

HIGHBURY GROUP ON HOUSING DELIVERY

HOUSING STANDARDS REVIEW – RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

Introduction

The Highbury Group comprises an independent group of specialists from public, private and independent sectors with a membership drawn from housing, planning and related professions; it offers advice and makes representations to Government and other agencies on a variety of subjects, including responses to the recession, with the aim of maintaining and increasing the output of housing, including high quality affordable housing (see footnote for membership). The key purpose of the group is to promote policies and delivery mechanisms, which

- * increase the overall supply of housing in line with need
- * ensure that the supply of both existing and new housing in all tenures is of good quality and affordable by households on middle and lower incomes.
- * support the most effective use of both existing stock and new supply
- * ensure that housing is properly supported by accessible infrastructure, facilities and employment opportunities

General Comments

The publication of the Housing Standards Review consultation documents represents a milestone in a long-running endeavor by many to rationalise the complex, over-lapping and sometimes contradictory regulatory regime for the house building industry in England. We support a national approach to the technical performance on new homes based on national policy imperatives rather than a localist approach which leads to confusion, delay and frustrating of much needed supply. Clarity is required on what is a technical matter related to housing which should relate to national policy objective and what are planning issues that require a local or regional planning policy objective. Reform is required but should not undermine advances that have been made in quality and sustainability through the use of voluntary best practice codes such as the Code for Sustainable Homes.

Key standards and the process for ensuring compliance should be included in National Planning Policy Guidance. Space standards and non technical external environment matters are a planning factor – policies should be set out in Local Authority core strategies, assessed at application stage, with compliance monitored through building control.

Sustainable Housing Standards – a vision for quality

The consultation focusses on the technical performance criteria only and does not embrace other design requirements that lead to new high quality sustainable homes. Issues covered by voluntary standards that are at risk of not being addressed adequately in the review include

aspect, sunlight and daylight, privacy, external space, balconies and security around the home for example. These issues should be included in Planning Practice Guidance.

In de-constructing the Code for Sustainable Homes and transferring some technical requirements in Building Regulations, there is no single document that sets out an aspiration for quality and sustainability. There is a danger that the gains achieved by using the Code to drive up performance will be lost by not including all design requirements within the new standards framework.

A single document is required that sets a vision for the quality and sustainability of new homes entitled Sustainable Housing Standards. This would bring together the planning and technical performance requirements under the headings Place, Space, Access, Performance and Wellbeing with respective sections bedded into Planning Practice Guidance or Building Regulations, and clear distinction between the two sets of requirements, for example ecology, open space, privacy, bin storage, cycle storage clearly identified as a planning related issues and incorporated in Planning Practice Guidance.

Joining up the reviews

Co-ordination with other Reviews – the HSR, Taylor and Farrell Reviews are running concurrently and more needs to be done to ensure the detailed co-ordination of reviews. This is particularly important in respect of the national Planning Practice Guidance content.

Encouraging higher levels of performance through labeling

The endorsement for space labeling is welcome, however the concept should be extended to include at least energy and carbon in order to better inform purchasers or renters about the performance and likely financial impact of their choices. Benchmarking is required in addition to labeling to facilitate comparisons against best practice norms and provide an incentive for further improvements in performance above the baseline.

Viability

Once minimum standard set, no waiver on viability grounds. Financial support should be provided by public sector to ensure full range of affordable housing, including social rented housing meets full standards.

Implementation

The consultation puts forward 3 options and confirms that B is Government's preferred route:

- A New nationally described standards set out in planning in addition to expanded Building Regulations.
- B New nationally described standards set as an interim measure, as stepping stones to full integration into Building Regulations (as regulated options)
- C New standards integrated into Building Regulations now (with regulated options)

To ensure full implementation of revised standards, we propose revised technical standards are introduced into regulations at the earliest opportunity, with matters of compliance with planning policy, including minimum space standards, external space and, daylight and sunlight requirements, to be determined through the planning application process, with compliance during the construction phase enforced through the building control regime. This is a variant of Option A.

