Building Beautiful Council Houses

Policy Exchange

A 35-Point Blueprint for a New Generation of Superlative British Social Housing

Ike Ijeh

Foreword by Rt Hon Ruth Kelly

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About the Author

Ike Ijeh is Head of Policy Exchange's Housing, Architecture & Urban Space Unit. He is also a practising architect, writer and author of two books on architecture, Designing London: Understanding the Character of the city (Lund Humphries, 2020) and The 50 Greatest Architects: The People Whose Buildings Have Shaped Our World (Arcturus, 2021). He was also a co-author of Architecture Beyond Criticism: Expert Judgement and Performance Evaluation (Routledge, 2014). As well as establishing his own architecture practice and founding original London architecture walks provider London Architecture Walks, Ike has been an architecture critic for two of the UK's leading architectural trade titles and has lectured on the subject extensively in the UK and abroad. He was the winner of the 2018 International Building Press (IBP) Architecture Writer of the Year and received an IBP commendation in 2020. He was also nominated for the Professional Publishers Association (PPA) Writer of the Year Award in 2016 and has been on the judging panels of some of the UK's foremost architecture awards. He has sat on the design review panels of two London boroughs and is a former trustee of the Hackney Historic Buildings Trust.

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Endorsements

"I welcome the central message of this paper, as part of Policy Exchange's longstanding Building Beautiful programme. There is no solution to the housing crisis unless we are committed to building beautiful, inspiring, and affordable homes. If the recommendations of this report are properly considered, a new generation of council housing can make a meaningful contribution to fostering both strong communities, and national economic growth."

Kevin Hollinrake MP, Conservative Party Chair, Former Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

"I share the ambitions of this Policy Exchange paper. In the rush to increase the quantity of social housing, we must not ignore the need to ensure that new homes are built to a high quality - and that they adhere to Policy Exchange's long advocated Building Beautiful thesis. It is essential that we build council housing stock that enhances and serves communities - for generations to come. I commend the recommendations of this report and believe that the creation of council housing as set out by this paper's 35-Point design blueprint, would make a difference to the lives of the people I am here to serve."

David Simmonds MP, Shadow Minister for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities and MP for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner

"Having experienced homelessness in my teens, and after spending 10 years as a councillor working hard to deliver new council homes - I believe strongly than ever that everyone has a right to a decent, affordable, and high-quality home. As set out so clearly in this paper, we should be building places that are tenure blind, where affordable housing is built to the very highest standards and people have high quality, beautiful home, that communities feel pride in. We need to redouble efforts to bring about a new generation of council homes, to end the growing crisis of homelessness and temporary accommodation use which is blighting the life chances of far too many families."

Danny Beales MP, Labour MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip and member of the Health and Social Care Committee

"This is a timely contribution to the growing discussion around sustainable place-making which, given the new Government's housing ambitions, will prove crucial to ensure we build communities where people can put down roots and thrive. 'Building Beautiful' should not be the preserve of private developments, and this paper expertly sets out ideas and sentiments close to my own; how good quality council housing can form the foundation for the neighbourhoods of the future. This paper is a must read for anyone with a passion for social housing."

Margaret Mullane MP, Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

"The shortage of housing that is affordable to rent in the UK is dire, and year on year gets even worse as the building of new homes is outpaced by a rising population. This is a situation that needs to be urgently addressed by government to provide genuinely deliverable solutions. A significant increase in the creation of Council Homes is surely the most efficient way to start to address the problem. This paper outlines a very timely critique of why we got here and then offers informed, constructive advice on how our local authorities can act, using their own assets, to make a rapid impact on this housing crisis".

Matthew Lloyd, Founder of Matthew Lloyd Architects and designer of Camden Council's Bourne Estate regeneration project

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Foreword

By Rt Hon Ruth Kelly, former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Building more council homes is likely to sit at the centre of any credible strategy to tackle the current housing crisis, not least because it is one measure to increase supply over which the Government has some control. But this paper sets out a number of other practical reasons why the Government should consider a serious council house building strategy, rooted both in affordability and personal and community identity. Council houses, it argues, must not only be built, they must also be of high quality.

Starting with affordability, the paper argues that the UK's annual housing benefit bill is expected to balloon from just under £25bn currently to over £70bn in 2050.It would be a far more effective use of public money instead to invest in new council housing stock as it would secure more socially-rented units as long-term public assets and ultimately reduce massive Government expenditure on housing benefit. Such a venture would reverberate throughout our economy. As previous Policy Exchange reports have so powerfully articulated, more housing naturally leads to more economic growth and this in turn generates more jobs, more public transport, more infrastructure, more investment and ultimately more prosperity.

Concentrating these benefits on the poorest in society, as council housing has the innate ability to do, could be a transformational and historic fiscal intervention that fundamentally rebalances our economy for future generations. It would do so by galvanising social mobility and affording those on the lowest incomes the confidence, means and opportunity to claim a firmer stake in society and make a more dynamic contribution to its economic productivity.

Even more importantly, this paper argues, council housing is not just an economic asset, it is an intrinsic part of how we view ourselves as a society and the social and urban values we seek to prioritise within it. Simply building more council houses is not enough and British social history of the mid-20th century is littered with examples of how the well-intentioned council housing and estates not only failed disastrously but exacerbated the very social problems they sought to resolve.

We must instead ensure that the quality of this new generation of council houses is of the highest possible standard. Not only will this prevent future repetitions of the wave of demolition of 1960s and 1970s council housing with which we are now all too familiar. But it will deliver

the best possible chance of securing new council housing that will become a liveable, resilient and sustainable long-term public asset. Not only would this ease the housing crisis but it would honour the proud and enduring legacy of early English public housing models by enhancing the social and physical fabric of future generations too.

The design strategy by which this can be achieved is included in this groundbreaking and indispensable new paper from Policy Exchange. For the first time, this report has brought together the key design tools and ingredients on which an exemplary new generation of British council housing can be built. As this paper explores in illuminating detail, securing this legacy means council housing that does not merely meet targets or satisfy regulations but revitalises neighbourhoods and strengthens communities.

It means tenure blind developments that promote mixed communities and facilitate greater social interaction between different groups. It means social housing that is not conceived as autonomous socio-economic communes but fully integrated into its surrounding streets and communities. It means housing that promotes good citizenship and discourages anti-social behaviour. It means richer streetscapes, more active frontages, more visual variety and a more welcoming and inviting public realm. And significantly, it means council housing that fully embraces the core principle of beauty that Policy Exchange's Building Beautiful programme has been such a valiant advocate for.

But perhaps this paper's most sage advice comes in it actively demonstrating that these coveted design assets need not come at exorbitant cost to the public purse, a key consideration in our straitened fiscal climate. Instead, this paper proves convincingly that beauty and quality are more effectively summoned by conscious design choices than they are by generous project budgets.

This critical understanding helps wrench beauty from being solely a preserve of the rich to being an egalitarian human and social commodity to which we are all entitled, even the poorest in society. In making this argument and in using council housing as the vehicle to carry it, Policy Exchange has proposed a novel solution to the housing crisis based on a strategic democratisation of beauty that has the unique potential to both revitalise our built environment and boost our economy at the same time.

Executive Summary

This paper recommends the construction of a new generation of 100,000 beautiful, high-quality council homes in England and Wales a year. This paper welcomes the Governement's recent commitment to spending £39 billion on the Affordable Homes Programme over 10 years and ensuring that at least 180,000 of the anticipated 300,000 homes will deliver will be ringfenced for social rent. But with this providing potentially 18,000 social housing units per year over the next ten years, we believe the Government can and must go much further.

While many lay the blame for the current housing crisis at the feet of Right to Buy, the fact remains that housebuilding numbers have collapsed over the past 40 years and this has been acutely felt in the failure to replenish our council housing stock.

Throughout the 13-year New Labour administration from 1997 to 2010, a total of 7,870 council houses were built in Britain. Yet this is fewer council houses than the Thatcher government built in just one single year, 1990, the year in which its 17,710 council house completions represented the *lowest* annual number of new social rent properties the 1979-1990 Thatcher Government ever provided[1].

This paper offers a 35-Point design blueprint for how Britain's council housing stock can be replenished in a manner that strengthens communities and enhances neighbourhoods and does not repeat the chronic mistakes that afflicted Britain's last council housing construction boom from the 1950s till the 1970s. This Government has committed to providing new social housing can be of the highest quality possible.

This paper therefore extends the central mission of the Building Beautiful programme, the pioneering policy initiative that has been at the centre of Policy Exchange's housing advocacy for much of the past decade and has previously helped shape Government housing policy during this period. As such, the paper fully aligns with previous reports, such as *Tall Buildings* (2024), *Better Places* (2023), *A School of Place* (2022) and *Building More, Building Beautiful* (2018), all of which have recognised that there can be no solution to the housing crisis unless it also involves a marked simultaneous increase in the quality as well as quantity of our homes and the neighbourhoods and places in which they are situated.

This paper now applies this mandate to council housing and theoretically details how many of the qualitative tests included in the Placemaking Matrix, (the pioneering placemaking performance measuring tool presented in *Better Places*) can be met within a social housing context.

This Executive Summary starts by analysing the socio-economic

1. MHCLG Live Table 241; https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-house-building

circumstances which make the council housebuilding programme it recommends necessary.

I: THE COUNCIL HOUSING PROBLEM

The Housing Crisis

The housing crisis remains arguably the most acute and intractable socio-economic crisis facing the United Kingdom today. Recent Governments have estimated that Britain needs to build up to 300,000 homes per year to meet current and anticipated demand[2]. This however is widely perceived by independent experts as being a bare minimum and other estimates, such as those contained within a report compiled earlier this year by the *Financial Times*, put the figure in excess of 500,000[3].

Regardless of the targets, the reality is that Britain is nowhere meeting any of them. 2023 saw more homes built in the UK than in any year of the previous decade. Yet the number completed was less than 250,000, significantly short of the most conservative estimate of the number we are said to need.

But the housing crisis is also one of affordability as well as supply. The average house in Britain today costs 65 times more than it did in 1970[4]. But wages have not risen by anything near the same rate. In 1970 the average house in London was four times higher than the average salary. Today it is fourteen times higher[5]. Incredibly, only the top 10% of London's earners could reasonably afford to pay for and finance a property valued at London's average house price of £510,000 with less than five years of income[6].

It is clear therefore that affordable housing needs to assume a significant quota of the new homes constructed if Britain is going to build itself out of the its housing crisis. But this too is not a straightforward remedy and has thus far had limited success. First many find the definition of affordable housing - officially set at no more than 80% of market rates – spurious in itself as this threshold only represents a marginal reduction on already hefty prices.

And secondly, despite Government investment in the Affordable Homes Programme, affordable housing has proved consistently difficult to deliver in meaningful numbers. London again provides a discouraging case in point. Its latest Affordable Homes Programme, run by the mayor but financed by central Government, aims to provide between 23,900 and 27,200 between 2021 and 2026, itself a reduction of the 35,000 initially sought. But as of August 2024, just 1,853[7] have been built meaning that while the scheme is almost two-thirds into its lifespan, it is 93% short of its target.

But even if this target was miraculously met, housing benefit still ensures that affordable housing exerts a monumental fiscal drag on public finances. Many of those who occupy affordable homes in the private sector qualify for housing benefit. But because rents, like house prices, have also reached historic highs, (rentals rose by 9% in the UK last year[8]

2. https://www.gov.uk/Government/publications/new-homes-fact-sheet-1-the-need-for-homes/fact-sheet-1-the-need-for-homes
3. https://www.ft.com/content/32846f68-52fd-40e1-9328-0fe6bb3b9c19
4. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/05/how-uk-house-prices-have-soared-ahead-average-wages
5. https://www.schroders.com/en-gb/uk/individual/insights/what-174-years-of-data-tell-us-about-house-price-affordability-in-the-uk/
6. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/bulletins/housingpurchaseaffordabilitygreatbritain/2022#:~:text=Download%20the%20data&text=Figure%206%20shows%20that:,times%20a%2090th%20percentile%20income
7. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/sadiq-khan-affordable-homes-housing-statistics-london-b2596188.html
8. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68620204

and 20% in London the previous year[9], both record highs) this is placing unprecedented pressure on the housing benefit budget.

Total spending on housing benefit payments was £24.8 billion in 2019-20[10]. But by 2050, if rents and population rise at their current rates, experts have predicted it will mushroom to £71bn[11]. This is bigger than Russia's entire annual defence budget[12]. Even worse, the bulk of it will be dispensed in the form of an indirect state subsidy to private landlords.

The Council House Solution

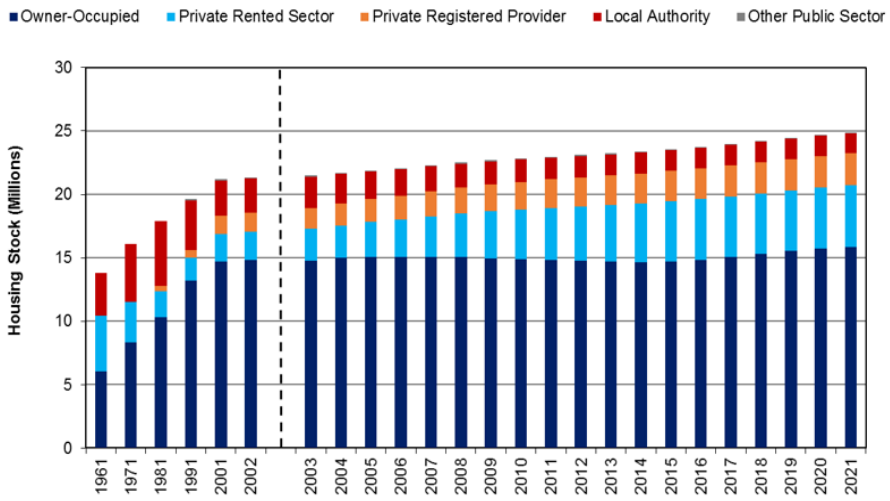
Therefore, the only economically and politically viable solution to both the supply and affordability predicaments that fester at the heart of the housing crisis is a significant increase in the amount of council housing Britain builds. This will not, in itself, solve the housing crisis entirely and must also be accompanied by significantly increased volumes of private sector housebuilding, strategies for which were recommended in the recent Policy Exchange paper *The UK's Broken Housing Market* (2024) and include strategic reforms to planning, tax and land assembly as well as demand-side measures.

But a new council housebuilding programme will ease pressure on demand by removing the most economically disadvantaged from the private rental market, thus freeing supply and easing the seemingly inexorable acceleration of rents. (Rents for social housing are generally 50% lower than private rates as opposed to the 20% saving affordable rents generally accrue).

Equally, it will ensure that public money currently spent subsidising private landlords through housing benefit can be better spent as a capital investment providing a new generation of council properties that, subject to appropriate Right To Buy restrictions, will remain a state asset in perpetuity. Equally, we have estimated that the construction of 100,000 council housing units this paper recommends could add almost £10bn to the economy during the life of this Parliament alone and create up to 140,000 jobs. This is on top of the significant savings it would accrue in the housing benefit budget.

UK council housing stock has declined catastrophically over the past half century. In 1969 council housing amounted to 28% all housing stock in England. In 2023 it was just 6%[13]. Right To Buy is commonly cited as the principal reason for the astonishing downtown but this does not tell the whole story. Right To But in itself would not have reduced stock had every council property sold been replaced with a newly built one. The real culprit is the collapse in council house construction. In 1954, under the pioneering leadership of Harold Macmillan as Housing Minister in the second Churchill Government, just under 70% of all new homes built in the UK that year were built by local authorities. In 2022, it was just under 2%[14].

9. https://www.landlordzone.co.uk/news/rent-rises-hit-20-in-london-last-year-reports-leading-lettings-agency
10. Department for Work and Pensions, "Benefits Expenditure and Case Load Tables", 2020
11. https://www.pbctoday.co.uk/news/planning-construction-news/social-housing-bill-71-billion-2050/48388/
12. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-doubles-2023-defence-spending-plan-war-costs-soar-document-2023-08-04/
13. https://www.gov.uk/Government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants
14. https://www.statista.com/statistics/746101/completion-of-new-dwellings-uk/



While this recent figure sounds paltry, it is a marked improvement on council house construction levels over the past 25 years. In 1999, with just 60 new local authority houses built across the entire country, they represented just 0.04% of the total new homes built in that year[15]. In 2013 the Coalition Government extended local authorities' Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap enabling them to borrow more funding to finance new housing. This sparked the first, albeit slender increases in council house construction in a generation, moves further encouraged when the HRA cap was abolished entirely in 2018. Both moves led directly to the modest resurgence in new council housing we are witnessing today.

This process culminated with the election of the new Labour Government this summer which committed to delivering "the biggest increase in social and affordable housebuilding in a generation."[16]

II: THE POLICY EXCHANGE RESPONSE

The Beautiful Council House Imperative

Now a new generation of British council housing is potentially on the horizon, this paper is committed to ensuring that it is of the highest built and design quality possible. The paper sets out a blueprint of 35 design points that, if followed, we believe can lead to new generation of beautiful and inspiring council homes. The blueprint is based on the seven principles below:

1. Making Council Housing Beautiful

This paper does not seek to impose a unilateral idea of what is beautiful on planners, residents, architects or local authorities but it does implore all stakeholders charged with the delivery of council housing to accept that beauty is important. Recent history has shown us the results of what happens when the state does not consider beauty to be important and the

15. https://www.gov.uk/Government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants

16. https://www.socialhousing.co.uk/news/labour-vows-to-deliver-biggest-increase-in-social-and-affordable-housebuilding-in-a-generation-86934

traumatic council housing legacy of much of the 1960s and 70s shows us that under these conditions it is the poor that suffer most. it is imperative that beauty is actively used not simply as tool to enhance the visual appearance of our society but to improve the homes and neighbourhoods of some of the poorest within it.

2. Making Council Housing Human

The most successful architecture is always that which appeals most closely to the human spirit and condition. Therefore, new council housing must first and foremost be people-focussed and must smartly deploy all of architecture's potential to trigger a positive emotional response. Determinants ranges from scale, colour and texture to space, intimacy and access. This humanistic approach is especially important considering council housing has inherited a historic context scarred by estates that revelled in inhumane, institutional detachment.

3. Making Council Housing Diverse

Cities are full of visual variety and council housing should be the same. Again, this principle seeks to avoid council housing's historic legacy of estates that relentlessly employed near-militaristic totalitarian repetition which served to crush the nuance, spontaneity and individuality that not only represents the human condition but generates the most liveable places.

4. Making Council Housing Places

Even today, council housing is too often associated with the buildings themselves rather than the places between them. But strong, secure communities and safe, thriving neighbourhoods are essential for council housing too to thrive too. No positive urban renewal is possible unless it has placemaking at its very heart and the guidelines in this paper consistently seek to ensure that the spaces between properties benefit from the same beauty and quality envisaged for new council homes themselves.

5. Making Council Housing Secure

Unfortunately some council housing is still associated with disproportionate occurrences of antisocial behaviour. While there are limitations to what design can reasonably do to stem such practices, (especially in surrounding areas) each design guideline contained within this paper is channelled through the ubiquitous prism of what it can do to help minimise crime.

