

THE NEW STATESMAN

# The Report

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**Better housing for the future**  
**Quality homes that meet need**

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**Alex O'dell** On sustainability and  
quality housing

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**Roundtable** How to best use the  
current housing stock

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**Muyiwa Oki**  
On design in new homes

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**VELUX®**

# How to deliver healthy, sustainable and resilient buildings for people



## Europe is far off track...

### Renovations

It's necessary to boost renovations by 1,400 per cent to reach EU climate goals.



3% recommended

+1,400% required

0.2% in 2019

### Indoor air quality

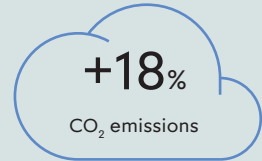
1 in 4



Europeans live in buildings where indoor air quality falls below national standards.

### CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

In 2020 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were 18 per cent higher than they should have been to reach the EU's climate goals.



## ... but the potential gains are substantial

### Return on investment

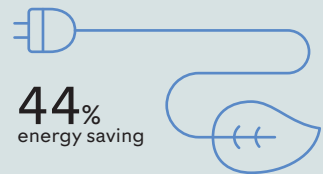


194bn

The cost of renovating all inefficient housing stock in the EU could be recovered in just two years – and the renovations could save €194bn in equivalent societal goods (such as fewer sick days, higher performance at work and school etc).

### Homes

Meeting the EU energy-efficient standards could save 44 per cent of final energy used for space heating.



44%  
energy saving

### Hospitals

Renovating hospitals can lead to...



21% reductions in medical costs

19% lower mortality rates

20% reduced employee turnover



**Alex O'dell**  
Vice president, Great Britain  
and Ireland, at Velux

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# “The UK’s housing crisis is about quality and sustainability, not just numbers”

Crisis can bring out the best in us as a society. We are forced to examine what we value, how we do things, and to challenge some of the assumptions that have been allowed to persist unchecked.

The housing crisis is not just a crisis of numbers, and its solution can't be only about numbers either. Building 1.5 million homes by the end of this Parliament may still be possible – if increasingly unlikely – but we

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must ensure they are quality, sustainable homes. Past experiences in the UK of building cheaply and quickly to the exclusion of everything else has led to further problems down the road. Poorly planned, sprawling, low-density neighbourhoods can become car-dependent at a time when we need to prioritise active travel and public transport.

That could be as simple as ensuring the communities we are creating together have what they need and can adapt and change over time, and that the health and well-being of individuals who live in those homes is maintained. Research shows that good quality housing has a range of benefits, from educational outcomes to physical and mental health.

We can look to other countries which have pioneered better approaches to building communities, particularly in Scandinavia and our home market of Denmark, where we are involved in projects such as Living Places Copenhagen. Velux is currently collaborating with Sunderland City Council on a brownfield riverside development, where we are working with socially minded developers who want to build quality homes for the community.

Fundamentally, we need to be building homes that people want to live in, that are well-ventilated, have good natural light, and a low impact on our environment. We can design them to be adapted over the life course to meet a changing set of needs for a family without them having to move.

We follow a set of principles called the Active House principles with three key metrics to focus on: energy, environment, and indoor climate.

A critical part in accomplishing this is working together, bringing in architects, engineers, designers, housing professionals and communities to engage in the process.

In this report we set out some of those discussions around how to meet our housing needs in their fullest sense.

At our roundtable event (pages 4-6), we brought people from across housing policy together to discuss how building at higher density can achieve high quality and quantity of housing. That includes enabling extensions, conversions and renovations so that the space we have is used to the best effect.

The challenge is very real. The UK's housing market is broken and does not serve us well. The solutions are there if we are prepared to prioritise long-term thinking.

The government cannot make its legacy fixing one problem only to create another. Let's work together and do it the right way. ●

# Ending the housing crisis is possible if we are committed to the solutions

Building more must come with building better and building more efficiently

By Samir Jeraj



The Labour government is committed to delivering 1.5 million homes over the course of this parliament. It is an ambitious intervention into the UK's housing market. Much of the public policy discussion has focused on how to change planning laws, reclassify some land as "grey belt" and build on parts of the green belt. However, there are other approaches too.

This was the focus of a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the *New Statesman* with Velux, answering the question: "How could a focus on existing housing stock and densification help the government achieve its housing target?"

