
Strong Foundations: Building Homes and Communities

**Response from the Royal Institute of British Architects
August 2009**

Introduction

The Royal Institute of British Architects has been promoting architecture and architects since being awarded Royal Charter in 1847. The 35,000 strong professional institute is committed to serving the public interest through good design. It also represents 86% of registered architects in the UK through its regional structure as well as a significant number of international members. Our mission statement is simple – to advance architecture by demonstrating benefit to society and promoting excellence in the profession.

Summary

The RIBA welcomes many of the proposals outlined within the Conservative Green Paper and its intent to put local people in control, but does have some concerns over the practical implementation and implications of aspects of the paper. In summary the RIBA:

- Is disappointed that issues of quality in housing design have not been addressed in the paper and would like to see design at the forefront of any future government's approach to housing delivery
- Believes that any future government should stimulate innovation and choice in the housing sector by setting challenging design standards. Minimum space standards for private sector housing should also be considered
- Calls for the planning system at a local authority level to be strengthened, better resourced and be able to draw upon a greater level of design expertise
- Welcomes the focus on local delivery of housing but is concerned that the abolition of the regional planning system will hinder the UK's spatial and strategic planning capacity
- Welcomes efforts to create a more positive, constructive planning system but believes that decisions over development control should be retained by local government
- Agrees with the principle of incentivising development, but would like to see the proposals outlined in this paper strengthened
- Believes the proposed Local Housing Trusts could herald a revolution in the delivery of housing in smaller communities, but would like to see them properly resourced, with access to design expertise
- Wants to see an expanded, professionalised and better quality private rented sector, by way of attracting institutional investment
- Welcomes the commitment to retro-fit existing housing stock but believes a more comprehensive and ambitious roll-out is essential if the UK is to meet its obligations on climate change

Housing Design

The RIBA approaches the Conservative Party Housing Green Paper primarily from a housing design perspective and although we welcome the paper in many respects, we

are disappointed that it does not specifically and comprehensively address issues of design quality.

The quality of housing is of critical importance. People who live in well-designed and attractive homes are more satisfied, healthier and more likely to feel pride in their area. Well-designed homes are not only aesthetically pleasing, but are flexible, highly energy efficient, suitably-spaced, accessible to all and capable of adapting to changing social and environmental needs. Well designed homes will last and hold their value longer, grow old gracefully, are cheaper to run in the short-term and more environmentally, socially and financially sustainable in the long-term.

The recent Housing Design Awards aptly demonstrated the value of good design standards. Exemplar projects such as the South Gate development in Totnes (the overall winner of the Awards) demonstrate that high quality, affordable housing can be delivered with public support and close partnership working between developers Local Authorities and local communities.

However, whilst there are many exemplar housing projects around the country, overall standards of new housing continue to be unsatisfactory. CABE's most recent national housing audit¹ underlined this trend, finding that only 18% of new developments could be classed as good or very good; whilst 29% were found to be of poor quality.

We need to change the way we approach housing design and cannot continue to make the mistakes of the past, in which, with a few notable exceptions, there has been a proliferation of badly planned, poorly designed, small and inappropriate housing in many communities across the country. Some of the major factors contributing to such low quality housing include:

- An overburdened planning system that often fails to properly consider issues of design quality
- A lack of consumer choice in new housing due to insufficient innovation amongst housebuilders
- A highly inefficient construction industry² in terms of resources, labour and time.

In the midst of the current recession and its associated impact on the construction industry, there is a huge opportunity to fundamentally change the way in which we deliver new housing in the UK and at the same time, significantly raise standards. Housebuilders are not delivering the homes that people want, nor the type of homes that are needed. We need homes that are energy efficient and capable of adapting to both the effects of climate change and demographic changes, in order to avoid homes becoming obsolete within the next generation or two.

The next government must challenge the construction sector to address these issues and must not tolerate the complacency of the past. The UK has the highest construction costs in Europe and the least efficient construction sector. The RIBA therefore recommends that the Conservative Party should:

¹ <http://www.cabe.org.uk/housing/audit>

² Bernard Williams Associates (BWA) **"Benchmarking of Construction Costs in the Member States"** commissioned by ECDG Enterprise and Industry Construction Unit. And Building costs in Sweden in an international perspective Lars Jagrén & Jessica Johansson - <http://www.snee.org/filer/papers/190.pdf>

- a) Stimulate innovation and choice by setting more challenging design standards
- b) Encourage different methods of procuring housing, including partnership between the private sector and Local Authorities, in order to drive improvements in design quality
- c) Encourage housebuilders to examine how costs can be cut in their supply chain
- d) Encourage new approaches to delivering housing, further incentivising off-site construction methods and high quality prefabricated housing. The construction industry needs to explore new ways of delivering this on a larger scale

Planning system

One of the major barriers to improving the design and quality of new developments is the planning system, which is poorly resourced and under-skilled. In most instances, planners do not have sufficient training to help them properly assess the quality of design in new developments. Local authorities can do much to ensure that both planners and Councillors make better informed judgements on issues of design quality and sustainability and drive up standards across the board.

