climate change¹.

Cycling hub

This example shows how the layout of a cycling hub building can give flexibility for various uses. It provides a mix of options for changing and toilets, secure storage and adaptable social space. The design also allows some areas of the building to be closed off depending on the patterns of use and the needs of the community. This approach can save energy and maintenance costs while still providing essential facilities at all times.
Spaces

There are good reasons why some public spaces are popular and well used - and why some are less so, or best avoided!

Many factors can influence the way spaces are used and the extent that they create a sense of pride and ownership from the community. For example, a feeling of safety and convenient access at the times when people want to use them, a feeling of thoughtful design and quality, and being clean and well maintained.

Some very successful public spaces have different purposes through the day or the week or become the natural place to have community events. Sometimes, precisely designing a space for a specific purpose reduces the overall potential to be flexible and adaptable. The result can be that some spaces are only used by particular groups at a particular time and are empty for most of the time. There may be very good reasons for this in some situations, but often, there can be advantages in adopting a more neutral approach.

Spaces that have no explicit reference to particular sports or other activities can be very successful community assets. This can be particularly so when they are carefully designed with quality materials, are open and accessible, are close to where people live and work, are welcoming and feel safe, and most importantly, are readily adaptable for a range of community needs. This will help to:

- Create an open invitation for someone to meet and play by themselves, with friends, with their children or grandchildren for a very short visit ‘on the way’ to or from somewhere else
- Create a quality space with a careful blend of design and operation that signals it is obviously cared for and to encourage use throughout the day and evening.

Spaces are more likely to encourage use and a sense of community pride and ownership if they:

- Feel safe
- Are accessible
- Have a feeling of quality
- Are well maintained.
**Individual site factors**

The mix of spaces, facilities, paths, routes, features and the connections between them all depend on community needs and the opportunities presented by a particular location. Many factors play a part in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment to encourage wider participation in physical activity. These include:

- Consideration of diversities in culture, religion, gender identity and levels of confidence, mobility and ability
- Establishing quality provision to encourage a sense of belonging
- Implementing effective management and maintenance
- Appropriate marketing.

The examples illustrated show a range of concepts for various scenarios.
Public open space planning

Mapping out elements, established through community engagement, and the connections between them can be a useful way to start to design or remodel a public space.
Connections and Routes

There are a number of different ways paths, trails and routes are described and graded, and although guidance and standards vary, there are some general principles and conventions. Of course each site, route and trail must be considered based on probable uses and the opportunities and challenges the terrain presents together with the type and location of features and infrastructure that encourage and enable participation by as many people as possible.

Requirements for widths, gradients, resting places, passing points, surfacing, signage and route marking are set out in detail in the documents and references provided in Table 1.
## Route types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope and purpose</th>
<th>Guidance and publications available</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessible and inclusive external environments</strong></td>
<td>BS 8300–1:2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://shop.bsigroup.com/ProductDetail/?pid=0000000000030335801">https://shop.bsigroup.com/ProductDetail/?pid=0000000000030335801</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessible outdoor routes</strong></td>
<td>Paths for All – Outdoor Access Design Guide</td>
</tr>
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<td><a href="https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/outdoor-access-design-guide">https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/outdoor-access-design-guide</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Best practice for inclusive design</strong></td>
<td>Global Disability Innovation Hub with the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) – Inclusive Design Standards (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mountain bike trails</strong></td>
<td>Forestry England – Trail Grades and Safety – Mountain Bike</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td><a href="https://www.forestryengland.uk/article/mountain-bike-trail-grades-and-safety">https://www.forestryengland.uk/article/mountain-bike-trail-grades-and-safety</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Waymarking</strong></td>
<td>Natural England – Waymarking Public Rights of Way</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bridleway access</strong></td>
<td>The British Horse Society – Access to bridleways</td>
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<td><a href="https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/access">https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/access</a></td>
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<td><a href="https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/access/access-and-bridleways-officers">https://www.bhs.org.uk/our-work/access/access-and-bridleways-officers</a></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Network of traffic-free paths</strong></td>
<td>Sustrans – Infrastructure design guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://www.sustrans.org.uk/about-us/paths-for-everyone">https://www.sustrans.org.uk/about-us/paths-for-everyone</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of equal importance are the features, facilities and infrastructure that enable effective use. This includes provision and location of:

- seating
- accessible toilets
- shelters
- accessible gates
- accessible parking
- public transport drop-off
- bike/ trailer/ adapted bike rental
- workshop and secure storage
- adequate lighting for routes to enable use after dark.
Trail surface options

