

A new deal for social housing: how design makes the difference

Design Council's response to the Social Housing Green Paper

Recommendations to Government

The person-centred nature of the design process ensures residents and communities will be engaged throughout the planning, construction and management stages. In this way design is the golden thread that enables the provision of high quality, safe and decent social housing, and the creating of places that support health and wellbeing.

The government should work with Design Council, its official adviser on design, to promote good design in social housing by:

- Promoting a set of design principles for social housing;
- Expand the current system to deliver design reviews at the pre- and post-planning stages to ensure the consistent quality of design through the concept, technical and construction stages;
- Pilot a comprehensive and integrated design-led approach to the planning, construction and management of social housing in areas of high priority.

Introduction

1. The ambition of the Social Housing Green Paper is striking: an end to the stigma of social housing; ensuring that residents' voices are heard; building good quality, safe and decent social homes. The Green Paper recognises the contribution that the design of homes and their surrounding area can make to residents' quality of life and wellbeing. Design Council welcomes this acknowledgement. **However, we believe that if the government is to achieve its wider objectives it must mobilise the wide-ranging contribution that design and the design process makes to resident engagement and creating a sense of pride and community in high quality social housing. Action must also be taken to ensure that the design contribution continues beyond the receipt of planning permission through the construction process through to occupancy.**
2. The Green Paper sets out five principles that it says will underpin a new fairer deal for social housing residents. Design and the design process have a contribution to make to each of them:
 - ensuring that the design of new housing developments and estate regeneration delivers safe and decent homes with a sense of security;
 - using design thinking to improve and speed up the resolution of complaints;
 - using the person-centred focus of the design process to empower residents and ensure that their voice is heard;
 - using successful resident engagement in the design process to tackle stigma and celebrate thriving communities;
 - using the design process to build support for the construction of the social homes that we need.

3. This requires an understanding that design is not just about the physical design of buildings and places but recognises the significant impact (good or bad) design has on health and wellbeing; the importance of public engagement to good design and the contribution of design thinking to public service reform and industrial innovation.
4. It is important to see the design contribution as a golden thread that runs through the whole process from the initial planning and design elements, through to the construction period and the subsequent management of the housing stock. It is essential that design is at the heart of the construction and facilities management stages to ensure the delivery and maintenance of high quality homes and communities.
5. In this response we explain how design, and design thinking, will help to achieve the objectives of the green paper in relation to:
 - empowering residents and securing genuine resident engagement;
 - improving customer services, complaints systems and neighbourhood management;
 - promoting good design, tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities.
6. This response was informed by a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders and draws on the expertise of social housing providers, architects and planners. The roundtable included representatives from:
 - Town and Country Planning Association
 - Clarion Housing Group (the attendee was one of Design Council's Built Environment Experts)
 - Karakusevic Carson Architects (the attendee was one of Design Council's Built Environment Experts)
 - National Housing Federation

Section 1: What we mean by design

7. By design we are referring not only to the visual quality and layout of social housing, but also to the functionality and liveability of housing developments and their contribution to wider social, health and economic objectives. We are also referring to the design approach as a way of thinking about processes and services.
8. Design puts the needs of people at the centre of products, services and places. It unlocks solutions to complex problems and makes the connections between products, services and environments that affect our lives. It enables us to think about how services or developments are delivered, what impact they will have, what purpose they provide and how they may bring people together to find agreement and move forward. By connecting people and place, design provides a consistent way of thinking about social housing, finding new ways of responding to challenges that make a difference to people, and facilitating successful development by focussing on residents' need.
9. The Green Paper does not fully reflect this potential. Design is essentially confined to one section of chapter four. Too often design is seen as being narrowly focused on the appearance and layout of social housing. The Green Paper should promote design as a way of ensuring that social housing is decent and safe and in which residents have a renewed sense of pride.

