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Delivering design value: The housing design quality conundrum

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Executive summary

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About the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence

The UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) is a consortium of 14 institutions led by the University of Glasgow. The centre, which was established in August 2017, is a multidisciplinary partnership between academia, housing policy and practice. It produces evidence and new research focused on tackling the UK's housing problems at a national, devolved, regional, and local level. CaCHE is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Arts and Humanities Research Council and The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Project partners

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Report headlines

Background

Well-designed places have an enduring sense of place and are characterised by diversity in form, function and community.

Research has long shown that good design has a positive impact on health and wellbeing, the economy and environmental sustainability. As a result, the value of design is foregrounded in planning policy across the UK. Yet, the quality of new-build housing remains poor and design is consistently undervalued – we call this the *housing design quality conundrum*.

The research

This report examines the complex and meandering process of planning, designing and developing new homes and neighbourhoods through a series of case studies conducted in all four UK nations during 2019 and 2020.

Our aim was to understand why new homes and neighbourhoods are poorly designed and, using the evidence we collected, to make a series of recommendations about how the *status quo* might be changed.

Conclusions

The design quality of new homes and neighbourhoods across the UK remains stubbornly low: Our research found that new homes and neighbourhoods fail to meet the aspirations of the national planning policy statements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The responsibility for delivering design value is shared: The four UK governments, local authorities, housebuilders, and their consultants, are all accountable, in different ways, for allowing poorly designed places to be created.

Despite differences in policy emphasis and articulation, the four planning systems in the UK do not deliver better (or worse) design outcomes than each other: Our research found that housing and neighbourhood design is undervalued across the UK and, more often than not, planning decisions are driven by the need to achieve housing targets or to make a planning decision quickly and efficiently.

The barriers to design value are wide-ranging: They encompass the ways in which the four UK governments plan for new housing and the extent to which local authorities are prepared to foreground design as an issue of genuine local concern. There is also an endemic culture of deprioritising design in the housebuilding industry.

Recommendations

Our principal recommendation is that the four UK governments should consider adopting 'design value standards' that place neighbourhood urban form principles and layout parameters in regulation and embed the economic, social and environmental value of design at the heart of planning and housebuilding.

Our full list of 12 detailed recommendations for policy and practice can be read here. To summarise:

The housebuilding industry must stop receiving a 'free pass' on design: It must be held better to account by the planning systems in all four nations.

Good design should be cast as a crucial public good: The responsibility to deliver well-designed places must be understood as a shared responsibility between the public and private sector.

Future planning reforms must put design at their heart: The four UK governments must do more to translate positive policy rhetoric on design into actionable, measurable and well-funded design governance solutions that lead to the creation of sustainable and enduring places.

Executive summary

Introduction: the housing design quality conundrum

Well-designed places have an enduring sense of place and are characterised by diversity in form, function and community.

Good quality design positively impacts health and wellbeing (Jackson, 2003; Kleinert and Horton, 2016; Royal Town Planning Institute, 2020; Scott, 2020; White et al., 2013), the economy (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, 2016; Savills, 2016) and environmental sustainability (Carmona, 2019; Frumpkin et al., 20-4; Hong et al., 2014).

The 'value' of design is foregrounded in UK planning policy, yet the quality of new-build housing remains poor and the value of design is under appreciated – we call this the *housing design quality conundrum* (see Chapter 1).

Contribution of 'Delivering design value'

This research uniquely examines housebuilding and design value in all four nations of the UK.

We hope our research findings will influence current and future reforms to planning policy in the four nations, while encouraging change in the housebuilding industry.

Design value

This report builds on an evidence review by members of the research team called *Design Value at the Neighbourhood Scale* (Serin et al., 2018). It defined 'design value' and reported that it is typically framed through the lens of the 'triple bottom line' of sustainability (see 1.2).

> ***Value*** is typically understood as the measurable worth of something. Design value combines all of the values derived from a place, whether they are financial (exchange value) or more socially and culturally grounded (use or aesthetic value).
>
> (Serin et al., 2018)

Research aims and objectives

We aimed to investigate the extent to which design is valued (or undervalued) during the various stages of planning, designing and developing new homes and neighbourhoods.

Our research questions and objectives focused on understanding the cultural conditions and expertise needed to deliver design value by identifying the points in the planning, design and development process where a commitment to design can lead to higher quality homes and neighbourhoods (see 1.3).

Existing perspectives on design and housebuilding

Chapter 2 explores existing research on the theory and practice of housebuilding. From this review of the literature, we identified a series of gaps that informed the development of the research questions (see 1.3).

