Book review

DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENTS EXPLAINED

R. Cowan (ed.). Thomas Telford Publishing, 2008. ISBN 978 0 7277 3440 2, £35, 72 pp.

A design and access statement is a relatively new part of the UK's planning process. It is a legal requirement that a development control application (with some minor exceptions) must be accompanied by such a statement.

Not only will this publication be a useful addition to the bookshelves of everyone involved in the process, but it should also be essential reading for anyone who is about to make or determine a development proposal. While most practitioners will already be familiar with the arguments deployed, this book brings them together in one concise volume.

The main elements of a design and access statement have already been published in a number of other publications. Most notable of these is *Guidance on Changes to the Development Control System*.¹ This volume however, develops these arguments, and gives useful explanations, summaries and checklists to assist the process of preparing one.

It can be used in a number of ways, both as a guide to new trainees and as a checklist for submissions to be used by experienced staff. It could also be deployed as a training aid for newly elected councillors on a planning committee.

Given that the publication is produced by nine authors, drawn from both private consultancies and a planning authority, it is authoritative in the development of its subject, well-illustrated throughout and it contains many wry cartoons to underline specific points.

As the book is intended not only to be an explanation but also a checklist for a submission, readers will note that it repeats itself in several places. It is generally none the worse for this repetition although it is probably sufficient to state only once that the authors prefer to use the term 'design statement' instead of 'design and access statement'.

What is particularly helpful is the authors' emphasis on ensuring that developments give good access to all at the earliest stage of the design process, rather than considering disabled access at a much later stage. Similarly, they develop the same arguments about the need to design for crime prevention and environmental issues earlier, rather than later. Perhaps optimistically, they argue that if the design statement lists the consultations and considerations that have taken place, then an audit trail will have been created that will nullify a legal challenge from a disgruntled user.

Controversially the authors' argue that 'Developers should be encouraged to explain... how they developed their design options... and... chose... one. Unfortunately developers often find it difficult to be open about the design options they have considered. They may be worried that the local authority will favour an option they themselves have rejected'. In this context it is overly optimistic to state that a 'clearly argued design rationale, based upon a careful analysis of the context (should prevent) the subjective views of council officers and members to cloud (an application)'. This argument presupposes that there will always be a single design that all stakeholders will recognise as being perfect for any site.

Experience tells us that in most, if not all, cases, there are a range of possibilities that will have greater or less appeal to different stakeholders. The planning process is not an objective scientific test. It is a political process, albeit tempered by legal constraints and procedures, which attempts to balance out the differing views of the various stakeholders to find a solution that is acceptable to the majority. The true value of a design and access statement will be to facilitate this debate.

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Editorial Advisory Panel

REFERENCE

1. DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT. *Guidance on Changes to the Development Control System*. DCLG Circular, London, 2006.