Ideally, a trail surface should be suitable for multiple users including cyclists, scooters, skateboarders and wheelchair users. Table 2 indicates the suitability characteristics for a range of surfaces. Some commonly-used surface types are illustrated in the adjacent indicative construction details.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Surfacing</th>
<th>Cyclists</th>
<th>Pedestrians</th>
<th>Wheelchair users</th>
<th>Scooters</th>
<th>Skateboarders</th>
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<td>● ● ● ● ●</td>
<td>See examples 1 / 2</td>
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<td>Porous asphalt</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>● ● ● ● ●</td>
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<td>Cobbles / sets</td>
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<td>● ● ●</td>
<td>See example 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crushed stone</td>
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<td>● ● ●●</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grass / turf</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Wood chip</td>
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<td>● ● ●</td>
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</tbody>
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* Subject to design and intended use.
** Typically less than 50 mm deep and well compacted (loose surface materials are susceptible to erosion/ degradation) - subject to design and intended use.

Surface examples

1. Traditional dense tarmac (Recessed)

2. Traditional dense tarmac (Low dig)

3. Porous asphalt (No dig)
A 3 m width allows the track to be used as a dual cycle/footpath route. However, by-pass routes around bike activity zones can have reduced widths down to 1 - 1.5 m depending on the usage, for example, on some school sites where access is controlled and the riders will be monitored or regulated.

Depending on the surface material selected, it may be possible adopt a no-dig construction solution. This can allow the path to be embedded in existing planting areas and within tree protection zones. It also may assist on archaeologically sensitive sites as it avoids the requirement to disturb the existing ground.

More traditional construction methods could be used dependent on ground conditions using ‘tray’ excavation – minimal cut and fill, re-use cut material to form landscaping and raised tracks. Cut out tracks level with existing ground levels are more suitable for wheelchair and buggie-friendly users. The resultant spoil created can be used along with other site spoil to form viewing areas and landscape bunds. The overall profile of the path can follow the existing gradients and contours making use of existing topographical features, ridges and undulations.
Resting and Meeting

Spaces for comfort, contemplation and transition to activity.

What are they?

Public resting and meeting spaces can be in many different forms. Depending on the context, these spaces can range from a simple square with no defining features, to the inclusion of a building used for a range of purposes. Example scenarios are summarised below:

1. **Open public space / square**
   An open square is a basic form of public meeting space where people can come together easily. Such spaces are usually flat for accessibility.

2. **Screened / walled enclosure** (add-on)
   An area enclosed on two sides becomes more structured with clear boundaries while avoiding entrapment. Solid boundary walls can give a sense of comfort, protection and security. The walls can also be used for various physical activities.

3. **Covered shelter** (add-on)
   Adding a sheltered area provides a space for people to rest or gather while being protected from the elements. Shelters can include seating areas for groups to gather, a resting/stretching place for active group meets or even for recreational activities e.g. table tennis.

4. **‘Hub’ building** (add-on)
   A building, however small, can be located in a number of settings to create a community focal point. As well as providing a meeting and resting place, it can offer other services or flexible spaces that benefit the local area and promote physical activity. For instance,
cafe, workshop, community or fitness spaces can be incorporated to create a welcoming, well-used and sustainable social hub.

The following enhancements can benefit any of the above scenarios to create attractive destinations for community use:

a. **Planting:** Open squares that are devoid of any planting can feel somewhat exposed and unwelcoming. By adding planting and landscaping features, a space can feel more protected, comfortable, pleasant and uplifting for users. It can also help integrate a structure in its surroundings and soften its appearance. Contributing to biodiversity also benefits the environment and wildlife.

b. **Seating:** Appropriate seating features can turn a meeting space into one that can also be used for resting by people being active and general passers by. Seating can also be used for stretching exercises. For those with disabilities and hidden conditions, regular resting points along a route can be essential features in order to participate in physical activity. Seating should generally be designed to be comfortable, robust and require low maintenance.

c. **Lighting:** Adding lighting can make otherwise intimidating corners more pleasant at night and reduce blind spots. This can give increased natural surveillance and a greater sense of security, making a space or a site more usable for more of the day. Lighting solutions should be selected that are appropriate to the setting, be operated to suit community patterns of use, and reduce energy use and light pollution to a minimum.

Whatever the selection of features used in a public space, regular maintenance is always essential to retain civic pride and help reduce the likelihood of anti-social behaviour and vandalism.
Run, Throw, Jump

Smaller-scale provision that can enable activity.

When developing a facility for formal training and competition in any sport, it is essential that the relevant standards are maintained. However, it is also possible to design informal spaces that can open up the enjoyment of running, jumping and play to more people.

These community spaces provide entry level facilities on a much smaller footprint and use innovative and eye-catching layouts designed to remove barriers to participation. There is no set layout so they can respond to community needs, available space and budget by applying a kit of parts. The co-location of smaller-scale games provision broadens the opportunity to try different activities and increases the potential for income generation.