Planning development management officers should consider space standards at planning application stage, with enforcement through the building control system. Planning should consider matters of external space and playspace and access, daylight and sunlight, bin storage. Window sizes, ventilation and air quality requirements should be set through building control.

2.0 Response to Technical Requirements

The following is a summary of our response to consultation on technical requirements:

Consultation paper proposal	Our response
<p>ENERGY</p> <p>No standard proposed above recently announced Part L uplift as Government has confirmed Zero Carbon goal by 2016.</p> <p>Government to prevent LAs requiring renewables by repealing Planning and Energy Act that enables LA's to set energy targets local (ie overturn the Merton Rule)</p> <p>Plans to phase out the Code and placing energy requirements in Building Regulations</p>	<p>YES BUT, there is insufficient information on definitions and metrics for Allowable Solutions and Carbon Offsetting to know whether the policy for Zero Carbon will be met. Clarification is required now to allow industry to gear up for 2016.</p>
<p>WATER</p> <p>Current Part G of 110 litres/day (or equivalent from fittings based approach) to remain in place</p> <p>Higher 'opt-in' standard (or regulated option) of 125 litres/day (or equivalent) proposed for LAs to draw down in water-stressed areas subject to viability</p> <p>LAs would be unable to require grey water recycling to meet or exceed these standards</p>	<p>YES BUT, the targets could be tougher and more can be done through application of standards of fittings at point of manufacture rather than through Building Regulations – so applicable to new and existing improved homes. Water metering should apply to existing, as well as new, homes.</p>
<p>SECURITY</p> <p>Security not currently regulated. 2-tier 'opt-in' standard (or regulated options) proposed</p> <p>Level 1 - based on current NHBC warranty standard (broadly in line with industry practice)</p> <p>Level 2 - based on Secured by Design Part 2 for LAs to draw down in areas of high crime (new affordable housing typically complies with SbD but rarely applied to private housing)</p>	<p>NO, more should be done than appears to be the case to explore tighter warranty requirements to achieve a single higher standard. A single standard set at Level 2 applied through Building Regulations is required.</p>
<p>ACCESSIBILITY</p> <p>Current Part M to be updated in line with Level 1 of a new 3-tier standard (or regulated options) linked (or tied) to a 3-tier space</p>	<p>YES, we think a 3-tier accessibility standard bedded in Building Regulations is the most logical and cost effective</p>

<p>standard (ie no plans to remove baseline regulation for accessibility) LAs expected to assess the proportion (%) of new homes needed at each of the higher levels based on need and viability Level 1 - based on current Part M but with minor improvements (including widened definition of approach routes to cover parking and refuse areas etc, improved access to the WC, minimum stair width of 850mm, communal lifts ‘standard’ 8 person (wheelchair + companion) size) Level 2 - based on Lifetime Homes but with additions (including step-free access, new requirements for garden access) - and reductions (including no requirement to show through floor lift provision or temporary bedspace and no need to provide strengthened ceilings for hoisting) Level 3 - based on the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide but with additions (including a bath and a shower for 5p+) and reductions (including no need for parking spaces to be covered)</p>	<p>way to meet the needs of a diverse and ageing population. It addresses the complexity that Part M is assessed under Building Control, Lifetime Homes under planning, funding and the Code sometimes with different results and wheelchair housing often not scrutinized at all.</p> <p>A single National Wheelchair Standard is welcomed.</p> <p>Level 2 needs step-free access to justify the inclusion of features aimed at wheelchair users, provide flexibility and represent a decent housing offer for older people (particularly when combined with a matching space standard). A 2-tier approach (with a Level 1 hybrid of Part M and LTH) would fail under One-in, Two-out and doesn’t provide enough choice.</p> <p>BUT More should be done to explore the potential for a 2 tier accessibility standard with (fewer, basic) LTH standards in Part M and a single Wheelchair Standard as this option addresses a policy objective for flexible homes for changing circumstances over time and would address space requirements simultaneously.</p>
<p>SPACE</p> <p>Space not currently regulated and no national, cross tenure space standards have been defined to date</p> <p>HCA requirements for social housing no longer assessed through HQI assessments and social housing linked to Tier 2 accessibility requirements</p> <p>Government supports industry led ‘space labeling’ (ie floor</p>	<p>NO, not enough options have been presented.</p> <p>We support mandatory space labeling for all new and existing homes at point of sale or rent with benchmarking against Level 2 of the proposed new space standards. However</p>

