

HOUSING AS INFRASTRUCTURE – A FAIRER FUTURE FOR ALL

Introduction

Britain's housing stock must be regarded as essential infrastructure that delivers public good. Every citizen should enjoy a comfortable, safe and secure home – just as everyone has a right to clean water and affordable energy. Like all infrastructure it should be well located, well designed, sustainable, affordable and built to a high quality. It should cater for all in society and lead to balanced, integrated communities.

A 'tipping point' has been reached, requiring a change to housing design and delivery: addressing climate change, learning from the pandemic experience, improving health and wellbeing, addressing post-Brexit impacts, and embracing technical and digital transformations. Government must also deal with the faltering housing supply, acute shortage of affordable homes, poor condition of the existing housing stock and lack of productivity. Delivery of new homes and improving existing homes can be a driver to reboot the economy. Effective strategies will differ regionally and locally to reflect local housing market conditions.

The sector requires both public and private sector investment at all stages of the process, from strategic planning through to delivery and continuing neighbourhood management. A rebalancing of the roles of the private sector and public sector is essential so there is a partnership for change. We need to challenge the institutional mindset that the private sector alone can deliver beneficial change.

This entails a change of culture and approach – making the economic case for change, bringing leadership, Government apparatus, institutional bodies and communities on a journey of transformation to deliver good housing for all based on fairness, aspiration and hope.

This brief paper sets out broad principles that must surely underpin a recovery of our broken housing market, together with some specific recommendations for addressing the issues. It draws from the depth of knowledge and experience from leading architects specialising in housing and regeneration and references further reading from which the principles and propositions are drawn.

Housing in the right place

1. Treat housing as national infrastructure with the necessary public investment, co-ordination and intervention.

Government has promised 'more, better, faster' housing delivery, but reliance on the market has failed to deliver. A new national plan should treat housing as essential infrastructure, co-ordinated with sustainable transport, utilities, education, employment, and health facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recreate a Ministry of Housing, with a senior ministerial appointment represented in Cabinet.

- Develop a national plan to invest in existing and new housing according to local need and opportunity, and alongside other essential infrastructure.

2. Empower democratically accountable regional bodies to deliver spatial planning and investment

The national housing plan should be informed by local consultation and delivered through regional structures, empowered to align infrastructure and economic development with housing growth. This requires civic leadership and pro-active planning by properly skilled and resourced local authorities. Communities need the confidence that existing social and technical infrastructure will not be overwhelmed by new homes, and instead expanded and improved in tandem with new development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build on and expand DLUHC's Trailblazer devolution programme, currently limited to West Midlands and Manchester.
- Build up local authority skills and resources to deliver place leadership, urban design, sustainability, heritage & conservation, cultural programming, and community engagement.
- Aggregate funding pots, streamline the bidding process, and support long-term holistic investment programmes.
- Public land should be retained and developed by local authorities, local development corporations or community land trust models to provide mixed tenure homes according to local housing need.

3. Enable the Green Belt to deliver accessible open space, biodiversity and solutions to local housing need

The purpose of the Green Belt must be broadened to help deliver net zero carbon and to reconnect people with nature. The natural environment and green infrastructure should be enhanced and public access widened. Managed release for housing of no more than 5% of the Green Belt will provide affordable homes for those currently priced out of the housing market and relieve the negative impacts from unsustainable over-dense brownfield development. Green Belt homes must achieve exemplary environmental and design standards and help offset the carbon footprint of adjoining urban areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recast Green Belt policy to enhance environmental value and enable managed release for exemplary housing in well-connected locations.
- Incentivise Green Belt landowners to improve biodiversity and public amenity. Streamline compulsory purchase of under-performing land.

4. Invest in estate regeneration to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits

The current model of funding estate regeneration through cross subsidy from housing for sale is broken: in higher value areas it delivers over-dense development and fuels local resentment, while in poorer areas it simply cannot raise sufficient funds. Effective regeneration provides multiple social value benefits, including improved health, education and employment outcomes, and should be funded accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest public funds into kick-starting estate regeneration initiatives, which can demonstrate effective social value impacts.
- Devolve power and resources from central government to local development vehicles with a democratic mandate from the communities they serve.

5. Target investment to revitalise town centres through housing and community infrastructure

Vacant shops and under-used shoppers' car parks present an opportunity to reshape town centres through managed retreat of High Street retail and injection of new life through housing infill, homes above shops and development of community uses and managed workspace. This will require intervention and funding to support local community initiatives, especially in low value areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enable Homes England to fund town centre renewal through affordable housing development and related community uses.
- Incentivise institutional investors in town centres to offer up vacant and under-used properties for publicly funded renewal.

