

RIBA Policy Note

Statement on Housing: Quality and Choice

The Royal Institute of British Architects champions better buildings, stronger communities and higher environmental standards through the practice of architecture and our 40,000 members. We provide the standards, training, support and recognition that put our members – in the UK and overseas – at the peak of their profession. With government and our partners, we work to improve the design quality of public buildings, new homes and new communities.

The vast majority of new housing in this country is not nearly as good as it could, and should, be. This is not the case with other industries or products. The design and performance of cars, televisions, phones, digital technology, kitchen appliances - almost everything else we can think of - continues to improve over time.

Like housing, these are competitive sectors. But whereas in these other fields, competition has driven innovation, increased choice and availability, and reduced cost, this cannot be said of the housing industry, large parts of which are culturally resistant to change. It is not only the occupants who suffer from poor quality housing; we all feel let down by it. The public is increasingly aware that most of today's new housing represents a missed opportunity.

A number of examples of outstanding new housing offer proof that we can do significantly better. Though varied in scale and style and often not expensive, they share certain characteristics. Individually, they work at a practical level, are attractive, desirable, flexible and efficient to run. Collectively, they offer choice and amenity, create places with a discernible identity rooted in the particular locality, and will improve over time. It is no coincidence that the vast majority, if not all, will have been designed with, or by, an architect.

We urge the government to recognise and promote the causal link between good designers and good design, to properly value both, and to understand that nowhere is this more important than in housing. This should begin at primary school and continue throughout the educational system; giving rise to a cultural expectation that architects will be involved in the design of all new buildings, working closely with residents and other stakeholders, wherever possible.

It is important to understand that the design process continues through to completion, and that the best results are usually achieved when the architect is retained from start to finish. This makes it much more likely that the original design intent will be carried through, saves time and simplifies responsibility and accountability.

Unfortunately, Design and Build contracts often fail to achieve these ends and the 'design architect' is often replaced by an 'executive architect', usually to save money. Value engineering (often a byword for cost-cutting) is commonplace and frequently involves the substitution of cheaper materials and components, and less attention to detail. A great deal of quality can be lost after planning permission has been granted. The client is often unaware of this until it is too late and planners are usually powerless by this stage.

A number of recent reports have highlighted the skills shortage, the need for better on-site practice and supervision, an increase in apprenticeships and much greater use of off-site manufacture. We strongly support these calls.

Since the 2007-8 recession, the government has focused on deregulation, removing barriers to make it easier to gain planning permission. While some of that has been helpful, much of it has not, and it is disappointing that many of the proposed reforms to the NPPF seem to be perpetuating this approach. Despite promises to build better housing, some of the newly announced measures threaten to further undermine the role of local authorities as custodians of quality and advocates of local democracy, and continue to legitimise a race to the bottom. The RIBA believes that this has had a damaging effect on general quality.

The small size and poor quality of many of the homes created through the conversion of offices to housing demonstrates the importance of a robust planning process and the consequences of undermining it. We are therefore dismayed that the government is now considering automatic permission for homeowners to build upward extensions; showing no understanding of the extent to which such ad hoc and uncontrolled additions could damage the integrity of streetscapes and residential environments, while doing little to solve the housing problem.

Some of the worst living conditions are found in the private rented sector, particularly in individual, private lets. Interest from institutional investors in large-scale, purpose built private rental developments is therefore welcome but for this to succeed, standards across the private rented sector must be effectively regulated and actively enforced. The most regressive examples of poor practice such as the 'Lockdown Model' must be prevented; tenants deserve decent, safe homes, and greater security of tenure.

RIBA recommendations:

- The social and financial value of good design is acknowledged and there is a widespread understanding, promoted by the government, that architects should be involved in the design of all buildings, including housing.
- Design of the built environment forms part of the primary school curriculum and continues to be taught throughout secondary education.
- Building Regulations and Approved Documents are rationalised to provide clearer, simpler and better requirements that raise the bar in areas such as fire safety, energy efficiency, soundproofing, space, air quality, ventilation, daylight and prevention of overheating.

- The Nationally Described Space Standard is incorporated into Building Regulations to provide a fair offer across the country, give developers the certainty they need and allow any additional cost to come out of land value.
- ‘Category 2’ (‘accessible and adaptable housing’), as defined by Part M of the Building Regulations, becomes the minimum standard for all new housing subject to specific exemptions where step-free access is not feasible. ‘Category 3’ (wheelchair user housing) is not subject to viability testing where need can be demonstrated.
- Homes England shows leadership by adopting these higher standards immediately, for all new housing that receives public financial support and the government commits to extending these standards to all new housing by 2021.
- The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is revised to reclaim the planning system as a creative force for good; placing the social value of well-designed places and buildings, achieved with and for people at its heart.
- Local and Combined Authorities are encouraged to make Design Review a mandatory requirement for developments above certain thresholds or in particular circumstances – preferably all developments of 20 homes or more.
- Design awareness training is provided for planners and local councillors.
- Local planning authorities are better trained and better resourced to carry out their role in safeguarding the quality of the built environment, and their duty to refuse applications on the grounds of poor design is supported, including at appeal.
- Housing is designed and built to be tenure blind and tenure neutral to ensure that no group is stigmatised, that tenure can change over time and that all homes are fit for purpose when fully occupied.
- Office to residential conversion through Permitted Development is ended and replaced with a ‘presumption in favour’, to ensure that proposals are scrutinised and subject to appropriate standards.
- New plans to grant automatic permission for homeowners to extend upwards are abandoned.
- As part of a comprehensive reappraisal of Planning Use Classes, Class C: ‘Dwelling Houses’, is revised to recognise changing living patterns, promote choice and diversity, and ensure that more, well-designed, specialised housing is provided for particular demographic groups and those with special needs, including people with dementia. This should include ‘re-ablement housing’, supporting those who are discharged from hospital or released from prison but lack sufficient support to return home immediately.
- Research is conducted on the impacts of ‘micro-homes’ and ‘shared living developments’ (currently treated as Sui Generis and therefore exempt from standards set through planning policy). If deemed beneficial, these forms of housing are formally recognised within Use Class C in order that they can be subject to safeguards and controlled in terms of location, numbers, size, quality, management, length of tenure and the rents charged.

- Design and Build contracts are reviewed and steps taken to address the risks and shortcomings of this form of procurement, including retention of the design architect throughout a project; at least in a 'design guardian' role.
- The potential benefit of a single point of sign-off (a completion certificate that requires the joint signatures of the planning authority officer and building control) is explored.
- Support for SMEs, custom build, community led housing and various forms of specialised housing development is stepped up, including measures to ensure that some smaller sites are allocated for specific types of housing and larger sites are parcelled up to increase customer choice and meet a range of housing need.
- Building Information Modelling (BIM), Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) and investment in training and apprenticeships is prioritised, and Homes England take a key role in facilitating this.
- The Decent Homes Standard is updated and improved and extended to privately rented housing.
- The Housing Act is updated to include a sensible definition of overcrowding (one that does not permit living spaces, kitchens or bathrooms to be used as bedrooms or require same-sex children and parents to share a bedroom), and to increase minimum bedroom sizes to align with the NDSS.
- Local councils are empowered and required to take legal action to prevent overcrowding; the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) Operating Guidance is similarly updated and tightened, and the 1994 CIHE 'Amenity Standards for Homes in Multiple Occupation' is replaced with a new standard, which includes minimum space standards for HMOs and bedsits.
- A comprehensive strategy to end all forms of homelessness is made a priority and considers the need for various forms of temporary accommodation with on-going support from multiple agencies to address the complex needs of many homeless people.