The pursuit of housing design quality is clearly established in the planning policies of the four UK nations, but evidence on the implementation of these policies, particularly in the last decade, is very limited (see 2.1).

Local authorities can employ a range of 'design governance' tools to deliver design value (Carmona, 2016). Although scholarly work on this topic is well developed in the literature (e.g. Carmona, 2017, 2016; Punter, 2007; White, 2015), there is a lack of empirical evidence on the current practices and cultures of design governance (see 2.2).

The housebuilding sector is dominated by market-orientated volume housebuilders that rarely prioritise design (see 2.4 and 2.5). While research has been conducted on the value afforded to design by housebuilders, it is dated (e.g. Hooper and Nicol, 1999, 1999; Tiesdell and Adams, 2004).

Evidence on the practice of post-occupancy evaluation in the housing sector is growing (e.g. Hay et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2019) but it demands further scrutiny. (see 2.4).

Housebuilding occurs on both greenfield and brownfield land, the latter of which is widely considered to be riskier (Pediaditi et al., 2005). Existing research has more to say about brownfield than it does about greenfield housing development (see 2.6).

A range of 'supply side', 'demand side', and 'regulatory' actors are involved in housebuilding and the 'opportunity space' (Tiesdell and Adams, 2004) they are able to carve out during the planning, design and development process influences design value. An emerging focus in the literature on the fluid roles that public and private sector actors play in design governance merits further investigation (e.g. Linovski, 2019; Parker et al., 2018; Wargent et al., 2020) (see 2.7).

Methodology

Our research took the form of a multiple case study of ten carefully selected housing developments in five local authorities across the UK (see Chapter 3).

We approached the research with the understanding that five case studies would not be sufficient to capture the diversity of housing markets across the UK, however, we felt that in-depth study was important, and we were able to achieve diversity on a range of dimensions, as we outline below.

UK-wide study

To ensure that our research accounted for any national or regional variations, we examined housing developments in one local authority in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while, in England, we examined one local authority in the South and one in the North. This is because England is much larger than the other nations and there is a distinct north-south difference in the housing market (Meen and Nygaard, 2010).

Data sources

We used semi-structured interviews, documents and archives, and direct observation data, alongside key informant interviews. In total we conducted 48 semi-structured interviews with 54 participants, and 6 purposefully-sampled key informant interviews.

Data analysis

Five members of the research team each collected the data and conducted a phased analysis. The lead author of this report then undertook a content analysis of all the data and wrote up the findings.

Local authority selection process

We identified the five local authorities using housing delivery data from each UK local authority, aiming for case studies that would give us insights into typical new housing development rather than examples of best practice that are already well-versed in the literature.

Housing development selection process

We identified two housing developments in each of the local authorities using a set of key criteria and by examining planning applications online. We also sought advice from local authority officers via email.