6. Making Council Housing Affordable

There is a broad misconception that building beautiful is expensive and that the expense required to procure beautiful buildings makes the prospect of beautiful council houses a fiscal oxymoron. Nothing could be further from the truth. This paper will set out to prove that the intelligent utilisation of cost-neutral design modifiers such as scale, proportion and character can ensure that well-designed, high-quality council housing is

achievable without attracting an additional financial premium that would not be in place were beauty not being pursued.

7. Making Council Housing Available

It will be impossible to implement any of the above unless the Government makes true on its promise to realise Britain's biggest council housing building programme in a generation. The quantity must be delivered in order for the quality to be realised and new council housing must be delivered at a prodigious and meaningful scale if the beauty we maintain will emanate from it is to be capable of sparking a wider visible enhancement of our neighbourhoods and built environment.

We believe that underpinned by these seven guiding principles and the subsequent 35 guidelines included in this paper, modern British council housing can not only help ease the housing crisis and therefore promote national economic growth, but it can enhance the built environment not just for council tenants but for everyone in society.

This new generation of council housing is essential for two reasons: first, to avoid the mistakes made in the past and ensure that this new generation of housing makes a meaningful and positive contribution to Britain's urban fabric and civic infrastructure for centuries to come. And secondly, to prove that beauty, so often misinterpreted in recent times as an elitist vehicle for traditional pastiche, can be demonstrated to rejuvenate the lives and environments of some of the most economically disadvantaged and socially disenfranchised people in our society.

The 1950s and 60s was a period of prodigious council house construction with almost half the number of new homes being built in Britain in the late 1960s being built for and by local authorities. But half a century later many of these homes and estates have been or are in the process of being pulled down because they became totemic symbols of design failure, municipal mismanagement, antisocial malignancy and socioeconomic hopelessness.

Many of these problems came down to design and to this day in the minds of many, the words 'council estate' still summon a caustic cocktail of urban deprivation and dystopian collapse. Concrete eyesores, crumbling tower blocks, abandoned open spaces, threatening alleyways, smashed windows, graffiti, drugs, refuse, crime, all of which promoted a sinking social spiral that actively suppressed the feelings of ownership and responsibility on which the communal residential condition relies.

To be clear this was by no means not the fate of all 1960s and 70s council housing and there are many excellent examples of British municipal housing of the period which fostered strong communities and intense civic pride and continue to do so. But there are too many examples demonstrating the opposite to allow these exceptions to bend the rule.

In many ways, it was the *absence* of beauty that gave license to much of the civic corrosion this council housing left in its wake. Architecturally buoyed by a Modernist orthodoxy that deliberately discarded architectural

decoration and dismissed beauty as a reactionary relic from an elitist and traditional past, council houses from the mid to latter periods of the 20th century engorged themselves on the mechanistic utilitarianism and societal collectivism prescribed by the quasi-totalitarian ideals of Corbusier, Brutalism and post-war socialism to often thoroughly socially disengage themselves from the very human condition they were built to serve.

The reimposition of beauty is the way to reverse this disengagement and ensure that once again, council housing has a meaningful, intimate and positive relationship with its residents and with the wider social and urban environments it finds itself within. This will allow Britain's new generation of council housing to reclaim the proud tradition of late 19th century and early 20th century social housing which, unlike their post-war successors, were able to combine pioneering egalitarianism with established, traditional design principles.

Traditionalism is also an important subject within council housing. While as has already been stated this paper in no way intends to dictate traditional styles as the settled aesthetic for 21st century council housing and welcomes all styles that subscribe to good architecture, it is no accident that the popular conception of beauty that this paper wishes to apply to new social housing often falls within a traditional aesthetic. Equally, Policy Exchange's own extensive polling has consistently proven that traditional styles remain popular with those working-class communities most likely to occupy council housing.

Only 17% of socioeconomic groups DE thinking that new architecture should seek to challenge or shock its surroundings, a figure that rises to 31% amongst the AB socioeconomic group. Across all socioeconomic groups, 85% believed that newly built homes should fit in with their traditional surroundings[17]. The design guidelines in this paper are not determined by these findings but they are certainly cognisant of them.

The 35 points in this paper are split into three categories, Buildings, Public Realm and Typology. While there is no magic formula for good design, the paper hopes to set out good practice that designers, planners, stakeholders, politicians and developers can follow when seeking to deliver the highest possible design standards in social housing.

Scope

This paper recognises that while aesthetics is an essential ingredient of architectural success, there are other issues beyond beauty that will also hugely affect the degree to which council housing performs. These include funding, transport, education, infrastructure and local socioeconomic factors. While this paper is aware of these determinants it does not seek to adjudicate on them and confines its chief area of attention to beauty. This however is underpinned by the economic analysis provided in this Executive Summary, the Introduction and the Appendix.

17. Policy Exchange, *Building More, Building Beautiful* (2018)

Recommendations

1. Building 100,000 New Council Homes a Year

We believe the Government should extend its recently announced targets under the 2026-27 to 2035-36 phase of the Affordable Housing Programme[18] and commit to building at least 100,000 council homes a year and we maintain that the following recommendations will provide the fiscal and design means to do it. In 1979 there were 5.1 million council homes in England[19], today there are 1.5 million[20]. While it might be neither socio-economically feasible nor desirable to return social housing levels to historic highs, there is no question that a significant increase in the supply of council housing can play a major role in both solving the housing crisis and helping plug the chronic affordability deficit that helps sustain it.

2. A New National Design Guide for Council Housing

The first and currently only National Design Guide was published in 2019 and it provides "planning practice guidance for beautiful, enduring and successful places". These are based on ten abiding design characteristics identified as being essential for good design and placemaking. In anticipation of its new council house building programme, we propose the Government publishes a new national guide specifically for council housing and based on the 35-point blueprint included in this paper. This will also continue the intellectual lineage of the existing National Design Guide which was a recommendation of the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission. This was itself a recommendation of a previous Policy Exchange paper, the founding report of the same Building Beautiful programme that has generated this paper, *Building More, Building Beautiful* (2018).

3. New Requirement to Build to append Right to Buy

In order to ensure that this new generation of council housing stock is retained as a public asset in perpetuity, we propose the passing of primary legislation specifying that every council housing unit sold under the Right to Buy scheme automatically imposes a statutory Requirement to Build obligation requiring a new council housing unit be built as compensation. While this paper welcomes the Government's decision to allow councils to retain 100% of Right to Buy recipts[21] and to also exempt new council properties from Right to Buy eligibilty for 35 years[22], we maintain that a simple numerical commitment to sustaining council house stock levels

18. https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-02/hcws771
19. MHCLG, Live Tables, Table 104: Table 104 Dwelling stock: by tenure, England (historical series)
20. MHCLG, Live Tables, Table 100: Number of Dwellings by Tenure and district, England, 2023 [p]
21. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/retained-right-to-buy-receipts-and-their-use-for-replacement-supply-guidance
22. https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-02/hcws771

is the most effective way to maintain Right to Buy privileges without additional undue depletion of social housing supply.

4. Local Authorities Required to Incorporate Local Design Guides for Council Housing into Local Plans

As well as the national guidance contained in the new National Design Guide for Council Housing, local authorities will be required to tailor its recommendations to their own local circumstances and incorporate this amended guidance into their Local Plans. The new Government has signalled a more interventionist approach with regard to driving local plan adoption. Incorporation of Local Design Guides for Council Housing will be an indication that plans are "sufficiently ambitious", in the words of the Secretary of State for Housing Angela Rayner[23], to avoid central Government action.

5. Permission In Principle Status for Compliant Affordable Housing Proposals

Any proposed affordable housing development progressed by the private sector or housing associations that can demonstrate adherence to either the National or Local Design Guides for Council Housing can benefit from Planning Permission in Principle status **for the architectural design elements** of the scheme in question. While this will leave other elements of the proposals still open to normal planning scrutiny processes (parking, sustainability, flood risk, drainage etc.) this will potentially represent a significant time and cost saving on normal application determination periods thereby increasing the viability of affordable housing schemes and encouraging the inclusion of affordable housing in private developments.

6. Increased Capital Grant Funding for councils adopting National or Local Design Guides for Council Housing

This paper acknowledges that the 2018 abolition of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) cap has led to increased levels of council house construction and also welcomes the Government's recent commitment to implementing innovative new funding measures such as low-interest loans the reintroduction to rent covergence[24]. However, local authorities still report significant financial barriers obstructing the delivery of significant numbers of new council homes. One of the most onerous is limited capital grant funding. We recommend that adoption of National or Local Design Guides for Council Housing makes councils eligible for increased capital grant funding to finance the construction of more council homes. Additionally, over time, if councils can demonstrate a material uplift in the quality of its new council housing, this too enables them to apply for a further increased tier of capital grant funding. Both measures should provide a clear fiscal incentive for delivering quality and beauty.

23. https://www.lgcplus.com/services/regeneration-and-planning/rayner-will-not-hesitate-to-intervene-in-local-plans-as-new-criteria-proposed-01-08-2024/#:~:text=Regeneration%20and%20planning-,Rayner%20'will%20not%20hesitate'%20to%20intervene%20in%20local,plans%20as%20new%20criteria%20proposed&text=Deputy%20prime%20minister%20Angela%20Rayner,she%20expects%20to%20do%20so.

24. https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-02/hcws771

7. Infrastructure Levy used to raise funds construction and maintenance of new council houses

We propose the introduction of a compulsory, flat rate and locally set version of the new Infrastructure Levy to help local authorities self-finance the construction of new council homes. Not only would this provide a more reliable stream of increased revenue for new council housing than that collected through the existing Community Infrastructure Levy (which councils need only enforce voluntarily and which cannot be used to deliver affordable homes unless planning obligations agreed under Section 106 are already in place) but it would also ensure that councils need not rely on private developers to increase their affordable housing supply, a process which potentially slows down delivery of private housing and whose obligations developers are often able to tactically evade. This mechanism will also leave councils in a strengthened and more flexible fiscal position to enter into the commercial partnerships and joint ventures with developers or contractors (especially SMEs) that might be better equipped to deliver new council housing within specialised local contexts than would be the case were the local authority themselves acting as the sole builder.

8. New Mandatory Social Housing Modules for Architectural Education

We recommend that the Government collaborates with the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to introduce new mandatory social housing modules as part of architectural education. As determined by the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission and Policy Exchange's own *A School of Place* paper (2022), increasing skills in architectural design and placemaking is essential for improving the quality of the built environment. Equally, while not every architectural student will eventually specialise in the social housing sector in their careers, the subject area provides a good, general civic grounding in the broader role design plays in social altruism, socio-economic integration, community relations and professional empathy. While derived in this instance from a social housing context, these are skills pertinent to all sectors of architectural engagement and whose increased deployment has the potential to have a transformative effect on the quality of our urban fabric.

9. Public Land Intensification Pledge

As part of their Local Plans, local authorities will be required to identify underutilised sites on publicly-owned land that could be used for new council housing development. It is anticipated that the bulk of this land will be located on existing council estates and will comprise low-density elements such as garages, storage units and bungalows. Remedial design interventions could involve the construction of additional storeys on existing structures or the full replacement of low-rise blocks with mid-rise buildings. By this piecemeal targeting of under-developed land, it is hoped that both the supply and density of council housing can be incrementally increased without the significant capital expense of land

purchase. This is in line with the Government's recent commitment to "support regeneration schemes that provide a net increase in homes on a site and will allow a limited number of acquisitions."[26]

25. Salingaros, Nikos A., *A Theory of Architecture*, (2006) Umbau-Verlag

26. https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-02/hcws771

Introduction

For years, council housing has been the elephant in the room when it comes to solving Britain's housing crisis. Most, though not all observers, have accepted that the biggest obstacle to solving this most intractable of socioeconomic predicaments is ultimately one of insufficient supply.

Housing experts have estimated that Britain needs to be building more than 500,000 new homes a year to meet current and anticipated demand[27], in recent years the country has barely managed half that number. Between 1983 and 2021, Britain built 7.3 million, an increase in the stock of only 34%. By comparison France, which has a similar population, built 13.5 million new homes over the same period, a 56% expansion of the French housing stock[28]. Furthermore, it has been well over half a century since any British Government has built over 300,000 homes a year, the last time being under the Wilson Government of 1969-70[29].

The ability of low- or average-income earners to afford housing has also fallen in recent decades as a direct consequence of the constriction of supply. In 1970 the average London house price was four times greater than the average London salary[30]. Today it is fourteen times higher[31]. All of which suggests that the key to solving the housing crisis lies with increasing supply to make housing more affordable. And one of the most direct ways to achieve this is by building more council housing. Happily, this is an outcome the new Labour Government is fully committed to delivering and not only did it make it a central manifesto pledge before the general election but it is now the cornerstone of its signature housing policy of building 1.5 million homes in the life of this Parliament[32].

In 1979 there were 5.5 million social housing units in England, the majority of which were council houses. Today, after an intervening time period when house prices have risen exponentially, that figure has plummeted to around 3.8 million with council housing only comprising 1.5 million. Housing associations have undertaken some of the slack but even with these included, social housing stock (council and housing association combined) still only amounts to just over 4 million homes in the UK[33].

Since the turn of the century housing available for affordable rent (up to 80% of market levels) has played an increasing role within the UK housing sector too. But even this has not fully addressed the acute affordability deficit. Before 2011, most new affordable homes delivered were council houses but by 2022/23, this had fallen to just 15%[34].

Also, Treasury modifications to local authority spending limits introduced by the coalition Government in the early 2010s may have seen

27. https://www.ft.com/content/32846f68-52fd-40e1-9328-0fe6bb3b9c19

28. Policy Exchange, *The UK's Broken Housing Market*, (2024)

29. MHCLG, Live Tables, Table 104: Table 104 Dwelling stock: by tenure, England (historical series)

30. https://www.financialreporter.co.uk/income-to-house-price-ratio-more-than-doubles-since-the-70s.html#:~:text=As%20a%20result%2C%20the%20average,to%20climb%20the%20property%20ladder.

31. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/bulletins/housingaffordabilityinenglandandwales/2022

32. https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/just-announced-labour-will-build-1-5-million-homes-to-save-the-dream-of-homeownership/

33. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8963/

34. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8963/

a steady rise in council house construction since their nadir under the Blair and Brown Governments. Between 1997 and 2010 just 7,870 council homes were built. This is fewer council homes than the 17,710 council houses the Thatcher Government built in 1989-90, the year in which it built its fewest council properties on record[35]. But even with the welcome increases in their construction rates over the past decade, there needs to be a monumental increase in council house construction if the affordability conundrum at the crux of the housing crisis is going to be meaningfully addressed.

But the economics of council housing is just one aspect of the issue, another, equally thorny prospect is their aesthetics. Few words in the English language are more capable of summoning the social stigma and architectural disdain that the loaded juxtaposition of "council" and "estate" can herald. Decades of failed mass social housing projects have left an indelible stain on the national consciousness, a stain that has been further entrenched by the estate regeneration schemes that are now commonplace across the country and which usually stand as a polite pseudonym for the welcome demolition of some woe-begotten concrete residential dystopia-commune from the 1960s or 1970s.

It is important to note that not every council housing endeavour from this period was a failure by any means. Renowned developments like Patrick Hodgkinson's popular and endearingly civic Brunswick Estate in London's Bloomsbury (1967-72) or the spatial intimacy of Ungless and Neylan's Bishopsfield in Harlow, Essex (1967) reveal the human empathy and social engagement that was all too often lacking from the architecture of the period.

The vast, Brutalist Heygate Estate (1971-74) in Southwark, south London, once home to more than 3,000 people, typifies the nihilistic hopelessness that often afflicted British council housing developments of the 1960s and 70s

But in the main, and without disputing the pioneering social altruism

35. MHCLG, Live Tables, Table 104: Table 104 Dwelling stock: by tenure, England (historical series)

and unabashed egalitarian spirit that often drove these projects, Britain's mid-century excursions into mass public housing were often marked by the worst exigencies of architectural design and aesthetic spite. Threatening tower blocks, concrete eyesores, inhuman scale, defensive form, abandoned amenity spaces, soulless, windswept public spaces, cheap construction, physical isolation, horrific thermal performance, deck access carried by caustic corridors in the sky, all conspired to concoct the perfect toxic backdrop against which all manner of criminal vice, antisocial malignancy and chronic social dissipation could flourish. The poorest people in society doubly burdened with the worst buildings society could offer.

Of course not all of this was down to design. More often than not woefully inadequate levels of money and maintenance further corroded an already noxious mix of neglect and mismanagement - while the City of London's Barbican is revered by some as a civic exemplar of it day, the mind boggles at what gruesome indignities would have befallen its stricken residents had it suffered the fiscal misfortune of being built in the neighbouring boroughs (and with the neighbouring budgets) of Hackney or Tower Hamlets and not in what some allege to be the richest municipality in Europe.

But there can be no doubt that bad design was and is central to many of these ills and has likely combined with latent class prejudice to irrevocably stigmatise council housing in the minds of many. But this was not the case in the past and need not be the case in the future and there is one critical element the Government must adopt if it wishes its new generation of council houses to avoid the mistakes of recent history: beauty.

There was a time when far being an aristocratic bauble or elitist commodity, beauty was hardwired into the political ideology that created the first council houses in Britain. Eminent 19th century scholars like John Ruskin and Willam Morris spoke eloquently about how beauty was not just an essential facet of human dignity but an impregnable ingredient of the social remedies required to improve the living and working conditions of the poor. In so doing, they argued, individual enrichment could foster national wellbeing, a concept in whose ideological annals nestled the first slender stirrings of English socialism. Of all Governments, the challenge of using beauty to enhance the prospects of the poorest and most vulnerable in society is one that must surely appeal to those of the left.

England's earliest social housing experiments showed the extent to which beauty was harnessed to house the poor. The world's first housing estate, the Boundary Estate (1899) built on the City fringes of London's East End marked an astonishing transformation of the slums and rookeries of Dickensian London into a resplendent urban quarter complete with the handsome red brick blocks, formal circuses and radiating tree-lined avenues more commonly associated with the more prestigious addresses in the capital.

Into the twentieth century this trend surged with early housing associations like Peabody partnering with the pioneering municipal

powerhouse that was the London County Council to create council housing that not only remains memorable and coveted to this day but went onto to inspire superlative inter-war social housing hubs in European cities like Copenhagen and Vienna.

Unlikely as it may now be to contemporary eyes, before the concrete walkways and windswept plazas of the 1960s, early council estates like the Bourne and Millbank Estates were a rich cornucopia of arches, columns, pilasters, pediments, courtyards, glazed brickwork, ceramic brickwork, Mansard roofs, articulated facades, sash windows, ornamental flourishes, gable ends, terracotta facings, brick dressings, colonnades, string courses, aedicules and entablatures – all essentially brimming with all the crafted physical intricacies and gentle social intimacies that we humans like to call home.

This is the beauty legacy the Government has the opportunity to reclaim today. Not just to ease the housing crisis, important as that may be. But to fulfil a grave ideological commitment to the very poorest in our society. This must not be misconstrued, as many architects are wont to do, as a prohibition against selected styles. While traditionalism, consistently popular with the public, must play a role in this renaissance and styles like Brutalism are harder to reconcile with the human intimacy homes, of all building typologies, require most, this must be a programme where the simple recognition that beauty is important plays as much of a role as the specification of what beauty, within a council housing context, might be.

