Good design can help us do much more to tackle the housing crisis.

Many of the tools to facilitate this are already in place but what we lack is an agenda for improving the design quality of new residential developments. Design standards are often too often seen as an impediment, whereas in fact, where applied correctly, they provide greater certainty for developers and support sustainable development.

This document follows our recently published report Design Matters: RIBA Award Winning Homes, which highlighted examples of large scale, high quality housing developments from recent years. The tools detailed in this document enable local authorities to demand higher standards of design for new housing in their area. We encourage everybody with an interest in protecting and enhancing the quality of the built environment to engage with their own local politicians to drive up design quality in their area.

Following the publication of the revised NPPF, the Minister of State for Housing and Planning stated that “permission should be refused for poor design”.

If this is to be more than a soundbite, planning authorities need the backing of Government so that they can rely on the fact that their decisions will be upheld during the appeal process.

The RIBA and its members are experts in delivering and protecting quality in the built environment.

For further information or for support in accessing the tools available to improve design standards through the planning process, you can either visit our website www.architecture.com or get in touch with us at public.affairs@riba.org or on 020 7307 3709.

“permission should be refused for poor design.”
Design Matters

Promoting Good Design through the Planning System

01 DESIGN CODES
A good Design Code can play a major role in driving up the standards of new developments. Design Codes can be incorporated into local and neighbourhood plans and provide specific, detailed guidance for the physical development of a site or area. They make it clear to potential developers and local residents the sorts of things which are expected from those looking to build in an area.

02 DESIGN REVIEW
Design Review Panels are made up of independent advisers with local expertise that offer impartial recommendations and advice.

03 DESIGN QUALITY PANELS
Design Quality Panels are used to review and critique outcomes at key stages in the design process.

04 PROPERLY RESOURCED PLANNING SYSTEM
There is no substitute for a properly resourced and empowered planning system.

05 PUBLIC SECTOR STANDARDS Raising
Focusing on effective long-term management of land over short-term financial gain delivers value over time and achieves wider social benefits.

06 SUBDIVISION OF LARGER SITES
Planning authorities should be able to mandate subdivision of masterplans to SMEs and custom builders.

07 ENCOURAGING THE USE OF EXPERTS
Good design comes from engaging the right professional teams as early in a project as possible.

08 ENSURING DELIVERY
Local authorities should ensure architects are retained until the completion of developments, so that quality does not diminish post-planning.

09 LOCAL HOUSING STANDARDS
Housing Design Guides have the potential to transform the quality of new housing.

10 MANDATORY DESIGN REVIEW
Planning departments should be able to mandate the use of Design Review for projects that meet agreed criteria.

11 RESTRICTING PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT
All office to residential conversion schemes should meet local housing standards.

12 MAYORAL CALL IN
Elected Mayors should be the final decision makers on planning applications, not the Secretary of State.

RIBA Policy Asks

04 PROPERLY RESOURCED PLANNING SYSTEM
Over the last decade, local authority planning departments have seen significant cuts. There are now fewer planning officers working on physical cases, and in-house expertise on issues like building conservation, environmental impact and heritage issues is increasingly scarce. To address this, there are urgent steps including the strengthening of planning fees and support for initiatives such as Public Practice which seek to encourage architects to work in planning departments. However, this can be no substitute for a properly resourced and empowered planning system.

05 PUBLIC SECTOR STANDARDS Raising
Throughout history, public sector clients have played a key role in raising design and innovation standards in the built environment. At the same time, many of the buildings procured by the public sector are purchased on the basis of how cheaply they can be built. With little or no concern for their impact on communities or how they can deliver quality and value over the long term. By focusing on effective long-term stewardship of land, including when entering into joint ventures, local authorities would ensure wider social benefits are captured through development. This includes collaborating locally and providing genuine opportunities for community input from the very early stages in the design process. Promoting the use of Post Occupancy Evaluation is also essential to determine the performance of development and whether it is delivering against its original targets.

06 SUBDIVISION OF LARGE SITES
The Lanner Review has made a strong case for the role that a lack of diversity of housing stock, tenure and appearance has played in silencing the role at which new homes are built. Planning authorities should be able to mandate subdivision of masterplans to SMEs and incorporate right to build for self and custom build. These proposals will require additional policy support to enable access to finance and skilled labour.

07 ENCOURAGING THE USE OF EXPERTS
Good design comes from engaging the right professional teams as early in the planning process as possible. Local authorities should encourage applicants to engage architects, planners, landscape architects, urban designers and others as early in a project as possible.

08 ENSURING QUALITY DELIVERY
The Natural Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) recognises the problem of development quality determining between permission and completion, which is often the result of the original architect not being retained after a development receives planning permission. Local authorities should consider restructuring planning permissions for major projects to ensure architects are retained until the completion of developments, ensuring that quality does not diminish following granting of permission.

09 LOCAL HOUSING STANDARDS
Housing Design Guides have played a major role in improving the quality of new housing in London and their adoption in other areas including Merthyr is a positive step. Where development agreements have been reached, Housing Design Guides should take precedence over national policy statements.

10 MANDATORY DESIGN REVIEW
Currently an optional process recognised in the NPPF, the RIBA believes that planning departments should be able to mandate the use of Design Review for projects which meet agreed criteria including size, height, density and impact on existing residents, employers or services.

11 RESTRICTING PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT
The lack of quality safeguards and oversight powers has led to an explosion in the number of low quality office to residential conversions. All offices to residential conversion schemes should be required to meet local housing standards. There is little evidence of any benefits of excluding permitted development from the planning process and the weight of evidence suggests that new homes delivered through permitted development fail to live up to the hopes of policy makers in terms of design, environmental performance and long-term affordability.

12 MAYORAL CALL IN
The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should consult on the potential for devolved authorities with an elected mayor to be able to appoint an independent panel to make the final decision on planning applications, not the Secretary of State.

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