One participant said that delivering 1.5 million homes in five



**High-density housing can be built to high standards to meet housing needs**

years would require looking at “all elements of the market, all elements of delivery” and involving public and private sector partners. She said that planning reform was just one part of the puzzle, and that in addition to building housing, “we’ve really got to think about the communities that we’re creating as well and what works.” She added that there has been a “cultural mind shift” around high-rise and leasehold homes, particularly since the Grenfell fire in 2017.

Another attendee said the target of 1.5 million homes was not the key issue. “The point is, can we solve two social problems; social housing for people in temporary accommodation and other things and people on low incomes; and getting people on the housing

ladder,” he said. He added that the previous government should have kept mandatory housing targets and been “tougher” on councils that did not bring forward local plans, and that he agreed with the approach to environmental regulation adopted by the current government. “This is about the society winning, and clearly delivering more homes is part of that,” he said.

However, he was sceptical of classifying land as “grey belt”, which he felt was a “Trojan Horse” for building on the Green Belt. “I think fairness has to be built into this. If you’re talking about a 50 per cent uplift in delivery, yet you see mainly rural areas getting 100 per cent uplift, and urban areas get 15 per cent uplift, that’s wrong,” he said.

One policy change that he would like to see is lifting the restrictions on pension funds owning residential property, as this often leads to flats above shops that are owned by a pension fund being left empty.

“It’s not just a numbers game. We have to build quality. We have to build efficiently in the land and space we have, but also we have to design places that people want to live in,” said another speaker. For him, one of the solutions is better enabling existing homes to be extended and renovated to meet the needs of people, particularly families, without having to move. These homes, if built to a good quality, also have a positive impact on the health and life outcomes for the people who live in them. ▶

◀ “I think where we fail in this sector is actually our house builders don’t use architects. They don’t design well. And the problem with that is it’s really inefficient,” he said. Further to this, the presumption when talking about densification is that it is about building high rise, whereas there are other ways to make housing development denser. “You can build some beautiful houses three stories. You can double the density, and you need half the space,” he said.

A speaker set out the findings of a recent report on housing. In particular, they found that the public wants brownfield and empty homes brought into use before using green space. According to the report there could be 1.2 million homes delivered on brownfield sites, 1.4 million homes on sites that have planning permission but have not been built out, and empty homes that could be brought back into use. She added there was also the potential for 165,000 homes to be created by converting commercial property and 20,000 from publicly-owned buildings.

One of the largest potential ways to make more homes available, she said, was to bring some of the UK’s 26 million spare rooms into use by turning them into spaces for lodgers. “There’s an enormous amount out there before you need to start building the countryside,” they said. Another person pointed out there are around 11.6 million “lots” of land available next to homes that could be used to extend them, while someone else added that conversions and extensions still need to ensure quality.

A participant felt that stronger action was needed against landbanking in order to ensure that homes with planning permission are built, rather than delayed by developers seeking to maximise profit. “They’re waiting for the price of the land to go up, which makes them unaffordable for young people and for affordable housing,” he said. The speaker agreed that the “grey belt” was a Trojan horse for

development that he feels is not sustainable and does not have the necessary infrastructure.

An attendee said it was important to work with the economic geography as it is. “Rents are least affordable in the southeast and core cities like Bristol and York. And that’s also where we get the biggest bang for our buck in terms of new housing,” he said. He added that empty homes are a “red herring” as many are not in areas with enough jobs, which reduces their appeal. By contrast, Oxford has a high number of jobs compared to homes, which raises the cost of housing. This means densification is a key policy. “We know a 1 per cent increase in housing stock can lead to a 2 per cent decrease in rent,” he said.

“In Knightsbridge, Belgravia and Hyde Park, 35 per cent of the properties have got two or more unoccupied bedrooms. In Bermondsey, where there’s a high concentration of social housing, it’s only 10.7 per cent,” said one person, noting that council tax could be used to create an incentive to downsize. They said, “in the 1980s, of the homes that were delivered, 40 per cent were by small and medium enterprises, now it’s 10 per cent.” He added: “There needs to be a rebalance of the market, and there needs to be support for the smaller companies.”