And it is this latter task that this paper primarily sets out to accomplish. By dissecting the ingredients of beauty in architecture and rigorously applying them to the council house condition, this paper hopes to provide a blueprint by which our next generation of British council housing can be the greatest yet. For too long beauty has been misinterpreted as an accessory of affluence. And for too long, council housing has been misunderstood as an antonym of beauty. For the sake of easing our housing crisis and enriching the lives of the poorest in our society, this paper seeks to put both these misconceptions to rest.

With its gentle curves, furtive roofline, intimate courtyard and richly textured surfaces, McGrath Road in east London by Peter Barber Architects (2019) sets a virtuoso exemplar of what a new generation of beautiful council housing could look like.

Justifying the Blueprint

Good design, as Policy Exchange's Building Beautiful programme recognises, is of course based on timeless, universal and enduring principles that can be applied to a wide range of building typologies. However, there are a number of specific circumstances unique to council housing that makes the specific articulation of key guiding principles particularly important and their inclusion within this paper necessary:

1. Budgets

For obvious reasons and by its very nature council housing, particularly in a Britain beset with our current fiscal state, cannot usually rely on the financing largesse often deployed on more commercially lucrative private residential development. Therefore, with straitened budgets and the absence of a competitively discerning private market, the temptation is to build cheaply and badly, as was so often the case in the council housing of the 1960s and 70s. Even worse, if beauty is wrongly perceived as being expensive, (a stubbornly persistent misconception) it becomes more likely to be discarded on public projects where fiscal benefit to the taxpayer is paramount. Therefore, in order to ensure that Britain's new generation of council housing embraces beauty without reservation or hesitation, it is of huge importance that this paper proves that beauty need not be expensive and can be routinely accrued through the judicious deployment of cost-neutral aesthetic manipulations like scale, proportion and symmetry. Similarly, the vast majority of the 35-point guidelines included in this paper are cost-neutral.

2. Scale

Some of the British council estates of previous generations were vast. With over 100,000 people living there, (more than the population of Chester) Becontree Estate in Dagenham remains the largest council estate in Europe by population and with an area of 11 square miles (bigger than Windsor Great Park), Wythenshawe in Manchester is Europe's largest council estate by size. While it is highly unlikely the Britain's next generation of housing will see council housing developments exclusively conceived on anything near this scale, it does serve as a reminder that social housing is often not simply a case of adding additional units, but of fundamentally re-ordering and reconfiguring built environment on a significant scale. As such, it is imperative that the very highest standards of design are routinely applied

to developments capable of having this substantial urban impact.

3. Amenity

Amenity is an important consideration in all residential typologies but it becomes a particularly sensitive issue in council housing. This is because amenity space initially derived for altruistic civic purposes on council estates in the 1960s and 70s quickly became a spatial maelstrom signifying all that was wrong with them. Large expanses of open space were used to separate vertical or horizontal slabs of flats but because no purpose was ever defined for them and, beyond being public open spaces, no communal residential ownership strategy was ever devised for them, they quickly became abandoned, unadopted, untended hinterlands, operating on the formless periphery of public and private space and thereby eventually colonised by the antisocial behaviours and civic neglect that would taint the residential blocks that surrounded them before they had even been entered. New council housing amenity spaces must not be allowed to fall into this corrosive vacuum and the latent opportunities they present to embed good placemaking and assert a positive and vibrant sense of place must not again be wasted.

4. Anti-social Behaviour

While not all council estates became havens for crime and antisocial behaviour, many of them did. This is not in itself entirely without precedent, whether it be Victorian slums or Parisian banlieues, historically areas that have housed the most economically disadvantaged have tended to attract disproportionate instances of criminality and vice, although crime of course can take place anywhere. Equally, realistically there are limitations on what good design can do to stem these trends, particularly when they might already prevalent in the surrounding neighbourhood. Nevertheless, initiatives like Secured By Design have had notable success in increasing safety in residential developments and there are good design principles that can be adhered to that minimise the likelihood of either buildings or spaces being manipulated as enablers of crime.

5. Maintenance

Poor maintenance is arguably the biggest single non-design issue that led to the failure of many of the council housing and estates of recent decades. Buildings that had already been built cheaply were further undermined by woefully inadequate maintenance regimes whose inability to ensure the timely and efficient upkeep of housing stock and its attendant fixtures and fabric merely exacerbated the problems poor design had already implanted from the start. Even today, large maintenance backlogs of council housing stock present a prodigious cash flow problem for local authorities and debilitating quality of life problem for local authority tenants. While, as

has been acknowledged, maintenance is not a design issue per se, there are definitely design choices that can be made that will either increase or reduce the maintenance burden imposed on the future life-cycle of the building in question. And as maintenance assumes such a large portion of local authority budgets, it is essential for the long-term physical and socio-economic resilience of any new generation of council housing that all possible steps are taken to design future maintenance liabilities out.

BLUEPRINT I: BUILDINGS

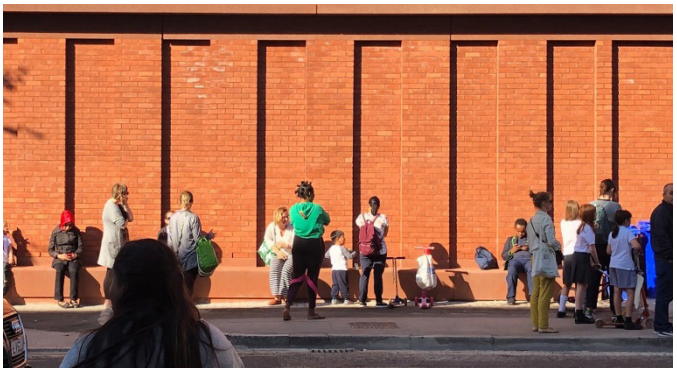
1. Active Frontages

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
The Brunswick Centre, London (above) Oldham's Walk, Covent Gdn., London	• Enliven ground floor frontages to enliven developments • Retail & leisure at ground floor if possible • If not other solutions are planting, entrances, decoration etc. • Treat frontages as filters not edges
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £ *(£: Low; ££: Medium; £££: High)*	

Active frontages are one of the easiest things to get right in council house design. The challenge is straightforward, to simply adopt a design that places as much activity as is reasonably possible on the ground floor of properties and preferably facing onto public or communal areas. It is essentially a practical permutation of mixed-use design principles that prioritise public realm engagement on building edges in order to animate and enliven not only the ground level pedestrian environment and experience but the general character and ambience of the location or development in question.

One of the simplest ways to achieve active frontages in a residential context is to place retail or leisure amenities like shops and restaurants on the ground floor with housing above. This is solution that is common throughout British inner-cities and high-streets but is more challenging to achieve within exclusively residential settings. Mixed-use residential settings like **The Brunswick Centre in London's Bloomsbury above** (Patrick Hodgkinson, 1967-72) which effectively has a shopping centre at its base is a stellar example of how this can be successfully achieved. But what of smaller council housing developments that cannot rely on a component of retail or leisure facilities?

In these instances, it is generally preferable to locate whatever non-residential amenity a development may have, whether it be a community resource or workplaces, along the edge of public areas to ensure that some activity takes place on the frontages that surround them. But even when this is not possible and the development in question is entirely residential, there are still options.



Even blanks wall need not be visually inactive

Entrances alleviate blank expanses of walls and should be located as often as practically possible to provide even nominal movement and activity to building frontages. Windows too, are superb architectural devices for animating facades. Landscaping and planting can also subtly transform a blank wall into an engaging one even when no doors and windows are present. Finally decorative architectural details like string courses, sculptural flourishes, dressings and bas reliefs can provide ground

floor surface activity when functional or physical activity is not possible.

The key is to see building facades not just as passive edges but as adjustable filters whose careful manipulation can determine the spatial and social quality of the spaces they enclose.

Blank, unattractive and inaccessible expanses of ground floor frontage sully the character of both the development and its surroundings and waste the opportunity for positive engagement between building and public realm

2. Arches

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Bourne Estate, London (above) McGrath Road., London	• Arches help frame views and fortify public realm • They can also add spatial interest and dynamism • Crucially, they help human-ise architecture
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

Arches are ancient architectural devices traditionally used to frame views, denote routes and mark entranceways and they are of infinite functional and visual use within all civic settings, including council housing. In the early British council housing models from the 1890s to the Second World War they were used prodigiously on council estates for the reasons stated above. While their use waned on post-war developments, their value to contemporary council house design, (as demonstrated by **Matthew Lloyd Architects' elegant modern interpretations of them on their heroic renovation of London's Bourne Estate (1905-09 & 2018) above**) remains vast. On housing developments which by their very nature have

a stronger public component than might be the case on private housing, they fortify public realm by allowing it to quite literally thrust itself into and through buildings. They also help break down the mass of larger estates by multiplying views and, softening scale and adding a sense of spontaneity and to the pedestrian experience.

An arched entranceway on Peabody Square, London (1871) designed by Henry Astley Darbishire

And aesthetically they are in themselves visually engaging architectural features whose (usually) curvaceous form helps humanise architecture, a vital function in any institutional context. If we consider 'facades' to be 'faces', the word from which they are etymologically derived, that arches are one of the features that architecturally give form and reference to those faces, raised eyebrows perhaps cast in brick and stone. In the same way that we subconsciously note the features on a person's face when we first meet them as part of the psychological process of forging familiarity, arches too give architecture an anthropomorphic quality that helps transform buildings from inanimate objects to intimate enclosure. Within the context of council housing, this softening psychological service could prove indispensable.

The McGrath Road council housing development (2019) by Peter Barber Architects in east London demonstrates how arches can give buildings an anthropomorphic quality that makes them appear more intimate, playful and ultimately human

3. Balconies

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Cosway St. Housing, London (see p.99) 95 Peckham Road, London (see p.31)	• Balconies must never appear like superfluous or 'stuck on' afterthoughts • They must always be an intrinsic part of the visual narrative of a facade.
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

Balconies are a hugely important aspect of residential housing but within a council flat scenario where residents likely don't have access to individual gardens, they are of paramount social as well as visual importance. Architecturally they help soften and animate facades by embellishing then with potential decorative railings or guarding and by providing the opportunity for spontaneous human activity to enliven architectural elevations.

Finally, they form a physical filter that helps navigate the transition from private space inside buildings to the public space outside, crucial therefore for making private buildings feel like fully integrated parts of public realm. While planners may understandably fret about the potential they hold for facilitating overlooking and loss of privacy, of far greater value is the huge social role they play in helping secure the anonymised

connectivity on which the entire urban condition depends.

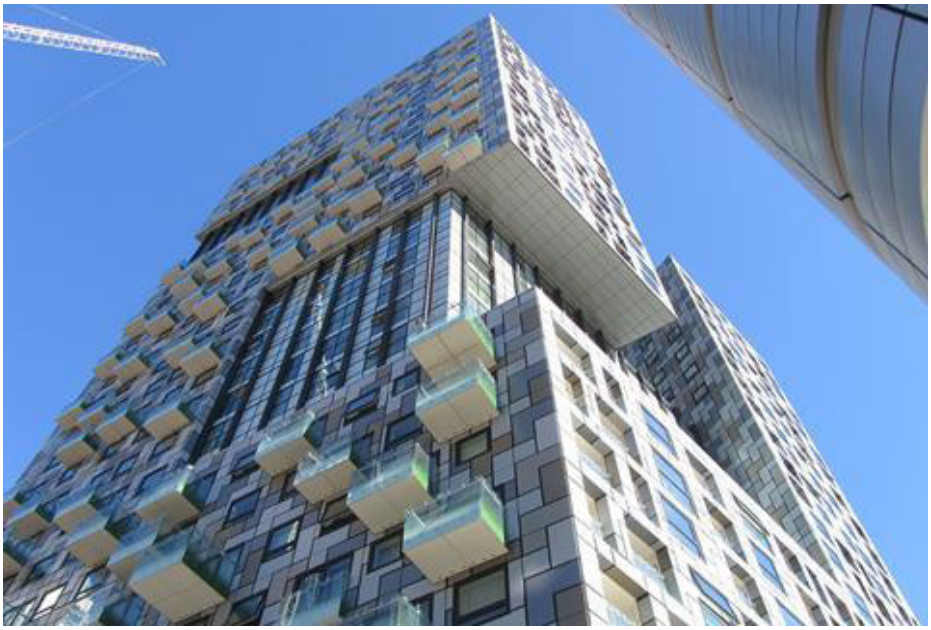
Consequently, balconies are of such enormous intrinsic value within a residential context and the very act of their inclusion is such a generally a welcome addition that there are routinely no overriding rules for what makes a good or a bad one within a council housing scenario. Except for one significant exception and that is they must always be designed to appear like fully integrated parts of the building and façade composition and must never be conceived as extraneous 'stuck ons' without which one imagines that to all intents and purposes would offer no material change to how well the façade visually functions.

Early 20th century social housing models sought to seamlessly integrate balconies into their masonry elevations rather than express them as architecturally distinct additions, thereby helping give the developments an reassuring sense of mass and solidity.

Georgian housing offers a formal masterclass in how to successfully integrate balconies onto an elevation, often appearing as a continuous ironmongery trim to the first floor or *piano nobile*, a practice that Regency elegance perfected. Victorian mansion blocks also offered excellent examples, threading balconies into facades by deftly weaving them around projecting bay windows, **as in York Mansions in south-west London pictured on the previous page** and as replicated on much of the council housing of the early 20th century period.

After the dearth of the ritualistic, 'stuck-on' balcony aesthetic witnessed on countless council estates and especially tower blocks from the 1960s and

70s, contemporary architecture reflects both ends of the quality spectrum. Housing like 95 Peckham Road pictured above by Peter Barber Architects (2019) integrates the balconies so well that brick extends from the walls to clad the balcony bases while much of the high-rise flats being built in London's regenerated Docklands (see picture below) shows balconies as volumetric spreadsheet afterthoughts that offer little in terns of spatial amenity or visual enhancement.



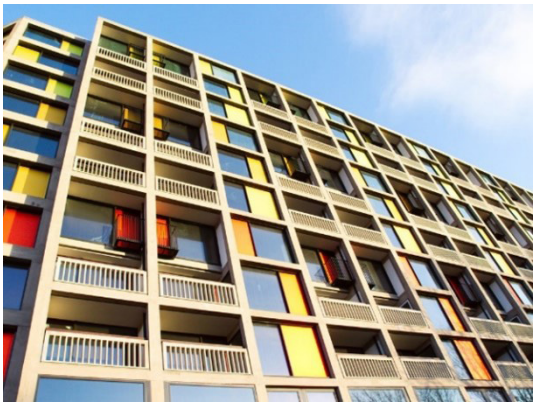
Balconies appear randomised and superfluous in east London's high-rise Lincoln Plaza development.

4. Colour

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Karl-Marx-Hof, Vienna, Austria (above) Woodward Place, Manchester (see p.34)	• Colour can animate and enliven facades and neighbourhoods • Greater deployment within council housing settings to greatly assist with intimacy and character
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Colour is normally one of the simplest ways to add interest and animation to external facades. While some materials allow for more polychromatic variety than others (for instance, it is easy and cost-effective to paint buildings faced in render, less so when they are clad in stainless steel) judicious and controlled use of colour can be an easy way of introducing vibrancy and enabling the council housing development to have a more memorable impact than might otherwise have been the case. The vast Karl-Marx-Hof in Vienna (1927-33), arguably mainland Europe's most iconic council estate, gets much of its distinctive character from the large red projecting bays that punctuate its facades, themselves a tribute to the 'Red Vienna' inter-war socialist ideologies and period that conceived it.

Historically colour has also made a discernible impact on British council housing. Early Peabody Estate were often a warm, yellow buffed brick while later early to mid-20th century municipal council estates by the London Country Council and others adopted red brickwork with white render or stone dressings, still a recognisable template on London's urban landscape today. Post-war and Brutalist versions of council housing often went with the grey aesthetic that is common to concrete, although estates like Golden Lane in London were often interspersed with riotous bursts of yellow or red. Today pluralist polychromies are occasionally deployed, but perhaps not often as they could be to help soften and enliven social housing aesthetics. They are a particularly useful tool when it comes to estate regeneration, the bold insertion of colour panels into the façades of Sheffield's notorious Park Hill Estate was a key part of its successful regeneration overhaul.



Park Hill Estate, Sheffield (Hawkins\Brown, 2013)

Woodward Place, Cardroom Estate, Manchester (FAT, 2014)

Y:Cube London, (RHSP, 2016)

5. Concept

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Donnybrook, London (above) Terrace, Derwent, Derbyshire (see p.36)	• Well executed concepts can add visual integrity to council housing • It can also be useful in helping personalise and humanise it • Concepts need not cost more to build
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Concept remains a controversial quantity in modern architecture. Is it a pretentious intellectual gimmick that remains alien to the end-user and distracts from the imperative for buildings to actually work and succeed in the real world? Or is it an essential narrative hook that provides buildings with a compelling visual story and structure that ultimately helps their users and surroundings understand and relate to them better? Depending on how concept is deployed both interpretations can perhaps be true. But as the latter one gives architecture a cost-neutral opportunity to channel character, personality and distinctiveness to what might otherwise be a perfunctory municipal exercise, its deployment on council housing could potentially represent a net-benefit.

Concepts can come in virtually any form. At Peter Barber's **Donnybrook social housing development in east London above** (2006), the dazzling white render re-imagines the East End townhouses as Mediterranean villas, or more as the architect intended, the inter-war continental Modernist housing of Adolf Loos. early 20th-century work of JJP Oud in Rotterdam and Adolf Loos or J.J.P. Oud. While visually incongruous to its surrounding residential aesthetic, it nonetheless earns architectural integrity through the strength of its concept and the conviction with which the design responds to it. This also proves that context, here partially rejected, need not be the constraint some misinterpret it as.

18th century mill houses served as the design concept for Evan Vetturi's 2020 social housing terrace in Derwent Valley Hills World Heritage Site

Countless other residential examples abound of effective conceptual residential execution, from the social housing flats inspired by local historic industrial units at Metropolitan Workshop's Barchester Street scheme (2022) near London's regenerated Docklands to the 18th century millworker cottages that formed the conceptual basis of Evans Vetturi's new social housing terrace in the Derwent Valley Hills World Heritage Site (2020). As long as concepts perform the role of architectural guide rather than gimmick, then they can be a powerful way of humanising and personalising council housing.

Barchester Street by Metropolitan Workshop (2022) draws inspiration from the industrial heritage of the local Docklands area

6. Context

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Vaudeville Court, London (above) Portobello Square, London	• Engaging with context is vital to successfully integrating any scheme into its surrounding area
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	• Engagement can be achieved through multiple means, materials, form, colour, scale, etc.
£	

Engaging with context is one of the most powerful ways in which a development can successfully integrate itself into its surroundings and this is no less the case with council housing. For various ideological, social and economic reasons, post-war social housing often sought to distance itself, both physically and architecturally, from its surrounding context, with its tower blocks and podium slabs choosing instead to express themselves as isolated, autonomous objects rather than intuitive extensions to existing fabric. Ultimately, this was to prove disastrous in terms of both social cohesion and urban consistency with new developments eventually proving to be of little practical or emotional value to neighbouring residents thereby sustaining the toxic emergence of ghettoised rather than unified communities. The difference between ignoring context and

recognising it is essentially the difference between merely adding to a city and actually enriching it.

