

Briefing Paper 9: Design and Standards – safety, sustainability, liveability and accessibility

Key Asks

- Create a Government funded non-departmental body supporting delivery of well designed places and effective use of land.
- Require local planning authorities to create area and site specific design codes setting densities and landscape strategy.

Introduction

The NPPF includes a requirement to secure well-designed places and effective use of land, including through the presumption in favour of sustainable development. If this is to work, ‘quality’ needs to be better defined using policy, regulation, standards and practical guidance. This will also achieve economic, health, environmental and climate policy objectives.

Realistic and desirable policy objectives

1. Quality homes and neighbourhoods for all

Strengthening standards and regulation provides a level playing field for all housing providers: developers, councils, housebuilders and landowners. It addresses Government priorities by contributing to improved health outcomes, reducing health budgets, and sets standards for a zero carbon future. It is a springboard for improved productivity in housing delivery through, for example, off-site manufacture which can deliver improved quality, environmental and safety outcomes based on clear and consistent metrics. This can underpin on or off site housing production, and reboot the wider economy, benefiting deprived areas and providing attractive careers for young and older citizens, contributing to an improved national economy.

2. Leadership and oversight

Delivering well designed places requires local and national leadership, advised by expert professionals and practitioners in public service. Governments in Scotland and Wales fund non-departmental public bodies that advise on design quality. Many organisations are concerned about the quality of place in England, including experts within the MHCLG, but England has no similar body.

Experience shows there is a need for a single Government backed body of experts to give independent, consistent and informed advice on the quality and sustainability of new homes. The role includes research, oversight and support for central and local government.

3. Planning and design

The National Model Design Code is a practical manual for delivering well designed places. It should enable planning authorities to set clear criteria for the effective use of land by delivering height, scale and massing for housing sites that is supported by communities, whilst optimising the development of land. Up front clarity in Local Plans will avoid poor outcomes arising from over-development; inflated land prices can starve design and development budgets; over-dense developments can make unsustainable places, which are alien to their context and unpopular with surrounding communities; costly 'superdense' development is poorly suited for affordable housing and will hit leaseholders with unaffordable long-term maintenance bills.

Design codes are used successfully in many northern European countries, providing certainty, speeding up delivery and enabling multiple providers to deliver at pace. Design codes are an option in the NPPF but their use needs to be mandatory at least for large sites.

4. Environmental standards

For the UK to meet its 2050 net zero carbon obligation a rigorous, consistent approach to all scales of residential development and domestic improvement is essential. This can be provided if Local Plans include targets for environmental performance, energy in use, whole life carbon and embodied carbon based on recognised national standards. National policy and regulation should include guidance on the circular economy and long-life loose-fit design. The provisions of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act for National Development Management Plans can be used to deliver consistent energy efficiency metrics in Local Plans.

The existing housing stock in England is one of the worst in Europe in terms of environmental performance. An enhanced standard for the energy and environmental performance of existing stock is required to create healthier homes and address widespread problems of damp and indoor air quality. Initial investment in local authority stock will help build a reliable and skilled supply chain, which can then expand to serve the private rented sector, funded through tax incentives and grants.

How desired policy objectives can be achieved in the present circumstances

- Create a new agency to address design quality issues; support public and private agencies deliver complex large scale development and regeneration; provide skills and resources; signpost to good practice and case studies; advocate sound urban design principles.
- Require all regional, single tier authorities and local planning authorities to appoint an empowered statutory Director of Planning and Place and provide additional funding for supporting built environment expertise.
- Strengthen the role of design codes, requiring regional and local planning authorities to use them to set non-negotiable maximum limits on development densities by fixing heights, scale and massing, open space, amenity and parking arrangements.
- Rebalance planning policies through the lens of health and wellbeing by supporting the role of nature, green space and environmentally supportive active travel routes, with specific targets.

- Local planning authorities should be required to set local environmental performance and energy targets by withdrawing the Written Ministerial Statement 13th December 2023 that causes confusion and uncertainty on whether they can set targets above Part L.
- The Future Homes Standard has been watered down to suit housebuilder demands and a more ambitious standard should be set by either upgrading the standard now or in the near future, alternatively, and preferably, mandate the Net Zero Carbon Building Standard for new and renovated housing, currently a voluntary standard.
- Adopt a passive 'fabric first' agenda for improvements to existing homes, such as window replacement, insulation and air-tightness.
- Invest in high-performance off-site manufacturers through loan guarantees and incentivise those who integrate factory-based housing with exemplary environmental standards.

Lessons from past experience

The last Labour government created the Commission for Architecture and Built Environment (CABE), which was judged to be 'a very effective organisation' in independent academic review. With advances in technology, an equally effective organisation could be smaller, more agile and able to advise at local as well as national level.

How successful delivery can help achieve the Govt's key missions – economic growth and clean energy

These measures would create a new, skilled workforce and encourage innovation in housing production, directly benefiting the growth agenda.

Homes that are designed for reduced energy demand and high accessibility by active travel modes are essential to meeting clean energy goals.

Andy von Bradsky

andy@vonbradsky.uk