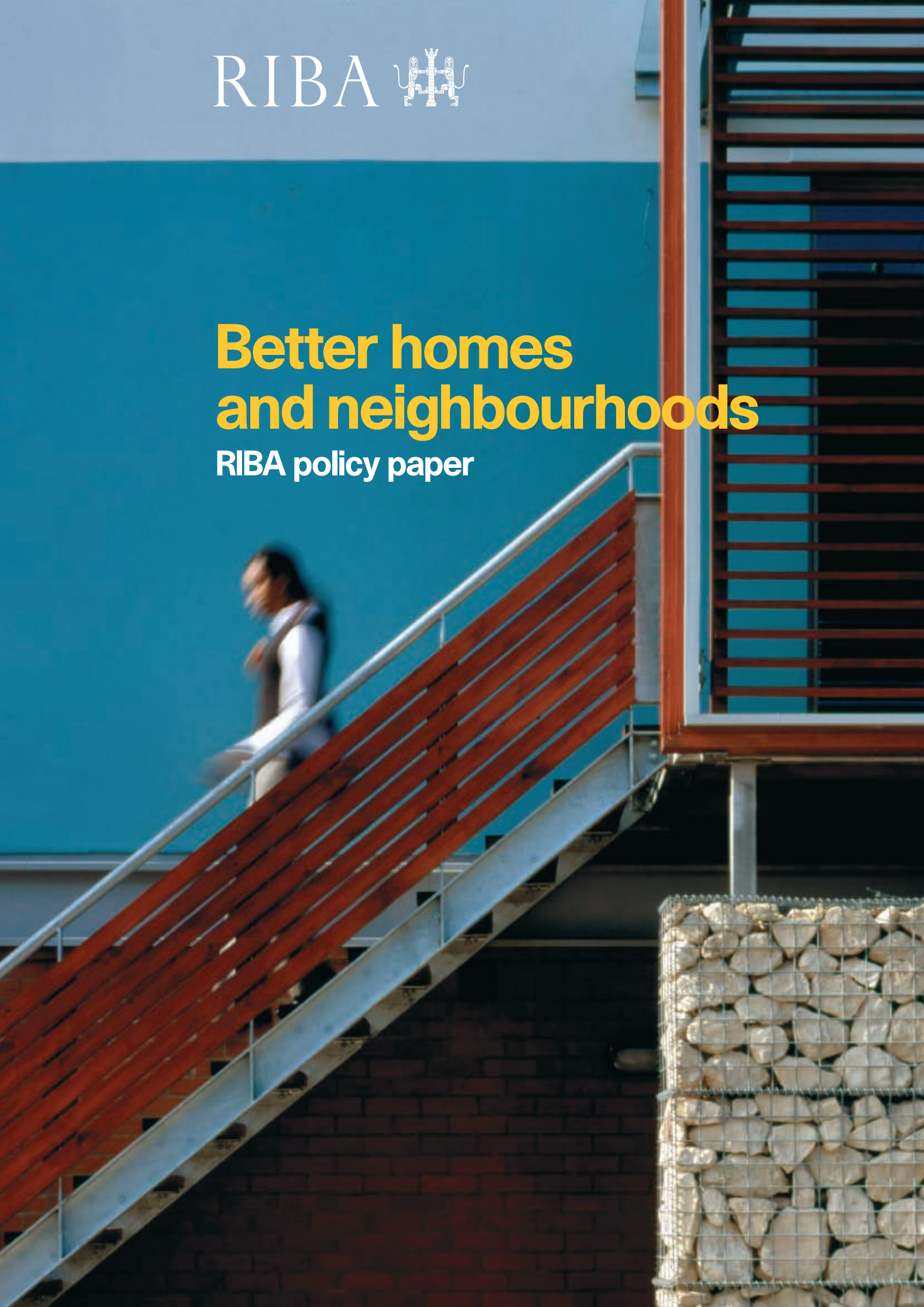


Better homes and neighbourhoods

RIBA policy paper



Summary and recommendations

In many parts of the UK today people are facing a serious shortage of decent affordable housing. The reasons for this are complex, involving distortions in land supply, the workings of housing finance and high rates of household formation. Whatever the reasons, many more houses are needed, and we can either repeat the mistakes of the 1960s when quantity was pursued at the expense of quality or we can create decent homes and neighbourhoods, which also help us combat the simultaneous challenge posed by climate change.