The RIBA calls on Government and policy-makers to achieve this by encouraging local authorities to employ a number of measures, including:

- a) Establish local Design Review Panels to raise standards and support design through peer review
- b) Seek better advice on issues of design, both through the use of Procurement Support Agencies and Design Review Panel members
- c) Encourage new ways of working e.g. shared planning services across different councils, or by outsourcing planning application processing

Design Standards

Much new housing in the UK is built with little input from architects. Whilst we recognise that architect involvement *per se* is no guarantor of quality, involving good designers with a wide range of skills and considerations is a key component of creating well-designed, sustainable and successful communities.

Design standards are incorporated in a range of publicly funded housing requirements. The HCA are currently in the process of devising standards that ensure a minimum level of quality for developments that receive HCA funding. Similarly, the Mayor of London has published a comprehensive set of design standards.

The RIBA believes that government should provide guidance for Local Authorities which outline minimum standards of design. This would ensure that planning authorities have a basis from which to judge design quality, and challenge developers when it is considered that they have fallen short.

Integral to good housing design is the amount of space in homes. We need enough space to cook, eat, relax and socialise. There should be sufficient space for furniture and the storage of personal possessions. And they must be adaptable spaces for families to grow, children, older people and disabled residents.

Compared with other EU member states, the UK has both the smallest newly built dwellings and the smallest average room size³. The average size of a room in a newly built dwelling in France, for example, is 26.9 square metres and in the UK it is 15.8 square metres⁴.

In a recent CABE, English Partnerships and RIBA commissioned survey by Ipsos MORI, *Space in new homes: what resident's think*, some of the findings show:

- 47% do not have enough space for all furniture they have, or would like to have
- 50% do not have enough storage
- 72% said they do not have enough space for three small bins required to recycle properly

90% of those surveyed have a spare bedroom, which adds significant extra weight to the findings.

In the UK minimum space standards are required for social housing and for development on publicly owned land. The London Development Agency has recognised the importance of space, by proposing minimum standards. But there are no mandatory national minimum space standards for privately developments and no current guidelines outlining best practice.

The RIBA urges the Conservative Party to consider national proposals for minimum space standards for all housing development in the UK. We also recommend that Local Authorities, the majority of whom are Conservative controlled, should introduce or apply existing minimum space standards through their planning departments.

New Community Driven Housing

Regional Planning

The Regional Development Agencies currently play an important role in developing the strategic infrastructure needed to support new development and help increase economic growth. Many Local Authorities currently neither have the capacity nor the expertise to plan and deliver ambitious infrastructure projects and it is essential that this strategic spatial approach is not lost with the removal of the regional planning apparatus.

If Local Authorities are to be real leaders in development, they will need to work with a range of partners, including neighbouring Local Authorities, and take a strategic, holistic approach to planning policy. Whilst locally popular and supported schemes are to be striven for, Local Authorities will need to be prepared to push forward unpopular decisions for development based on an understanding of the greater long-term economic and social needs of the area.

We would urge the Conservative Party to retain some important functions of the current regional planning system. Regional Housing Boards (RHBs), for example, play a crucial role in ensuring that housing is properly integrated

³ *Unaffordable housing: fables and myths*, The Policy Exchange, 2005

⁴ *Ibid*

within spatial planning and transport policy and is responsive to the migrational and economic shifts which drive housing need.

The RIBA would also like to see the Conservative Party set out how the planning expertise that currently lies within RDAs (and formally the Regional Assembly) will be captured and how local authority planning departments will be properly resourced to drive forward high quality public spaces and housing development.

Locally-led Development

The RIBA welcomes the paper's focus on encouraging community empowerment. We agree that locally-led development with strong public involvement and support is far more likely to bring about successful developments that are beneficial in creating stronger communities. Greater community ownership of local development should encourage greater levels of trust and understanding between local communities, Local Authorities and developers, which in turn, should foster greater levels and higher quality development that better reflects local needs.

We welcome the Conservative Party's intention to establish a more localised framework for the delivery of new housing, which we believe will help ensure that new housing more accurately reflects local demand and is more closely aligned with local democratic decision-makers and local communities themselves.

Whilst we welcome the desire to introduce greater levels of public consultation, it will be important that these consultations do not turn into protracted exercises that lead to long delays in the development process. In order to avoid this and potential 'nimbyist' opposition to development, all Local Authorities will have to develop strong and coherent overarching local development plans (in consultation with the local population), so that any proposed developments are consistent with the overall development strategies of councils will be allowed through.

The RIBA believes that positive engagement with the planning system should be driven through greater engagement with and involvement of local communities in development planning, so that they can help shape an overall vision for their area. However, we believe that decisions on development control should remain with planning authorities.

Incentivising development

The RIBA fully supports the principle of incentivising high quality development and ensuring that local communities are able to understand the benefits rather than assuming or seeing drawbacks of development in their area.

However, whilst we welcome the proposed match-funded council tax incentive scheme, we are concerned that it is not a strong enough incentive. Whilst any additional funding would undoubtedly be gratefully received and made use of by Local Authorities, the additional cost of providing and maintaining public services for new residents would result in a relatively small net monetary benefit for Local Authorities. This incentive could be especially weak in more affluent communities, where residents are less reliant on public services and the burden of council tax is less acutely felt.