<p>area of new homes to be displayed at the point of sale or rent) and recommended as the only mechanism for Tier 1 standards</p> <p>Possible 3 tier ‘opt-in standard’ linked to the 3-tier accessibility standard (not given Government backing and regulation not on offer)</p> <p>Level 1 – min. GIAs based on HQI/LHDG furniture and activity space and compatible with proposed Level 1 accessibility requirements – not far below Level 2, especially for flats, but better than HQI.</p> <p>Level 2 – min. GIAs with same furniture but compatible with proposed Level 2 accessibility requirements – identical to GLA space standards subject to 3 minor exceptions</p> <p>Level 3 – min. GIAs with same furniture but compatible with proposed Level 3 accessibility requirements – 15-30% bigger than Level 2 depending on typology (flats easier than houses, 2 storey houses easier than 3 storey)</p> <p>LAs could adopt one or more of the 3 tiers of the space standard but only for use with the matching level of the accessibility standard – possibility that Levels 2 and 3 could be tied to accessibility (ie unable to require one without the other)</p> <p>Specific extra standards defined for storage area and ceiling height to living space (same and all levels) and bedrooms areas and widths (vary for each level)</p> <p>so, the options are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) space labeling only b) space labeling + opt-in 3 tier standards – choose any, all or none c) space labeling + Levels 2 and 3 automatically required where corresponding levels of accessibility are required d) option above without space labeling 	<p>it is not enough. Our view therefore is that minimum standard should be set at Level 2. Otherwise in London there will be a reduction of standards from the standards set in the London Plan and the Mayor’s Design Guide. Such a reduction of space standard would be unacceptable. We support a leveling up rather than a leveling down.</p> <p>There should also be requirements in Building Regulations for individual rooms based on functionality : bedrooms, and living rooms (minimum areas and widths and ceiling heights) storage areas. The Housing Act should be updated to reflect current minimum bedroom sizes of 7.5m2 and 11m2. Homes cannot be marketed if they do not meet certain functional requirements. (This is also necessary in terms of application of welfare benefit restrictions relating to determination of which rooms count as bedrooms and living rooms in terms of entitlement to housing benefit).</p> <p>The minimum standard should incorporate the requirement for Lifetime Homes and be equivalent to the proposed Level 2 – ie the GLA space standards with 3 minor exceptions. Any proposal for a higher standard would need to be subject to an evidence base and impact assessment to be tested through a planning Examination in Public. We cannot support any proposal that doesn’t embody minimum</p>
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	<p>space standards for housing.</p> <p>There should be an enhanced space standard for live work accommodation which should be applied where a LA has demonstrated a need for such provision.</p>
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Further detailed space issues

Space labeling

We support mandatory space labeling whereby gross internal floor area (GIA) is displayed for new and existing homes of all tenures at the point of sale or rent.

We believe that customers have a right to know how big their home is, that it will help them make more informed choices when contemplating a move, and that it is likely to have a positive impact on the size of new homes – particularly at the bottom end of the market.

We would like Government and industry to work together on this to make it an obligation. GIA will need to be carefully defined noting that the RICS method, which is commonly used, was defined for valuation purposes and needs reviewing and updating (industry tends to refer to ‘net internal area’ or ‘net sales area’). We suggest that the metric needs to be m² and that the construction industry should move to metric measurements for room dimensions and all other housing related empirical data (including cost per square metre, rather than cost per square foot). Labeling needs to be on a standardised format to allow consumers to compare different homes.

Space benchmarking

We support benchmarking in parallel with labeling for all new and existing homes. We propose that homes should be benchmarked against a recognised baseline standard of Level 2 of the proposed new space standards.