The RIBA 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.

Design solutions and the application of improved materials and technologies must be at the vanguard of our efforts to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to our changing climate. Fortunately, well-designed homes also cost less to heat, light and maintain. Well-designed, sustainable housing will last longer, be more flexible in use, improve accessibility, safety and security, and grow old more gracefully.

The RIBA believes that too much of the new housing stock built in the UK falls well short of the standards we should expect, in terms of both design and sustainability. We welcome the Government's commitment to high quality design and its efforts, alongside the ongoing work of CABI, to improve the quality of new housing stock. But it is important to recognise that, whilst architect involvement *per se* is not necessarily a guarantee of design quality, involving good designers with a wide range of expertise is a key component of creating well-designed, sustainable and successful communities.

This policy sets out what we believe to be the main barriers to achieving this, and sets out clear and achievable recommendations. Key amongst these are:

- We strongly support the use of local and regional design review panels where developers and design teams can engage positively with critical expertise through local planning authorities. In order to promote good design, we believe that all locally significant housing developments should automatically be submitted to such a design review panel.
- The average home built today is significantly smaller than the equivalent built in 1920. While that is partly explained by smaller household sizes, England and Wales are the only countries in the EU which have no minimum space standards for housing. We believe that minimum space standards should be introduced for all new homes in England and Wales, and that homes, both new and for resale, should be marketed with the square metre area of the property clearly displayed.
- Given projected household growth figures we do not think that the Government's target of 200,000 new home completions per year by 2016 will be enough. However while 250,000 or more completions may be needed, this should not be achieved at the expense of design quality.
- Homes must be designed to be adaptable to changing social and environmental needs. The challenge for architects is to support housing providers in finding new replicable solutions – the modern equivalent of Victorian or Georgian housing – while recognising that modern lives and cultural and social diversity means we need homes that respond to this complexity.

- Successful communities need a balanced mix of housing type. Density levels must be set at a fine grain and guided by a spatial strategy (and, where appropriate, a spatial masterplan). The current measure of dwellings per hectare is too simplistic and we call for density to be measured using a ratio of floor space to site area.
- We strongly support the introduction of the Code for Sustainable Homes and commit to helping refine it to become the industry standard measure of the environmental performance of housing. But we also want to see equivalent standards applicable to other building types, sooner rather than later.
- We urge Government to bring forward measures to improve to a reasonable maximum the energy efficiency of the existing residential stock within a declared time frame. We suggest a target date of 2020.
- The quality of the public realm is as important as the quality of the houses that make up a community. Government, developers, architects, planners and their building industry colleagues must explicitly encourage the provision of well-designed and well-maintained public spaces as an intrinsic part of creating decent homes.
- We believe that while the Government should continue with its focus on encouraging brownfield development, some flexibility on greenbelt development will be needed. A careful balance between housing demand and the protection and enhancement of valued open spaces is required.
- We believe that affordable and social housing provision should be well-integrated and of the same design quality and building standards as private housing on the same site.



'For too long many architects have been disenfranchised from the housebuilding industry. That cannot continue. We're back in the game and ready to do our bit to deliver great homes and places.'

Jack Pringle
RIBA President 2005–2007

The value of good design

High quality design adds value to homes and their surroundings. It can achieve higher values for development sites, provides greater occupier satisfaction, an improved public realm and prestige for owners. Well-designed, sustainable housing will last longer, be more flexible in use, cost less to heat, light and maintain, increase safety and security and grow old gracefully. Good design contributes to a sense of wellbeing – statistics have shown that over £2 billion per year is spent treating illness arising from poor housing stock – more than is spent by local authorities on the building stock itself.