Image © Stocker1970

Image © Duncan Andison

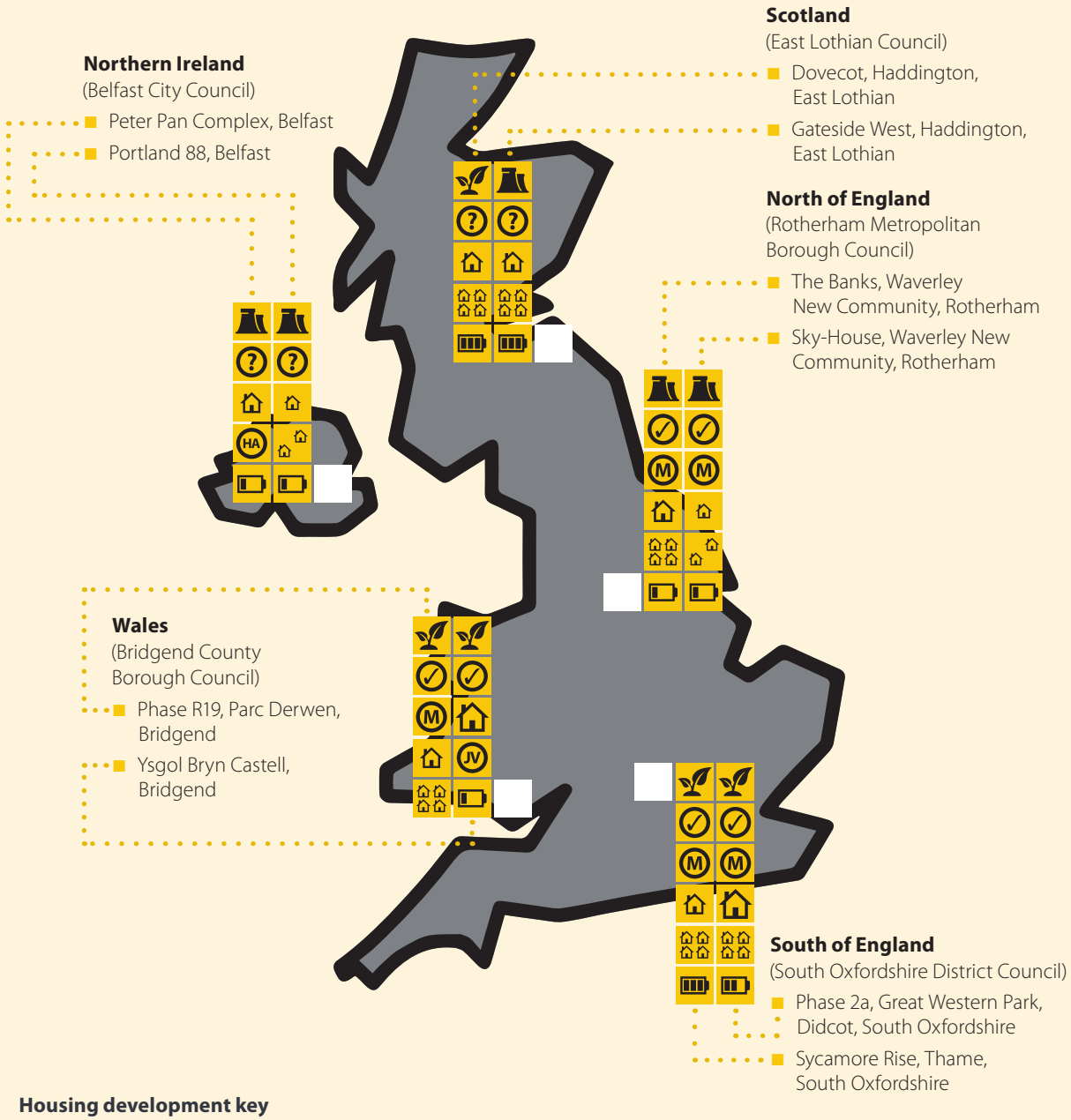
Typical housing design outcomes in the UK

The case studies

The housing developments we examined provided sufficient breadth and variety to offer a range of conclusions on housing design value (see Chapter 4).

We looked at housing developments in high land value areas and areas where land values are lower, and we identified sites that were either allocated for housing or where an application for housing development had been made on a speculative basis (see 4.6).

The local authorities and housing developments where we conducted primary research are highlighted on the following map.



Location of the case study local authorities and housing developments

Image © Gareth Clarke

Phase 2a at Great Western Park facing The Oval public space

Cultures of design practice

The first part of our research findings focus on how the participants we interviewed conceptualised design and explores how design influences the way decisions in their respective organisations are made (see Chapter 5).

Different actors perceived 'good design' in various ways, but our interview participants in local authorities, private consultancy and the housebuilding industry, largely shared in the view that well-designed places are shaped by human needs (see 5.1).

Achieving a 'sense of place' was widely discussed by a range of regulatory and supply-side actors. Some participants also stressed that 'aesthetic' concerns should come second to strategic urban design objectives (see 5.1).

> "What we're trying to do is create legibility, create a structure to the neighbourhood, so we're looking at gateways, we're looking at primary routes. …I think [a] good neighbourhood obviously [has] legibility, structure to the street scene, high quality design on gateways and ....corners."
>
> **Rotherham 1 Planning Officer interview**

Overall, participants understood the social and environmental value of design, and more than one referred to the 'holistic' role that design should play in the planning and development of new housing (see 5.2).

Our participants had quite a sophisticated understanding of design, although we did observe differences (see 5.2):

- Local authority officers tended to be outward looking in their definition of design and were concerned about how a scheme might fit into a wider area.
- Housebuilders and their planning consultants were more inward looking and were motivated by the external appearance of their housing products within the neighbourhood/ development setting.
- Many of the architects and designers we spoke to bridged these two perspectives, although their conceptualisation of design was framed by their specialist professional training.

Images © Tom Kenny

Example of road layout and house types used at Sycamore Rise, Thame

Numerous participants provided examples of where design value had been ignored and where efforts at design governance had largely failed, and participants rarely spoke about the role of ecology in delivering sustainable places (see 5.3).

