

Royal Institute of British Architects

Response to the call for written evidence: Labour Party National Policy Forum – Supporting Families 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 the next Labour government ensure all young children enjoy a childhood that enables them to thrive?

Everyone deserves access to circumstances that will allow them to thrive throughout their life course. While the scope of this question is broad, it is clear that access to safe, suitable and secure housing is a key element. We welcome the public commitment of the Labour Party to increase access to ‘good quality, safe and truly affordable homes’ⁱ with an increase in community empowerment.

There is a wealth of research that indicates a clear link between safe, suitable and secure housing and future outcomes. Evidence suggests that young people who do not have access to secure housing are more likely to experience challenges including stress and anxiety, which can lead to more serious mental health outcomes in the long term. They are also more likely to experience poor outcomes within the education system.ⁱⁱ

The housing crisis is stark; and RIBA has been unwavering in urging the Government to act without delay to build high-quality, accessible housing to alleviate it. Poor quality housing is a significant barrier to levelling up and poses substantial problems for individuals and wider communities in terms of health outcomes, wellbeing, life chances and wider community cohesion.

We have identified three clear steps to address the crisis in terms of the quality and shortage of housing stock. We recommended to Government, and would be pleased to see the Labour Party support:

- Investment in building up the capacity of local authority planning departments, particularly with qualified design expertise. This would allow local authorities to build more high-quality housing at pace, with good design considered at the earliest possible stage.
- Removal of borrowing and spending restrictions on local authorities and providing grant funding for new social housing to help lower long term housing support costs. From a lack of

powers to raise or borrow money, to continued cuts in central funding, we cannot expect local government to rise to the housebuilding challenge with current restrictions.

- Implementation of a National Retrofit Strategy, with a clear focus on improving social housing stock. This strategy would improve energy efficiency, thus reducing household energy bills, and 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.

In addition to issues related purely to housing provision, provision of and access to green space is a particularly salient issue in the wake of the pandemic. For those who do not have access to private outdoor space the use of public green space is particularly vital for the maintenance of both mental and physical health. For young people especially, having access to green space to exercise and socialise has a wealth of benefits. This also has positive implications, particularly in urban settings, for mitigating the adverse environmental impacts of the climate emergency.

We would urge the Labour Party to prioritise access to green space, and the improvement of transport infrastructure which would allow more people of all ages to reach green space. In recent RIBA member roundtables, members expressed concern about the relationship between experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and access to open space. Members were clear that such access did not need to necessarily be walkable; but that transport infrastructure must be improved for more people, especially those in dense, urban areas and those in sprawling suburbs, to conveniently reach green space.

Improvements to walking and cycling infrastructure have a role to play in raising living standards for generations to come. One case study of an innovative scheme in this vein is the Bee Network scheme initiated by Transport for Greater Manchester, which aims to create an integrated transport system in which cycling and walking are given parity to public transport.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. How can Labour make home ownership a reality for more families, give private renters the security they need and tackle the scourge of homelessness? How can the next Labour government build more social and council housing and ensure greater investment in genuinely affordable homes?

The RIBA agrees that the issues raised in this question are of vital importance; and that ensuring that everyone is able to access a high-quality, affordable home regardless of tenure is critical. The scale of the UK's housing crisis is significant. Thousands of people are without permanent housing, millions are on social housing waiting lists and many are stuck in unsuitable and unsafe housing conditions. This cannot be allowed to continue.

There are several key priorities in terms of the multiple systemic issues in housing supply and quality. We must ensure that new development supports mixed communities and inclusive community engagement, and it is of huge importance that we improve the sustainability and energy efficiency of homes of all tenure types. The RIBA has previously established ten characteristics of well-designed and attractive places, which put quality at the centre.^{iv} This included promoting mixed communities through a variety of housing tenures, with development occurring in the right places; for example, near proposed or existing infrastructure and essential local services.

To effectively implement these changes, we must urgently address the resource gap in local

authority planning departments, with particular focus on the shortage of qualified design expertise. There are clear changes which can be made to the resourcing of the planning system. Local Authority net expenditure on planning has fallen significantly over the last decade. While the decline affects all regions, the biggest fall is in the North East. This has clear ramifications for ensuring that people across the country have access to genuinely affordable, high-quality homes.

One example of a change which can be made to better benefit communities and help resource the building of new homes is the proposed reform of Section 106 contributions. Under the current system of Section 106 contributions, developers can avoid contributing to local infrastructure, for instance via the utilisation of Permitted Development Rights (PDR). Replacing Section 106 contributions with an Infrastructure Levy, as outlined in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, is an important step to ensure that new development serves to meet the needs of existing communities. We would urge the Labour Party to support measures which serve to ensure that new developments meet the needs of communities who will live and work in and around them.

We must ensure that funding encourages the design of better places. This can only be achieved if there is a substantial net increase in investment across the board. We need to prioritise long-term value for communities, thinking not only of housing but amenities, building sustainability into every aspect of the design and planning process.

At the heart of building genuinely affordable, high-quality homes must also be a level of community engagement. The RIBA has repeatedly championed inclusivity within community engagement in planning and development.^v We are clear that inclusivity is a feature of good design, and that all tenants and residents should benefit from full and meaningful community engagement. This must include demographic groups often precluded from engagement in consultation, such as disabled people.

3. 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?

There are clear implications for protected characteristics in the establishment of a landscape where everyone is able to access a safe, suitable and secure home. For members of marginalised groups this is incredibly important. Knowing that you can access a safe, suitable and secure home is one of the protective characteristics which have a wide range of positive material impacts on people's lives.

With regards to accessibility, the RIBA is a member of the HoME Coalition, and we have long been working to ensure that housing meets the needs of both current and future generations.

This includes campaigning for raised accessibility standards for new homes, and we welcome the Government's recent decision to raise mandatory minimum accessibility standards for new homes. Instituting the standards stipulated in Part M4(2) will raise living standards for people occupying these homes throughout the life course.

While financial disadvantage is not a protected characteristic, it often intersects along lines of race, gender and disability status. Any programme to provide more social housing will therefore have positive ramifications in terms to equity.

ⁱ <https://labour.org.uk/stronger-together/britain-2030/families-first/>

ⁱⁱ https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/22.7%20HEALTH%20AND%20HOMELESSNESS_v08_WEB_0.PDF

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://beeactive.tfgm.com/bee-network-vision/>

^{iv} <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/1970-01/sri-riba-the-way-we-live-now-may-2012.pdf>

^v <https://riba-prd-assets.azureedge.net/-/media/Files/Policy/RIBA-responses-to-consultations-and-inquiries/MHCLG-NPPF-and-National-Model-Design-Code-consultation-proposals-March-21.pdf?la=en&hash=EA693D82BFD3CC4F61D4FCBDBE5E633E>