Some architects are suspicious of context because they see adherence to it as a limiting proscription on design creativity or slavish adherence to existing or historic vernaculars. These sentiments must be resisted at all costs. Acknowledging context does not impose design subjugation nor does it create constraints on creativity. Newbuild greenfield sites for instance may offer little in the way of built context yet this does not mean it would be impossible, in an architectural sense, to build something new there. What matters most is not *copying* context but *understanding* it because only after thoroughly analysing what already exists can any design intervention hope to react sensibly to it. If that analysis results in a dismissal of context, so be it. But more often than not it will expose precious threads and patterns that can be used to more thoroughly bind new and old together and thereby ensure respect for the latter and resilience for the former.

Aerial views make it abundantly clear that council estates like the Aylesbury Estate (1963-77) in south London sought no contextual engagement whatsoever with either their immediate or wider urban surroundings

These properties become even more important with regard to council housing. Exclusive fiscal reliance on the state and greater demographic reliance on particular socio-economic groups already leaves council housing exposed to vulnerabilities that may not exist to the same degree in private housing or commercial development. It is therefore of paramount importance that council housing is not viewed as 'separate' or 'other' in any way and thoughtfully immersing itself into the context its

surrounding built fabric offers is one of the most powerful ways in which these outcomes can be avoided.

Early housing estates like the Boundary Estate very much saw themselves as extensions of their wider civic context, incorporating the brickwork, vistas and avenues that were by then an intrinsic part of London's urban vernacular. The compulsion faded in post-war eras as Modernist ideologies like Brutalism prided themselves on their deliberate contextual isolation, London's Barbican forming one of the most visceral examples. Thankfully, recent developments have been much more contextually sympathetic with new social housing developments like **Levitt Bernstein's Vaudeville Court (2015) in north London above (p.31)** and parts of London's Portobello Square by PRP Architects. Any new generation of council housing will not succeed in the long-term unless it fully embraces the context in which it stands.

New affordable housing at the Kilsyth Road development in East Dunbartonshire by Page/Park Architects (2022) engages with context by drawing on and reinterpreting the traditional aesthetic of local barns

7. Corners

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Edgewood Mews, London (above) Millbank Estate, London (see p.41)	• It is helpful to think of a typical, four-sided building as an eight-sided one once the corners are included as facades in themselves • Corners provide manifest opportunities for landmark architectural features
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Turning a corner is an ancient performative ritual within architecture but it instantly provides an opportunity to create a visual landmark, feature or event. Also, because corners tend to be sited at the confluence of at least two urban routes, they are also a means to make an architectural statement that pervades across a wider visual catchment area. Therefore, by re-imaging corners as additional conjoined facades, a building's

opportunity to make a meaningful, positive impact on its local area is instantly multiplied. It is very much worth considering council housing in particular in these terms. While budgets may be less lavish than on private developments, by embracing the opportunity corners present to make engaging architectural statements, the design potential for buildings to positively impact their surrounding urban fabric can be as much as doubled at no extra cost.

The careful placement of chimneys and subtle adjustments to fenestration, roof and roof height turn what might have been a pedestrian corner on London's Millbank Estate into a feature one

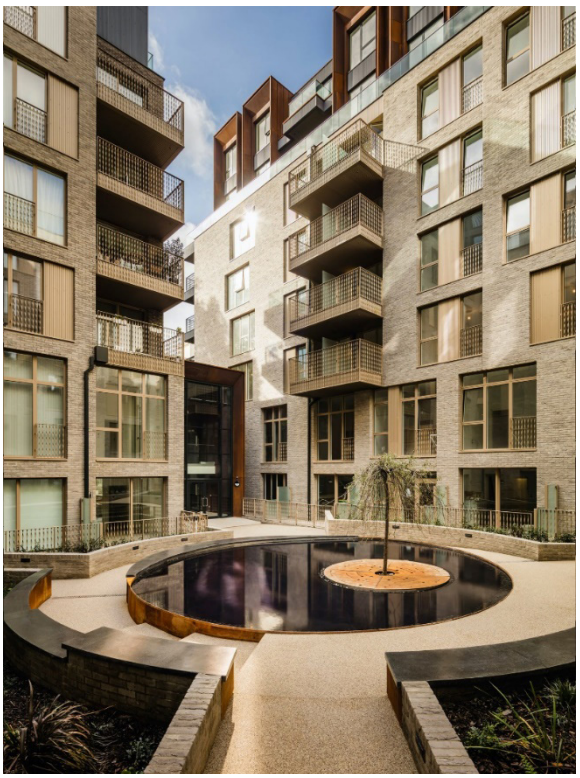
8. Courtyards

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Hargood Close, Colchester (above) Shadwell Estate, London (see p.44)	• Vital architectural devices that combine privacy and communality • Excellent at increasing density • Can offer a variety of uses, i.e. play, circulation, seating, landscaping • Essential for helping to humanise council housing & confer intimacy
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

Depending on the size of the development, courtyards can be a fantastic way of segmenting larger developments into smaller and more discernible fragments and are consequently of enormous value when trying to humanise and personalise council housing. They are also a superb way to achieve higher densities in mid-rise housing. Many of the European apartment blocks that help cities like Paris, Athens and Barcelona achieve their extraordinarily high densities are built around courtyards. Similarly, individual UK schemes that have achieved similarly high densities, such as Abell & Cleland House by DSHA Architects and Camden Courtyards by

Sheppard Robson, (2018, both in London) also make extensive use of the courtyard typology.

Courtyards may also be of greater value to a new generation of council housing than they were in the last post-war phase of the 1950s to the 1970s. Council housing of this area was often gigantic, with large, sprawling estate housing several thousand people and comprising waves of tower blocks and podium slabs. It is very difficult to craft courtyards out of buildings at this scale, by their nature they become gaps between buildings, with all the rootless anonymity that suggests (and was usually delivered), rather than courtyards full of charm and intimacy.



Courtyards in the Camden Courtyards development (50% social housing) are primarily used for circulation.

It is very unlikely that our new generation of council housing is going to be conceived on anything like this scale. It is far more likely that much of this new council housing will append existing estates, be squeezed into infill sites or manifest as smaller developments. Under these circumstances, courtyards become a more natural and typologically appropriate solution therefore providing the unique opportunity to imbue council housing with the sheltered, enclosed and collegiate nature of Oxford or Cambridge or the London Inns of Court and all the cultivated intimacy they bestow.

Not only will this instantly embed new council housing into prestigious English urban and architectural vernaculars, (an association that has the potential to transform the way in which council housing is popularly viewed) but it provides residents with a dynamic spatial tool

that is inherently capable of offering private intimacy within a communal template – an invaluable asset in any mass-residential condition. And, on more practical terms, courtyards can provide vital amenity space for gardens, landscaping, seating or children's play areas. And, as Camden Courtyards proves, the increase the possibility of residential units having double or even triple-aspect layouts.

The manifest typological and psychological tricks courtyards retain were well known to England's first generation of council housing and even today some of the early Peabody Estates provide thrilling spatial sequences that use arched openings to dramatically conjoin interlocking courtyard spaces into a theatrical civic *enfilade*. Where possible, it is a tradition we would do well to revive today.

A courtyard in London's Shadwell Estate (1866) has been converted into a play space for children

9. Curves

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Kiln Place, London (above) Goldsmiths Street, Norwich (see p.51)	• Curves help soften adn humanise buildings • Psychologically they satisfy a human urge to see natural forms in our built environment. • Can help diffuse the UK housing 'boxes with holes' aesthetic.
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
££	

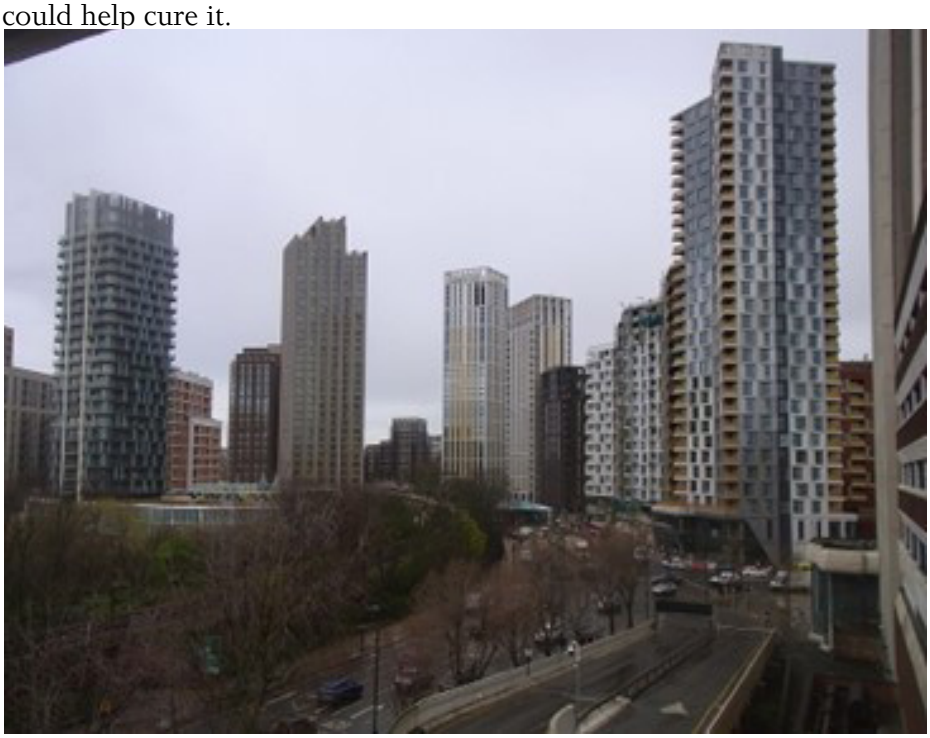
There is a significant body of psychology research from academics like Marcos Nadal, Oshin Vartanian and others that argues that curves are an essential asset of architectural beauty because they prompt a positive emotional response in the human brain that is not present to the same extent when that same brain views straight lines. The origin of this positive response is said to be our core human emotional affinity for nature, an aesthetic preoccupation that was particularly prevalent in Gothic and Islamic architecture. The theory goes that if we as human beings are drawn to nature, we intrinsically find if beautiful. And if we find it beautiful we are then conditioned to covet it in our built as well as natural environments. As nature generally abhors a straight line, if the curves that define our natural world are replicated in our architecture, we will intrinsically find that architecture beautiful too.

While this theory neatly appeals to the core Scrutonian polemic that beauty is not in fact subjective but is a universal response to specific visual

stimuli, one does not necessarily need to invest in the theory wholeheartedly (or believe that orthogonal buildings can't be beautiful) to appreciate that curves obviously play a vital role in softening architecture and making it more relatable to the human condition – and physiognomy. Whether they come in the form of domes, crescents, columns or circuses, when integrated well into an overall design and not injected as gimmickry, curves have an eminently humanising effect on our buildings and built environment and do indeed recall the natural word we are said to be preconditioned to crave.

Therefore, the inclusion of curves on council housing is a practice that should generally be encouraged. This is not a compulsory architectural instruction, there is no geometric formula for designing good buildings and zero guarantee that curvaceous forms will secure them. But it is merely a call for greater aesthetic awareness of the forms that we as humans relate to and find, for whatever reason, pleasing.

The reintroduction of curves into our broader contemporary vernacular may also be no bad thing at this current time. Sadly over the past 20 years, while there has been much to celebrate in some areas of British residential design, far too much of it has also been characterised by a bland, rectilinear repetition that imbues new housing with an anodyne spreadsheet tedium that may be broadly inoffensive in (recent) historic terms but is also utterly uninspiring. This typology, which London vernacular sometimes falls prey too, can perhaps be summarised as 'boxes with holes'. Curves could help cure it.



Curveless Lewisham Gateway in south London is a founding father of the 'boxes with holes' aesthetic

10. Decks

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Frampton Pk. Est. extension (above) Bell Street Stables, Glasgow (see p.48)	• Well-designed decking is cheaper and more sustainable than internal corridors • Consider making decks wide enough to accommodate communal uses • Lighter, visually permeable railings
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Up until relatively recently, the perceived wisdom was that deck access was complete anathema to good council housing design and should be avoided at all costs. Decking - so beloved of 1960s brutalist estates where blocks would be wrapped in linear, multi-storey circuits of extended public balconies lined with external front doors – were dismissed as impersonal, inclement and inhumane, elevated concrete streets in the sky that further severed residents from their surroundings and offered an inordinate array of semi-sheltered antisocial sanctuaries on which crime and misbehaviour could fester away from the natural surveillance imposed by ground level public realm.

But thinking has now changed. A series of thoughtful and considered social housing schemes have quietly resurrected decked access but given it a newer, gentler and more intimate lease of life. These decks invariably

appear on smaller schemes, have controlled or concierge access, are generally brightly coloured, often overlook sheltered courtyards, opt for lighter, visually permeable railings

New Mildmay by Matthew Lloyd Architects (2018)

rather than solid masonry guarding, are often built from natural materials and are sometimes even combined with columns to exude a robust architectural character in their own right which reassuringly recalls traditional external circulation models like loggias and colonnades.

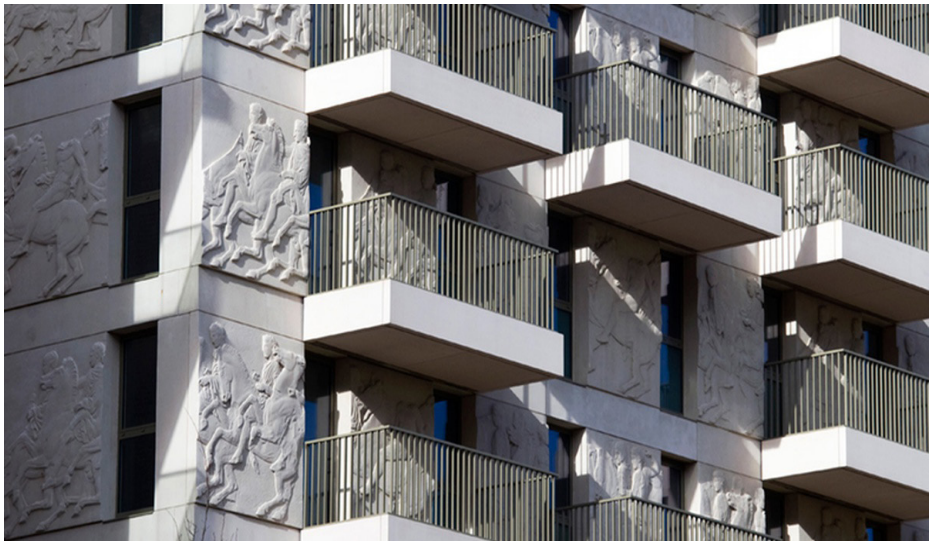
Bell Street Stables by Collective Architecture (2019)

All these design solutions have been crucial to the broader cultural reassessment of that has taken place in recent years and have enabled well-designed and humanistic deck access solution to once again play a meaningful role in social housing. This reappraisal has also led to a clearer understanding of the benefits good deck access can actually bring. They give every property an external front door, they potentially sweep public realm right into a building, strengthening its connections with its surroundings and, by keeping the bulk of circulation space outside the main building envelope in spaces which, unlike internal corridors, do not require mechanical heating and ventilation, they are a cheaper and more sustainable design option than internal corridors.

And finally, if the corridors are wide enough, they can potentially blur the lines between amenity and circulation, public and private, to an extent that encourages residents to adopt their quota of decking for planting, external seating or orderly storage. This communal adoption of what in essence remains elevated public space is a wonderful way of cultivating the feelings of shared ownership and responsibility that is a foundation stone of all thriving communities.

Cheap, unrelenting, impersonal and poorly maintained bands ox external desking help explain why council house decking fell so firmly out of favour

11. Decoration



POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
N15, Olympic Village, London (above) Goldsmith Street, Norwich (see p.51)	• Decoration is not compulsory, but it caqn be beneficial. • It can not only make visual statements but prompt posistve emotional responses. • New technologies make it cheaper and easier to procure.
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

For some, decoration remains a controversial subject in architecture. Many are still wedded to the modernist orthodoxy that dismissed it as archaic artifice and superfluous visual flippancy that distracted from the expressionist integrity of structurally honest facades. Others see it as an essential tool not just in making architecture more aesthetically harmonious but humanistically relatable and view the prospect of buildings engaging with their surrounding urban fabric without decoration as absurd as humans venturing out in public without clothes.

Within the confines of this paper, the first thing to make clear is that decoration is not a mandatory inclusion in the pursuit of good council housing. While many of the earlier generations of council estates saw fit to imbue the ornamental trappings of classical architecture - from volutes, urns and dressings to entablatures, quoins and pilasters – this was the common stylistic dialect of the day and was included out of instinct, not instruction.

However, while the use of decoration cannot and must not be enforced,

nor should its ideological prohibition to serve a modernist orthodoxy that has also seen its day be culturally mandated either. We are now in a pluralist age and those schemes that wish to consider the inclusion should be free to do so without the accusation of traditionalist introspection or the threat of mainstream exclusion.

Consequently, decoration can achieve all manner of wonders for those audiences inclined to procure them. Amongst other things, it can be a highly effective way of enlivening buildings, organising facades, integrating artistry, soothing repetition, modulating surface, alleviating monotony, providing visual relief and adding depth, texture and articulation to buildings. All of which is manifestly well-suited to a domestic context and, on both a visual and deeply psychological level, has the potential to make all buildings appear instantly more human.

Decoration can take many forms and even gentle perforated brickwork, such as featured on the RIBA Stirling Prize-winning Goldsmiths Street social housing scheme in Norwich by Mikhail Riches Architects (2018) can add a subtle touch of ornamentation to council housing

There are decades of academic research as to why this might be the case. Renowned American mathematician and art theorist Nikos Angelos Salingaros has written that "details and ornament allow human beings to connect to geometrical structures"[36] Additionally, architectural theorists Ann Sussman and Justin B. Hollander have found that humans are

36. Salingaros, Nikos A., *A Theory of Architecture*, (2006) Umbau-Verlag

emotionally hardwired to react positively to fractal elements[37].

These are nested, patterned and intricately segmented geometric structures that human brains are said to be subconsciously drawn towards and are found throughout nature, from the veins on a leaf to the composition of human bodies and faces. Traditional architectural decoration also uses fractal elements, the capital of Corinthian column for instance is formed by rows of acanthus leaves and classical ornamentation regularly deployed all manner of naturalistic imagery from cherubs and mascarons (faces) to shrubbery and swags of fruit.

Therefore decoration of any kind is not conceived simply to make a visual statement but to provoke an emotional response. This exactly the kind of empathetic engagement we should be seeking to exploit in all architecture, including council housing.

Beyond ideological reluctance, another criticism some architectural quarters may have of decoration is additional cost and lack of available craftsmanship skills. But modern technology makes these concerns less prevalent than they once might have been, the advent of 3D-printing, iterative design and modular assembly has opened up a whole new world of technical possibility in which decoration can now be tested, manufactured and installed more cheaply, easily and quickly than at almost any other time in the recent past.

Elements of this process were used on the N15 Block in the Olympic Village built by Niall McLaughlin Architects on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park for the 2012 Olympic Games. The building is decorated in precast concrete panels featuring bas relief depictions of the Parthenon Marbles, an ornamental allusion to the Games' Hellenic origins. The panels were created from digital scans of the original Marbles at the British Museum which were then used to create latex moulds from which the final panels were formed. Initially built for the athletes during the event, the block has since been converted into social housing.