“One of the reasons we’ve seen diversification decline is because we’ve made it harder for smaller builders and smaller companies to operate in an increasingly complicated and complex system,” said one attendee. He rejected claims of landbanking, saying that there is no evidence of it in studies commissioned by government.

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We could  
be building  
400,000  
homes by 2029

One speaker expressed his concern that “everything has been hung on deregulation and planning, as if planning is the only problem.” He pointed out that the capacity of the planning system needs to be expanded, meaning more planners are hired in order to ensure excellent design and quality.

One person said the proposed planning reforms were still quite modest. What he wanted to see was a stronger emphasis on building homes for social rent, pointing out that in the 1990s 87 per cent of new affordable homes were social rent and in 2022 that figure was 15 per cent. “In terms of a local government perspective, reforming the housing revenue account is so important, because only councils and housing associations are going to be able to build genuine social rent homes,” he said.

“Viability is almost non-existent across most of the country,” said a participant. The challenge is that, for her members, the money they want to invest in homes is being asked to do too many things at once. “It’s being asked to build the home for rent. It’s being asked to deliver social homes. It’s being asked to deliver infrastructure,” she explained.

There was, however, optimism in the room together with an acknowledgement that there was no simple answer. “By the end of the parliament, we could be building 400,000. I feel comfortable saying that, and then we could see what would happen over a ten-year period,” said another attendee.

“We’re starting to see a new breed of developers coming who are social minded,” said a speaker. “They’re working with local contractors. They’re using modern methods of construction (MMC), like off-site manufacturing, so they can build at scale. They’re building simple models. They’re working with great designs, and we’re helping them do that,” he said. ●



**Muyiwa Oki**  
President  
of the RIBA

“We need to ensure that we don’t sacrifice quality design in the rush to 1.5 million homes”

The government has committed to an ambitious target of delivering 1.5 million homes across the country during the course of this parliament. With 1.3 million households in England currently on social housing waiting lists, and research showing that building 90,000 social rented homes would add £51.2bn to the economy, there are clear moral and economic cases to make this happen.

However, we need to guarantee that we don’t sacrifice quality design in the rush to meet this aim. This means ensuring that buildings are designed proactively and strategically to meet the needs of residents and communities, while adhering to safety, sustainability and accessibility principles.

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At the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), we know that this is sorely needed – data from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has shown that 54 per cent of local authorities surveyed in 2023 reported skills gaps in urban design and architecture, impacting the quality of delivery at all scales.

Architects have a clear role to play in rectifying this, making sure that the homes we build are fit not just for the way we live now, but also for the future. This means designing homes with different typologies and prioritising a mix of tenures, with the aim of meeting current and projected need across all tenure types.

Our 2024 report, Foundations for the Future, looks at one way to do just that – through an innovative model which proposes a one-off initial investment from central government to local authorities to deliver high-quality, well-designed homes for social rent and market sale.

Making sure that social housing is also designed to exemplary standards is vital to the success of the government’s housebuilding programme, and we know what difference it can make to people’s lives. The winner of RIBA’s 2019 Stirling Prize, Goldsmith Street, demonstrates this – not only do residents live in attractive, well-built homes, but also enjoy reduced energy bills due to the design solutions employed.

On a wider scale, best practice design in terms of new homes also means considering design on the scale of place – bringing homes, public transport options, schools and workplaces, retail, green space and community space within close enough proximity to avoid overreliance on personal car use and maximise quality of life.

This could be medium to high density neighbourhoods, mixed use development to maximise opportunities for interaction and access to shops and community facilities, and utilising sites near transport hubs.

Architects are also well-placed to unlock challenging sites such as infill sites to deliver homes, using design solutions to increase volume and tackle viability issues. In doing so, new homes can benefit from existing infrastructure.

Putting design quality at the front and centre of the way we look at housing delivery will require a real change in the way we think, particularly given the bold target that the government has set. But the economic and social gains we can make from ensuring that the homes we build improve our quality of life mean that it’s one worth making. ●



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VELUX roof windows have been bringing daylight and fresh air into homes around the world for more than 80 years, creating healthier living environments.

As the UK embarks on ambitious plans, both to renovate homes for climate and energy goals, and to build 1.5 million new homes this parliament, it is vital to include policies that prioritise the health and well-being of occupants alongside lowering energy bills and meeting climate targets.

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