

Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission's Interim Report: Creating Space for Beauty

Briefing Note

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The interim report was published on the 9th July by the *Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC)*, an independent body set up in November by MP James Brokenshire, which is advising government on how to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods.

Purpose of the Commission

The purpose of the BBBBC is to tackle the challenge of poor-quality design and building of homes and places and to ensure that we build for the future. The Commission aims to gather evidence from both the public and private sectors to develop practical policy solutions to ensure the design and styling of new developments helps grow a sense of community and place.

Key Issues Identified

The report identifies five key issues *with* what is going wrong with development today:

- **'Anywhereville and mass-produced boxes':** lack of prior attempts at place-making, landscaping, lay-out or provision for local character and local needs.
- **'Buildings which efface or deface the character of a street or townscape':** buildings with an absence of a façade, non-alignment, alienating materials and offending height and scale.
- **'The erasure of the urban fabric':** unadaptable buildings whose sole meaning is their function and the scatter of functional or semi-functional buildings over a no-place.
- **'Neighbourhoods that make you ill':** ways of building that increase anxiety, depression, ill-health and alienation, whether in residents or in those who live nearby.
- **'Neighbourhoods that make you poor':** poor design which sucks up surplus income through the cost of commuting and multiple car ownership, unfair service charging or the lack of employment opportunity near cheaper or affordable housing.

Why These Issues are Present

The report identifies four key reasons which the BBBBC believes are the cause for this failure:

- **Firstly, the nature of risk in the planning system and land market sets up the wrong incentives and timeframes, identifying that beauty and place-making are an uncompensated cost to a short-term developer, rather than a source of value to a long-term place-maker.**
- **Secondly, the planning system does not ask for beauty, or insist that beauty is delivered.**
- **Thirdly, tax signals which incentivise taking uplift in land-value at the outset rather than along with returns being enhanced by place-making.**
- **Finally, the lack of mixed-use schemes as a result of single-use buildings and an over-focus on housing land supply, resulting in silos created between housing and other land uses.**

The report identifies that too few people have faith in the planning and development process to insist on beauty or the creation of real settlements. While recognising the need for homes in much of the country, the intuitive reaction to potential development is often suspicion or active hostility.

What the Report Proposes to Combat These Issues

The report identifies how beautiful places need to be delivered at three scales:



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All are necessary to 'grow beautifully', whilst meeting housing needs sustainably and with popular consent. The Report identifies eight priorities for reform to achieve this. The key points we've selected from each priority are set out below:

- **Beauty first:** beauty and place making should be embedded prominently alongside sustainable development in the NPPF and local plans should embed this national requirement locally. Examples of poor and ugly schemes Councils have turned down should be celebrated as exemplars to encourage beautiful and popular place making.
- **Places not just houses:** we should be building real settlements and walkable mixed-use places. This will require a review of legal and tax regimes to better support a long-term stewardship model of land and infrastructure investment and moving more of the democracy upstream from development control to plan-making.
- **Regenerative development:** developments should make places better, not minimise harm. Local policy should encourage, wherever possible, the redevelopment of retail parks and large format supermarkets into mixed 'finely-grained' developments of homes, retail and commercial uses which can support and benefit from public transport.
- **Early collaboration not confrontation:** there is enormous scope to encourage the use of deliberative engagement and design processes to facilitate wider community engagement in design solutions throughout the plan-making and development control process.
- **A level playing field:** urgent need to reduce planning risk to allow for small firms and other market entrants and innovators to act as developers within a more predictable planning framework. This needs to be accompanied by a greater probability of enforcement, if rules are broken, with stricter sanctions.
- **Growing beautifully:** mixed-use and 'gentle density' settlement patterns around real centres which benefit from the advantages of lower density are often the best ways to secure consent whilst also developing in more sustainable land use patterns. The planning system should strongly encourage these. Evidence gathered by the Commission also strongly suggests that car dominance needs to be tackled when designing places.

- **Learning together:** there is a need to invest in and improve the understanding and confidence of some planners, officials, highways engineers and local councillors in a number of identified place-making and design topics. There is also an urgent need for more high-quality planning, landscape and urban design skills within local authorities.
- **Making beauty count:** Highways, housing and planning teams in central government and councils should have objective measures for wellbeing, public health, beauty and nature recovery in their key parameters. We should be measuring quality and outcomes as well as quantity.

It should be kept in mind that this is an interim report, and the above proposals are not yet fully formed.

The Final Report

This interim report has set out the Commission's work to date. Commissioners are aiming to prepare and submit the final report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government by the end of 2019.