

Housing and Regeneration Bill

House of Commons Second Reading – 27 November 2007

Briefing from the Royal Institute of British Architects

Introduction

The Royal Institute of British Architects is committed to improving the design quality of UK housing. High quality design adds value to homes and their surroundings. It can improve the lives of residents, achieve higher values for development sites, create better public spaces and add prestige for owners. However too much of the new housing stock built in the UK falls well short of where we need to be in terms of design and sustainability. CABE's most recent national housing audit found that only 18% of new developments could be classed as good or very good; 29% were found to be of poor quality.

It should be noted that much new housing in the UK is built with little input from architects. While 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.

Part 1 - Homes and Communities Agency

The RIBA welcomes the creation of the Homes and Communities Agency. For us the key element of the new organisation's remit is quality.

The HCA assumes the role of two predecessor bodies – the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships. In doing so, it is vital that the best of those organisations' legacies is preserved.

In April 2007 the Housing Corporation published *Design and Quality Standards* which sets out the core design quality standards that social housing providers must provide. In doing so, the Housing Corporation has helped to ensure that the public sector is taking a clear lead in delivering well-designed new homes.

A crucial element in the design of new homes is space. Space makes a difference to people's lives – space for privacy, space for children to study and space to keep homes cool and reduce overheating in the face of climate change. Yet England and Wales are the only countries in the EU which have no minimum space standards for housing. Anecdotal evidence has shown that the average size of new homes – particularly at the lower end of the market – has shrunk in recent life.

We believe that minimum space standards should be re-introduced for all new homes in England and Wales. While increasing space standards will have cost implications for developers, we believe these can be balanced by the development of more efficient methods of construction and the economies of scale offered by an expanding housebuilding programme. We were therefore delighted by the recent news that English Partnerships is to reintroduce minimum space standards for developments on its land.

We hope that the HCA will continue to build on its parent bodies' legacies in terms of design quality and space standards.

Part 3 - Sustainability standards

Since its introduction in 2006, the Code for Sustainable Homes has made a remarkable difference in encouraging sustainability and is a very significant step towards making all new homes zero-carbon by 2016.

Making the Code mandatory at the outset for publicly-funded new homes has meant that the public sector has pioneered sustainable design and is driving the emergence of new sustainable markets and technologies. Now the commercial sector must follow the public sector's lead. Proper implementation of the Code will be key to achieving that objective and, at present, the Government's proposals fall short. **We want to see mandatory sustainability assessments alongside mandatory sustainable ratings for all new homes.**

We are disappointed that assessments – not just ratings - will not be mandatory for new homes and believe that assessment leading to a rating should become compulsory as soon as practically possible. We are worried that the lower standards permitted under the Code for Sustainable Homes for homes in the private sector will lead to homes being built to the lowest common denominator, and that hundreds of thousands of new homebuyers by 2010 will be buying properties that do not even reach Code Level 1, far behind the standards being set by the public sector. If the public sector, which works at much tighter margins, must be assessed then we believe that the private sector should be subjected to the same requirements. Berkeley Homes has recently announced that all new homes will be built to Code Level 3 – a perfect example of how setting high standards in the public sector has encouraged the private sector to follow suit.

We cannot understand why the Government – which on one hand is driving forward extremely ambitious carbon reduction targets would, on the other, permit the commercial sector to mask its failure to match the public sector's efforts with purchased zero-rating certificates. Such an approach may be mandatory in respect of achieving a rating, but in every other respect it would be meaningless.

Ensuring design quality in new homes

Design is about much more than aesthetics. It is functional, sustainable and gives pleasure. It attracts people, investment and activity to places, and brings social, environmental and health benefits. It must therefore be one of the most important considerations in the delivery of new housing and should be entrenched within the planning system.

The biggest problems encountered by developers and architects alike arise out of a chronic lack of skills and resources within local planning authorities. That is why we support efforts by the Government to strengthen local planning departments and the design skills of both planning officials and elected councillors. This will, however, take some time to come to fruition. In the meantime developers and architects continue to find themselves at the sharp end of refusals on spurious design grounds while homebuyers also suffer as poorly-designed schemes are nodded through the planning process.

The recent Calcutt Review of Housebuilding Delivery has endorsed a recommendation by the RIBA that there should be a nationwide design review process for housebuilding. We want an assurance that the Government will take this recommendation forward.

Design review panels enable developers and their design teams to engage with a well-supported panel representing local planning authorities and other interests such as architects, landscape designers and conservationists. The benefits include raising the standard of design through informed criticism of proposals, and reports by design review panels can then be used by local planning authorities to better understand the design quality of submitted schemes. By bringing decision-makers into a forum of informed discussion, vital skills and understanding can be shared and communicated at a political level. And, most importantly, planners are then able to make decisions about the design merits of proposed development based on subjective advice from experts.

We are not proposing a brand new, untested system. In fact many design review panels already exist where RIBA members participate alongside others in many areas - for free and in their own time - with positive outcomes for their communities. The national roll-out for housebuilding design review would be a natural role for CABE, in partnership with the RIBA and other partners such as the Royal Town Planning Institute.