



BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL



Part 1: Development Framework Protocol including the preparation of Masterplans and Design Codes

1. Protocol overview

This protocol sets out guidance on preparing development frameworks (including masterplanning, the preparation of parameter plans, and design codes) to help inform and shape development proposals and applications within the borough.

By way of definition, a development framework is a project-specific tool agreed upon between the applicant and the local planning authority at the outset of the planning application process. The framework establishes clear rules to guide the overall vision, design parameters, and masterplanning of the proposed development.

Where development frameworks are embedded in Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) they can provide the basis for collaboration between the applicant and the local planning authority to deliver good quality outcomes.

Where a PPA is not in engaged, applicants will still be expected to demonstrate within any application submission that the key steps in the process (set out in Table 1), particularly in relation to early background analysis, concept development and masterplanning, have been undertaken.

1.1 Introduction

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that creating high-quality and sustainable buildings and places is a fundamental goal of the planning process¹. It mandates that poor quality developments should be refused, especially where it disregards design policies set out in local plans and national guidance. Conversely, good design that aligns with this approach should be given significant weight in the decision-making process².

The adopted Bedford Local Plan 2030 seeks to ensure that new development creates attractive and high-quality places which enhance heritage assets, townscape and landscape characteristics, and the distinctiveness of the borough through place-making (policy 28S) and design quality (policy 29).

In this regard, the Council have published a borough-wide design guide to provide detailed guidance on the design and layout of new development³. This guide is based on the principles set out in the National Design Guide and Code.

The NPPF emphasises integrating design quality throughout the planning process - this includes early and open discussions between developers, the local planning authority, and communities to align development expectations,

¹ Paragraph 131 of the NPPF

² This is contained in the National Design Code and National Model Design Code.

³ Bedford Borough Design Guide (adopted in 2023)

particularly for design, with both local needs and commercial interests.

“Applicants should, where applicable, provide sufficient information to demonstrate how their proposals will meet the design expectations set out in local and national policy, and should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot.⁴ **”**

In the context of these tiers of policies and guidance, the Council expect that **all major planning applications** in the borough will be based on masterplanning and design coding which is appropriate to their scale and reflects the guidance set out in the National Design Guide and Model Design Code.

1.2 Purpose of the protocol

The Council has prepared this protocol to ensure that the preparation of major and strategic applications follow a clear and collaborative process to ensure high quality and deliverable development proposals.

The amount and nature of information required to inform the process should be proportionate having regard to the scale and complexity of the site and nature of the application. Applicants are strongly encouraged to engage in discussions

with the local planning authority at the earliest opportunity regarding the nature and scope of supporting information required.

2. Routes to engagement and collaboration

Applicants and developers can engage in the planning application process and submit development proposals through the following routes (as described below and illustrated on figure 1).

2.1 Route 1: Direct Application

This route is not recommended for major developments.

If no engagement is sought with the local planning authority through routes 2 or 3 prior to submission of planning applications in categories A to D (as set out below), applicants will be expected to submit sufficient material, and to demonstrate through their Design and Access Statement and supporting documents, that in preparing the application the key steps in this Development Framework Protocol have been addressed.

It is noted that if insufficient material is submitted, or that the application does not evidence the key steps in this Development Framework Protocol, then the application may not be validated or failure to provide sufficient evidence could result in the refusal of the application.

⁴ Paragraph 137 of the NPPF

2.2 Route 2: Pre-application enquiry

Applicants can engage with the local planning authority's development management service through the pre-application enquiry process for smaller schemes. This process allows applicants to receive advice on their proposed scheme from planning officers and other technical disciplines, understand relevant planning policy requirements, and identify potential issues before submitting a formal planning application. For guidance on the pre-application service, charging schedule/ fees and guidance on the scale of development appropriate for this route, please see [Planning pre-app charging schedule 2025](#).

The local planning authority may offer both a meeting and a written response as part of this service. The pre-application service should address/ include:

- a) Applicant - the applicant will typically table a number of development concepts/ options in sufficient clarity to allow for meaningful engagement of various technical disciplines (e.g. planning, urban design, highways). It is noted that poorly presented material to engage the pre-application enquiry will not be validated.
- b) The local planning authority - advice given at this stage should be used to help define the development framework brief for the development, identify and understand planning policy objectives, and guide into

refining the development concepts prior to a planning application submission.

For larger schemes where pre-application advice is not available, applicants may seek initial guidance through a project initiation discussion (PID) for which a charge is made.

Forms for both pre-application requests can be found here at Step 4 <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/planningenquiries> and for PIDs <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/planningPPA>

2.3 Route 3: Project Initiation discussion (PID)/ Planning Performance Agreement (PPA)

Planning performance agreements (PPA) are voluntary project management tools that applicants and the local planning authority can use to set agreed deliverables, programme, review mechanisms, and manage resources, from the pre-application stage through to determination

The Council defines a number of planning and/or development categories⁵ where the engagement of a PPA is strongly advised; namely:

- Category A: Major (Bespoke)
- Category B: Major (Large)
- Category C: Major (Medium)
- Category D: Moderate (Large)

⁵ [Planning Performance Agreement application categories and costs](#)

For such large-scaled and complex development sites/ applications, to enable active engagement, establish a mutually agreed process for collaborative working, and define a set of deliverables to support a planning application, the applicant will need to formulate and table a development framework brief to structure the PPA process with the local planning authority.

