

Planning Bill

House of Commons Second Reading – 10 December 2007

Briefing from the Royal Institute of British Architects

Introduction

The Royal Institute of British Architects is committed to improving the design quality of the built environment. High quality design adds value to homes, businesses and their surroundings. It can improve the lives of residents, achieve higher values for development sites, create better public spaces and add prestige. However too much of new development built in the UK falls short of where we need to be in terms of design and sustainability. This is particular true in terms of housing: the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment'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.

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 and places.

As drafted, the Planning Bill concerns itself mainly with the “big things” such as power stations and airports through the creation of the Infrastructure Planning Commission. Proposals elsewhere by the Government to reform permitted development deal with the “little things” such as loft extensions. We are also concerned with the bits in the middle – where the impact of poor design is most keenly felt at the local level. **The RIBA believes the Planning Bill should be used as an opportunity to entrench design into the planning process in order to improve the quality of the built environment.**

Entrenching design quality in the planning system

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 development 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. If used well in the planning process, design review can speed up the process, give certainty to developers and avoid the mistakes of poor design.

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. In doing so, we call upon the Government to make local design review panels available to all local planning authorities for all types of new development.

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 objective advice from experts.

Our proposals build on the well-established and hugely-respected model offered at the national level by CABI, which has also undertaken valuable work to develop regional design review panels. Our proposals follow a logic that, using the CABI model, **local design review panels should be available at the local level where the vast majority of planning decisions are taken and where the impact of poor decisions is most immediately felt.**

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 local design review panels would be a natural role for CABI, in partnership with the RIBA and other partners such as the Royal Town Planning Institute.

We therefore propose:

- local design review panels should be made available to each local planning authority to advise planning officers and councillors on the design merits of development proposals
- local panels should include not only architects, but also other relevant professionals such as conservationists and engineers where appropriate
- there should be a presumption that any development proposal which passes assessment by a design review panel would not be subject to further objections on design grounds (schemes could of course be rejected on other grounds)
- design review should be a relevant consideration at appeal
- design review should be open and transparent, and panels should find ways in which they can engage with local communities and consider local people's views about proposed development
- design review panels should operate against robust, clear and consistent criteria. The development of design criteria would be a suitable role for CABI, working in partnership with other organisations such as the RIBA, Royal Town Planning Institute and the Local Government Association.