

Government policy alone is not enough to deliver good homes. We need a detailed public inquiry into how people live and what homes we need now and in the future.

Feb 3 2012

*The government has recently revealed its new housing strategy. While it has made improvements in several important areas of its strategy, there is still much that is lacking. **Rebecca Roberts-Hughes**, Policy Manager for the Royal Institute of British Architects argues that it is of central importance that new homes are of adequate size and properly equipped in order to ensure the wellbeing of their occupants. Above all, communities need to be consulted about their needs and provided with better information before new building projects are started.*



Core to the government's growth plan is a commitment to build more homes both immediately, to improve the current financial outlook, and for the long-term, to ensure the number of homes being built better responds to the rising demand. But building in haste risks storing up unnecessary problems for the future. The new homes delivered must be of good enough quality to meet the needs of people not only today but in fifty or more years from now.

In November 2011, the [government revealed](#) its new housing strategy that grapples with possible solutions to increase the supply of new housing. It aims to improve finance mechanisms and, vitally for the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), seeks to deliver quality as well as quantity. The government promised not to advocate 'building more homes at any cost' and recognised the importance of design and sustainability – a crucial shift away from the numbers game that has dominated housing policy in recent years.

In the housing strategy, the government committed to holding a ministerial-led design summit with the involvement of the Design Council, RIBA, Royal Town Planning Institute and others to investigate how design support can be provided to local communities. The aim is to create a nationwide network of neighbourhood designers who can help communities to influence design locally. They also committed to strengthening design support for communities by funding Neighbourhood Planning projects. The importance of improved energy performance was recognised; restating the government's commitment to the Green Deal to fund energy efficient retrofitting for existing homes and to make sure all new homes are zero carbon by 2016.

The context of this strategy is of course [localism](#). The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is set to appear in the next couple of months. The draft, consulted on last year, has a strong section on design that will help planners in local authorities refuse poor development plans that will not benefit their communities. The Localism Act and the NPPF support the rights of local people to influence what gets built in their neighbourhoods. Furthermore, it supports their right to plan and develop their own environment through Neighbourhood Plans and Development Orders.

There is no question that giving communities a

voice in shaping the design of their areas is important. Recent reports from think tanks [Policy Exchange](#) and [IPPR](#) reiterate the dissatisfaction with design that contributes to communities' rejecting development proposals in their area.; If people don't approve of new build homes they aren't going to sanction them in their area and aren't going to be happy living in them either.

The RIBA's 2011 YouGov consumer poll found that people believe new homes fail to offer two of the top three things they look for. Top of the public shopping list was outside space, the size of the rooms and proximity to local services. The housing strategy uses this research to discuss what good design means. People who wouldn't buy new homes said the rooms are too small and that they lacked style and outside space. The RIBA then looked at the [size of over 4,500 new homes](#) being built in England. The average home in our sample was nearly 10 per cent smaller than basic space standards advise, meaning the average home provides inadequate space for households to live comfortably. The research raised concerns about how properties were marketed by bedrooms rather than floor area, which means that consumers may not understand the size of their property until they move their furniture into it. People shouldn't have to compromise on their quality of life just to get on the housing ladder. At a bare minimum, everyone deserves a home that suits their needs and provides them with adequately sized rooms.



The RIBA will support the government in exploring how local people can work with designers and access advice to help create the best environment possible for their homes, streets and schools. We've recently published [guidance for architects](#) about community-led design and many architects already work closely with communities. Developers are starting to recognise the importance of engagement too.

But if we really want Britain to have better homes, we can't just rely on community involvement. We need a detailed public inquiry into how people live today and what homes we need now and in the future. We need to ask the public what they want, be clear about what is available to them and enable them to choose the best home for their circumstances. The RIBA is producing resources to support people buying or renting a home: the [Nest Test](#) is an online tool that helps people assess whether the floor area of a home would be adequate for the number of people in their household. This is a small step towards helping people make informed decisions about the size of a home that will be right for them rather than simply relying on the right number of bedrooms.

Our research is part of an ongoing campaign called HomeWise which makes the case for building better new homes. The RIBA has also tasked the independent [Future Homes Commission](#) to further investigate the quality of newly built housing with the aim of understanding how people live today, what they need and expect from their homes and whether the design and delivery of new homes is fit for their purposes. The provision of adequate space to enable households to live healthily and cohesively is of course just one element that needs to be addressed in all our new housing. People need homes that are accessible, adaptable, secure, energy efficient and that have adequate storage. Our homes need to be places of comfort and delight that support our wellbeing.

Community involvement can only go part of the way to achieving better homes, and for this reason the government's strategy only addresses some of the problems that are yet to be solved. Improved

information for consumers and community awareness of design issues can help to ensure a well-intended policy results in better homes, streets and neighbourhoods.

Postscript: The Future Homes Commission has called on the public, the housebuilding industry, architects, academics and policy makers to submit their views on the future of housing in Britain. To contribute evidence to the Commission's inquiry, please go to <http://www.behomewise.co.uk/>

About the author

Rebecca Roberts-Hughes- RIBA

Rebecca Roberts-Hughes is a Policy Manager at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), leading on housing policy. Her current role is to influence government policy and the built environment industry to improve architectural quality. She is also currently studying part-time for a PhD at King's College London. She has previously worked in research at Metropolitan Housing Partnership and in communications at John McAslan + Partners architectural practice.



You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [What people want and need from their homes must be considered in the design of modern housing](#)
2. [When planning for new housing developments, we must make sure they are built where people actually want to live.](#)
3. [Britain's housing shortage disenfranchises the young. We should use the tax system to encourage people to free up larger homes.](#)
4. [There is a woeful lack of affordable homes in rural areas. Greater leadership from local authorities to encourage more locally-initiated sustainable development may offer a first step towards more affordable homes.](#)