37. Sussman, Ann & Hollander, Justin B; *Cognitive Architecture: Designing for how we respond to the Built Environment* (2021) Routledge

Ornamental stone engravings on Granatniy 6, a 2012 St. Petersburg apartment block by Speech Tchoban/Kuznetsov Architects

9. Diversity

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Marmalade Lane, Cambridge (see p.54)	• Visual diversity can make one development seem like several • This helps better integrate council housing into surrounding fabric • Also helps the housing appear more intimate and human-scaled
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
££	

Up until now, one of the founding principles of council estates was to make them architecturally homogenous, to in effect, to make all the component buildings subscribe to an overring aesthetic composition that makes the development appear separate to the urban fabric that surrounds it. In early council estates this philosophy was only gently applied, while many early Peabody or London County Council council estates appeared conceived as a single architectural composition, the use of, for instance, vernacular brickwork or vertical proportions still helped reconcile the buildings with their wider urban and often historic contexts. But as council housing design matured through the middle of the 20th century, so too did the desire to make them wholly autonomous, architecturally

distinct objects aesthetically, volumetrically and thereby socially separate from surrounding urban contexts, a process that appealed most readily to Brutalism's naturally isolationist instincts. We indeed see this latter more totalitarian approach most viscerally displayed in Brutalist housing like the Barbican, the Alexandra Road Estate and Sheffield's Park Hill.

Today we should aim for a different objective, in the same way we now recommend tenure blind housing where one is not supposed to be able to determine the economic tenure of residential accommodation from its exterior, so too should we have tenure blind urban fabric where one is not able to spot the council housing from the various housing types in present its surrounding residential fabric. This will not only aid architectural unity but crucially will help enshrine social cohesion.

There are many ways of achieving this. (see Terminology on p 93). But one of the most architecturally reliable is to integrate visual diversity into council housing schemes. Schemes like London's the Ruby Lucy Hotel **(pictured on p. 49)** by Kyson Architects (2020) may not be council housing but their elevation approach shows a single building broken down into multicoloured individual facades.

Not only does this make one single project appear to in fact be many, but it breaks down the mass of the building and makes it far more responsible to the human scale of historic urban grain. All of which helps the new development to bleed more successfully into its surroundings and relate more humbly to its users. While the days of building vast, city-shifting mega-council estates are likely over, the role that visual diversity can play in helping immerse new council housing into its context is a vital one.

Marmalade Lane co-housing development in Cambridge by Mole Architects (2019) employs a variety of elevational finishes to help create visual diversity within a single architectural development

10. Entrances

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Goldsmith St., Norwich (above) The Mailings, Newcastle (see p.56)	• As many private street-level entrances as possible. • Private street-level entrances to upper flats where possible. • Prioritise hosuin typologies that maximise entrances • Entrances are effectively free CCTV.
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

If the eyes are said to be the windows to the soul, then within architecture it is doors, rather than windows themselves, that perform a comparable function. Windows may be transparent but, especially within a residential context, they are usually screened with a privacy filter (i.e. curtains, blinds etc.) that limit their transparency and thereby renders their contribution to public realm, for most parts of the day at least, as static.

Entrance doors on the other hand may in most cases lack transparency but are more active architectural elements, forming a dynamic, physical and accessible link between public and private realm that, in most cases and unlike windows, are situated directly on ground level and are thereby

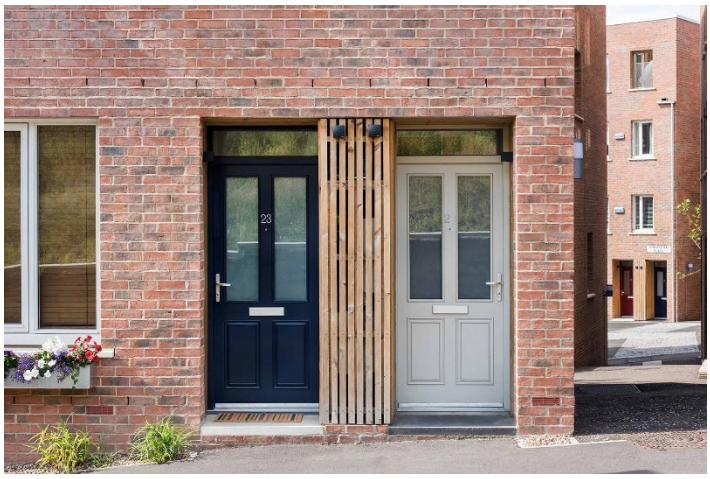
better suited to animate streets and public areas. Doors are critical from a safety perspective too, their spontaneous use means they can literally open at any time, instantly pouring private intimacy into public spaces and thereby, whether open or closed, acting as excellent natural surveillance devices to psychologically discourage antisocial behaviour.

Architecturally doors are also powerful humanising devices where, even on the largest buildings, they provide direct and distinctive physical concessions to human scale as well as offering valuable opportunities for unique design and localised aesthetic variation. They also provide opportunities for expressions of ownership and personalisation (i.e. doors colours, planting pots) that help forge a vital dual sense of community and responsibility throughout the public realm.

It is for all these reasons that the new generation of council homes should encourage as many private ground floor street entrances as possible. Even where upper flats are located, where reasonable, efforts should be taken to afford them a private ground floor front door entrance in order to foster critical links between internal private space and external public realm.

For obvious reasons, this mandate becomes harder to achieve on multi-storey blocks of flats. But even here there are strategies to enforce it. Again where reasonably possible, access to ground floor flats should be from private external front doors rather than internal cores. Additionally, cores should be designed to serve as few flats as efficiently possible on each floor, not simply to proscribe against endless internal corridors but to ensure that even communal entrances feature as frequently as possible within the public realm.

This prioritisation of entrances should also encourage further priority being given to those housing typologies that maximise the number of entrance doors. Terraces or townhouses obviously lend themselves best to this feature but tend to in themselves be low density. Flats reach higher densities but it should also be noted that mansion blocks, which traditionally cluster a handful of flats around a number of communal ground floor entrances, are more effective entrance multipliers than blocks of flats, which have the ability to serve hundreds of units from a single ground floor entrance.



The motto of the The Mailings, Newcastle, by Ash Sakula Architects (2017) is that "every home has its own front door"

14. Materials

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Barchester Street, London (above) Boulange-Bilancourt, Paris (see p.59)	• Materials that reflect local heritage may aid integration with context • Choose low-maintenance materials • Select sustainable materials • Remember that design quality is not dependent on expensive materials
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £-££-£££	

Materials are principally an aesthetic and economic choice entirely at the behest of the design team in question and this blueprint does not seek to adjudicate on which selection should be used in favour of another. However, there are a number of strategic considerations that should guide choices within a council housing environment.

First is context. If materials chosen reflect or reinterpret those already in the existing local or historic vernacular, they will have a better chance of ultimately securing the successful social and urban integration of the buildings on which they are used. An example is the **Barchester Street affordable housing development in Limehouse, east London above** by Metropolitan Workshop (2022) which used zinc cladding to reference the site and neighbourhood's industrial heritage.

Alternatively, brickwork remains an obvious candidate in cities like London and the New London Vernacular stye is very much based on its usage. But in other, especially rural areas, context obviously differs and other materials, such as wood or render may be better suited to reflect

local traditions.

Maintenance is also a key consideration, particularly within the financially constrained fiscal environment in which council housing operates. Materials should always be selected on the basis of their durability and likelihood not to inflict undue pressure onto the public purse when it comes to their repair and replacement. Sustainability is also an increasingly vital and related concern and one in which low carbon local natural materials, like clapboard timber or rammed earth, as used on the walls of the 6-unit Boulange-Bilancourt social housing townhouse in Paris by Déchelette Architecture (2024, see image on p.55) may enable developments to meet environmental as well as contextual commitments.

Of course cost is the consideration that hovers above all the others and it has the potential to be a particularly ruthless financial constraint on council housing projects. But financial constraints should not be misconstrued as design ones, no matter how expensive the material, it is the quality of the design (as indicated by the other guidelines in this blueprint) that will ultimately determine whether the project in question fails or succeeds as a work of architecture.

15. Proportion

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Boulange-Bilancourt, Paris (above)	• Vertical proportions help ground housing blocks in their urban grain
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	• Proportion can be effective in establishing rhythm and balance in elevations

Proportion is the ancient architectural discipline that determines how the various shapes and forms that together constitute the full physical composition of a building should relate to each other. Despite famed (though disputed) historic rubrics like the Golden Section, there is no magic formula for how to execute it well, so once again the skill and nuance of the individual design becomes paramount. However, there are universal considerations that might be conducive to more successfully

composed works of architecture and therefore could be of use within a council housing context. What also makes it pertinent to a housing context is that proportion is a matter of architectural arrangement rather than economic expense, a well-proportioned building or street costs no more than a badly proportioned one therefore it Is imperative that the manifest opportunities it presents for cost-neutral quality enhancement are fully utilised.

Horizontal proportions (as at the Heygate Estate above) often point towards infinity and offer no visual rooting in either the street or ground level whereas vertical proportions (below) can be useful in segmenting even long terraces into a more accessible human scale reassuringly regulated by the urban grain of the street

There are a number of considerations that can be voluntarily observed when trying to ensure architectural proportions are pleasing. The vertical arrangement of facades into discernible top, middle and bottom sections is a common solution in classical architecture and was widely deployed on Georgian residential terraces. Even when subtly applied it can be useful in helping people 'read' a building façade more easily than might otherwise have been the case.

Vertical rather than horizontal proportions also tend to be useful in segmenting long facades and rooting larger buildings into urban grain (see pictures on preceding page), a reassuring commodity that helps humanise our surroundings. And large windows generous spaced with an established elevational surface rhythm between solids and voids (as on the new **Boulange-Bilancourt social housing block in Paris (2024) by Déchelette Architecture, see p.59**) also tends to add geometric legibility and visual reassurance even on the simplest and smallest facades.

16. Roofs

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Greenwich Housing, London (above) Cherry Court, London (see p.63)	• Monotonous, featureless flat roofs to be avoided where possible • Treat roof as 'fifth elevation' • Utilise their opportunity for amenity, i.e. roof terraces
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

In many ways roofs are the signature of a building, the visual sign-offs capable of making a lasting impression, forming skylines and celebrating the point where the built fabric gives way to the omnipresent natural backdrop of the sky. Traditional architecture has several roof treatments from gable ends to hipped roofs, all of which make recurring impressions within our built environment and on council estates to this day. Traditional buildings also benefitted from chimneys which help make roofs more dynamic and distinctive.

To this compendium contemporary architecture adds mono-pitches, sawtooth and flat roofs amongst others, each one, if designed well, capable of making a dramatic contribution the cityscape. Central heating has essentially made chimneys functionally redundant from modern

architecture (at least for their original purpose) but some schemes, such as the RIBA Stirling Prize-winning Accordia (2008) in Cambridge by various architects and Dagenham Courtyard council housing by Patel Taylor (2015), have still been able to incorporate them to dramatic effect.

Al Jawad Architects' social housing block in London (2018) offers a contemporary interpretation of traditional gable end and hipped roofs and was part of Hackney's new wave of 21st c. council housing

Regardless of the composition, the general rule of thumb must be to never waste the opportunity roofs and roofscapes present to form a dramatic visual crown to council housing. By thinking of them as a 'fifth elevation', they can form a meaningful visual termination to buildings capable of having as much townscape impact as the facades they surmount. Additionally, in a new council housing era where housing will more often than not be squeezed into small infill sites, consideration should also be given to how roofs can be configured as accessible roof terraces to further aminate rooftops and provide vital amenity space to sites whose restricted coverage may be ill able to afford it elsewhere.

Expansive terraces are subtly concealed on the roof of Karakusovic Carson's 2016 regeneration of Cherry Court in north London's Bacton Estate

17. Scale

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Dover Court, London (see p.65) New Eddington, Cambridge	• Human scale is an architectural reminder that buildings, especially homes, must always relate to people • Scale differs to density • Human scale allows large buildings to still appear intimate and domestic
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Achieving human scale in architecture is not a question of creating buildings that are the same size as people, that would of course be ridiculous. But it is a question of creating buildings that people can more easily relate to and thereby feel more comfortable in their built environment and less intimidated by it. When it comes to residential architecture where feelings of domesticity and intimacy are paramount, human scale becomes a vital design contraption whose presence, or lack of it, can often determine the

success of a building.

Human scale is also not a proscription against large buildings or tall buildings, nor does achieving it reduce density, both are common misconceptions. It is often assumed that high-rise buildings offer the highest residential density but this is not necessarily the case as tall buildings often allocate disproportionate internal space to cores, circulation and services and equally disproportionate

Dover Court, London (2024) by Pollard Thomas Edwards Architect treats both floors with a different material to accentuate a human sense of scale and further emphasises this by intermittently pulling the roof zinc downwards to playfully make the ground floor seem even lower

Though initially conceived for a privileged clientele, Victorian mansion blocks like Albert Court, London (1894-1900) by R.J. Worley, provide excellent examples of how larger building façades can be subdivided by colour, decoration, geometry and form to relate more effectively to human scale

external space to amenity and services. Mid-rise is often best primed to achieve optimum residential densities, as the fact that low-rise European cities like Paris and Barcelona tend to have substantially higher densities that British cities where, in recent years at least, high-rises have flourished. Trellick Tower, the infamous 35-storey Brutalist 1960s London tower block by Erno Goldfinger, **(pictured on p.64)** would have to be twice its height to achieve the same density as Abel and Cleland House, a modern Westminster mansion block that is just a third of its height.

Notwithstanding, new tower blocks in Britain are far more likely to built as luxury housing than council housing and it is unlikely we will see a return to the high-rise mega council estates of the 1960s and 70s. So the attainment of human scale within a council housing context is more likely to pertain to mid- or low-rise buildings and it is here where design strategies will need to be deployed to best ensure that buildings relate comfortably to the people they serve.

These strategies can involve a wide range of solutions varying from variations in colour, material and texture to mimic human scale or using any of the aforementioned, as well as tactical shifts in geometry, surface and massing, to constantly ensure that the building, however large, remains physically aligned to human scale as its core compositional unit. Once this is achieved, then a new generation of council housing will be best placed to evoke the soothing sense of intimacy, domesticity and enclosure on which good residential architecture depends.

18. Style

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Longton Avenue, London (see p.68)	• Pluralism, rather than style, matters • As long as the design places people first, then most architectural styles should be appropriate • No style, inc. traditionalism, should be rejected • Reinterpreting style can be valuable
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
£	

Style is an infinitely controversial diversion in the world of architecture and what matters first and foremost is that architecture, and perhaps council housing most of all, relates to, addresses and prioritises the residents it is meant to serve. That said, style has also become grounds for exclusion with partisan factions recommending the unilateral exclusion or adoption of certain styles, be it brutalism or traditionalism, on ideological grounds. While Policy Exchange polling has proved conclusively and consistently that working class socioeconomic groups predominately favour traditional

styles[38], this paper seeks to promote a pluralist consensus where a new generation of council housing utilises all styles with the unequivocal caveat that the design in question can be shown, by adherence to the other guidelines contained in this blueprint, to put people first.

With this assurance in place, style presents a rich tapestry of historical and visual references for new council housing to draw upon. While early council housing often opted for classical or Arts & Crafts styles, or a mix of the two, later modernist styles pursued the aforementioned Brutalist approach, a predilection which, as we have seen, was often to the detriment of the housing concerned.

The lavish ornamental flourishes and formal compositional symmetry of the Peabody Estate in Hammersmith, west London (1926) reveals the stylistic indebtedness early council housing owed to 'Wrenaissance' precedents that combined Neo-Georgian and English Baroque styles

The later post-modernism period took a different approach, seeking to reinvent and reinterpret historic styles. This period produced the vast Theatre block of the **Espaces d'Abraxas council estate (see p.67) just outside Paris** (1978-1982) by acclaimed Spanish post-modernist Ricardo Bofill, arguably modern Europe's only example of gargantuan neoclassical social housing.

38. Policy Exchange, *Building More, Building Beautiful* (2018)

Walter Segal's self-build houses (1980) are modern houses co-built by the local authority that provide Tudor feel

On a calmer note, the early 1980s self-build venture between Lewisham Council and self-build architect Walter Segal proved to be an unwittingly convincing example of this, it produced a pair of houses on Longton Avenue that look to all intents and purposes like streamlined, monochromatic versions of half-timber Tudor architecture. In so doing they display the thematic ingenuity and aesthetic experimentation an inclusive approach to style could potentially deliver, a process that could add genuine character and interest to a new generation of council housing.

19. Windows

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Longton Avenue, London (see p.64)	• Avoid small or narrow windows to habitable rooms • New regulatory balance required between energy performance and spatial comfort
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
£	

Windows serve various obvious spatial, environmental and aesthetic roles within architecture and they can be key to the external and internal beauty and attractiveness buildings offer. Within council housing they also offer a useful cost benefit anecdote that is helpful to establish how our wider attitudes towards beauty and economics in architecture should be arranged. Essentially, windows make buildings more expensive and a building with no windows would be significantly cheaper than one in which they were included.

However, not only would abolishing windows produce uninhabitable homes it would likely produce ugly ones too. A windowless home therefore is an untenable option, despite the significant increase in construction cost it engenders. But we see that cost as both justified and tolerable because it ultimately turns what would be a useless commodity into a valuable one.

If we see beauty as philosophical windows on which our environmental comfort and harmony depends, then it becomes easier to understand why beauty is an essential asset rather than an extravagant one.

Small windows on council housing present mean exteriors and suggest uninviting interiors

On a more practical, architectural note, windows in housing usually occupies a significant proportion of the façade and are therefore crucial with regard to achieving the proportions, rhythm, detailing and articulation that helps housing appear more visually attractive. Thicker reveals can also add depth to facades and bestow a reassuring sense of permanence and solidity to the architecture. Within a council housing context it is also imperative that windows are able to admit as much natural light into the interior as possible and afford views out to the surrounding urban fabric that psychologically embed the property and its residents into the wider fabric of their neighbourhood and community.

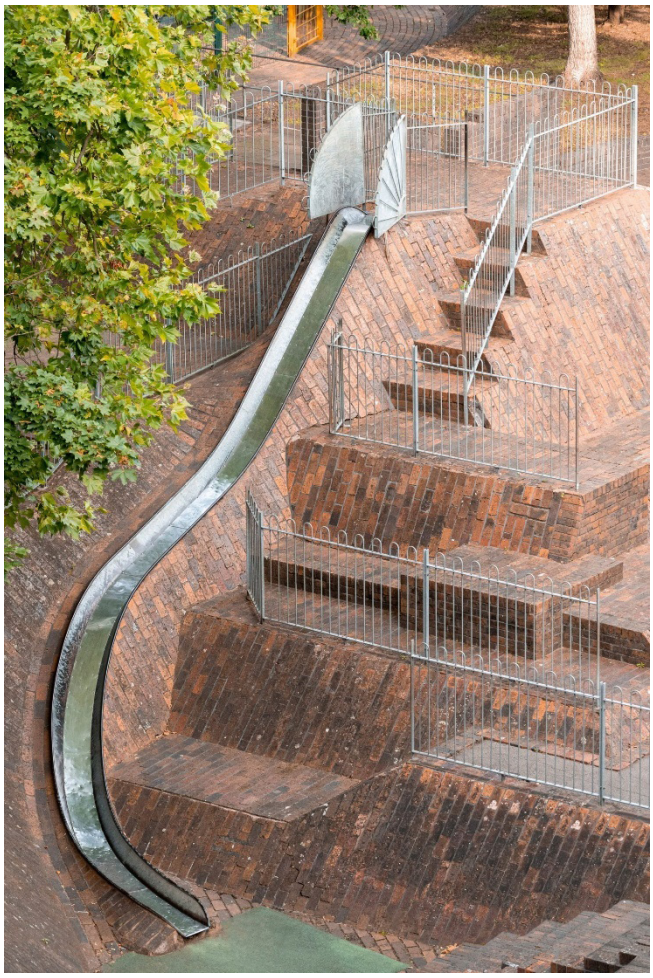
Ironically, these may be ambitions latterly at odds with recent regulatory changes. In an attempt to meet net zero commitments and ensure a more environmentally sustainable housing stock, recent versions of the Building Regulations, principally Parts L and O which deal with insulation and overheating respectively, have sought to limit the size of glazing in an attempt to minimise the risk of overheating and maximise the performance of insulation.

