

Lyons Housing Review

Response of the Landscape Institute, 28 February 2014

Background

The Landscape Institute is the royal chartered body for landscape architects. We are a professional organisation and educational charity working to protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for the public benefit. We work to improve the planning, design and management of urban and rural landscapes. Through our advocacy programmes and support to our 6,000 members we champion landscape, and the landscape architecture profession, in order to inspire great places where people want to live, work and visit.

The current housing shortage presents a complex challenge. Previous governments have attempted, and largely failed, to create the necessary conditions needed to increase the scale of house building required to meet demand. The location and development of new housing is always a contentious issue and with an estimated annual shortfall of around 230,000 new homes, it is understandable that housing supply is high up on the political agenda. The scale of housebuilding required to meet the current shortage will result in a significant degree of change to our landscape. This change is an opportunity to enhance our environment, not a threat which should be resisted.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute towards this review. We are however concerned that the questions posed in the *Call for Evidence* limit the opportunities to deal with the issue of housing quality; something we believe is a critical factor in achieving the increase in housing delivery that this country needs. Part one of our response deals with this directly and part two outlines our views on some of the questions of the Review.

Part 1: Increasing supply: an issue of quality?

“In the face of so enormous a problem, there is a temptation to cut standards, to reduce size, to eliminate planning and design - anything for speed - but this would be a crime for which we, our children and grandchildren would pay for 50 years to come; it is a crime we must not commit.”

Aneurin Bevan, Minister for Health and Housing, 1946-1951,
Homes for the People (1946)

Housing quantity cannot be divorced from housing quality. It is unfortunate that the questions posed in the *Call for Evidence* do not provide for an exploration of this important issue. However it is an issue of such importance that to ignore it would be a mistake.

The UK features many low-quality, poorly-designed, housing estates which are out of keeping with the character of their local landscape. This is a significant barrier in increasing the supply of housing needed because existing local communities often expect that new housing will be of poor quality and will have negative consequences for their local environment. This can lead to objections causing

delays in the planning process or result in housing developments failing to receive planning permission.

This view is supported by research from the Local Government Association. Its *New Housing Developments Survey (2010)*¹ is designed to enable a better understanding of attitudes to new housing development at the local level, and identify potential barriers to housing delivery. It found that 61 per cent of local councillors considered public opposition to be a significant barrier to housing development. When asked what would make housing development more acceptable to local communities, the following responses were given:

- Ensuring housing came with improved local services and facilities (including green space) – 82 per cent;
- Involving local communities in early discussions about design – 56 per cent;
- Ensuring a commitment to excellent design – 65 per cent

It is clear from this research that improved design, provision of green space and involvement of local communities are key to overcoming local opposition to new housing. All three of these factors can be tackled by a 'landscape-led' approach to housing development. By this we mean an approach to the planning and design of development that considers and responds to landscape character. Put simply, landscape character is what makes an area unique. It is defined by Natural England as "*...a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements, be it natural (soil, landform) and/or human (for example settlement and development) in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse*"².

Landscape is the context in which development happens. It provides the 'glue' that holds places together. By working with landscape from the very outset of development, it is possible to achieve distinctive local character in housing developments and a public realm where communities can interact and thrive. At present, landscape is often an afterthought in the house building process and we believe that in order to improve quality, and at the same time increase support for new housing, it needs to take centre stage.

New housing must also be sustainable if quality is to be maintained. We, along with others such as Natural England and Defra, have been championing the concept of green infrastructure (GI) for the past five years as an effective way of planning, designing and managing change in the landscape in order to make the best use of land. GI is the network of natural and semi-natural features, green spaces, rivers and lakes that intersperse and connect villages, towns and cities³. Individually, these elements are GI assets, and the roles that these assets play are GI functions. When appropriately planned, designed and managed, the assets and functions have the potential to deliver a wide range of benefits, through ecosystem services – from reducing flood risk, adapting to climate change, regulating air temperature, improving biodiversity, providing space for recreation, and encouraging sustainable transport.

¹ Local Government Association (2010) *New Housing Developments Survey*, Local Government Group, London.

² <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/landscape/englands/character/>

³ Landscape Institute (2013) *Green infrastructure: An integrated approach to land use*, Landscape Institute, London.

We have been encouraged by the increasing recognition of GI in government policy in recent years. The *Natural Environment White Paper (2011)* was significant in that it introduced support for the concept. However this recognition has yet to extend to full integration of GI into our everyday environments, such as housing developments. This is evident in the recent draft National Planning Practice Guidance which is designed to support delivery of the National Planning Policy Framework. Insufficient attention is given to the importance of properly integrating GI into our towns and cities. Future Government policy must correct this in order to improve the quality of housing development.

Part 2: Response to specific questions in the *Call for Evidence*

(a) The land market – unlocking land for housing development

How do we get much more residential land to market and what are the best mechanisms to achieve this?

A key constraint to housing development is public opposition. To a significant extent this has roots in issues of poor quality design. A 'landscape-led' approach to housing development would help significantly in addressing the issue of public opposition.