Creative thinking can establish ways that the essential features of sports facilities can be scaled down to suit individual sites where space is limited.

Co-location creates an activity hub

Proportionate level of facility to meet community need
Running straight

A running straight of 40–60 metres can provide the focal point of a community facility that will allow participation in a wide range of athletics-based activities. It provides a safe space for training and development of specific skills such as starting, baton changing and finishing for different athletics disciplines. Four, six or eight lanes will enable informal races and also provide a useful area for a range of physical education activities. For small sites, this could be reduced to a shorter two-lane straight. The relatively small area requirements of 399–918 m² depending on the number of lanes enables easy integration with many education, sport and leisure or public park sites.

A running/ jogging route

Such routes provide a facility for recreational running as well as the development of skills in distance running. Distance markings on the surface and marker posts will enhance the design and provide information to allow participants to monitor their progression. A short circular route enables mentoring, teaching and coaching activities to be carried out which develop an understanding of the importance of pace and how it affects the body.
Standing jumps, jump trails and jump circles

These can be used for fun activities and also for training in jumping techniques. They can be set out to suit a specific site with no limit to the size, shape or colour. They offer an attractive way to bring to life an otherwise under-used space.

These smaller spaces adjacent to existing sports or play areas can be combined to create real destinations for community activity.
Lighting

Lighting to all activity areas and access routes can extend the hours of community use during evenings and weekends. For outdoor jogging tracks and trails for community and recreation level, horizontal illuminance could be as low as 50 lux. For most other areas, a maintained lighting level of at least 100 lux is required. Existing lighting should be used wherever possible.

The example above features lighting columns for an 8-lane 50 m straight with adjacent storage building located in the space between mature trees at the Stoke Newington School & Sixth Form and base for Hackney Hurricanes Athletics Club.
Safe Cycling

Small-scale provision can enable people to learn how to ride and develop skills in safe environments including those connected to main routes.

Places to learn to ride, develop skills and enjoy cycling can be designed to enable and inspire people of all ages and abilities. Specific locations can be developed to enable informal and organised activities that suit the needs of the community and the space and budget available. They can be relevant to a wide range of situations. For example, complementing existing sport and play provision in primary and secondary schools or be added to sports and leisure provision.

Learning to ride

An area as small as 50 x 15 m could be formed on a level hardstanding area such as part of a school playground or public park. Markings as shown below should guide the beginner in a safe environment with limited obstacles such as no kerbs or level changes. A ‘straight road’ element can establish boundaries of varying width that the rider can aim to stay between, or depending on the lesson, could be used to practise turning and control. Additional markings such as ‘bullseyes’ and ‘wavy lines’ can add interest and variation for practising different degrees of control. This type of element can be standalone or integrated into other activity areas.
Cycle trails

These can form the primary routes around a site and also link trail elements together. Primary routes should ideally be designed for multi use and be a minimum of 3m wide to suit, for example, cyclists, scooters, skateboarders, roller bladers and wheelchair users. They should be planned to run around the boundaries of existing facilities, such as play equipment and sports pitches, with a degree of imagination to inspire users. By-pass routes and additional skills areas can provide variety, interest and challenges for skills development.

Planting should also be incorporated wherever possible to create wildlife habitats and opportunities for biodiversity. This has added benefits in creating attractive and dynamic environments that change with the seasons that can be enjoyed by all users throughout the year.
Pump tracks and skills areas

A pump track can be developed as a standalone element or integrated into a cycle trail. The configuration can be adjusted to suit site constraints. However, it should ideally combine generic pump track features such as roller, double roller, climb, berm, transverse, chicane, hairpin, table top, step up/down and rhythm sections as set out below and overleaf.

The aim is to create an interesting combination of both technical and non-technical components. The parallel solution can offer opportunities to combine straight sections with hairpins and berms. The spaces between the various sections of track can be planted with wild flowers to help embed the facility into its landscape, create habitat for wildlife and promote biodiversity.
Summary of features

- Berm
- Roller
- Double roller
- Climb
- Transverse
- Step up / step down
- Table top
- Chicane
- Rhythm section
- Hairpin

Safe cycling
Talent development and activity stations

Activity stations can add variety to the primary route. They can be in several forms including those set out below.

These obstacles should be arranged to allow multiple routes for different levels of ability and skills development. Ramps can allow users to practice jumping and landing to develop the correct technique. Balance and rumble strips allow the rider to develop skills moving their weight forwards and backwards to negotiate the obstacle.