Affordable housing

6. Increase direct procurement of affordable housing for those in most need

The system of imposing Section 106 obligations on market housing developers to provide affordable housing is discredited by fractious and time-consuming arguments over financial viability assessments. Instead, most affordable housing should be grant funded using the collective receipts from non-negotiable formula-based levies (potentially on a wider range of development than just housing). A grant funded system would accelerate supply, reduce advisor costs and stabilise the land market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Equip Homes England to prioritise affordable rented housing, based on mean local earnings, and specialist housing for homeless people and others on society's margins, over home ownership products.
- Complete the transition from negotiated Section 106 obligations on market housing to locally set Community Infrastructure Levies (CIL).

- Reduce reliance on market-led development to provide affordable housing as an obligation, and instead use CIL receipts for direct funding.
- Set affordable housing grant at rates which attract developers, as well as councils and housing associations, to want to provide it.
- Require LPAs to include clear targets for delivery of specialist housing, including for an ageing population, in local plans.

Well designed places and homes

7. Improve placemaking and dampen land speculation by setting clear limits to urban density

Planning policy seeks to *optimise* the development of urban land, but this is translated into *maximisation* by the development industry and by a planning system which seeks multiple conflicting benefits through a process of negotiation. In practice successful land buyers bid on the assumption of achieving denser permissions than their competitors, and this leads to poor outcomes: inflated land prices starve design and development budgets; over-dense developments 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage regional and local planning authorities to set fixed non-negotiable maximum limits on urban development densities.
- Drop the conflicting demands of the NPPF to maximise brownfield development while also referencing surrounding neighbourhood character, and instead require high standards of masterplanning and design coding based on the National Model Design Code and supported by community engagement.
- Expand and adapt the Office for Place to address future facing holistic design quality and innovation, based on research and enlarged with additional skills to support local authorities deliver complex large scale development and regeneration.
- Initiate an independent review to assess the impacts of PDR on the quality of development compared to the benefits arising

8. Mandate universal minimum space standards and ensure an effective mix of new homes

75% of local authorities still do not mandate the Nationally Described Space Standard in their local plans, let alone the enhanced accessibility standards in Building Regulations, and consequently many new homes are too small to meet people's basic needs. Making these standards mandatory will help create more sustainable and adaptable neighbourhoods, accommodating changing lifestyles, enabling people with special needs to stay in their homes, and improving health and education outcomes. Common standards would also create a level playing field for housebuilders, housing associations and SMEs bidding for land.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require all new homes to achieve Nationally Described Space Standards (NDSS) and Building Regulations Part M4(2) accessibility standards.
- Require local plans to seek a mix of new homes based on local need, and including specialist housing for our ageing population, to encourage down-sizing and free up family homes
- Review housing standards to address changing lifestyles, including work from home, health and social care needs.

A sustainable and healthy future

9. Mandate and monitor net zero carbon standards

For the UK to meet its net zero carbon obligation by 2050 requires a rigorous and consistent approach to all scales of residential development and domestic improvement. Local plans should include targets for environmental performance, energy in use, whole life carbon and embodied carbon based on recognised national standards such as LETI. National policy and regulation should include guidance on the circular economy and long-life loose-fit design.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Place a lifetime carbon limit including transportation costs on urban extensions and new settlements. Require local authorities to prepare a costed whole life plan for achieving the national Net Zero target by 2050 in existing urban areas.
- Mandate the Net Zero Carbon Building Standard for new and renovated housing, currently a voluntary standard prepared by a wide consortium of institutions.
- Reduce the woeful gap between designed and actual energy performance by funding the Built Environment Carbon Database as a repository of standards and agglomerated data from post-occupancy digital monitoring.

10. Fund environmental upgrades to create a sustainable and healthy housing stock

The existing housing stock in England is one of the worst in Europe in terms of environmental performance, and government will need to fund an ambitious programme of improvement to meet 2050 net zero carbon obligations, starting with a new Decent Homes standard covering upgrades to the building fabric. The standard must also create healthier homes and address widespread problems of damp and 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Carry out an objective analysis of the environmental benefit, health impacts and financial payback of different levels of improvement.
- Adopt a passive 'fabric first' agenda such as window replacement, insulation and air-tightness. Avoid mass investment in mechanical installations.

- Invest in low carbon infrastructure technology including electric car charging.