Building for Life 12 (BfL12) has the potential to achieve a real change in the quality of new housing developments. BfL12, published by Design Council CABE, Design for Homes and the Home Builders Federation, is a traffic-light system which assesses the quality of development. The system asks 12 questions of development proposals. 11 of these 12 have are reliant upon landscape planning and design. We believe that greater use of BfL12 by local authorities during pre-application discussions could play a considerable role in improving design, thereby reducing opposition to new development. It would also have the added benefit of tackling poor design issues that may arise at a later stage and which can result in greater costs and delays to delivery of housing.

Another practical step is to encourage greater use of Design Review to assess schemes. While this is urged in the current National Planning Policy Framework it is unclear to us how far local authorities are using Design Review, or indeed if they have the resources to do so.

Given the consensus that our current development industry is not capable of delivering the homes we need, how can we bring about greater capacity, competition and diversity to ensure it delivers the homes our country badly needs?

In the interests of securing sustainability, housing should not be seen in isolation from other land uses. We need to move away from the segregation of living and working and more emphasis needs to be given to quality of place within which live/work units are encouraged, to reduce the need to travel. As mentioned elsewhere we recommend that multi-functional green infrastructure must become central to all infrastructure provision associated with any development.

Future housing policy must be seen in the context of the need for sustainable approaches to land use in this country. The emphasis on resilience has never been more sharply in focus, given recent flooding events across large parts of England. Add to this the growing realisation that the

demographic pattern of the population has been inadequately catered for by previous development policy the urgent need for a new approach becomes obvious.

(b) Investment in housing and associated infrastructure

No response to any of the questions in this section.

(c) The role of a new generation of New Towns and Garden Cities

What contribution can a new generation of New Towns and Garden Cities make to a step-change in house building?

New Towns and Garden Cities can certainly contribute towards increasing the supply of homes. However they are by no means a silver bullet and lessons need to be learnt from the previous Labour Government's approach to ecotowns. We need to understand why proposals for ecotowns failed to deliver against original aspirations.

Clearly the infrastructure required of any proposed new settlements has to be balanced against the benefits of extending existing settlements. However the lessons that have been learnt from the Garden City movement are relevant today. The Town and Country Planning Association have set out the following principles of a Garden City:

- strong vision, leadership and community engagement;
- land value capture for the benefit of the community;
- community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets;
- mixed-tenure homes and housing types that are affordable for ordinary people;
- a strong local jobs offer in the Garden City itself, with a variety of employment opportunities within easy commuting distance of homes;
- beautifully and imaginatively designed homes with gardens, combining the very best of town and country living to create healthy homes in vibrant communities;
- generous green space linked to the wider natural environment, including a surrounding belt of countryside to prevent sprawl, well connected and biodiversity rich public parks, and a mix of public and private networks of well managed, high-quality gardens, tree-lined streets and open spaces;
- opportunities for residents to grow their own food, including generous allotments;
- strong local cultural, recreational and shopping facilities in walkable neighbourhoods; and
- integrated and accessible transport systems – with a series of settlements linked by rapid transport providing a full range of employment opportunities

It is clear that these principles provide valuable insights into the way that we might approach housing at a range of scales and settings, not just in relation to Garden Cities.

What are the barriers to, and solution to ensure, their effective delivery in terms of...infrastructure?

Critical in ensuring that New Towns and Garden Cities are successful will be the early provision of green infrastructure (GI) around which future development can take place. Advance investment in GI, informed by the local landscape character, will enable multifunctional land use and ensure that these settlements make space for water, biodiversity, food growing, climate change adaptation and energy provision in addition to housing.

(d) A new 'right to grow'

How can we ensure that local authorities that want to expand, but do not have the land on which to grant planning permission without cooperation from a neighbour, are able to do so?

It is important that the Duty to Cooperate is strengthened. There are not only examples of lack of cooperation between local authorities, but also between different wards within a local authority area where additional precepts from large edge-of-town housing developments go to the parishes and not to the town. Creative partnership funding arrangements can be the way forward for this and potentially for adjacent local authorities.

(e) Share the benefits of development with local communities

How can we ensure that a larger share of the windfall gains from planning permission goes to local communities?

There need to be more mechanisms by which local communities are encouraged to draw up their aspirations for their areas. For many communities a neighbourhood plan is both time-consuming and expensive and may not even make it past the referendum stage. Therefore, village plans, parish plans or statements need to have the same status in what is negotiated or asked for in relation to planning permissions for housing.

It is essential that local planning authorities draw up local plans to include green infrastructure and open space policies and objectives that also include projects to which windfall gains can be directed.

Closing remarks

We believe that a 'landscape-led' approach to future housing development is critical in increasing the supply of housing because of its role in helping make development more acceptable to local communities. This approach also has the potential to deliver a wide range of benefits to developers, the environment and wider society. We note that a programme of meetings and roundtable will be held in the coming months and would be delighted to discuss our thinking on this in greater detail with members of the Expert Panel.