

CIH submission to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

About CIH

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the independent voice for housing and the home of professional standards. Our goal is simple - to provide housing professionals and their organisations with the advice, support and knowledge they need to be brilliant. CIH is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. This means that the money we make is put back into the organisation and funds the activities we carry out to support the housing sector. We have a diverse membership of people who work in both the public and private sectors, in 20 countries on five continents across the world.

Further information is available at: www.cih.org

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Summary of our key points

This is a response to the call for evidence from the government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

CIH argues that to 'promote better design' of homes and achieve 'what communities want', the commission will need to extend its remit to cover all aspects of design, of which aesthetics is only one.

Our key points are:

- Design quality is important, but gaining public support means going beyond aesthetics.
- The commission needs to address the challenges of the forthcoming Future Homes Standard, particularly for energy efficiency and renewable power sources.
- The commission should address poor standards of space and accessibility in new homes, left unresolved by the earlier Housing Standards Review.
- Rules about permitted development which allow residential development via conversions, without planning permission being required, should be addressed.
- The commission must engage with the growing use of modern methods of construction, which provide the opportunity to tackle many of these issues.

Detailed points for consideration by the commission

We are pleased that the government is launching a drive to promote high-quality design in newly built homes. The Chartered Institute of Housing supports this drive

and believes that it should go further. We urge the commission to adopt a wide definition of ‘high-quality design’ that embraces energy efficiency, space standards and accessibility, as well as the aesthetics of housing and neighbourhoods. We see this as an opportunity - which should not be missed - for the government to have a co-ordinated approach to issues which, if tackled separately, will be much more difficult to resolve. We set out our arguments below.

First, we believe it is important to recognise that gaining ‘public support’ for new development (one of the commission’s aims) involves more than aesthetics and is about the whole quality of new development and what it adds to an area. There is considerable concern (as the BBC has [shown recently](#)) about poor quality new construction and hence poor value-for-money of new homes. Space, accessibility and environmental standards are crucial, as we explore below. And the local impact of new housing is affected by issues such as the housing mix, the proportion of affordable housing and the contribution to local amenities (such as play areas, etc.) as well as the appearance of the new development. These wider issues need to be tackled, too, through the planning process.

Second, the government has indicated that by 2025 it will impose a Future Homes Standard which has radical implications for the design of dwellings, and these need to be addressed as part of the commission’s work. There are a number of factors involved:

- The commission should specifically address the Committee on Climate Change’s recommendation that new homes achieve ‘world-leading levels of energy efficiency’ by 2025.
- To relinquish gas heating systems, as the government intends, new homes will need to be built to high energy-efficiency standards and to have heating systems designed to work with more fuel-efficient sources such as heat pumps.
- A new emphasis on renewable energy and battery storage is required, given the move to electric vehicles and the potential for new homes to be net generators of energy.
- As well as being cheaper to heat, energy efficient homes will provide a healthier environment.

Regrettably, abandoning the previous ‘zero carbon’ target has meant that the industry has slipped backwards and it is vital that a plan to work towards high standards again is devised and agreed in good time to allow the 2025 date to be achieved. Doing this would also indicate the government’s seriousness about achieving its carbon reduction targets and address current concerns about the slow pace in addressing the causes of climate change.

Third, the 2014 Housing Standards Review led to an unsatisfactory mix of patchily enforced national standards and local standards that vary from area to area. The result is that homes are being built to poor space standards and to poor accessibility standards. The opportunity was missed to adopt the Lifetime Homes standard which could by now have been the norm, but at a lower level many houses are being built

that are not even wheelchair-accessible. Given our aging population, this is a trend which must be reversed quickly. We urge you to bring space and accessibility standards within the scope of the commission's work.

Fourth, given the concerns about these issues both within government and outside it, surely it is time to reconsider the changes to rules about permitted development which allow residential development via conversions without planning permission being required in many cases, meaning that the issues are not addressed (or if they are, this depends on the goodwill of the developer)? It is notable that permitted development has been the subject of complaints in many different respects, ranging from safety issues and space standards to the absence of affordable housing as part of the development. It also means that issues about the wider contribution to a neighbourhood which are included in the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's role are ignored. Now is the time to bring all significant new housing provision back within the scope of planning laws.

Fifth, a positive opportunity exists to tackle these issues via the increasing use of modern methods of construction (MMC). The Housing and Local Government Select Committee is considering this issue and indeed we have [submitted evidence](#) to its inquiry. Our key points are:

- Government must seize the opportunity presented by MMC to ensure high standards of new housebuilding; failure to do so will be highly wasteful of resources and in conflict with climate goals and other government objectives.
- Given the practical difficulties of achieving high levels of energy efficiency in on-site construction, MMC offers a huge opportunity to make a step-change in the delivery of energy-saving, climate-friendly homes.
- New homes are being built to inadequate space and accessibility standards (e.g. for wheelchair users); MMC could help resolve this deficiency.
- Following the Grenfell Tower fire, there is a high premium on homes being built of safe materials and by safe building methods; MMC must ensure this happens.
- The Grenfell Tower fire exposed severe weaknesses in the enforcement of building regulations. The consistency of production standards achievable via MMC potentially resolves many such problems.
- MMC offers new employment opportunities outside the traditional building trades, and can help to solve building industry skill shortages.

We are aware of some housing associations such as Accord (LoCal Homes) and Swan having their own MMC assembly plants which lead to much higher standards while also producing cost savings. These are exemplary but there is an urgent need to find ways to promote 'good' MMC across the industry, so that all factory-produced units are far superior to traditionally-built ones and are aiming for the 2025 standards.

As you can see, we believe there is a range of issues here incorporating but going beyond the 'building beautiful' agenda. Especially now that the government has set

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its sights on a new standard for 2025, we do believe that it would be an enormous missed opportunity not to tackle these issues in the round. The growing use of MMC provides a route towards achieving this and indeed shows the urgency of starting a process which leads the industry step-by-step towards higher standards, with a clear direction of travel and with comprehensive goals setting out what high-quality housing means in all respects.

The industry has already said that it believes the government should [lead from the front](#) if high standards are to be achieved by 2025, and the Chartered Institute of Housing agrees.

Chartered Institute of Housing
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