

ResPublica – Written Evidence (BEN0044)

Written Evidence prepared by Duncan Sim, Policy and Projects Officer, and Edward Douglas, Policy and Projects Officer, ResPublica

1. Are the decisions that shape England’s built environment taken at the right administrative level? What role should national policymakers play in shaping our built environment, and how does this relate to the work and role of local authorities and their partners?
 - I. As we set out in our recent report, *Devo Home*, the only way to plug the shortage of affordable housing is through the creation of new local institutions – Local Place Partnerships (LPPS) – that devolve housing to people and places. The LPP model can dramatically increase the numbers of homes built through bringing together all the interested parties: private developers, housing associations, residents, civil society and local business, and addressing their concerns and wishes through one decision point. Housing Zones, introduced by the Greater London Authority and the 20 Zones announced for England outside London, is recognition of the benefits of this approach. We believe more must be done to move from a command and control model to one in which not just local authorities but also other local stakeholders are empowered to address local housing need. More also needs to be done to address the fragmented terrain that is the current housebuilding process, which prevents ambitious action from becoming a reality.
 - II. We also believe that there is a significant role for communities in shaping their local built environment. Research shows that people highly value beautiful places, spaces and developments – and that experiencing such places can bring significant physical and mental health benefits – but that access to these, particularly for the least wealthy in society, is limited. Original polling conducted for our July 2015 report *A Community Right to Beauty* found that those most able to access beautiful places, spaces and buildings in their local area were households earning more than £45,000 per year. To address this question of social justice, and promote publically beneficial outcomes, we believe that communities must be given a greater say in promoting the creation of a local built environment they consider ‘beautiful’.
3. Does the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provide sufficient policy guidance for those involved in planning, developing and protecting the built and natural environment? Are some factors within the NPPF more important than others? If so, what should be prioritised and why?
 - III. The NPPF retains the commitment to good design in buildings and spaces, and makes reference to the importance of visual appeal, attractiveness and beauty, but submerges them beneath considerations such as viability and sustainability.

Yet the appreciation of beauty is something that is much valued by the public – in one poll, 81% of those surveyed responded that everyone should be able to experience beauty regularly, with only 3% disagreeing.

IV. We therefore believe that the idea of beauty should be given more explicit weight in the NPPF, in order to drive a large-scale re-evaluation of the importance of beauty in the planning system. To give beauty a stronger emphasis in relation to other considerations, our July 2015 report *A Community Right to Beauty* detailed four alterations we believe should be made to the text of the NPPF. These were as follows:

- i. Under Core Planning Principles, amend the fourth bullet of paragraph 17, so that it reads: “Planning should ...
 - always seek to secure high quality, ***create beautiful places***, and provide a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings”.
- ii. Under Requiring Good Design, amend the sixth bullet point under paragraph 58, so that it reads: “Ensure that developments ...
 - are visually attractive as a result of good architecture and appropriate landscaping ***and protect or enhance the beauty of an area***”.
- iii. Under Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment, amend the first bullet point under paragraph 109, so that it reads: “The planning system should contribute to an enhance the natural and local environment by:
 - protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, ***natural beauty***, geological conservation interests and soils”.
- iv. Under Plan Making, Local Plans, insert a new bullet at paragraph 156 which reads: “Local planning authorities should set out the strategic priorities for the area in the Local Plan. This should include strategic policies to deliver:
 - ***Places of urban and natural beauty that enhance the character and visual appeal of an area***”.

V. This is not to say that beauty should take precedence over all other considerations in making decision about buildings, places and spaces. However, the fact that beauty is not always the most important consideration does not mean it should be considered a luxury only to be addressed when the finances allow.

6. What role should the Government play in seeking to address current issues of housing supply? Are further interventions, properly coordinated at central Government level, required? What will be the likely effect upon housing supply of recent reforms proposed for the planning system?

VI. As we argue above, we believe the Government should enable and empower local authorities to work with their communities and collaborate with

neighbouring authorities to address local housing need at the appropriate scale. Local authorities built housing at the needed scale in the post-war period, but too often homes were ugly, cheap and utilitarian. Housebuilding under the command and control model of recent times has been stifled by the fact that, as a nation, we stop development. This is not simply 'nimbyism': it is very often a legitimate reaction to the commonly negative impact of new developments on communities, infrastructure and places. A new institutional model is needed to enable communities and local authorities to work together to steer local development and build communities in which people not only live but thrive.

