

# INTRODUCTION



This report focuses on new suburban and rural housing, including urban extensions, suburban infill and completely new settlements. It aims to inform and inspire those who may be planning, designing, delivering or hoping to inhabit new developments, including the latest generation of garden towns and villages. It includes guidance and case studies showing how to create genuinely distinctive and popular places. In doing so we hope it will help foster a positive perception of new development that can in turn help smooth the path for boosting housing supply.

Our report is a positive response to housing minister Kit Malthouse's challenge to architects to help Britain achieve the government's ambitious housing targets by "building the homes the next generation deserves". Writing in the *Architects' Journal* in January 2019, he said: "If you get the design right - the scale, the context, the fitness - communities will feel enhanced and respected, and will lay down their petitions and placards."

Our report is also intended to support and complement Sir Oliver Letwin's *Independent Review of Build Out Rates* (October 2018) and the RIBA's response, published in the same month, *The Ten Primary Characteristics of Places Where People Want to Live*.

Unlike the RIBA document, this report does not aim to provide a comprehensive primer on placemaking. Rather, we concentrate on key aspects of design and aim to show in more detail 'what good looks like'. Our report begins with a chapter explaining the idea of local distinctiveness and why it is important in the context of boosting housing supply. In the following chapters we cover some of the essential themes to achieving this distinctive sense of place and quality. They are:

- Creating places which respond to their context
- Designing people-friendly streets and open spaces
- Crafting modern houses which feel like home
- Offering choice and diversity

Beyond the practical needs of comfort and convenience, people aspire to live in places which promote health, happiness and, that elusive concept, community. We also value a sense of place: that our neighbourhood, village, town or city has some special and positive characteristics that make it different from others.

The government certainly agrees. The rewritten National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published in July 2018 promotes community engagement as a means to understand the local context and instil new development with distinctive character. Every local plan and every urban design guide seem to feature the phrase 'local distinctiveness'.

In addition, in November 2018, the government launched the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. Chaired by the philosopher Sir Roger Scruton, its purpose is "to tackle the challenge of poor-quality design and build of homes and places across the country, and help ensure as we build for the future, we do so with popular consent." The authors of this report applaud the government's focus on quality, but caution that successful placemaking involves much more than stylistic preference. Our report contains case studies which show that successful responses to context can be more profound than architectural style alone.

Part of the ritual of achieving planning consent is demonstrating that proposals respond to the local context. Too often, this involves a formula of photographing a handful of the more characterful old buildings in the area and making superficial reference to them in a materials palette. Seductive imagery is used to steer bland proposals past the local planning committee.

These houses find buyers, not because they are well designed, but because they are well located and carefully priced in relation to the nearby second-hand stock. 'Local distinctiveness' is achieved, for example, by some timber cladding and a quaint fanlight. There is little joy.

So, how can we achieve genuine local distinctiveness? How can we create homes and places which tap into a more profound understanding of context and history, while also providing contemporary solutions which suit modern aspirations and lifestyles?

And how can we make great places, rooted in their context and offering choice to consumers, when there is growing pressure to adopt standardised production to double supply in a period of acute labour shortage and rising construction costs?

This report shows that it is possible to square these circles.