

Inspired by the past, picture your future...

LOOK! St Albans **our community voice on design**

Look! St Albans: Our Community Voice on Design Flyer 2020

"I realised that this was indeed going to be a community-based and co-operative exercise, and our combined knowledge had real value."
- a local resident

What we do:

Look! St Albans has only one purpose: **to promote community co-design generally and to provide a vehicle to enable community co-design within the St Albans district.**

The process can bring the local community together with landowners and developers to create major building projects that meet the wants and needs of all parties, financial, aesthetic and environmental. Look! has been promoting this agenda as a sensible way forward since 2012 (when the Community through Look! created outline [Design Codes](#) for St Albans city centre with the support of the Prince's Foundation for Building Community). But in 2020 this approach also began to be incorporated into government planning policy, as the experts began to see the value of "community expertise".

"We were initially sceptical about the delivery of a genuinely well-designed, viable and widely appreciated concept through the process... I am pleased to say that we have been converted." - A developer

And what we don't do:

As a body Look! does not respond to any planning applications expressing a view on what is good or bad design or what should be developed or not (although most of its volunteers have very strong views of their own). Its sole purpose is to help drive the process of community engagement through co-design.

Why We do it:

The traditional approach to development has failed, as was identified by The Policy Exchange in its report, [The Duty to Build Beautiful](#):

“Community consultation is a smokescreen used by developers who have already decided the scheme... **Community engagement, in contrast, is genuinely democratic** with people actively encouraged to share their opinions and properly inform a development plan”.

The Government has taken up the **Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission’s** Report: [Living with Beauty](#): “Local councils need radically and profoundly to re-invent the ambition, depth and breadth with which they engage with neighbourhoods as they consult on local plans, expanding from the current focus on consultation in the development control process to one of co-design.” Look! St Albans is totally in agreement with and what it does is aligned to this philosophy.

And this philosophy has now been accepted into **government policy** in the [National Design Guide 2019](#), (Part 1, Point 17) which states: “Local communities can play a vital role in achieving well-designed places and buildings and making sure there is a relationship between the built environment and quality of life. Communities can be involved in design processes through approaches such as **co-design, design workshops** and other engagement techniques, so that places and buildings reflect **local community preferences**, improve their quality of life and fit well into their surroundings.” And it is now encapsulated in the [National Model Design Code](#).

Look! St Albans is made up of **volunteers** who passionately believe in the **active involvement of communities** from the early stage of the design process of major developments as the way to create beautiful living environments, and to get **successful developments implemented efficiently because they are created co-operatively**. Its role is to provide a vehicle locally for the co-design process, which is now favoured by government planning policy.

How we do it:

Look! St Albans runs a process called a **‘design charrette’**. This is a professionally-facilitated **series of workshops** in which **anyone** interested from the **community, the developers and landowners** can take part on an equal basis, with the **independent professional facilitators**. It will usually involve an initial input session to **gather ideas and thinking**, a **site visit**, one or more **co-design workshops**, and a **feedback session** which might determine a preferred option. You can find what it looks and feels like [here](#). The costs including professional facilitators are met by the developers as part of their duty to consult, whilst Look! St Albans organises, and publicises the event, which can easily involve **more than 1,000 hours of time donated free by volunteers and members of the community**. The output of this process is recommended to the planning authority, but Look! St Albans expresses no view as a body beyond recommending the charrette output.

Does it Work?

Proof that co-design is tried and tested is the fact that government policy supports it. But Look! St Albans has conducted two successful design charrettes. The first was the redevelopment of the old **Museum Of St Albans (MOSTA)** site, to help fund the new museum. The output of that charrette process was four designs, but one clear winner, **Oak Tree Gardens**. The architects also took part in the charrette and delivered a final plan that was very close to it. There were only two objections to the planning application – unheard of for any multiple home site in St Albans, but especially when it is a conversion of an historic landmark building! You can find out more [here](#).

Then in 2016 Look! St Albans was asked by St Albans District Council to undertake a master-planning charrette for the **City Centre Opportunity Site**, a large segment of the city centre. Amazingly, in the work of just one weekend, two realistic master plans were produced for the site, which, it was envisaged, could form a ‘mix and match’ basis for detailed plans, which would be created by a further detailed planning charrette (the outcome report is [here](#)). Unfortunately, St Albans District Council decided not to pursue this, and the subsequent design bore little resemblance to the charrette outcome. It was generally not well received, and the planning application was withdrawn. You can find more about the full master-plan process [here](#).

What can you do to help or get involved?

Look! St Albans is an open and inclusive organisation, run by volunteers and has no ‘membership’. It relies on volunteer effort and any support from the local community. If you are interested in how the built environment is developed in St Albans and if you believe in what we have done and are trying to do, then get involved by signing up to communications [here](#). You can also follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). A recent tweet from [Create Streets](#) said: “**Co-design** with communities, **not consult at** them and you’ll get better and more popular places. To ignore a group as positive and experienced as Look! St Albans is almost criminal in its irresponsibility”.

Please engage in the dialogue which may affect where we live for generations to come. [CitizenLab](#) talks about a paradigm shift from: “An institutional class of professionals wasn’t the best way, it was the only way. But not anymore” to “the collective expertise of citizens first, with aid by the individual expertise of professionals”. Be a part of that paradigm shift.

You can help us greatly by making a **donation**, however small, to the running costs of Look! St Albans. Although small organisation with overall small levels of expenditure, there are regular costs involved in running a website, insurances and other incidental costs. Please **help us raise funds** for this cause.

[Look St Albans Buy Me A Coffee](#)