- VII. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) should devolve powers to LPPs to introduce Local Development Orders as a mechanism of land value capture to finance infrastructure and affordable homes; develop beyond brownfield land; offer whole sector investment opportunity; and enable the development of cross-boundary development plans. The DCLG has a crucial role to play in quality assuring Local Place Partnerships and the cross-boundary development plans they produce.
11. Do those involved in delivering and managing our built environment, including decision-makers and developers, take sufficient account of the way in which the built environment affects those who live and work within it? How could we improve consideration of the impacts of the built environment upon the mental and physical health of users, and upon behaviours within communities?
- VIII. Attractive public spaces are important factors in individuals' physical and mental health. ResPublica's July 2015 report *A Community Right to Beauty* included original polling which found significant discrepancies in respondents' satisfaction with their mental and physical health according to their perception of the beauty of their area. Those who rated their local area as 'good' or 'very good' in terms of being a beautiful place to live were significantly more satisfied with their physical and mental health than those who rated the beauty of their local area as 'fairly poor' or 'very poor'.
 - IX. We therefore believe that more attention should be paid to the impact of individuals' perception of the beauty or otherwise of their local built environment on those individuals' health outcomes. Improving consideration of this impact will require giving communities a greater say in shaping their local built environment in order to create spaces which they consider beautiful and which can promote positive health outcomes of this kind.
12. How effectively are communities able to engage with the process of decision making that shapes the built environment in which they live and work? Are there any barriers to effective public engagement and, if so, how might they be addressed?
- X. The absence of pre-existing exceptional buildings, places and spaces – most especially in deprived areas – ratchets down the expectations of communities as to the potential for new development to promote the beautiful and of the role

they can play in improving the look of their built environment. Only through exposure to high quality environments can we develop the language and the confidence to demand more from new buildings and spaces. This can perhaps be seen in the geographically unbalanced uptake of Neighbourhood Planning; ten of the sixty completed Neighbourhood Plans are located within Arun District Council in West Sussex. We therefore believe that proactive efforts to involve communities in improving the appearance of their local built environment will prove self-reinforcing. A *Community Right to Beauty* made a number of recommendations as to how to encourage efforts of this kind; a selection of these is outlined here.

- XI. Architects and developers should be given the space to physically display their plans, models and proposals for any new local developments, which should then be subject to a design competition and local vote. Communities should have the power to choose their preferred design and developer in line with what they believe will contribute most to the beauty and ethos of their locality and deliver the greatest community value.
- XII. Decisions surrounding local development and place-shaping are often cumbersome and long-winded, which puts many people off engaging with the process. To respond to these concerns, and to reinforce the principle of democracy in the planning system, we recommend the introduction of local Citizens' Juries, a model deployed in Australia and elsewhere to draw together a representative group of people from a given neighbourhood via a stratified sample of those on the electoral roll. A Citizens' Jury would provide communities with the support and the access to experts and skilled professionals to enable them to come to a decision and conclude with their recommendations. The Jury could be triggered where there is widespread concern or disagreement over a particular area or development, or simply to facilitate the construction of a Neighbourhood Plan. This must be a community-led but expert-supported process, working within a defined public budget, and the local authority should be bound to adopt the Jury's conclusions and recommendations.
- XIII. Government should allow certain buildings, areas and spaces of local importance to be designated for preservation or improvement by introducing a new class on the Community Asset register: 'local beauty assets'. This designation should seek to create a coalition of interest in favour of that preservation or improvement between property owners and the community.
- XIV. The Community Right to Reclaim Land should be extended to include buildings and spaces, to enable communities to challenge local councils and other public bodies to improve derelict, void or unsightly developments and areas, or to release such assets to enable the community to improve them. This process would be greatly assisted if local authorities were required to register unused or underused buildings and spaces to make clear for communities the assets that could be improved in this way. Where public land or development remains unused, the community should have the right to buy or use the asset in a way

which will most benefit the neighbourhood, for example converting an unused piece of land into a community garden.

13. Are there fiscal or financial measures potentially available which would help to address current issues of housing and land supply? Are there financial or other mechanisms that would encourage better design and place-making by private sector developers?

- XV. The tax which would be levied on private sector developers via Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 should be reduced or waived to incentivise beautiful design in cases where the development has been progressed as a result of a local referendum to choose a preferred design and developer.
- XVI. To incentivise improvement in the visual appeal of specific individual buildings, spaces and places, where such work is called for by the community, point relief on Capital Gains Tax could alternatively be used.
- XVII. Although currently limited by EU legislation, we recommend that in the long-term a partial VAT relief on refurbishment costs (for example, from 20% to 10%) should apply where developers and owners can justify, through community engagement, the claim that the work would enhance or maintain the visual appeal of buildings and spaces.
- XVIII. In our *Devo Home* report, we set out how a land value capture (LVC) mechanism can be instituted to fund infrastructure and affordable housing. A LVC mechanism can be led by local authorities through the use of Local Development Orders (LDOs). Through LDOs, local authorities can unlock sites and support developers in securing planning consent by establishing parameters for housing on brownfield sites. LDOs can enable local planning authorities to work with local communities to develop workable solutions to determine the development in their areas, providing a means for the planning system to incentivise development to meet a whole range of locally specific policy objectives. Through LDOs they would be able to capture the value of that site and set a bespoke levy, paid by the landowner, which would contribute to the cost. A major issue with Section 106 and CIL is that they can create an atmosphere of uncertainty the terms of the agreement are not set out from the outset. By empowering local authorities through LDOs, which can form part of their cross-boundary development plans, the costs and requirements will be clear for all to see upfront.

02 October 2015