Quality housing for the modern age

11. Put factory-based housing at the centre of industrial strategy

Off-site manufacture or Modern Methods of Construction has long been trailed, not least by the *Farmer Review of the UK Construction Labour Model: Modernise or Die* (2017), and there are many innovative systems and pilot projects to demonstrate improved quality, environmental and safety outcomes. Housing factories can reboot the wider economy, benefitting deprived areas and providing attractive careers for young people. However, roll-out has been disappointing, with traditional housebuilders resisting change. Government must lead the way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support research and development in the construction industry to improve housebuilding productivity, including wider adoption of factory-based housing.
- Invest in high-performance off-site manufacturers (for example through loan guarantees) and incentivise those who integrate factory-based housing with exemplary environmental standards.
- Link public investment in affordable housing with modern methods of construction.
- Establish procurement clubs for offsite manufacture to help aggregate supply, and establish an agency to monitor performance standards and reassure consumers, insurers and other stakeholders.

12. Use technology to empower consumers and learn from them

Post occupancy evaluation (POE) is an essential tool to learn from occupied buildings and their residents, and to compare actual and intended outcomes – technical, environmental and social. Lessons learned will improve future performance and consumer satisfaction.

By enabling consumers easily to compare the credentials of different homes (including energy performance, space standards and future maintenance costs), digital applications developed by the Proptech sector can help drive up quality and value in the market.

Digital engagement techniques, including social media, can broaden and widen community participation in local plan-making, design codes and regeneration programmes, including encouraging young people to get involved.

Digital tools and modelling can not only transform people's understanding of housing and regeneration proposals, they can also revolutionise consumer choice, effectively enabling people to customise their own homes from a kit-of-parts menu. This approach is especially, but not exclusively, suited to off-site construction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require post occupancy evaluation on all grant-funded projects (based on the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge model) and sponsor pilot projects among registered providers.
- Consult on a wider requirement for mandatory POE through the planning system.
- Sponsor pilot projects using home-performance labelling to inform and empower buyers and renters of new and existing homes. Test support with industry and consumers.
- Set out exemplary approaches to community engagement in large housing and regeneration projects, which combine digital with face-to-face techniques and include effective local ballots.
- Require an element of consumer choice through digital customisation among homes procured on public land. Scale this up in response to consumer demand.

Conclusion

Alongside new policy initiatives Government needs to engender a positive and optimistic view of the future, particularly for young people, who have been disadvantaged over a long period, whilst older generations have benefitted from property wealth and advantageous fiscal policies. Our younger generations need to see that good quality affordable homes for ownership and rent at a range of values are within their reach. In addition to policy changes there needs to be a 'soft revolution' through raising awareness and enthusiasm for change to: the affordability, availability and quality of our homes; how we address climate change and enhance our natural environment; how we embrace technological change, enabling consumer choice and providing housing for all.

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Further reading

Housing in the right place

- *Home Truths* – Ben Derbyshire
- *Altered Estates 1&2* – HTA, Levitt Bernstein, PRP and Pollard Thomas Edwards
- *New Civic Housebuilding* – Shelter
- *Building Greater London – An End to the Capital's Crisis of Affordability* – Ben Derbyshire for The London Society

Affordable housing

- *Reboot – Building a Housing Market* – Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Well designed places and homes

- *Places where people want to live* – RIBA
- *Distinctively Local* – HTA, Levitt Bernstein, PRP and Pollard Thomas Edwards
- *Transforming Suburbia: Supurbia and Semi-Permissive* – HTA and Pollard Thomas Edwards
- *One Hundred Years of Housing Space Standards* – Levitt Bernstein
- *Silver Linings* – RIBA
- *TAPPI Inquiry report: Technology for our Ageing Population* – Housing LIN

A sustainable and healthy future

- *Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap* - UKGBC
- *Building for 2050* – Aecom, Pollard Thomas Edwards Architects
- *Towards Net Zero – A Collaborative Approach to Increasing Social Value* - Levitt Bernstein, Pollard Thomas Edwards, HTA Design LLP, PRP Architects

Quality housing for the modern age

- *Home Truths* – Ben Derbyshire
- *Build Homes, Build Jobs, Build Innovation* Mike De'Ath & Mark Farmer
- *Altered Estates 1&2* – HTA, Levitt Bernstein, PRP and Pollard Thomas Edwards
- *Housing Communities – What People Want* – The Princes Foundation
- *Future Homes Commission* - RIBA

Delivering change

- *Better Procurement for Better Homes* – The Housing Forum
- *Construction Playbook* - Government Guidance on sourcing and contracting public works projects and programmes. Version 1.1. September 2022