Section 2: Empowering residents

10. The need to empower residents, to listen to residents' voices and to co-create solutions is a central theme of the Green Paper.
11. Design Council welcomes the government's call for "a more consistent picture across the country of genuine engagement with residents, to ensure that they have influence over their lives." We also welcome the recognition of the significant benefits of resident-led estate regeneration and the commitment to celebrating the role of residents in shaping fantastic places. The Green Paper also establishes a link between tenant engagement and the paramount importance, following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, of ensuring that social housing is safe. The fact is that residents have a bigger stake in the quality of social housing than anybody else.
12. The design process has a key role to play in supporting effective public engagement, and indeed public engagement is a central tenant of this process. Design Council's Community Led Design Programme¹, which was funded by the then Department for Communities and Local Government, explored ways in which community organisations, residents' groups and the wider community can influence or take a lead in the way housing is designed and delivered. There is a continuing need for a programme of this type which is no longer funded by central government. The active engagement of older people and other service users to effectively meet the needs of communities is at the core of our current work on the ageing society and public service reform.
13. Our research shows that where residents and landlords work together, new housing is more likely to meet the needs of community and create places that residents feel proud of. Best practice also shows that it is important to adopt an active and comprehensive approach to community engagement including action to hear marginalised voices as this leads to a greater range of ideas, richer information and more community buy-in during the design process and beyond.²
- 14. Social housing providers and landlords should learn from the evidence base and emerging good practice on the impact of engagement in the design process. Financial and regulatory levers should be used where possible to incentivise social housing providers and landlords to engage with residents and the local community.**
15. The Green Paper floats the idea of a programme of trailblazers to help develop and promote options for greater resident leadership within social housing. It also asks:
 - What more could be done to make landlords more aware of existing ways to engage with residents and influence how services are delivered?
 - How residents can be best supported in this important role of working with landlords to ensure homes are safe?
 - How the government could support or deliver a best neighbourhood competition to celebrate the role of residents in shaping fantastic places?
- 16. Based on our previous experience and knowledge in this area, Design Council is ready to work with government and scope trailblazer initiatives in two or three priority areas. These trailblazers would test and develop a comprehensive and integrated design-led approach to resident leadership and engagement in the design, construction and management of social housing.**

¹ Case studies and technical papers can be found online at: www.designcouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/social-innovation/community-led-design-development

² Design Council Briefing Paper: Design for Everyone [\[online\]](#)

Wornington Green

Wornington Green is an estate in North Kensington owned by Catalyst. Proposals to regenerate the estate initially prompted some very vocal opposition, but the scheme was supported by a strong residents steering group. Regular communications with residents built trust and proved key in alleviating resident concerns which were motivated by the fear that the community would be broken up and the area gentrified.

A full range of pre- and post-planning consultations allowed existing residents to inform the design of the new homes and be involved in the selection process for a construction partner. Catalyst funded a Community Investment Coordinator to lead on community consultation and day to day involvement. It also provided a very high level of support for existing residents using its housing management team and other specialist and local agencies such as Age UK. The scheme won the Mayor's Housing Design Award 2015. The end result is a genuinely tenure-blind scheme with homes re-provided for tenants next to very high value ones for market sale.

Section 3: Promoting good design

17. We are encouraged by the commitment in the Green Paper to giving “residents a stronger voice in the design, delivery and on-going management of social housing by helping to develop the skills for effective participation – particularly in leading or engaging with existing community-led housing developments”.
18. We also welcome the reference to strengthening planning guidance to take into account the principles of ‘Secured by Design’ and the need to encourage healthy and active communities, these aspirations reflect the approach we recommended in our response to the draft NPPF³.
19. Section 4.3 of the Green Paper (Promoting Good Design) makes a number of important references to:
 - the role of good design in tackling stigma and promoting wellbeing and happiness;
 - the need to embrace innovation to ensure quality and energy efficiency;
 - supporting healthy, independent living for an ageing population.
20. The Green Paper also raises issues around the rate of delivery of social housing, particularly the delivery of community-led housing.
21. The questions posed in the Green Paper on these issues relate to:
 - how planning guidance can support good design in the social sector;
 - how social housing residents can be involved in the planning and design of good developments;
 - how to remove the barriers that communities experience in developing new community-owned homes.
- 22. In essence our response to these sections of the report is that the government should:**
 - **develop and promote the value of applying design in its widest sense, to management, maintenance and construction as well as during the planning and design stages;**