Summary of features

Balance beams
- low and high

Balance snakes

Ramps – straight and curved (kicker)

Seesaw

Hoops / tunnels / Limbo (indicated)

Steps

Bunny hops

Rumble strip (simulates roots)
Using Landscape

The term ‘Active environments’ describes the application of existing resources that enables more activity without needing specific equipment or additional resources – one versatile solution using features, materials, landscape and public art.

Sometimes spaces for physical activity and sport are considered independently from their context and landscape. Similarly, landscape design can sometimes be a ‘bolt-on’ overlay or simply filling spaces between buildings or facilities to provide a very limited purpose. There are numerous reasons for this, from piecemeal development and budget constraints, to the way various sources of project funding are often allocated for particular packages of work.

However, there are clear mutual benefits to integrating physical activity opportunities into the landscape. An active landscape is purposely designed to promote health and wellbeing and comprises a range of opportunities that address different activity levels and abilities set within a natural environment for play, observation and social interaction. The features and elements are often intentionally ambiguous in design that responds to a specific location. They can also be places for reflection, observation, meditation as well as for physical activity.

Connected walking and cycling routes can provide traffic-free links to and through neighbourhoods and encourage active and healthy communities.
Calm, green settings designed to promote community activity can frame views, define spaces and highlight seasonal changes. This could include social raised lawns, street trees and sensory planting.

Enclosure and irregular pitches not designated for a particular sport or activity enable broader use, activities and events.

Quality, neutral spaces encourage inclusive, informal and diverse activities.

Changes in level and natural materials signify and encourage play and activity.

A SuDS feature designed as an opportunity to explore.
Zig-zag paths provide a direct route of steps for fast travel, an accessible route shallower than 1 in 20 so that handrails aren’t required and decked meeting and sitting places with WiFi.

Applying markings to an access road with different coloured tarmac and white lanes denote its use as a community space to where running is obviously encouraged and acceptable. Lanes can merge, cross over and split to link to other spaces and connect routes without the need for signage.

Rebound wall bounds and irregular pitches with power supply can prompt informal physical activity without being explicit and designed so that public art can be incorporated or an outdoor screen can be mounted for community gathering and events.

Routes should be planted to create wildlife habitats and opportunities for biodiversity. Longer routes can be punctuated with simple canopies or enclosures to provide shelter, resting and meeting places.

Obvious visual prompts encourage walking, jogging and cycling to promote walkable communities and create a network of connected routes.

Using landscape

A change in level negotiated by a direct route of steps or an integrated accessible route

Simple shelters can create a hub destination to meet or rest and help define the route.
Steps can provide a striking landmark feature and create an informal meeting place, with infrastructure suitable for both formal and informal fitness activities.

Giant steps are a landmark feature, an informal meeting place and suitable for informal fitness activities

Exercise stations, stretching locations and a range of other features can be suitable for informal uses or programmed activities.

Simple stretching location along a route

Pedal-powered USB charging and meeting points located along a sheltered and sunny south-facing wall

A bouldering wall with coloured holds for routes of varying challenge makes use of a blank retaining wall and includes a soft surface
Visioning

Creating informal activity spaces that are safe, welcoming and inclusive depends on many factors.

Important features and qualities that are common to well-used spaces can include:

- Entrances that are obvious and welcoming
- Easy access by foot, bike and/or public transport
- Access to refreshments e.g. water fountain or café
- Lighting to and around the space
- Access to inclusive toilets, either adjacent to the space or within a reasonable distance
- Secure storage for personal belongings e.g. bikes or buggies
- Seating for resting and meeting
- Some form of shelter.

Undertaking a visioning exercise involves taking a fresh look at what already exists and happens at the location and what changes or additions could make things better.

Site appraisal and strategy

The following examples 01-09 illustrate typical attributes to appraise for a particular site. These include:

- Constraints
- Opportunities
- Features / infrastructure
- Access, topography and views
- Areas of activity
- Photographic studies
- Communities served.
Following the site appraisal and strategy study, establish high-level design principles for the masterplan and set out the key desired outcomes. Together, these will lead to a viable vision for the project.

Masterplan and outcomes

The following examples 10-18 illustrate key questions and considerations that should be addressed by the masterplanning approach. These include:

- What is happening on site currently?
- What could it be like?
- Establish design principles for the key elements
- Identify areas for development, retention or improvement
- Zoning of future uses and activities
- Masterplanning for the site
- Project phasing
- Development constraints.
Document format

This document has been designed for comfortable reading at A4 and on a laptop screen, but can also be printed at A3 for large print versions. The pdf is accessible and has been tested to work with text readers.

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User guide

Before using this design guidance note for any specific projects all users should refer to the User Guide to understand when and how to use the guidance as well as understanding the limitations of use.

Click here for User guide and other Design and cost guidance

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