The provision of decent and affordable housing for all is a fundamental indicator of a civilised society. 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. 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; 53% were average and 29% were found to be of poor quality. This is extremely disappointing, and we believe that local authorities and Planning Inspectors must not tolerate poor design.

It should be noted that much new housing in the UK and in particular greenfield housing is built with little input from architects. We welcome the Government's commitment to high quality design and its efforts, alongside the ongoing work of CABE, to improve the quality of new housing stock. But it is important to recognise that while architect involvement *per se* is not necessarily a guarantee of design quality, involving good designers with a wide range of skills and considerations is a key component of creating well-designed, sustainable, and successful communities.

The domestic environment is appreciated most in the successful delivery of 'detail' whether in the architecture of the home or the design of public realm and new neighbourhood spaces. The current trend to curtail design input after planning approvals are obtained encourages a 'dumbing down' of the built environment. To maintain and improve residential quality, attention must be given to continuity of qualified design input at all stages of the building procurement.

Designers and clients alike often face capricious planning decisions. Housing design must be dealt with in a more professional, rational and consistent manner within the planning system. We want to see a planning system where planners are not only well-resourced and well-trained in design matters, but are also encouraged to seek expert advice from local and regional design review panels where developers and design teams can engage positively with local planning authorities. Many such panels already function on an informal basis – facilitated by the RIBA and CABE – and should be rolled out nationwide. The RIBA through its regional network is ready to help with this.

In order to promote good design, we think that all locally significant housing developments should be submitted automatically to a local design review panel, and pre-application presentations to such panels should be facilitated.

The Government's Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) on housing encourages local planning authorities to demand high standards of design for new homes and includes the CABE Building for Life criteria, which are an important benchmark for well-designed housing and neighbourhoods. We want to demolish the myth that design is solely subjective. The Building for Life criteria, for example, provide an objective means of judging the design quality of homes and neighbourhoods and should be more widely used. More should also be done to encourage the provision of a high quality public realm and vibrant, well-designed streetscapes.

Housing need and supply

Alongside strong economic growth, a rising population and decreasing household sizes, decades of low output of new build housing in the UK has created a shortfall. The effect on supply of planning constraints and the commensurate housing shortage has led to a widening social and economic divide between those who are able to buy their own homes and those who cannot, as average prices have risen by 204% in the last decade.

Land with planning permission should be brought forward quickly for development, with fiscal disincentives to discourage land-banking. The challenge is highlighted by noting that between 1997 and 2003, the amount of land brought forward for development actually fell by 7%.

We believe that while the Government should continue with its focus on encouraging brownfield development, some flexibility on greenbelt development will be needed. Housing provision and the protection and enhancement of valued open spaces need to be seen as mutually supportive.

The Government's stated target is to achieve 200,000 completions of new homes per year by 2016. However, given that the Government's own figures show that household formation in England alone is projected at an annual rate of 223,000 from 2004 to 2026, we think that an increased rate of housebuilding – perhaps of more than 250,000 homes per year – may well be necessary.

More completions are certainly needed – but not at the expense of compromising design quality. As Kate Barker's report into land use planning made clear, a presumption in favour of development should be encouraged, alongside a recognition that poor planning decisions – which must include design considerations – have social and environmental costs.



Sustainable communities – not just sustainable housing

70% of the buildings in the UK are houses. Because housing creates the fabric of cities and forms the boundaries of public space, homes must be designed in a wider social context. A sustainable community is one with a wide mix of uses including homes, workplaces, commercial and leisure facilities, together with attractive and safe public spaces.

We strongly support the Lifetime Homes standards, and encourage architects to think about the long term adaptability of the homes they design. Whilst 'default' volume housebuilder housing has tended to be seen by architects as unacceptable for various reasons, now that such solutions can be shown to be unsustainable in a number of different ways, it is quite possible that the default product will be rejected more and more by the public. The example of Georgian and much Victorian terraced housing provides a model of a building fabric that can be adapted over time as residents' needs change. The challenge for architects is to support housing providers in finding new solutions of general application – as adaptable and popular as Victorian or Georgian housing but designed to far higher performance standards while being responsive to the complexities of modern lives and of cultural and social diversity.