³ Design Council (2018) Radical, lasting reform: unleashing the contribution of design to delivering more homes through sustainable development [\[online\]](#)

- **incentivise landlords and social housing providers to:**
 - **focus relentlessly on putting residents at the heart of social housing, providing regular input that is high quality and meaningful;**
 - **use engagement processes to build support for new developments including social and community owned housing;**
 - **use design thinking to give residents a voice during the construction stage and subsequently to ensure quality of build and supporting on-going community well-being.**
- **mobilise the contribution of the design thinking to, for example, accelerating the adoption of innovation by the construction industry.**

23. Design operates at a number of levels. It is concerned with the appearance of homes and developments within their contexts, with their layout and functionality. It is also concerned with liveability and the potential of social housing to enable older people to live independent lives, to encourage healthy lifestyles, to support economic growth and address issues of inclusion and community cohesion.

24. There is a growing body of evidence that shows how the design of buildings, streets, parks and neighbourhoods can support good physical and mental health, help reduce health inequalities and improve people's wellbeing. Our *Healthy Placemaking*⁴ research identified the barriers to the creation of healthy places including: a failure to use data and insight; consultation rather than engagement; the perceived cost of healthy interventions. Design must be at the heart of housing and planning if these barriers are to be overcome. The built environment can also contribute to a more equal, inclusive and cohesive society if the places where we live, the facilities we use, and our neighbourhoods and meeting places are designed to be accessible and inclusive.

25. The design process itself is important, providing an opportunity for the active engagement of residents, local people and a wider range of stakeholders. Our experience shows that new developments will secure public support if local people are actively involved in the design process. Social housing providers, landlords and local authorities must have a grounded understanding of local areas and what matters to local people. Successful community engagement enables people to shape new developments. Public engagement can both improve the quality of the development and build local support for it. It ensures that new developments respond directly to local circumstances and have ambition, legacy and a clear local context.

26. The quality of design is key to successful, sustainable social housing developments which can:

- support economic growth and social inclusion;
- enable healthy lifestyles and support the ageing society;
- help to create sustainable, vibrant places;
- have good access to social and physical infrastructure;
- mature rather than suffer from neglect and poor maintenance;
- house empowered resilient communities who have more control over their own destinies.

27. **One way of embedding this approach is to develop and promote a set of design principles for social housing.** The design principles would be based on universal ideas of good design. They would not be instructions on how to design new developments, nor would they provide a tick box check list against which proposals should be assessed. Rather they would prompt thinking about how to consistently deliver design quality and outcomes that

⁴ Design Council (2018) *Healthy Placemaking* [\[online\]](#)

support communities. The way in which the principles could be developed is important. It should involve key stakeholders, including social housing residents, developers, house builders, social housing providers and landlords. The design principles would build on the Homes England’s adoption of Building for Life 12 in its 2018/19-2022/23 Strategic Plan,⁵ applying design thinking along the golden thread, from the planning stage, to construction stage and beyond.

28. A growing number of national organisations are establishing design principles including, for example, the NHS, Highways England and Network Rail. Highways England’s principles and the NHS’s principles are set out in the boxes below as examples of what can be developed. In his introduction to the principles the Chief Highways Engineer states: “The design principles will help us place good design at the heart of everything we do and ensure that our roads better serve the people who use them and the environments through which they pass. And we will embed them for the future, ensuring a design-led approach becomes central to the requirements and advice contained in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges.”