Some of the local authority officers we spoke to operate with the knowledge that their ability to shape design outcomes is often constrained by processes beyond their control (i.e. housing delivery target setting and planning appeal decisions) and which occur long-before their involvement in shaping local policy or assessing the design merits of a particular housing development (see 5.4).

A number of local authority officers we interviewed viewed design governance through a lens of risk. They were concerned that developers would not build in their local authority if design conditions were imposed and also worried that refusing planning permission on design grounds would lead to an appeal where their decision would be overturned (see 5.5).

The challenge of siloed decision-making in local authorities was mentioned by a number of our research participants, some of whom noted that officers struggle to take actions outside of their immediate area of specialisation (see 5.6).

Highway design and adoption was an area of acute frustration for many participants and differing interpretations of safety and appropriateness appear to prevail between planning, design and highways officers (see 5.6).

Across the four nations, two of the most significant roadblocks to better design governance were a lack of resources and the retention of specialist employees, including urban designers. These pressures can result in contradictory advice being offered to housebuilders (see 5.7).

Many participants spoke of the importance of training officers and local councillors in design, and also mentioned that local authorities increasingly rely on private sector expertise to plug design skills gaps (see 5.8).

> "I remember we lost half of our department [after austerity measures introduced post-2010 ....I'm afraid collectively you just have to accept that there are less people ....And, I'm afraid you lose years and years of skills and experience, and those people, once they leave local government, they don't come back."
>
> **Bridgend 11 Planning Officer**

We found that housebuilders are not necessarily disinterested in design, but some are more prepared to make design investments than others. Participants across our case studies reported that larger housebuilders tend to be driven by a profit-focused model and are motivated by identifying 'the path of least resistance' to gaining planning permission (see 5.9).

Housebuilders' focus on profit reinforces the use of standard house types because they deliver economies of scale, especially in places where the housing market is weak (see 5.10).

Image © Flora Samuel

Image © Tom Kenny

Standard house types around the UK

Private sector design consultants play an important role throughout the process of planning, designing and developing new neighbourhoods and are centrally involved in delivering successful planning applications for housebuilders (see 5.11).

We found that private consultants also undertake work for the public sector and produce design policies and guidance for local authorities that might otherwise have been produced by in-house local authority experts (see 5.11).

Image © Gareth James

Image © Tom Kenny

Standard house types around the UK

When is 'design value' delivered and when is it not?

The second part of our research findings set out the critical points for delivering design value in the planning, design and development process for new housing (see Chapter 6). We have mapped what we consider to be the 'critical points for intervention' in the diagram on page xxiii and we have characterised these points as either being 'upstream', 'midstream' or 'downstream' in the often lengthy and meandering process of planning, designing and developing new housing.

National planning policy and legislation in the four nations: Opinions were mixed about the influence of upstream national planning policy produced by the four UK national governments on housing design outcomes at the local level. Some participants stated that national policies that apply in their respective local authority play a critical role in setting a 'design benchmark'. Others held a contrary view and variously remarked that, across the four nations, national design policies are weak and ineffective (see 6.1).

Images © Gareth James

House types and streetscape at Dovecot, Haddington, East Lothian

Local authority plan making and guidance: Local plan site allocations were said to play a key role in shaping housing design outcomes upstream, and many local authority officers referred to the role that local plans play in 'setting the tone' for new development. A number of participants also stated that the most significant roadblocks to design quality at the local level were housing delivery targets (see 6.2).

> "I think it's often left to the private sector of putting the sites forward and the kind of sifting process. I think local authorities do need to….be more proactive…actually saying: how are we going to grow? And, identify the areas where they want to grow. Rather than putting out this call for sites and then using a spreadsheet approach of sifting the sites….I think we need to think about that process and adjust…[it]…because I don't think it leads to the best possible development we can have."
>
> **S. Oxfordshire 10 P2 interview**

Housing development viability assessments: For housebuilders, 'development viability' is perhaps the single most important upstream consideration in the housebuilding process. Some participants noted that developers tend to keep viability assessments confidential, thus making it difficult for local authorities to gauge how much to push developers to invest in design (see 6.3).

Pre-application discussion: Numerous participants said that the pre-application stage of the planning process, the last upstream point in the wider planning, design and development journey for new housing, is a critical moment for design value. This is because housebuilders can demonstrate what a viable scheme might look like, and local authorities can apply their design policies and establish their design priorities for the site in question (see 6.4).

