

Royal Institute of British Architects

Response to the call for written evidence: Labour Party
National Policy Forum – a green and digital future
March 2023

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

1. How can improvements to transport deliver growth across the country, including in rural areas?

For too long, a lack of public transport infrastructure has held back economic growth and impacted on the quality of millions of people's lives up and down the country. Public transport is essential to support people to access critical amenities, from accessing healthcare to commuting to work. Inadequate infrastructure is damaging the economy – a 2017 estimate found that the annual cost of congestion on major roads was over £9 billion.ⁱ

We cannot consider the transport system in isolation. An integrated approach to decision-making is necessary to support the development of transport and social infrastructure alongside new developments. Research undertaken for the 2018 RIBA report 'Joining the Dots' showed that 70% of British adults are more likely to support new housing developments in their area if there is a clear plan to improve transport links.ⁱⁱ Investing in transport infrastructure is likely to have a positive impact on community opposition to development.

As the Labour Party recognises, the UK is the most regionally imbalanced economy in Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ Improving transport infrastructure has a key role in narrowing regional inequality. Our own evidence suggests that residents in Yorkshire and the North West are half as likely as residents in London to believe that their area receives a fair amount of transport funding and investment.^{iv}

Investment in reliable and sustainable transport infrastructure boosts employment opportunities – creating jobs in the transport and construction sectors. New jobs are created to build the infrastructure itself, complemented by longer-term opportunities as a result of new transport systems. It also improves the accessibility of the labour market to people who previously would have been unable to commute to areas where employment opportunities are typically concentrated. Cross-country links improve accessibility, but local links between places which have fallen victim to decades of disinvestment are particularly critical.

The RIBA recommends setting out a decision-making framework that would allow for stronger local involvement in national level projects. This in turn makes sure that would ensure that the benefits of investment are maximised.

There are also clear sustainability implications for the improvement of transport infrastructure. To avoid perpetuating low density zoned suburbia, sustainable development must be mixed use at a density close to existing public transport to support local amenities. Sustainable developments must be walkable to avoid the continued reliance of personal car use (this includes electric vehicles).

We welcome the Labour Party's focus on ensuring that the transition to net zero is equitable and considers the needs of people throughout the country. Investing in public transport infrastructure is vital to build a modern economy and a built environment which prioritises sustainable growth without leaving anyone behind.

2. What policies can help deliver Labour's existing pledges on green growth, particularly the Green Prosperity Plan?

Labour's plan to create good green jobs and launch an urgent mission for a net zero emission electricity system will help to make the UK a leader in clean energy.

The Labour Party is right to state that the green recovery must be jobs-rich, and we applaud the focus on 'good, low carbon jobs of the future'.⁹ There is a shortage of workers in the construction industry - if the UK is to effectively transition to a green economy, there will need to be a huge recruitment and upskilling programme.

We would strongly encourage the Labour Party to turbocharge green growth within the built environment. The UK's ageing housing stock must be addressed, and we must reduce energy usage and ensure that homes are resilient for the future. A National Retrofit Strategy based on substantial and sustained funding is required to meet the challenge – it must be a long-term policy and investment programme, which upgrades the energy efficiency of England's housing stock. It is positive news that the Labour Party have pledged a significant retrofit programme. The £6bn a year commitment to retrofit 19 million homes over a 10-year period would go a long way in helping to tackle the challenge, but long-term thinking is also required to recruit and upskill the workforce.

Energy efficiency improvements reduce household energy bills, resulting in a sustained boost to the economy and consumption through increased disposable incomes in the long term. Retrofitting homes also improves health outcomes and is integral to reaching net zero.

We believe that there are several additional areas that are critical to success in achieving the UK's net zero ambition, and with the right decisions, the UK can demonstrate global leadership and create a world-leading built environment sector. For example, we must start regulating the total amount of energy used by a building. RIBA suggests that operational energy becomes the key metric to measure this. Operational energy includes all the energy used by a buildings' occupants (such as kettles, computers and other plug-in items) as well as the energy by building systems (such as lighting and heating).

Operational energy is well known and understood within the sector as well as by building owners and occupiers. Using operational energy as the key metric would also allow for benchmarking and minimum standards to be easily established based on building type, driving further innovation within the built environment.

The carbon emissions from a building's operational energy use make up only a portion of the carbon emitted across its entire lifecycle. There are significant carbon emissions embodied in the materials used to produce, operate and maintain buildings. However, currently there is no requirement to calculate or limit the embodied carbon of a building. We must phase in requirements for the consistent assessment and reporting of whole life carbon and set targets for embodied carbon and these should be regulated.

3. What policies can help contribute to the four missions outlined in Labour's industrial strategy?

Labour's industrial strategy recognises that the country is facing huge challenges and uncertainty. The climate emergency is a complex challenge, which will require cross-party and international collaboration to tackle. The recognition that sustainability policies can help to boost the economy is positive.

Clearly, to achieve the green transformation required, more money will be vital – to support and incentivise the retrofit of millions of homes and to upskill workers in the built environment sector. Urgent thinking is also required as to how to make the most of the tax system, bringing in greener taxation strategies such as stamp duty and council tax.

Stamp Duty Land Tax should be tied to the energy efficiency of a property. This helps to provide an incentive for homebuyers and owners to invest. A sliding scale of stamp duty, where the most efficient homes pay much less tax than the least, could be capped at £25,000 to avoid large and potentially punitive increases on expensive homes.

We know that people are more likely to pursue energy efficiency improvements at certain trigger points or moments of change, for example when moving home. This is because they are already prepared for disruption at these times. Reforming stamp duty could incentivise a large proportion of home improvements each year. However, stamp duty is not a silver bullet – but it must be one element of a suite of measures with the strategy.

If the Labour Party led the way on driving innovation and investing in energy efficiency, many new jobs would be created. It would also help the UK to establish itself as a leader in tackling the climate emergency. Labour must find a way to use the momentum of recent years, including the UK's COP26 Presidency, to be bold and brave in response to the climate emergency. Without boosting investment, generating green jobs and improving the resilience of the UK's housing stock, we will fail to meet our net zero ambitions on time.

4. What are the specific implications of policy proposals in this area for (a) women, (b) Black, Asian and minority ethnic people; (c) LGBT+ people, (d) disabled people and (e) all those with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010?

By improving our public transport infrastructure, we can improve access to employment opportunities, particularly where there are not options for hybrid or remote working. Better and reliable public transport helps to widen access and is vitally important to disabled people and people living with long-term health conditions which have an impact on day-to-day life.

Policies to improve the built environment, particularly around retrofitting, and a transition to a green economy, will create huge number of jobs. It is important that there is a consideration of how

people can be upskilled and how the economic benefits that investing in the built environment will inevitably bring can be shared across the country.

Regional disinvestment has a huge impact on both access to employment, long-term economic disadvantage and financial insecurity. Both investment in transport infrastructure and a meaningful attempt to decentralise jobs from major cities will have a positive impact in terms of narrowing the regional inequality gap.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/18/traffic-jams-on-major-uk-roads-cost-economy-around-9bn>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/uk-transport-infrastructure-exacerbates-housing-crisis-says-riba>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://labour.org.uk/stronger-together/britain-2030/green-and-digital-future>

^{iv} <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/joining-the-dots>

^v <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GER-10.11docx.pdf>