Designers must be encouraged to create homes that are sufficiently adaptable to enable home working as it benefits communities by keeping neighbourhoods active during the day, reducing travel demands and sustaining economic activity within neighbourhoods by extending employment opportunities to vulnerable groups.

It must be recognised that streets and spaces are as important as buildings. Government, developers, architects and their building industry colleagues must explicitly encourage the provision of a well-designed public realm. The right mix of buildings, green spaces and streetscape and the good design of traffic and car parking is crucial to the quality of residential environments. Research has shown that the good design of public spaces – in conjunction with high quality architectural design – can help boost civic pride. However design is not enough by itself – the public realm also needs to be maintained and managed well.

Combating climate change through housing design

Domestic energy use is a major contributor to CO₂ emissions. Dramatically improving energy efficiency and increasing the use of carbon neutral energy sources in both new and existing homes is the sector's greatest challenge. Those responsible for the creation of sustainable communities must rise to this challenge. We support the introduction of the Code for Sustainable Homes as a good start by the Government towards establishing a comprehensive and readily understood

system for measuring and improving the environmental performance of all buildings.

We support the objective of ensuring that by 2016 all new homes will be built to zero-carbon standards. However the UK's existing housing stock, which is being replaced only very slowly at a rate approaching 1% per year, will continue to make up the majority of our homes. As much as half of the existing housing stock will still be with us in 2050. Therefore we believe that a comprehensive and targeted programme to improve the energy efficiency of all existing stock to a sensible maximum by 2020 must be brought forward. This could be done both through government intervention and by encouraging owners and occupiers to take action, through a balanced package of incentives and regulation.

Planning and urban design are not only as important as the design of homes in achieving carbon reduction but also have a major role to play in adaptation to climate change. The RIBA welcomes the updated PPS25 on Flood Risk and the PPS1 supplement on climate change, but believes that further study is required to fully anticipate the impacts of warming and prepare the planning system to respond.

Density, spacing and layout

Higher density levels in suitable areas can prevent unnecessary sprawl and create attractive, vibrant communities. Low-densities in existing urban and suburban areas represent an opportunity to build more homes, workplaces and facilities in locations where infrastructure such as public transport already exists. Suburban areas need to be re-imagined and revitalised as sustainable communities without destroying the conditions that make them attractive to so many people.

Density levels must, however, be carefully tailored to localities and developers must not place pressure on designers and constructors to maximise density irrespective of site conditions or constraints. Such pressure in the past has led to a predominance of small units, creating 'ghettos' of 1-2 bedroom units on inner city sites, to the extent that almost half of new homes in the UK are flats or maisonettes, with too many lying empty as mere investment assets. According to the Home Builders Federation, new density requirements and the industry's response to affordability concerns have resulted in the proportion of housing completions with three or more bedrooms in England falling from 67% to 47% between 1999/2000 and 2005/6.

Successful communities need a balanced mix of housing type. Density levels must be set at a fine grain and guided by a spatial strategy (and, where appropriate, a spatial masterplan). The current measure of dwellings per hectare is too simplistic and we call for density to be measured using a ratio of floor space to site area.

In today's market, the tendency is for houses to be marketed on the number of rooms they contain rather than floorspace, as is common

Above top

Accordia, Cambridge

Developer: Countryside Properties

Architect: Feilden Clegg Bradley

© Countryside Properties

Above

St Mary's Island, Chatham

Developer: Countryside Properties

Architect: Countryside Properties in association

with OSP Architecture © Countryside Properties

Holland
115m²

Japan
92m²

England
and Wales
76m²

The average floor space of a new dwelling in England and Wales is 76m². Compare this with an average 92m² in Japan or 115m² in Holland – both countries with just as much pressure on land.

in most overseas markets. Homebuyers remain largely unaware that a typical house built today is comparatively much smaller than one built in 1920, and while house sizes have remained relatively constant in the past 20 years, they now contain on average 20% more rooms than in the 1980s. Much of the private sector and social rented housing built today fails to meet the Parker Morris standards set out in the 1960s for floor and storage space.