The number of bedrooms and bedspaces within a given home should be part of labeling and benchmarking. This requires a national definition of what is meant by a decent single (min 7.5m²) and double (or twin) bedroom (min 11m²) and is essential in light of recent welfare reform whereby benefit is effectively being withdrawn from those who are unable to justify their need for a ‘spare room’. The Housing Act should be updated accordingly.

Space standards

We support nationally defined space standards in addition to labeling and benchmarking. We are of the view that Government is right to take a cross tenure approach to housing standards but that the standards set must encompass space if it is to work across sectors. It is essential to protect those who have little choice about where they live, particularly in light of pressures to reduce under-occupancy. However, as we know that the tenure of any home is liable to change over its lifetime, a universal approach has to be sensible.

It is vital that any new national housing standards should include London, and we do not regard the capital as a 'special case' when it comes to the generic, ergonomic principles behind internal space. Despite initial opposition, the GLA space standards are working well and it is appropriate and necessary to include them within the proposed set.

Space regulation

We support regulation as the goal for all technical issues, including space. As the only means by which to impose any universal minimum standard, we support a regulated baseline, to include minimum GIAs, bedroom definitions (effectively minimum floor areas) and minimum storage areas.

Other standards

External space, balconies, privacy, cycle storage, bin storage and ecology should be dealt with under Planning Practice Guidance to inform Local Plans.

We wish to see more commitment to explore the need for additional standards in grey areas such as daylight, ventilation, air quality and overheating where design and technical solutions both have a role to play.

We would contest that the BRE's 'Daylight and Sunlight: A Guide to Good Practice' is universally and uniformly applied by LAs. Our experience is that there is often a local twist to their application which needs to be addressed through better guidance on application.

Compliance process

A more streamlined linear approach to compliance is required than is being currently proposed. Greater integration of Planning and Building Regs processes at the early stages would help to integrate compliance procedures. Consolidation of standards into Building Regs will itself aid the compliance process. There is a need to address the performance gap issue and the need to verify compliance at completion with Planning requirements.

To strengthen role of building control in enforcing regulatory standards, building control should be brought within local authority management, which would also enable a closer interaction with the planning system, with building control able to provide advice where appropriate on planning applications, and to ensure conditions of planning consent are implemented.

Footnote

The Highbury Group is an independent group of specialists from public, private and independent sectors from housing, planning and related professions which prepares

proposals for Government and other agencies on policy options for optimising the output of housing including affordable housing.

The group was established in 2008. The group meets at the University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1. It comprises the following core members: Duncan Bowie - University of Westminster (convener); Stephen Ashworth – SRN Denton ; Julia Atkins - London Metropolitan University; Bob Colenutt - Northampton Institute for Urban Affairs ; Kathleen Dunmore - Three Dragons ; Michael Edwards - Bartlett School of Planning, UCL; Deborah Garvie - SHELTER ; Stephen Hill - C20 Futureplanners ; Angela Housham - Consultant ; Andy von Bradsky - PRP ; Seema Manchanda - L B Wandsworth; Kelvin McDonald - Consultant ; Tony Manzi - University of Westminster; James Stevens - HomeBuilders Federation ; Peter Studdert – Planning consultant ; Janet Sutherland - JTP Cities; Paul Watt - Birkbeck College ; Nicholas Falk- URBED; Catriona Riddell – Planning Officers Society; Richard Donnell – Hometrack; Peter Redman – Housing Futures; Richard Simmons- University of Greenwich; Richard Blyth – RTPI head of policy; Pippa Read – National Housing Federation; Stephen Battersby- Pro-Housing Alliance; Roger Jarman – Consultant/ Housing Quality Network; Richard Bate- Green Balance; Eric Sorensen- consultant; Jen Pearce- Building and Social Housing Foundation.

The views and recommendations of the Highbury Group as set out in this and other papers are ones reached collectively through debate and reflect the balance of member views. They do not necessarily represent those of individual members or of their employer organisations.

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22nd October 2013