The RIBA would recommend that the Conservative Party look at ways in which community incentives can be strengthened and also how developers can be better incentivised to build.

Local Housing Trusts

Local Housing Trusts have the potential to bring about a revolution in the way new housing is developed in smaller communities. Taking this approach could mark a shift towards an enabling planning system, rather than one in which the scarce resources of planning departments are too often wasted on contentiously imposing development on local communities. All efforts must be made however, to ensure that Trusts are truly representative of and responsive to the views of local residents and that we avoid a situation where a small number of local residents have a disproportionate amount of influence over how the Trusts are run and ultimately, the development of new housing.

The RIBA is concerned by the proposed mandatory requirement for new development to be ‘in keeping’ with the area’s ‘existing architectural style’. This has the potential to suppress innovation and good design through rigid (and perhaps erroneous) interpretations of the local vernacular. Indeed, good design does not have to be in the local vernacular and many modern buildings compliment and sit very comfortably within the local setting and are welcomed by the community they inhabit.

The RIBA welcome the intention to provide some support for Local Housing Trusts, but would also stress the need for Trusts to be well resourced and to have ready access to appropriate design expertise. In order to ensure that design quality is taken seriously, the RIBA recommends that each Trust should employ a built environment professional with design training, such as having a Principal Architect post, and have a designated “Design Champion” and design lead from the sponsoring local authority.

Social housing: more supply, more mobility

The RIBA believes that all residents, regardless of status, should have access to a range of tenure all of high quality design.

Private rented housing

Whilst we recognise the right and aspiration of people to buy their own home, it is important that home-ownership is not promoted at all costs and consumers have choice of high quality, family sized and long-term secured rented accommodation.

It is imperative that capacity in the private rented sector is significantly increased. In light of the current economic crisis and its associated impact both on the mortgage market and housing market more broadly, it is clear that the next government needs to focus both on the supply of housing and the mix of tenure/choice that is available to larger groups of people. In order to increase volume, there is a clear need for larger, institutional private rented sector. This, we believe, will also help drive up quality, with long term investors such as pension funds, wanting to see properties standing the test of time and lettable and saleable in the long term.

There is a window of opportunity both to professionalise and expand the private rented sector. The next government should create an environment in which commercial investment companies and pension funds are encouraged to invest in homes for rent.

Energy Efficient Housing

The RIBA warmly welcomes the Green Paper's focus on retrofitting existing housing stock. There is an urgent need to address the energy performance of our existing homes and government has a vital role to play both in kick-starting a process of improvements and in helping create the mass market and infrastructure by which to deliver retrofitting on a large scale.

However, the proposed £6,500 grant for home energy efficiency improvement will fund only the most basic of improvements and would not cover a whole-house retrofit. We estimate that it would cost approximately £15,000 to retrofit whole-houses, which would provide reductions of at least 60% per household on average.

The task is huge. There are 26 million homes in the UK. 42 million tonnes of carbon are produced by houses in the UK every year which contributes 28% of total UK emissions. To retrofit every home to reach carbon targets for 2050 the UK will need to retrofit 11,000 homes per week every week for the next 40 years.

The RIBA recommends that the next government should pledge to complete the whole-house retrofitting of 4 million homes within the lifetime of the next parliament to ensure that the UK is on course to meet its 2050 emissions reductions targets.

We would also recommend that any future government adopts “feed-in tariffs”, to ensure that households are able to sell any excess energy they produce back to the grid. This would provide a greater incentive for households to adopt domestic energy production technologies. As with lower energy bills, would actively demonstrate the benefits of energy efficiency improvements in the home.

Social Housing

We question whether providing grants for individual households is the most effective and efficient use of resources. Taking a more holistic approach, where properties are upgraded neighbourhood by neighbourhood would be a more effective way to create the economies of scale needed to push down prices.

Some 25% of all housing is in some form of social ownership and it is hard to imagine an alternative to significant government spending on at least this portion of the stock. We propose that in conjunction with the Homes and Communities Agency and the RSL sector, the next government should make a start on the energy upgrade of all social housing to a 15 year time scale. A scheme on this scale would go a long way towards cutting domestic energy usage, whilst also helping to create the right market conditions, providing a catalyst for the upgrading both of owner-occupied and private rented housing.

RSLs could act as an effective driver across all tenures by offering upgrade packages available to local owner-occupiers at better rates than they could otherwise obtain. The offer would not only be attractive in terms of cost, but could also have quality and considerate construction assurances. Many owner-occupiers are rightly nervous about having building work done in their homes and where the result is largely hidden they have even fewer ways of checking quality.

VAT

An additional incentive to home owners to retrofit their own homes would be possible through reducing VAT to 5% on the refurbishment of homes. The EU in 2009 approved that for home maintenance and repair, member states could reduce VAT to 5%. We believe this would provide a huge economic boost to our economy. It also makes environmental sense by encouraging the sustainable reuse of our existing homes and making retro-fitting of housing more affordable and accessible.