Development Framework Brief: the purpose of the development framework brief is to facilitate early collaboration with the local planning authority, and other stakeholders as necessary, to agree on the development's objectives/ vision, resources/ disciplines required, programme, and deliverables which will guide the application through subsequent stages of the development framework to lead to making a submission.

It is noted that the development framework may include parameter plans, design and access statement/ design code, illustrative masterplan.

In all cases, the brief and related process must be based on the key stages and activities as illustrated in figure 1.

Project Initiation Discussion

Prior to entering into a full PPA an applicant will need to engage in the process of project initiation discussions (PID) which may lead into a PPA or could result in a direct application. Both of these routes should still follow the principles of this document. The PID process effectively

provides some initial pre-application advice for those schemes which fall outside the thresholds for Route 2. It does not however provide a fully detailed pre-application response nor will there be any detailed feedback given on any specific layout at this stage as the intention of the PID process is to provide initial advice allowing the applicant to then proceed with an application or a PPA.

This early engagement is aimed at helping align the applicant's expectations, address complex issues that require resolution to bring forward an application, identify project risk, set realistic programmes in the event a PPA is subsequently entered into, and enable sound collaboration between the applicant and the local planning authority.

The PID meetings will involve:

- a) An initial on-line meeting to establish the type, scale and nature of the development proposed so that the relevant technical disciplines, and related officers/ consultants, can be identified to assist; and,
- b) A meeting (possibly on-line) with the above identified parties. Prior to this second meeting the applicant will be required to submit a draft development framework brief (see previous section for the minimum requirements for this). The local planning authority and the applicant will use this meeting to discuss the brief, programme, and deliverables resulting in guidance as to which route to follow in making any future application. Ultimately, it will be for the applicant to determine how they may wish to progress.

Project initiation discussion (PID) fees are set out on the website <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/planningPPA>. If an applicant subsequently enters into a PPA these will be discounted by the amounts shown in brackets on the website. No fees will be discounted/refunded in the event that an applicant seeks to continue with an application direct and without a PPA.

Preparation of a draft PPA: where it is agreed that a PPA will be used the key elements of the development framework brief will be used to inform the preparation of a draft PPA contract having identified the key roles, deliverables and programme for moving the project through into the PPA process.

Before a formal PPA is signed both parties will need to agree on:

a) level of engagement on both sides;

Planning Performance Agreement fee: bespoke.

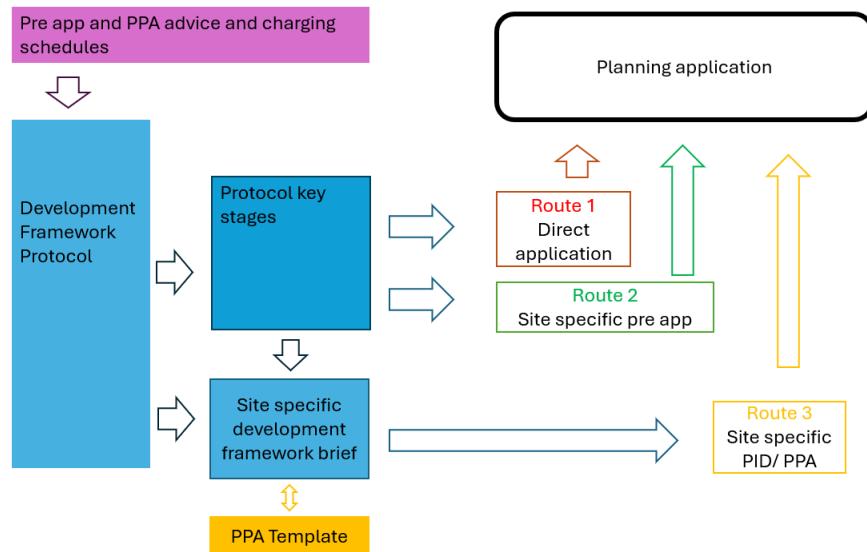
- b) the numbers of meetings required;
- c) timescales and milestones; and,
- d) costs associated with the process

At this stage the local planning authority will need to ensure that resources from the wider local planning authority team are available for taking the application through into a formal PPA. This internal coordination may take up to one-month to complete. Once this is finalised a PPA contract will be issued for both parties to sign.

The Council's PPA officer and appointed case officer will meet either in person or virtually with the applicant to finalise and sign the PPA.