So much so that the sash windows of many Georgian terraces and townhouses – one of Britain's most revered housing types - would now fall foul of current standards and would not be permitted to be built today. Of course the pursuit of an environmentally sustainable future is imperative.

But a more equitable regulatory balance should be drawn to ensure that it does not come at the expense of either architectural beauty or spatial comfort, quantities which are equally vital to the human condition.

BLUEPRINT II: PUBLIC REALM

20. Amenity



POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Brunel Estate, London (above)	• Give amenity space use & purpose • Ensure well-designed land-scaping • Avoid inactive edges • Apply measures that encour-age residents to apply the same level of ownership & responsibility to public space as they do private
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

Amenity is a critical issue in council housing. It is also a highly sensitive one because it is one of the principal reasons why so many public housing projects from the 1960s and 70s failed. Therefore ensuring that new council housing models get amenity right is immensely important. Amenity space is essentially public space within a council estate or attached to council housing which, as the name suggests, provides shared external space for communal resident use. It is often provided in lieu of the private gardens houses generally have access to but flats do not. Even where balconies have been provided to flats, the idea of amenity space is to supplement this private amenity with a much larger public one. Amenity space is therefore an invaluable social and environmental resource and in many ways the social success of council housing depends on it.

However, the problem that emerged in the last generation of council housing was that to simply identify external space as amenity was not enough - unless further design and social measures were taken to make the space, or at least its edges, active, inviting and valued, then it would invariably become an empty, abandoned no-man's land vulnerable to the very antisocial behaviours that conspire to make public space even less inviting to the residents its is meant to serve.

There are many ways to avoid these outcomes. Use is one. While its residential nature generally makes amenity space an inappropriate candidate for some of the more aggressive programming strategies that can be pursued in other public spaces, allocating uses for amenity space gives it a specific purpose that wards against its malignment and misuse. There are a range of uses that might be applicable within a social housing context, recreational (seating, exercise and play areas) and community based (food growing) are just two.

Landscaping that is more compelling than the empty open grassed areas that were often left to stagnate between council estate tower blocks can also be an effective tool in helping animate amenity space, coordinated and considered mixture of hard and soft surfaces being one such example.

Public art can also help achieve similar ends. Ensuring the space straddles desire lines can also help deliver circulatory activity that keeps the space at least notionally occupied.

And arguably how the edges of the space are treated can be the most powerful consideration. No matter what occurs inside it, amenity space lined with garages or undercroft spaces will inevitably fare worse than that lined with active frontages that include, at a minimum, the entrance doors and windows that can provide natural surveillance.

Whatever strategy is adopted, the guiding principle must be to encourage as many residents as possible to not see the space as a municipal possession but to psychologically adopt it as their own shared asset. Doing so will help foster the sense of responsibility and ownership that can at its most successful ensure that residents treat public areas within housing development with the same care and consideration that they extend towards their own private domain.

As London's demolished Aylesbury Estate proved, not even grass is capable of making amenity spaces valued and used if they have no clearly defined purpose, edge or relationship with surrounding blocks

21. Cars

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
St. Andrew's Estate, London (above) Dujardin Mews, London	• Good landscaping can help shelter car parking and minimise its impact on public realm • New council housing should not encourage car use but it should use intelligent design to accommodate it
COST TO IMPLEMENT: ££	

Cars remain one of the most contentious considerations in residential design, an accolade that is even more pertinent to the perennially confrontational issue of parking. While the wider national political context sees car use being broadly discouraged in urban areas, this is not feasible to anywhere near the same extent in rural areas where residents rely on car use to an exponentially higher degree. Both conditions are reflected in respective residential developments in both urban and rural contexts.

The onset of the more environmentally friendly electric car has also helped shift attitudes towards car use and housing in recent years. As active modes of transport like walking and cycling have been increasingly encouraged and adopted by the public, there has until relatively

recently been an expectation that car use would eventually become so environmentally insidious that it would no longer become a key consideration in housing design.

The planning policy shift in parking allocation in the 1990s anticipated this trend with national planning guidance shifting from requiring new developments to deliver a minimum number of parking spaces per residential unit to the current expectation of a maximum number. However the onset of the electric car has largely evaporated the car's environmental toxicity and they are now likely to be with us for many, many decades longer and arguably beyond.

There are also often uncomfortable class prejudices at play when it comes to car use. While the popular perception is that car use is predominantly the domain of middle or high-income earners and that those on lower incomes more commonly frequent public transport, this is not necessarily true. 70% of the wealthiest residents in central London do not own a car. Yet only 43% of the most deprived residents in outer London do not own a car[39]. Essentially the poorer you are and the further away you live from central London, the more likely you are to own a car. It is within this demographic context that measures like Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, Car Free Neighbourhoods and '15 Minute Cities' can potentially be construed as penalising the poor with restrictions that the more privileged are less likely to be constrained by.

Therefore new council housing should by no means seek to encourage car use, but it should accommodate it with the most subtle and intelligent design solutions possible. Here too planning policy has undergone significant shifts in recent decades. Reflecting the motorist Zeitgeist of the day, 1960s council estates were awash with garages, many of which never ended up being used for their intended purpose (and are even less so now) and thereby attracted nefarious antisocial misbehaviour due to the inactive and un-overlooked peripheries in which they were normally located.

It is inconceivable that a new generation of council housing will see a resurgence in garages, smaller construction budgets make them economically unviable and socially garages, which are now frequently used for storage in any housing tenure, have lost the consumerist cultural cachet they once commanded. Parking courts too have been popular in recent decades, with developments like Poundbury only being able to engineer their laudable reputation for limited on-street parking by concealing cars in back-street parking courts carefully hidden from view. But these too can be spatially wasteful and would represent an intolerable land-use extravagance on the vast majority of council housing schemes.

More likely solutions for a new generation will be a continuation of the shared surface or 'home zone' methodologies where kerbs are eliminated and parallel on-street parking is carefully concealed behind planters, landscaping and shrubbery that minimises cars' visual impact on an otherwise pedestrian-prioritised environment. Balance will be the watchword here and as ever, good design is the best way to secure it.

39. Transport for London; Table: *Income Deprivation & Car Ownership by Area of Residence*; Strategic Analysis and City Planning (2023)

22. Character

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Greek St. Housing, London (above) Dujardin Mews, London	• Good landscaping can help shelter car parking and minimise its impact on public realm • New council housing should not encourage car use but it should use intelligent design to accommodate it
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Character is essentially what turns buildings and spaces into places. It is not absolute or distinct, it cannot be described in definitive historic or decorative terms like architectural style, nor does it have measurable technical or structural attributes like a mathematical formula or scientific theory. It is invisible, intangible and amorphous. Yet it is absolutely critical to giving places individuality, identity and interest. And in so doing, establishing what every development craves, a sense of place.

But because character is difficult to define this makes it easy to ignore. And

it is the risk of ignoring or undermining character that has the potential to grievously compromise any new generation of council housing. Avoiding this failing involves making buildings and the places and neighbourhoods which they're in, distinctive, appealing and memorable enough to generate a special, personalised character all of their own. Not only will this make individual developments more successful, it will enable them to be clearly differentiated from others, thereby helping deliver a built environment that eschews monotony and enshrines vibrancy and variety.

Within a council housing context, every other guideline within this blueprint, as well invariably countless others, forms one of the variants by which urban character can be established or enhanced. Context, colour, materials, scale, nature, streetscape, proportion, lighting, street furniture all contribute to character and careful thought should be always be given to how these are deployed and what impact on character those design decisions will have. Ultimately, this process will enable new council housing to have a meaningful impact on local character and attain a richer understanding of how best to positively contribute to it.

One such example is the new **Greek Street affordable and social housing development in Soho (see photo on preceding page)** in the heart of London by MATT Architecture (2022) which sensitively maintains local character by mimicking, in a contemporary fashion, the materials and proportions of the Georgian townhouse terraces that surround it.

23. Community

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Marmalade Lane, Cambridge (above) Bacton Estate Regeneration, London	• Strong community is the lynchpin of successful council housing and good design is critical to empathise this • Community must be involved from the start of design process • Tools like Placemaking Matrix can show positive community impacts
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

Community is the lynchpin of successful housing development and, within the socially and economically condensed context of council housing, this becomes an even greater imperative. Counterintuitively, strong communities are not necessarily dependent on beauty either. Many of the last generation of council estates that became caustic hotbeds of crime and deprivation still exhibited terrific levels of civic pride from those residents who still fiercely defended them as their homes and communities.

But strong communities are very much dependant on one key quality, a strong sense of place. It was this sense of place that the Placemaking Matrix, the innovative design tool presented in Policy Exchange's 2023 paper, *Better Places*, sought to measure and define for the very first time. By establishing a universal qualitative criterion against which the placemaking performance of multiple developments could be measured and scored, the aim of the Matrix was to provide an instant, easily-digestible assessment of how successful the places created by new developments are. This level of success inevitably defines and determines the strength of the community the place in question sustains so the Placemaking Matrix offers a compelling example of how to construct a tangible relationship between design intervention and community identity.

Within a council housing context, how specifically can design shape community? The reality is it that the process starts long before a design is even formulated, it starts by very simply listening to what people want, the very principle that underpins the Placemaking Matrix. Architecture, by its nature, cannot subject itself entirely to being a popularity contest. But the most successful council housing schemes betray a strong thread of community empowerment and enfranchisement that has enabled residents to have a direct say in their final architectural product.

We see this demonstrated in a number of ways and on a number of different projects. Part of the reason Peter Barber's Donnybrook 2006 social housing scheme in east London is finished in resplendent white render (despite being surrounded by its gritty East End context) is because it helped remind residents of the villas of Mediterranean holidays. At Karakusevic Carson's estate regeneration project at north London's Bacton Estate, early engagement with the Tenants' Association (who wished for residents to remain on site throughout redevelopment) was crucial to the adopting phasing sequence ensuring just that.

And while 2018's **Marmalade Lane in Cambridge by Mole Architects** **(see image on p.78)** may be a co-housing rather than social housing project, from its car-free spaces to the absence of fencing around private gardens, almost every design decision has been taken by the residents, an impressive template for council housing, where reasonable, to emulate. There is beauty in democracy and enabling residents to shape their surroundings and create excellent places is yet another way of securing it.

24. Landscaping

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Igawa Lane, Gujo, Japan (above) Chobham Manor, London	• Positively implants nature into built environment • Captures the same instinctive human affinity towards nature that architectural decoration does • Carefully differentiate between soft and hard landscaping
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
££-£££	

Achieving an harmonious balance between the built and natural environments is not only essential to creating urban beauty but will be an essential asset in increasing the attractiveness, liveability and desirability of a new generation of council housing. Even today, landscaping is all too often an afterthought on housing projects, with carefully manicured architectural blocks gravely let down by the surly swatches of arid surfaces carelessly stuffed between them. There is some economic bandwidth for this kind of negligence in the private market, there is none whatsoever in council housing. Therefore it is imperative that good landscaping is used to create as welcoming and attractive an environment as possible.

The key to this is having a comprehensive landscaping masterplan that devises a landscaping concept for every inch of a council housing development. This need not be an exercise in profligacy nor is it a manifesto to cover every inch of council housing in greenery. It will merely form a framework that decides where best to utilise soft (and hard) landscaping and for what purpose.

A tree-lined street for instance could help provide shelter and create intimacy. The deliberate absence of trees may achieve the opposite within a more civic setting. This civic setting may merit a fountain, where one might be superfluous on a residential mews. Planters incorporating seating may help soften pavements and promote contemplation at one location and conceal parked cars at another. The key is to ensure that every element of landscaping has not been randomly dispersed to greenify the environment but is efficiently engaged in a specific urban role that is unique to its setting.

Nature is arguably the most humanising element of the built environment and there is wealth of academic study, from U.S. philosophers Denis Dutton and others, claiming that we are instinctively drawn to it because the human mind finds in nature the essence of beauty[40]. It is why so much of traditional architectural decoration mimics the forms and structures nature provides. And it is also why it is a win-win proposition that new council housing should use the innate beauty nature offers to enhance the visual beauty our built environment contains.

40. Dutton, Dennis; *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*; Bloomsbury (2009)

25.Layout

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Goldsmith Street, Norwich (above) The Mailings, Newcastle	• As with tenure blind housing, tenure blind neighbourhoods are the goal • Connectivity with surrounding fabric is vital • Council housing should not be autonomous to its surroundings but seamlessly embedded within it
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

The chief ambition of any layout for any council housing development of any size should be to insert itself as seamlessly as possible to its surrounding urban routes. It is fine for whatever masterplan may be in place to deploy all manner of urbanistic or design wizardry within its curtilage. But unless its edges are well integrated into the tapestry of streets and linkages around them then all that wizardry will count for nought. Connectivity must be key.

Needless to say history provides compelling evidence supporting this view. Many of the council estates of the 1960s and 70s took the opposite approach, gleefully revelling in their physical, social and architectural

dislocation from their surrounding fabric to arrogantly establish themselves as an autonomous and notionally inaccessible presence within their adjacent contexts. Much of this was fed by the prevailing ideology of Modernism, an ideology that very often saw itself as socially distinct and intellectually superior to its reactionary predecessors. But the end result was unmistakable, social severance rapidly feeding internal decline, like dying blood cells robbed of oxygen.

The aim today must be to 'de-estate the estate' (see Terminology chapter). Yes, council housing masterplans should to all the things good masterplans must do. They should be legible. They should respond to desire lines. They should establish a hierarchy of spaces. They should give those spaces firm, defined edges. They should promote views. But first and foremost they must be firmly connected to their surroundings so they that they become part of an urban collective bigger and civically richer than themselves, they must in effect turn council housing into a blinder but even more valuable social commodity: housing.

26. Maintenance

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Dujardin Mews, London (above)	• Consider long-term fiscal burden maintenance may impose on design decisions • Avoid short-term cost-savings that lead to expensive future maintenance costs • Higher efficiency = lower costs
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £	

To survive beauty must be sustainable. And to be sustainable beauty must be able to be efficiently and economically maintained. Maintenance is a hugely important issue when it comes to council housing. Today it assumes an inordinate portion of local authority budgets, an intractable long-term fiscal burden that could be dramatically reduced if maintenance was an embedded consideration from the very start of the design process. Even more compellingly, this is money that could be spent on building new council housing rather than being hurled into an ever-deepening

fiscal black hole attempting to sustain substandard products from the past.

While poor design made a prodigious contribution to the decline of many of the last generation of council estates, low and sometimes non-existent maintenance standards was a virulent antagonist too. Without the money to maintain the housing fabric or an adequate management plan in place to notify managers that maintenance was due, the inbuilt degradation of our council housing stock was inevitable. These mistakes must not be allowed to happen again.

There are many ways in which the future maintenance burden can be minimised. Material selection is one of the most effective, rainscreen cladding for instance requires more maintenance than brickwork. Equally powder-coated aluminium windows require less maintenance than those faced with exposed timber. This was one of the long-term cost-saving features incorporated into the Dujardin Mews council housing development by Karakusevic Carson Architects (2017), the London Borough of Enfield's first council housing project in almost half a century.

Early decisions like this can have a substantial impact on maintenance costs decades down the line. It is also important to note that short-term cost savings, such as the use of conventional rather than self-cleaning windows, can lead to much more expensive future maintenance costs, in this case a higher frequency of manual cleaning methods requiring additional associated equipment, labour and disruption.

Building management systems (BMS) have also evolved into highly sophisticated products. These are computer-controlled systems targeted at the facilities management of larger buildings that are not only capable of forensically monitoring mechanical building elements like ventilation, heating and lighting but can also inform building manager when any of the components required to run these mechanisms have failed and require replacement.

While the chief aim is to improve the energy performance of buildings, a by-product of this is the enforcement of more efficient maintenance and repair schedules, saving money and time in the long run. For local authorities often in charge of thousands of council homes, utilisation of technologies like this could be of immense long-term economic benefit. Residents rendered less aggressive by poor maintenance could represent a significant social (and political) benefit too. Ultimately, the more efficient the maintenance system, the less it will cost.

27. Security

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Bourne Estate, London (above) Primrose Park, Plymouth	• The best surveillance is natural • Design can't eradicate crime but it can help minimise it • Avoid concealed or un-overlooked areas, especially entrances • Good lighting of public areas and routes is an imperative
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £-££	

Anti-social behaviour and the resulting lack of resident safety it engendered became one of the biggest stigmas associated with council housing from the 1960s and 1970s. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the issue is comprehensively addressed in the new generation of council housing.

And one of the most powerful and effective ways to address it, as with so many other things, is good design.

Realistically there are of course limitations to what good design alone can do to defeat crime entirely, crime usually feeds on an established web of social, economic, geographic, demographic and behavioural pattens and unilaterally dismantling these eco-structures is generally beyond the reach of architecture.

However, there are definite recognisable design measures that can be taken to increase resident safety and reduce the incidence of antisocial behaviour. Good lighting, active frontages, mixed uses, a layout that generally avoids dead ends or dark alleys, buildings that avoid concealed alcoves (particularly near entrances), the constant encouragement of natural surveillance, amenity spaces with an adopted purpose - these are all measures that can lead to a safer public realm and to safer council estates.

28.Streets

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Edgewood Mews, London (above) Dujardin Mews, London (see p.89)	• Streets are traditional yet super-efficient horizontal skyscrapers • They enable all housing scales to connect to sur-rounding urban fabric • Housing generally responds best to a clear, front-facing relationship to the street
COST TO IMPLEMENT: £-££	

Streets are superlative, super-efficient horizontal skyscrapers that, unlike many of their vertical equivalents, can bestow a dazzling array of urban benefits. They allow new developments to be better integrated into existing street networks, they frame views and focal points, they facilitate wayfinding, legibility and connectivity, they provide a sense of intimacy and enclosure, they reinforce human scale, they provide clear edge boundaries, they denote a clear spatial hierarchy between circulation

routes and urban squares, they can intensify animation and activity, they can be instinctively domestic in nature and they provide a dynamic threshold between public and private realm

They are also as ancient as civilisation itself and for centuries have formed the principal physical arteries along and around which human life unfolds. It is for all these reasons that, when site and circumstances allow, their use should be encouraged as much as possible in any new council housing development.

