

RIBA Policy Note

Statement on Housing: Supply

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.

We welcome some of the government's recent initiatives to increase housing supply but, as we have noted, other measures (including aspects of liberalising the planning process) have already proven to be detrimental to housing quality and/or given rise to unintended consequences. The lifting of the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap provides an opportunity to change this – with the cap lifted, we hope that local authorities will rise to the challenge and work quickly to set out their plans for the next generation of public sector housing.

We urge the government to support local authorities in their endeavours to build new homes. This is not the only way to achieve more social housing but it is one of the best and most direct solutions, given the social responsibilities shouldered by local authorities. It seems entirely appropriate for councils who are able and willing to do so (in partnership with housing associations and/or private developers) to retain and develop public land.

Councils understand the social benefits of mixed communities and the need to generate a revenue stream. On all but the smallest sites, they will choose to build mixed tenure housing – albeit, we hope and expect, with a relatively high proportion of genuinely affordable housing made viable by the fact that they own the land. Where there is need, retirement and supported housing should be a fully integrated part of the mix too.

Local authorities should be given first option on surplus land owned by other public bodies, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health & Social Care. Where councils are not in a position to develop, even in partnership, transfer to Local Development Corporations and Community Land Trusts should be the preferred approach, depending on the scale and the intended land use.

Where other options are not appropriate and land is sold off, the local authority should retain an interest in the land and planning permission obtained first, in order to maximise the receipt while protecting quality. The current requirement to demonstrate 'best consideration' places undue emphasis on the financial offer because of the way in which it is evaluated. It should be redefined to place equal weight on long term social and environmental considerations, based on an understanding of the particular needs of the local community.

When other attempts to acquire strategic parcels of land that could significantly increase the development potential of a larger area have failed, councils should be encouraged to exercise their right to serve a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO). The price paid should be 'existing use value' plus a modest premium.

Residential development must be supported by appropriate transport and social infrastructure, particularly as there is a pressing need to optimise density; not just in towns and cities but also in suburban and rural areas. Too often, smaller communities are caught up in a vicious circle; left stranded by planning policies that resist new development on the grounds that there is no public transport, when new housing would, in fact, be the catalyst to make public transport viable.

The RIBA has published the report *Ten Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live* detailing how to increase housing supply while achieving high quality design in placemaking and build sustainable, lasting communities¹.

The continued emphasis on brownfield development is welcome but many sites will need expensive remediation. Larger sites will often need a range of new local services to ensure that incoming residents do not feel isolated or marginalised, and to encourage communities to develop and thrive. Most retail, commercial and community facilities need not be stand-alone buildings. Mixed-use buildings are an effective and responsible way to create vital services and new housing on a single site, and often create a more appropriate scale and a more vibrant environment.

However, the scale of the housing crisis is such that a qualitative review of the Green Belt is justified. Land use should always be periodically reassessed and it is evident that some parts of the Green Belt offer greater amenity, and are more accessible, than others. Some protected areas could be released for development with little or no adverse consequences while other land, not currently designated, may be worthy of inclusion.

No one should be prepared to sacrifice any Green Belt land lightly. Public concern about the quality of new housing development and the capacity of local services to support an increase in the population has understandably increased resistance. This strengthens the need to ensure that the quality of any new development will be exemplar, that important habitats will be protected, and that funding is made available for new transport and social infrastructure to provide tangible benefits to the existing community, as well as to new residents. It is imperative that local people support new development rather than oppose it, but that support has to be won, and the scheme that is developed must deliver on its promises; too often that is not what happens.

RIBA recommendations:

- Borrowing and revenue-raising restrictions on local authorities are lifted to allow them to build and refurbish more housing of all tenures, including social and supported housing.

¹ <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/ten-characteristics-of-places-where-people-want-to-live>

- A presumption in favour of retaining public land is introduced, and land owned by government departments is offered first to local authorities, Local Development Corporations or Community Land Trusts (CLTs) - in partnership with housing associations and developers where appropriate.
- Where selling off public land is deemed to be the best option, it is sold with the benefit of planning permission to allow local authorities to capture the planning uplift premium, and assure a high quality development. 'Best consideration' is redefined to take account of long-term social and environmental benefits to ensure that when public land is sold, the immediate capital gain is not the only, or the primary, consideration.
- Local authorities are encouraged to use their compulsory purchase powers (paying compensation at existing use value plus a modest premium) where appropriate and where negotiation has failed.
- The provision of new transport and social infrastructure, including schools and play space, is given greater priority and investment to allow higher density housing to be accepted by the local community, safe in the knowledge that the day to day needs of new residents will not place undue pressure on existing facilities. Mixed-use development is incentivised as part of this and planning permission is refused unless positive outcomes for existing residents can be demonstrated.
- The local community is actively involved with decision-making from the start. There must be meaningful engagement with the wider community as well as detailed consultation with those whose homes may be replaced, upgraded or otherwise directly affected by proposed development.
- Developers are required to submit anticipated build start dates as part of a planning application, to notify planners and Building Control when work begins and to supply a schedule of predicted dates for the release of homes for sale and rent. Local authorities are empowered to refuse permission where build-out rates are unacceptably low. The actual date of completion and actual release dates are also required to allow penalties to be imposed where targets are missed without legitimate cause.
- A comprehensive, qualitative review of the Green Belt is undertaken to allow for sensible rationalisation leading to the judicious release of under-used land for development, and/or the designation of new areas where this can be justified. New development on former Green Belt land is required to meet exemplary standards.