For guidance on PPAs and to review the Council's draft PPA contract, please see [Planning performance agreement | Bedford Borough Council](#)

Fig 1. Development Framework approach and routes to the preparation of a planning application



3. Process for preparing a Development Framework (vision, design parameters, masterplan)

The Development Framework (including potentially parameter plans, design codes, and/or illustrative masterplan) will need to follow the indicative stages below (see Figure 2 below). Please note that each application is unique and this process may be adapted to make it bespoke to the application.

Stage 1: Present options and concepts

Purpose: Establish the preferred development concept underpinned by a thorough baseline analysis of the site and concept design scenarios to guide the subsequent design and planning.

Key elements: Explain site constraints and opportunities, appraise viability, and present development options and concepts. Undertake design review of the concept.

Outputs: By the end of this stage, key outputs like the overarching spatial vision, development objectives, guiding principles and a preferred development concept will be identified and agreed upon.

Outputs/submission requirements:

Stage 1.1 Inception: project inception meeting.

First project meeting with case officer and project teams to confirm and clarify the programme and the need for any proposed meetings on specific topics identified, e.g. ecology, heritage, highways.

Stage 1.2 Initial baseline analysis

- Summarise the key drivers for the proposed development and evidence how conceptual options have been explored.
- Site and infrastructure conditions and capacity gaps.
- Contextual analysis and surveys initiated.

Stage 1.3 Vision setting and place-making principles

- Develop an initial spatial vision and a set of place-making principles to inform the initial design concept.
- Undertake early engagement.

Stage 1.4 Developing an initial development concept

based on the spatial vision and objectives

- Identify and evaluate at least three conceptual options in consultation with the case officer (including opportunities and constraints mapping and low carbon approach) and other stakeholders.
- Undertake initial design review and agree preferred concept incorporating outcome of discussions based on the overall spatial vision, objectives and principles, which provides a framework to guide the future design of the development.

Stage 2: Preferred Development Framework

Purpose: Develop the preferred concept, or amalgamation of ideas, from phase 1 into a preferred development framework.

Key elements: Parameter plans, draft contextual and material study, and an illustrative masterplan. Further details are provided within part 2 of this protocol.

Outputs: By the end of this stage, the development framework should be agreed.

Outputs/submission requirements:

Stage 2.1 Baseline Studies

- Report on the baseline data/ surveys (as a component of the emerging framework and Design & Access Statement).
- Environmental Impact Assessment screening /scoping (as necessary) (allow for statutory consultation within this application).
- Initial statutory consultation as required.

Stage 2.2 Draft Development Framework

- Prepare a report on the evolution of the development framework (review/ set out outstanding detail and/or technical matters).
- Emerging Design & Access Statement
- Design Code scoping.
- Draft parameter plans.
- Draft illustrative masterplan.

- Undertake public consultation.

Stage 2.3 Review Development framework to create a series of parameter plans, supporting strategies and draft design code, culminating in the illustrative masterplan:

- Parameter Plan: Proposed land use
- Parameter Plan: Landscape and blue-green infrastructure
- Parameter Plan: Access and movement
- Parameter Plan: Urban design, density and height
- Supporting strategies
- Illustrative masterplan
- Draft Design Code
- Sustainability statement
- Infrastructure delivery plan

Stage 2.4 Phasing delivery and stewardship

- Establishing a strategy for phasing and delivery including on and off-site infrastructure.
- Produce a delivery strategy and phasing plan.
- Undertake early viability testing/ possibly Financial Viability Assessment
- Establish an appropriate stewardship approach/vehicle in conjunction with case officers.

Stage 3: Preparation of a design code and/or specific area-based codes

Purpose: Establish a site-wide design code and/or specific area codes alongside the development framework to ensure consistent and high-quality design outcomes covering different aspects of the proposed development.

Key elements: The level of detail in the code will depend on the scale and size of the proposed development and type of application (outline/full), with larger sites requiring more comprehensive guidance on elements like the street network and green spaces, while smaller sites or specific areas may require more targeted codes to maintain the distinct character and appearance of the area.

Outputs: Specific guidance to inform any reserved matters application and/or discharge of conditions made; the detailed design resolution of the proposed development building on the masterplan framework vision and principles set out in phases 1 and 2.

Outputs/submission requirements:

Stage 3.1 Site wide coding: Developing site wide design codes to inform the urban design, landscape and architectural character of the development in line with the principles of the Bedford Design Guide.

Produce a site wide design code covering all aspects of the development, including but not limited to, servicing and utilities; form and massing; the arrangement of buildings and spaces and how they relate to the wider public realm; development density; access points and parking; building heights; net zero design parameters; the character and hierarchy of green spaces; the street hierarchy split into primary, secondary and tertiary roads across the site; and, the network of active travel and public transport routes.

Completion of this stage is the minimum requirement for the submission of an outline application

Stage 3.2 Area design coding (where relevant) Developing character/ neighbourhood area coding

Character/neighbourhood area-based design codes to help illustrate the character of specific development areas, enhance the sense of place and create a consistent standard of design.

This will be required for relevant full applications and all reserved matters including phased reserved matters.

Figure 2: Summary of the PPA process (after PID)