The reasons why are simple. Not only do streets have a proven track record of efficiently arranging housing but the recent track record of mid-20th century council housing tells us just how damaging their absence can be. Many (though not all) of the council housing of the 1960s and 70s conspicuously rejected the idea of the street, preferring instead the Corbusier concept of seeing towers and slabs and unmoored objects the landscape, separated by canyons of amenity space.

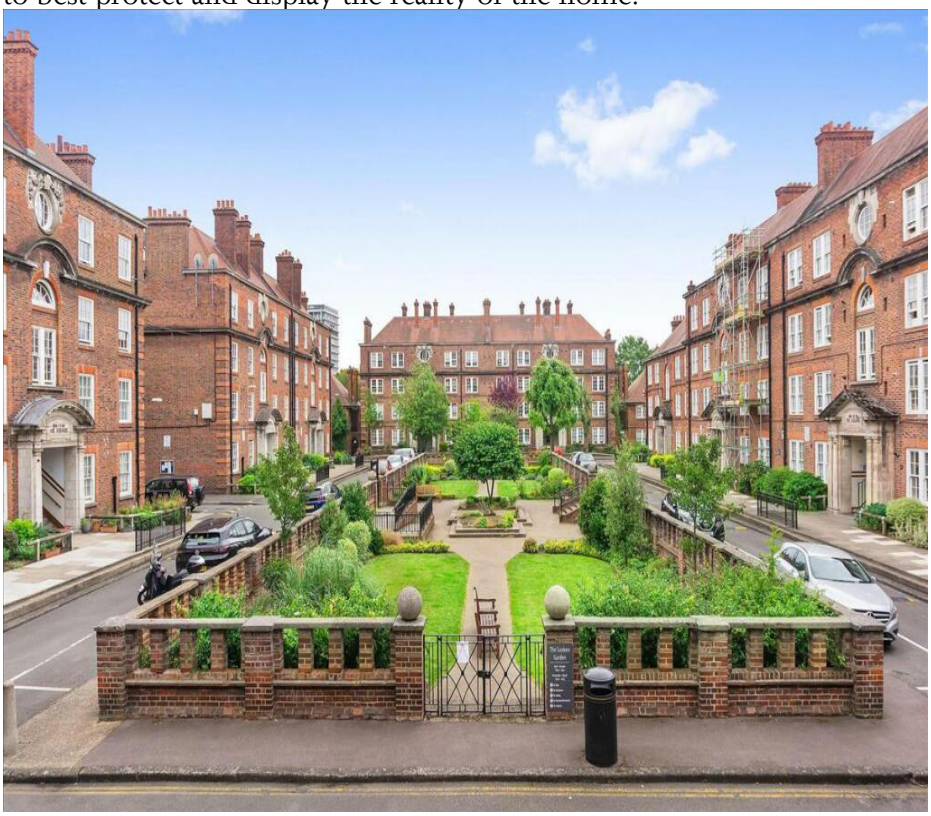
Naturally, as we have seen, the results were often catastrophic. Spaces, like children, need boundaries and they tend to perform badly without them, venturing unsolicited into unregulated areas that commonly trigger a decline in standards and a breakdown in discipline. Housing generally responds well to a clear, front-facing relationship with the street and all the best residential streets, from London's Georgian terraces to Paris's Haussmann boulevards, tend to conform to this simple, time-honoured template.

Streets provide housing with the reassurance of a shared physical framework, a clearly defined edge where the public ends and the private brings. Squares perform a similar role, replacing street's circulatory function with a communal one and providing manifest opportunities for more concentrated social gathering as well as curated civic or architectural display. All these strategies ultimately combine to strengthen public realm and tighten its physical parameters into a more relatable human scale.

Dujardin Mews in London by Karakusevic Carson (2017) is arranged around a traditional street

It goes without saying that all of these outcomes are ones in which council housing should be openly and unreservedly committed to achieving. The street is not just a humanising gesture, it is controlling one too. It does not control in an authoritarian sense. But in the same way that a window discourages misbehaviour through natural surveillance, streets are an architectural green belt that prevent spatial sprawl and impose civic structure.

These are the very qualities that were lacking from so much of the council housing of the recant past and their absence is not only the reason they often failed but it's the reason that even if they had aspired to beauty, they would have lacked the urban apparatus capable of conveying it. This new generation of council housing must embrace the concept of the street to best protect and display the reality of the home.



Like streets, squares, such as this one in the Peabody Estate in Hammersmith, west London (1926) can provide formal or informal concentrations of communal gathering

29.Street Furniture

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Boundary Estate, London (above)	• Minimise street clutter • Use street furniture to construct visual character and express character and local identity
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
£-££	

Street furniture serves two purposes. The first and most obvious is a practical municipal purpose, bollards provide safety and security, lamp-posts emit light, railings define boundaries and regulate access, litter bins promote cleanliness, benches offer rest etc. The second and more interesting purpose is the role they play in unifying the public realm and expressing the character and identity of a particular site.

On a lavish level, the maritime theme that forms the highly ornamental visual narrative for street furniture on London's Victorian Embankment remains a preeminent historic example of this process. Here, lamp-post stands festooned with dolphins and cast-iron benches with swans for armrests prove that no opportunity is wasted to vividly and sculpturally deploy street furniture as a dynamic theatrical affirmation of local heritage

and urban character.

While budgets for street furniture are unlikely to be anywhere near this expansive within a social housing context, there is no need for them to be in order to secure quality. What matters most, as with all housing tenures and urban conditions, is that street clutter is minimised and that where possible, the detailing and design of street furniture apparatus is co-ordinated to form a compelling and coherent visual narrative for the location in question.

As ever, the Boundary Estate in east London, the world's first council estate, uses street furniture to innovative effect. Acres of slums and hovels were cleared to build the estate at the end of the 19th century and rather than discarding it, the rubble from these "rookeries" as they were called was assembled in a mound at the centre of the new development. This mound became the site of Arnold Circus, the centrepiece of the estate. The mound itself was covered over to create the raised platform that still exists in the middle of the circus to this day and at the centre of this raised platform, a large example of street furniture was erected in the form of a bandstand. While the bandstand may not denote a direct visual narrative for the site, it's presence at the pinnacle of the piled slums that preceded it forms a powerful symbolic link with the area's past.

30. Terminology

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Goldsmiths Street, Norwich Golden Lane, London	• Discourage naming new council developments "estates". • Encourage greater physical & social reference to surrounding area.
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
£	

Language is critical to how we read the city and relate to our built environment. A street immediately tells us that it is different to a square which in turn tells us that it is different to a courtyard or a mews. But language is not just important for idene1tifying what things or places are, it is important for establishing how connected they feel to us and, in turn, the rest of the city. It is for these key symbolic reasons, that the term council estate, which has outlived its social, architectural and municipal usefulness, should be firmly consigned to history.

Why? Historically in English culture the word estate has positive and

even aristocratic associations, recalling to mind the rambling country estates of the nobility or the superlative Great Estates that played such an important role in London's urban development and today are still crucial to the civic husbandry of some of the capital's best-loved neighbourhoods.

It is also possible to concede that the term council estate itself still has benign connotations. It instantly recalls the ideas of domesticity and communality, the societal and to a degree socialist idea of individual homes enmeshed into a shared community and the crucial sense of place and belonging that flow therein. Contemporary observers might be surprised to learn of the sheer force of civic pride that once existed on the most bedraggled of council estates and still, to some extent, can be found on them today. At least some of this is entrenched in the concept of formalised, familial inclusivity that an estate denotes, belonging to a place that is *here* and not *there*. Identity expressed as place.

But it is not inclusivity that makes council estates a redundant and potentially pernicious term but their exclusion and separation. The idea of an estate instantly implies a sense of separation from the rest of the city, a severed enclave where normal rules can be disapplied and new, potentially dubious ones established in their place. And it is this very severance that not only gave license to the design mistakes that caused such harm to the council estates of the past, but it also ghettoised the poorest and often most vulnerable in society by mirroring their economic dislocation from their surrounding community with an arguably more virulent physical one.

There is no equivalent term in the English language to describe residential collectives serving other economic classes, the most prestigious parts of cities have no communal domestic moniker, they are simply neighbourhoods enjoying all the rights, privileges and access belonging to their host town or city affords. Council housing too should enjoy the same privileges, self-identifying as fully-fledged components of their wider communities and not banished to unseen corners where malice can fester and they can be neither seen nor heard by their fellow, wealthier citizens.

It is important to make clear that this is strictly a matter of terminology rather than tenure, this is not a mandate to dismantle existing council estates or, obviously, stop building new ones. Instead, it is designed to encourage new council housing to immerse itself more fully into the fabric of the surrounding city, thereby diluting the economic and physical isolation residents may have felt in the past by forging a stronger sense of connection with and belonging to their wider urban surroundings.

This will have consequences in design terms too, prioritising context and encouraging the adoption of local character and architectural vernaculars that will ultimately increase the chances of any new council housing development becoming a thriving, resilient, successful and well-integrated part of the city. If we as a society have generally accepted that tenure blind developments are the most socially responsible way to accommodate new housing then we should also promote tenure-blind neighbourhoods as their altruistic urban equivalent.

As with other economic strata, let streets rather than estates signify where people live and let the natural, mixed diversity of cities flow into the places where its poorest residents reside, breaking down the barriers that once left them stigmatised and disenfranchised and giving them equal access to the counterintuitive mix of invisibility and inclusion on which the urban condition ultimately depends.

31. Views

POSITIVE PRECEDENTS:	SUMMARY:
Falcon Point, London (above)	• External views can frame a memorable concentration of place and neighbourhood • Internal views can help merge the private and public worlds together and should seek to optimise external landmarks for internal benefit
COST TO IMPLEMENT:	
£	

Views are framed fragments of built or natural environments from which we make informed judgments of what the wider constituent nature or characteristics of that environment may be. A design developed solely for the express purpose of providing attractive views would likely not succeed because it would unreasonably subject architecture to the constraints of a contrived and curated snapshot. However, any development that embraces quality and beauty would most likely generate attractive views naturally as an intuitive and inevitable consequence of a successful design process and

product. It is this latter sequence that a new generation of council housing should seek to imbibe.

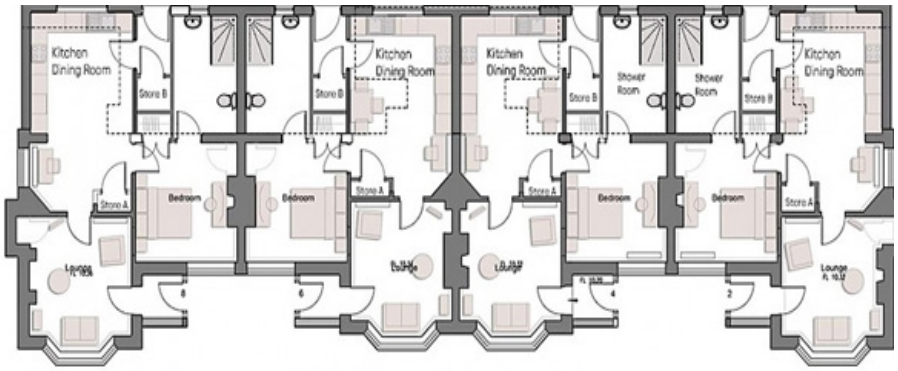
Architecturally views essentially work on two levels, external and internal. Externally, one of the ways to make new council housing visually memorable is to construct a public realm that does not present buildings or spaces as autonomous objects but as an integrated and continuous thread of related urban gestures and interventions. In this spirit, thought should be given to how streets terminate, where focal points and landmarks can be located, how curves and corners can be turned into memorable visual moments, how natural landscape can act as a picturesque counterfoil to built edges and how spatial hierarchy can add depth and spontaneity to the ground level pedestrian experience. None of this comes at any additional cost, it is simply an intelligent, intuitive design process of arranging the various notional chess pieces that comprise built environment into a composition most likely to install balance, harmony and where appropriate, drama into the public realm.

Internal views are a more fluid and less pliable commodity that nonetheless, like external views, are still capable of leaving us with a lasting visual impression of our built surroundings. It should be remembered that every window simply does not provide daylight but it also implants a trace of the outside public world into our internal private domain. This is in essence a great privilege, to create a built environment is a laudable civic pursuit but to have it form part of the internalised visual scenery on which the private, unseen rituals of residents' families and lives unfolds is an intrusion that demands the utmost sensitivity and respect. Consequently, there is not just an urban obligation to craft a public realm that affords us an uplifting visual experience but particularly on council housing, there also exists a keen social responsibility to ensure that that experience forms a positive, enriching part of our internal daily lives.

Falcon Point, the 1970s block of flats built as council housing for the London Borough of Southwark, **(pictured on p.95)** serves as a compelling case in point. The building itself is unremarkable local authority estate. But by virtue of its unparalleled location on the River Thames just west of the Tate Modern, at least half its flats offer stunning riverside views of St. Paul's Cathedral in the City opposite. At no additional construction cost, one the greatest buildings in the world is conveniently compressed from a global landmark to an interior adornment for the personal use and enjoyment of those residents lucky enough to have been allocated the flat and the view. Not every council flat can be fortunate enough to be located next to St. Paul's. But if designed well, every council house can certainly be canny enough to use views to colonise external landmarks and turn them into internal assets.

BLUEPRINT III: TYPOLOGY

32.Almshouses



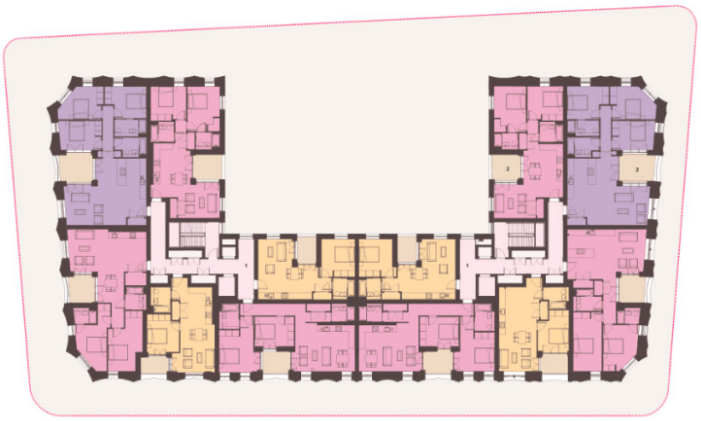
Modern Social Housing Almshouses: ***CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:*** *A plan of a typical modern almshouse from BPTW Architects, Thrale Almshouses, London (2016); Holmes Road Almshouses, London, by Peter Barber (2016); Appleby Blue Almshouses, London by Witherford Watson Mann (2022); Thrale Almshouses; Dagenham Courtyard, London by Patel Taylor (2014)*

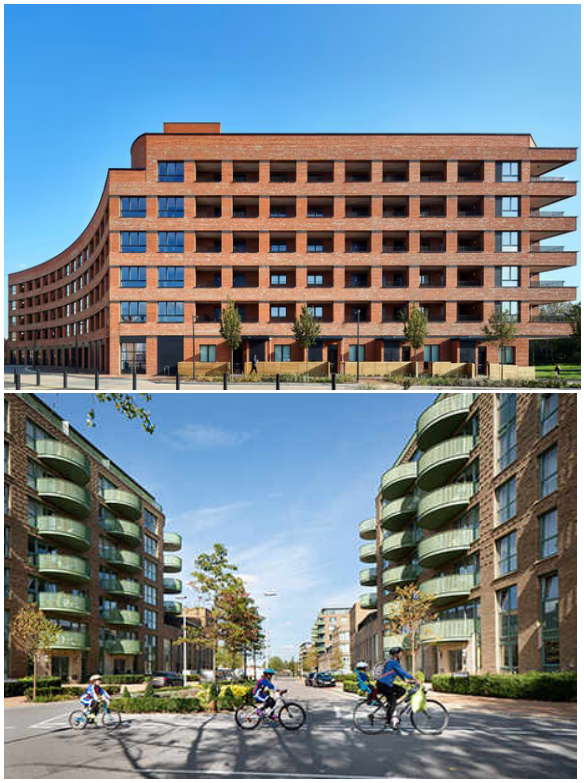
There are over 30,000 almshouses in England and Wales housing almost

36,000 mainly elderly or vulnerable people[41]. They are an ancient and uniquely English housing typology dating from the 10th century and as their name suggests, their original purpose was as benevolent charitable institutions in which the poor or underprivileged could be housed. But modern incarnations of this much-loved format have been increasing in recent years and not solely in a charitable setting but as a credible housing solution in its own right. While almshouses are by their nature small and are unlikely to unilaterally solve the housing crisis, in many ways they are a perfect solution for new, modest council housing developments. Their usually three-sided courtyard format provides intimacy and enclosure around inbuilt amenity space capable of trapping sunlight and promoting natural surveillance, they are usually composed of traditional materials that respond well to local vernacular, they relate perfectly to human scale and they are unapologetically picturesque.

41. https://www.almshouses.org/housing-and-almshouses-the-stats-and-facts/

33.Flats





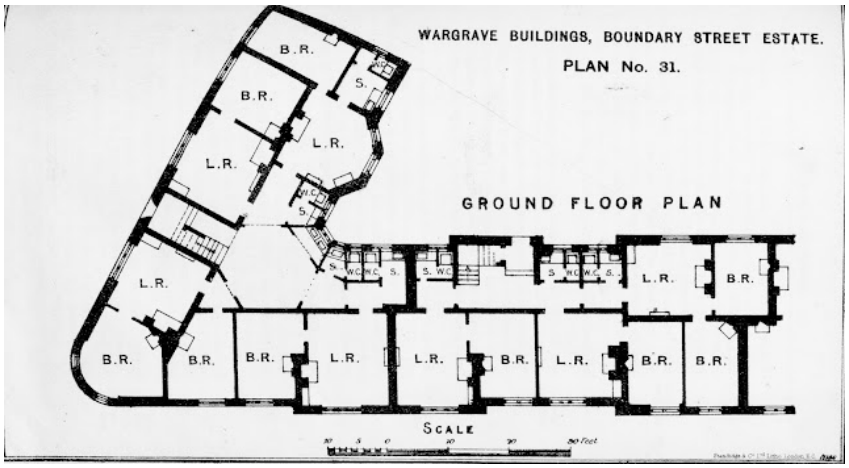
Council Housing Flats: ***CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:*** *A plan of Bell Phillips' Cosway Street Flats, London (2024); Magenta Court, Dacorum, RG+P Architects; Kidbrooke Estate, London, CZWG (2016); Peabody Thamesmead Reach, London, Pitman Tozer (2020); Wilmott Court, London, Henley Halebrown (2021)*

Flats remain arguably the most popular and consistent typology for council housing and they are capable of delivering high densities at various scales. One of their key advantages is their innate versatility, flats can be custom-built or converted from other traditional housing types such as terraces, townhouses or even almshouses. Mansion blocks too comprise flats, sometimes called mansion flats. Non-residential typologies, most commonly offices but sometimes as varied as hospitals and churches, can also be converted into flats. This makes them an eminently deployable format for a future leaner and more nimble generation of council houses that may find itself inserted into existing buildings or infill sites.