England and Wales are the only countries in the EU which have no minimum space standards for housing. The average floor space of a new dwelling is 76m². Compare this with an average 92m² in Japan or 115m² in Holland – both countries with just as much pressure on land as the UK.

We believe therefore that minimum space standards should be 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 with more off-site manufacture, together with the economies of scale offered by an expanding housebuilding programme.

We feel it would be beneficial to consumers if housing – both new and resale – was marketed with the square metre area of the property clearly displayed, and while we would hope that agents and developers would provide this information as standard, we think that if necessary this should be included as a mandatory component in Home Information Packs.

Affordable and social housing

Many of the public housing developments built in the latter half of the 20th century set high design standards for their times. They were larger and enjoyed more amenities than those they replaced. Many of the subsequent problems associated with public housing schemes can be traced to a lack of sufficient investment and to management issues. Developments such as the Golden Lane Estate in London where these issues were resolved highlight the longevity and liveability that can be achieved through successful planning, design and management.

The under-investment in social housing that has been apparent in recent times has led to a slippage in design standards, coupled with a severe lack of supply. We are concerned that in developments where the affordable housing provision is procured through Section 106 agreements, there is sometimes a clear divide between the design and material standards of the private and affordable provision. Affordable and social homes should be integrated with the rest of the scheme and surrounding neighbourhood, and ideally should appear no different to the passer-by. Those who live in social and affordable housing are often unable to exercise the same degree of choice about the design quality of the homes they live in. Everybody should be entitled to a well-designed home, and therefore we believe

that all major developments that contain an element of affordable or social housing should be assessed by a local design review panel.

We welcome the Housing Corporation's recognition of the importance of good design and quality in affordable housing through the introduction of its Design and Quality Standards. We are particularly pleased that all new homes funded by the Corporation will also have to meet Code Level 3 of the Code for Sustainable Homes – showing a lead to other developers.

We note that there are a number of Registered Social Landlords who are providing exemplary designed projects and commend those who are setting the benchmark for what can be delivered in terms of well-designed, integrated and affordable housing.

We believe that the Government, as a major landowner, is in a unique position to lead the development of well-designed and sustainable communities, and we will be pushing Communities England to ensure that good design is at the core of their agenda.

What will the RIBA do?

The RIBA will examine how architectural education as well as practice can contribute to the housing debate and the search for innovative solutions. Schools of architecture can, for example, contribute to local or regional design review panels, and more project work focussing on housing and neighbourhoods could produce some new ideas as well as higher levels of skills for the next generations of architects.

We will continue to work with Government to ensure that design quality is an intrinsic part of developing housing and planning policy. Through the work of the RIBA Housing Group and the institute's think-tank Building Futures, and in collaboration with like minded organisations like CABE and Design for Homes, we will encourage debate amongst architects as well as the development of partnerships with other built environment professionals and opinion-formers.

Through the development of a set of practical tools, launched in Autumn 2007, the RIBA is keen to enable designers and builders to meet the needs of increasingly climate-conscious clients, as well as greener planning policies and building regulations.

The RIBA is determined to ensure that as a profession, architects engage with housing as fully as they have done in some past periods, and continue to demonstrate how they can work with other design professions, constructors and developers to deliver better homes and better neighbourhoods.



Images clockwise from top left

Chimney Pot Park, Salford Developer: Urban Splash

Architect: shedkm © Joel Chester Fildes

Accordia, Cambridge Developer: Countryside Properties

Architect: Feilden Clegg Bradley © Countryside Properties

Abode, Harlow Developer: Copthorn Homes

Architect: Proctor and Matthews © Tim Crocker

St Mary's Island, Chatham Developer: Countryside Properties

Architect: Countryside Properties in association with OSP

Architecture © Countryside Properties

Gun Wharf, Plymouth Developer: Midas Homes and Devon and

Cornwall Housing Association

Architect: Lacey Hickie Caley © Karen Taylor

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