Engaging with local people: Many of the participants we spoke to downplayed the role of community engagement in shaping housing design outcomes. It typically occurs too far downstream in the process of planning, designing and developing new housing (see 6.5).

> "Sometimes we do go through the pre-application process, we do give the general place-making advice of all these different components of how the development should work and sometimes we're just routinely ignored. They'll just come in with the development that they want to put on the ground, rather than a development that we've advised might be a bit more successful."
>
> **East Lothian 1 Planning Officer P2 interview**

Outline planning permission and site masterplanning: Our participants widely acknowledged that outline planning permission[1] is a critical moment for delivering design value. It sits midstream in the process of planning, designing and delivering new homes and establishes both the principle of development and the anticipated design language of a scheme. On larger schemes, outline permission is typically granted on the condition that a site masterplan is produced in advance of more detailed planning application(s) submitted downstream in the planning process. Downstream 'value engineering' was said to be easier to avoid on larger sites where tools like a masterplan are deployed (see 6.6).

> "…the masterplans and the design codes and the frameworks need to be very flexible, certainly…we have changed the Waverley masterplan, not fundamentally, but we have changed it probably about seven or eight times in the last ten years. And that is to reflect market demands; to reflect changing demand for different types of housing,...changes on the ground and different ways of thinking. So, for me, the masterplan has to be very flexible and the planning consent has to allow the masterplan to change over time."
>
> **Rotherham 4 Landowner interview**

[1] Planning-Permission-in-Principle in Scotland

Planning obligations: Planning obligations are used to ensure that new development provides wider public benefits and contributes towards the functioning of the surrounding area. Although planning obligations are finalised downstream in the planning, design and development process, some participants noted that negotiations on these issues can often begin upstream and with limited transparency (see 6.7).

Full planning permission and reserved matters: Our research participants had differing views on the extent to which design value was influenced by the downstream process of gaining full planning permission or the conclusion of reserved matters. The main distinction was that issues of urban design are usually finalised midstream during outline planning permission, while more detail-orientated design decisions, such as housing typologies and material choices, tend to be treated as 'reserved matters' further downstream (see 6.8).

Construction: Although most strategic design decisions have been made by the time a housing development goes on site, there are still day-to-day decisions that impact design value. Sometimes these are made with limited design oversight (see 6.9).

Post-occupancy evaluation: We also found that post-occupancy evaluation, the very last downstream stage in the planning, design and development process for new housing, is rarely used. Our participants did not refer to monitoring design outcomes or to feeding lessons back into upstream plan-making processes (see 6.10).

> "Decisions will be [taken] by the developer and a construction team and the engineers and architects will still be involved. I think it's quite interesting in a scheme like [Great Western Park] how there are several sets of architects involved. There's one specific architect who does the layout, but they don't do the detailed design in the construction drawings. Then there comes another [architect] after they have got their planning consent, [and then] another set of architects come in who only focus on actually making it work. So there's a kind of split there. . ..because the architects who are [doing the] planning might think to a certain level of detail but might not actually look at the sub-level changes. . ..I think on a development like this, there are so many parties involved, that it is really tricky."
>
> **S. Oxfordshire 10 Design Consultant P2 interview**

NATIONAL POLICY & LEGISLATION

Goal: National policies can play a critical role in setting a 'design benchmark' for local authorities to follow.

Barriers to design value:
National policies that support well-designed places are easily overlooked and housing delivery targets often take precedence over design.

DEVELOPMENT VIABILITY

Goal: To establish whether a housing development is viable on a particular piece of land.

Barriers to design value:
Housebuilders are very focused on profitability and often exhibit little interest in design. This can be difficult to overcome, especially if local authority officers have a limited understanding of property markets.

ENGAGING LOCAL PEOPLE

Goal: To collect general feedback from local people on both the vision and intention of planning policy and detailed feedback on the scope of proposed development.

Barriers to design value:
Community engagement typically occurs too late in the planning process for new housing and few opportunities are offered for 'bottom up' decision-making or co-design.

PLANNING OBLIGATIONS

Goal: Planning obligations are used to ensure that new development provides wider public benefits and contributes towards the functioning of the surrounding area.

Barriers to design value:
Negotiations between local authorities and housebuilders about the scope and value of planning obligations can occur with limited transparency.

CONSTRUCTION

Goal: Completion of a housing development on time and within budget.

Barriers to design value:
Day-to-day design decisions made during construction are sometimes taken with limited design oversight and there is often a lack of post-permission scrutiny by local authorities.