- 10 principles of good road design**
1. makes roads safe and useful
 2. is inclusive
 3. makes roads understandable
 4. fits in context
 5. is restrained
 6. is environmentally sustainable
 7. is thorough
 8. is innovative
 9. is collaborative
 10. is long-lasting

- NHS design principles**
1. Design with compassion
 2. Design for the outcome
 3. Be inclusive
 4. Design for context
 5. Design for trust
 6. Test your assumptions
 7. Make, learn, iterate
 8. Do the hard work to make it simple
 9. Make things open. It makes things better

Section 4: Completing the golden thread

29. We are concerned that the quality of social housing is suffering because of a lack of attention to design considerations during the construction phase. We note the important reference in paragraph 130 of the NPPF requiring local planning authorities to make sure that the quality of approved developments does not materially diminish “between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted schemes.” And we welcome Secretary of State James Brokenshire’s comment at the launch of the NPPF that “critically progress must not be at the expense of quality or design. Houses must be right for communities. So, the planning reforms in the new framework should result in homes that are locally led, well-designed, and of a consistent and high quality standard.” This has recently been supported by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission which demonstrates Government’s commitment to this issue.

30. In her review of building regulations and fire safety following the Grenfell tragedy Dame Judith Hackett was highly critical of the construction industry. She concluded that the sector suffered from cultural factors which she said could best be described as “a race to the bottom” caused either through ignorance, indifference or because the system does not facilitate good practice. She concluded that there is insufficient focus on delivering the best quality building possible, in order to ensure that residents are safe and feel safe. The clear

⁵ Homes England (2018) Strategic Plan 2018/19 – 2022/23

message from our expert roundtable with social housing providers, architects and planners was that these factors are also driving a race to the bottom in terms of the quality of social housing developments generally.

31. We have identified three significant factors which are detrimentally affecting the quality of social housing during the construction phase. These are:
 - a tendency, for cost reasons, not to employ the architects and design teams responsible for designing the scheme during the construction phase;
 - the fact that clerks of works are not consistently employed on all construction projects;
 - the absence of tenant, resident or public engagement during construction, despite the fact that, as Dame Judith Hackett says, “the people who matter most in all of this are the residents of these buildings.”
32. We understand that these factors undermining the quality of social housing are particularly acute in schemes which are either funded through a requirement on developers to build affordable housing or result from the exercise of permitted development right to convert offices into residential accommodation.
33. In essence these problems arise from a tendency to cut the design golden thread (from planning through to occupancy) short, at the point at which a scheme receives planning permission. **We recommend that two ways of addressing these issues would be to:**
 - **introduce design reviews once a scheme has received permission and before construction starts.** This would provide an opportunity to ensure that arrangements are in place to achieve the design standards envisaged in the submitted plans and retain essential tenant, resident and public engagement.;
 - **use social value requirements during the procurement process to enable design to deliver outputs and outcomes for communities.**
34. Greater use of modern construction methods improves production efficiency, quality and costs and speeds up delivery of new homes. The UK has made great strides to modernise in recent years, but progress is still too slow. We must now take the opportunity to accelerate, taking advantage of our world leading design sector to realise the full potential that places across the country have to offer.
35. Design Council has a contribution to make to how new homes are constructed and financed as well as to how they are planned. We have a track record of using the design process to enable innovation in a variety of businesses and sectors.
36. The challenges in the construction industry to which this approach could be applied include:
 - developing ways of speeding up construction, while improving the quality of housing and contribution to place;
 - minimising the impact of the economics of development on the type and quality of development;
 - enabling a mix of tenures and affordability;
 - providing sustainable housing for ageing populations.

Conclusion

37. The Green Paper recognises the importance of design to social housing and in particular to residents' quality of life and wellbeing. If the government is to achieve its wider ambitions for the future of social housing it should see design as the golden thread which runs from the initial planning stages, through construction to the management and maintenance stage with resident and community engagement centre stage.
38. The Green Paper, coupled with recent announcements such as the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission, represents a unique opportunity to create well-designed social housing which will leave a legacy of inclusive neighbourhoods which allow everyone to participate equally, confidently and independently in everyday activities. Building communities where people want to live and work.
39. Design Council, as the government's adviser on design, is best placed to mobilise design's contribution to social housing through a series of activities including:
- a set of design principles for social housing;
 - the use of pre-construction design reviews;
 - piloting the application of the golden thread – a comprehensive and integrated design-led approach to delivering high quality social housing through the planning, construction and management phases.

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