LOCAL PLANS & GUIDANCE

Goal: Local plans and guidance can be used to 'set the tone' for discussions and negotiations with housebuilders about a proposed development.

Barriers to design value:
Local authority officers can be overwhelmed by the plans and guidance they are expected to enact and sometimes offer conflicting advice to housebuilders. This is exacerbated by the fact that many local authorities have limited resources.

PRE-APPLICATION DISCUSSION

Goal: Discussions before a planning application is submitted allow housebuilders and local authorities to explore what a viable scheme might look like and can lead to a series of shared design priorities.

Barriers to design value:
The advice offered to housebuilders during pre-application discussions can sometimes fall on deaf ears or occur after a housebuilder has already determined the scope and viability of a proposed development.

OUTLINE PERMISSION & SITE MASTERPLANNING

Goal: Outline permission is used to establish the basic design principles for a development. The production of a design masterplan can be made a condition of permission (especially on larger sites).

Barriers to design value:
Outline permission is often awarded to poorly designed schemes in a bid to stop housebuilders choosing to develop elsewhere or to avoid a planning appeal. Masterplan can often be poorly enforced or altered significantly.

FULL PERMISSION & RESERVED MATTERS

Goal: If awarded, full permission or reserved matters establishes the detailed design parameters of a housing development (i.e. house types and materials).

Barriers to design value:
Local authorities often lack the confidence to refuse a planning application on design grounds. This sends a message to supply-side actors in the housebuilding industry that delivering design value is a low policy priority.

POST-OCCUPANCY EVALUATION

Goal: An opportunity to collect the views of new residents and evaluate the design quality of a new development.

Barriers to design value:
Post-occupancy evaluation is rarely used to critically assess new housing developments and the outcomes are rarely monitored or fed back to earlier stages of the planning process.

OPPORTUNITY FOR FEEDBACK

Delivering design value: critical points of intervention

Download a high resolution version of this image here

Recommendations and conclusions

Our research concludes by highlighting the significant barriers to delivering housing design value in the UK and makes 12 recommendations for policy practice. We have characterised the significant barriers to design value as a 'leaky bucket'. This is illustrated on the following page.

The principal recommendation emerging from our research is that **housing and neighbourhood design principles should be regulated by the four UK governments in 'design value standards'** that embed the economic, social and environmental value of design at the heart of housebuilding and design governance.

Significant barriers to design value

- The design policies of the four national governments and local authority design policy and guidance is frequently overlooked because other policy objectives take precedence over design, and environmental design value is rarely foregrounded.
- A chronic lack of resourcing and a scarcity of design skills in local authorities means that design governance is severely restricted and design policy and guidance is not always enforced.
- Design priorities vary between local authority officers, and siloed organisational decision-making limits the ability of local authorities to make decisions that prioritise design value.
- Engagement with local communities about new housing development tends to be 'top down' and poorly implemented. The positive impacts of community participation associated with new build housing are not well understood.
- Housebuilders producing 'everyday' housing in the UK have a razor-sharp focus on profitability and exhibit a limited interest in delivering design value.
- Housebuilders are rarely prepared to make design investments in areas where land values are low. This leads to a culture of low expectations in local authorities where land values are below average.
- Masterplans and other formal design governance tools can help to deliver design value, but they are often poorly enforced or altered to such a degree that they become ineffective.
- Due to resourcing challenges, there is often a lack of scrutiny by local authorities over decisions taken on-site after planning permission has been granted.
- Post-occupancy evaluations of new housing developments are rarely conducted in the UK, and local authorities do not have the resources to adequately monitor design outcomes.

(See 7.2 for further detail)

The leaky bucket of design value

12 recommendations for policy and practice

1. **Housing and neighbourhood design principles should be regulated by the four UK governments in 'design value standards'.**
2. **Creating well-designed places should be a core national planning objective in each of the four nations.**
3. **Volume housebuilders should be held to account on design matters.**
4. **The four UK governments should encourage and support a more diverse housebuilding industry.**
5. **Housing land allocations should be based on sustainable development principles and prioritise brownfield development.**
6. **Design governance leadership should be championed in local authorities.**
7. **Local plans should be more place-based and outcome-focused.**
8. **Masterplans should be produced and enforced for larger housing sites.**
9. **Genuine community engagement should be undertaken early in the planning and design process where it can have the most influence.**
10. **Design and construction procurement decisions should be more design driven.**
11. **Post occupancy analysis and development monitoring should be used much more widely.**
12. **The four governments should provide more direct funding for design governance, especially at the local level.**

(See 7.3 for further detail)

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