Britain has not adopted continental Europe's rapacious appetite for flats and we are yet to see inner-city thoroughfares in London, Liverpool or Leeds lined with contemporary versions of them in the same way we see apartment blocks hug the edges of boulevards in Paris, Athens or Barcelona, contributing to the massive residential densities those cities are consequently able to achieve. But this perhaps is precisely what we do need to see more of in the centre of our towns and cities, mid-rise, well-designed, contextually sympathetic blocks of flats not consigned to suburbs or backstreets but proudly hoisted above ground floor retail to assist the urbane, cosmopolitan densification of our towns, cities and

high-streets. A new generation of council housing could be part of the vehicle on which this mandate is delivered.

34.Mansion Blocks



Modern Mansion Blocks: ***CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:*** *A historic plan of one of the mansion blocks on the Boundary Estate, London, Owen Fleming (1899); Chelsea Barracks, London, Eric Parry (2024); Achenbachstrasse 43/45, Dusseldorf, Sebastian Treese (2023); Abel & Cleland House, London, DSDHA, (2018); Hampstead Mansion Block, London, Sergison Bates (2022)*

Mansion blocks are potentially the secret weapon that does not merely deliver a new generation of superlative council flats but on which the wholesale resolution of the housing crisis relies. In mansion blocks Britain invented the preeminent urban solution to the riddle of achieving high-density living within a contextually sympathetic and historically empathetic format that could still respond to both the street and human scale. More dense than terraces and more humane than blocks of flats, they were adept at installing modern living standards behind facades that responded superbly to both traditional streetscape and historic vernacular. Also, with a greater number of communal entrances than typical blocks of flats, they were able to engage more positively with the street and required smaller cores and shorter internal corridors than their modern flat block successors, both of which represented a significant cost saving too.

And then, around the middle of the 20th century and largely due to misconceived ideas about social class and construction expense, we turned against the mansion block to build bigger and often more soulless blocks of flats that counter-intuitively provided smaller and less liveable units. The retreat was even more unwarranted due to the fact that some of the very earliest council house models, such as the Bourne and Boundary Estates (see plan above), comprised mansion blocks rather than the block of flats format we may be more familiar with today. Therefore, if the enduring model of the London mansion block is enjoying a resurgence in German cities like Dusseldorf, then it deserves a revival in its home territory too.

Mansion blocks have made something of a comeback in London in particular in recent years and there are number of compelling contemporary reinterpretations of them that deserve wider credit than they have thus far received. It should be noted that thus far their newer versions have predominantly offered high-end housing. However, a joint venture with a new generation of council houses could be the perfect mechanism to give this most robust of British housing precedents a well-deserved second

chance and banish generational social stigmas about council housing for good.

35.Terraces

Council Housing Terraces: *CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:* *Ground & 1st Floor Plans for Anne Mews, London, AHMM & Maccreanor Lavington (2011); South London Mews, Peter Barber (2020); Anne Mews; St. Chad's, Tilbury, Bell Phillips, (2017); Portobello Square, London, PRP (2011)*

London has just over 3.5 million residential dwellings[42] for a population of just under 9 million. 58% of these dwellings are flats with the remainder comprising flats[43]. The innate English affinity to the identically house being the archetypal housing type are demonstrated by the fact that in New York, a staggering 90.5% of its residential units (numbering over 3 million dwellings) are flats with just 9.5% being houses[44]. Of the 58% of London dwellings that are houses, 14% are detached, 39% are semi-detached and a convincing plurality of 47% are terraces[45].

The terraced house therefore leaves an indelible impression on English residential design and could once again make a meaningful contribution to a new generation of council housing and help ensure that these new units attain cultural integration by engaging with a popular and familiar vernacular typology. While terraced housing generally doesn't offer the very high-densities that can be achieved by flats and mansion blocks, it has a number of benefits which could enrich new council housing. They often come with private amenity space at the rear. They synchronise perfectly with streets and squares. And they come in a variety of scales, from townhouses to mew houses, that could ensure that new council housing is perfectly able to adapt with both large regeneration sites and the smaller, awkward infill urban gap sites that are likely to be the principal donors for our next generation of social housing.

42. Greater London Authority; *Housing In London* (2018)

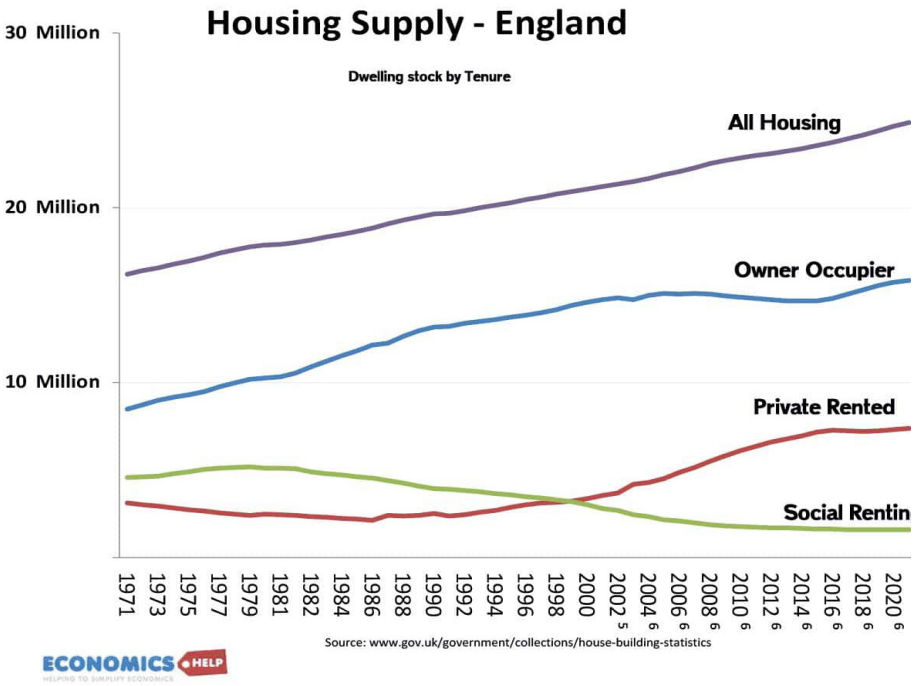
43. Land Registry UK House Price Index, April 2017

44. NYC Real Estate, Marketproof Inc.

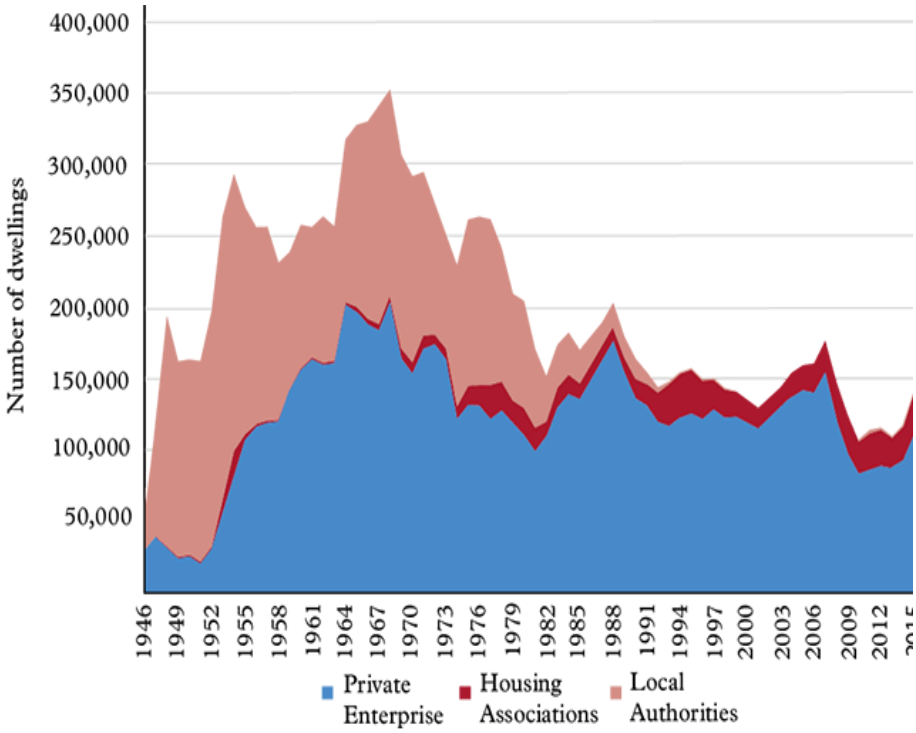
45. Office of National Statistics, Census Data for England & Wales 2011

APPENDIX: The Economics of Council Housing

Today's housing crisis is inextricably linked to a chronic undersupply of council housing. While insufficient supply is a feature across all three of Britain's occupier types, (owner occupied, private rented and social housing which includes council homes), only one has declined in number over the past half century, social housing. Throughout the 1970s Britain maintained a social housing stock of approximately 5.5 million. Today this has fallen to 3.8 million, a decline of almost 25%.



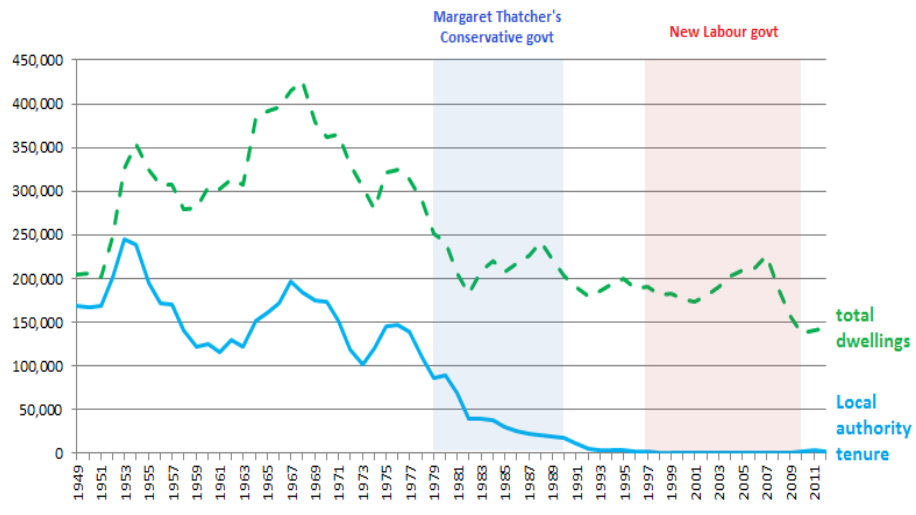
The picture is even starker when we chart trends prior to the 1970s. In the early 1950s prior to the housing boom orchestrated by the re-elected Churchill Government in which Macmillan famously served as housing minister, for every home the private sector built, the public sector would build at least eight. Yet by the early 2000s, the private sector accounted for almost 90% of all UK homes built with the vast majority of the remainder assumed by housing associations.



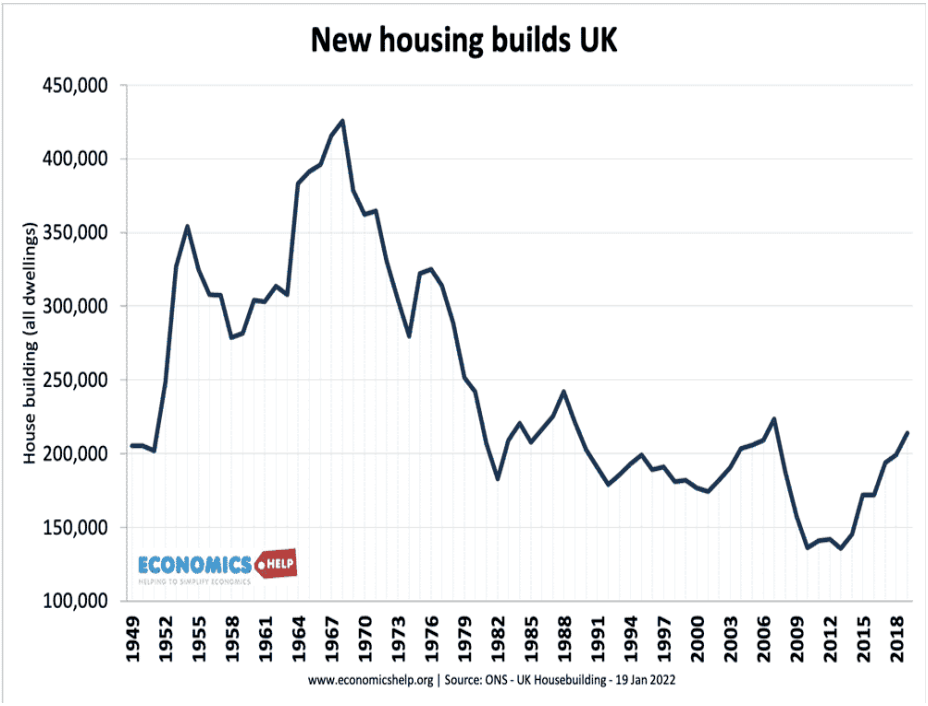
In fact the Blair/Brown Governments proved an unlikely nadir for council housing construction. The year in which the Thatcher Government built its fewest amount of council houses was in 1989-90 when 17,710 council properties were built under it. Yet more council houses were built in this single year than under the entire premierships of Blair and Brown when 7,870 council homes were built. While these chronic shortfalls in construction reflect national shortages across all housing types, there were most keenly felt within the council housing sector.

Number of council houses built in the UK

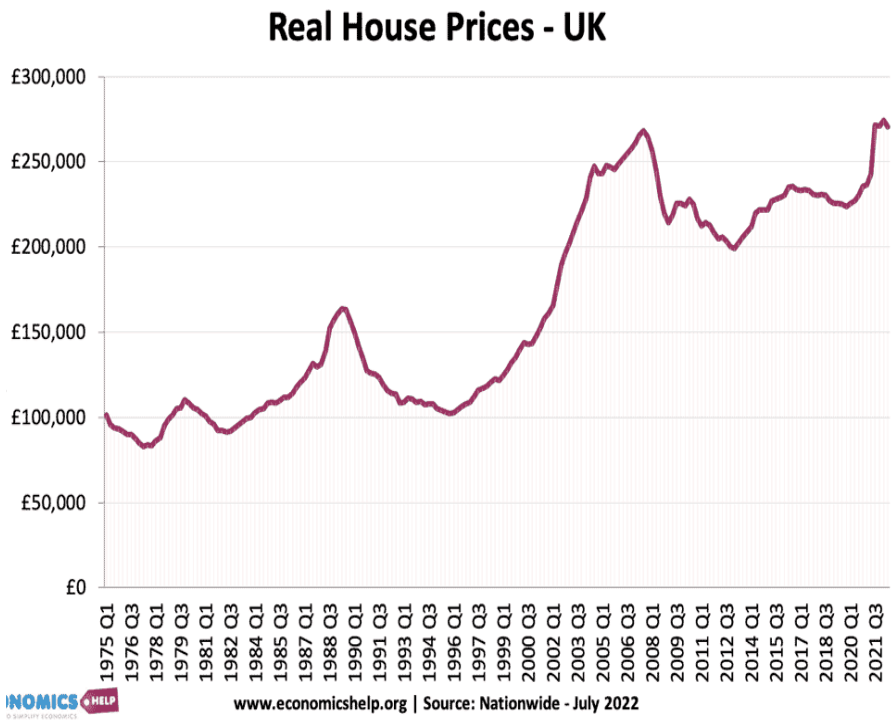
(Local authority tenure, completion of permanent dwellings)



Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, historical data on house building (Table 241)

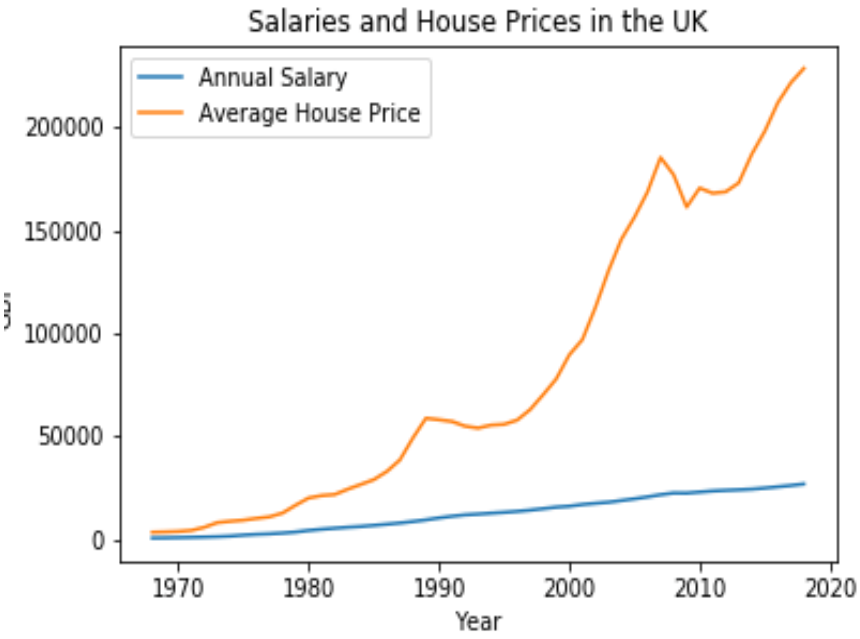


While the past 50 year period has been beset with chromic reductions in housing supply, house prices have risen exponentially and have not been matched by similar rises in wages.

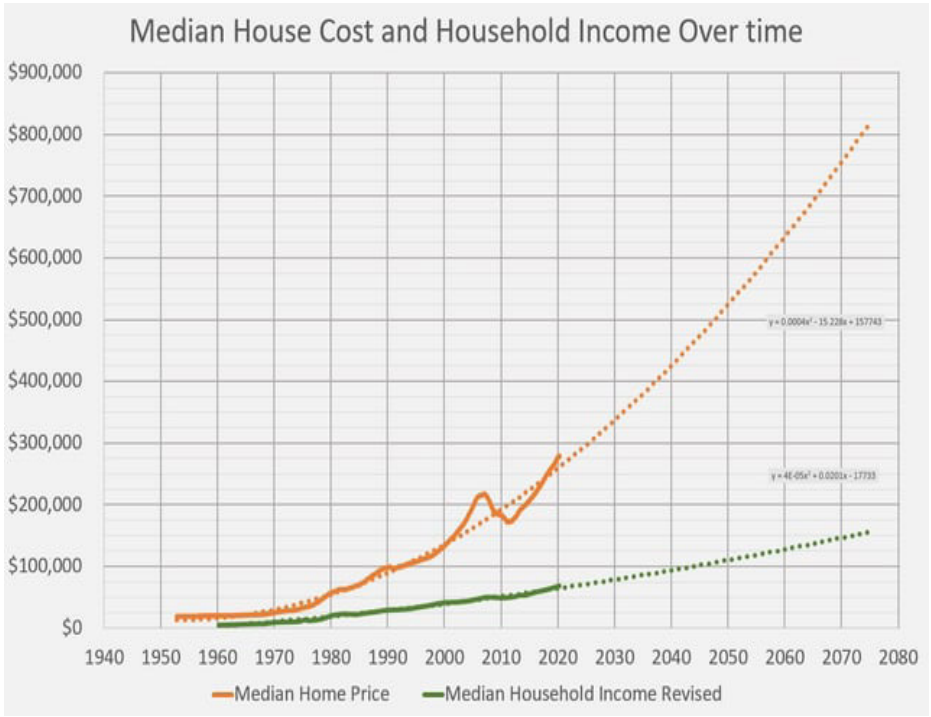


In 1970 the average London house price was four times greater than the average London salary. Today it is almost fourteen times higher. While London has witnessed the sharpest national increase, such rises have been

replicated across the country.



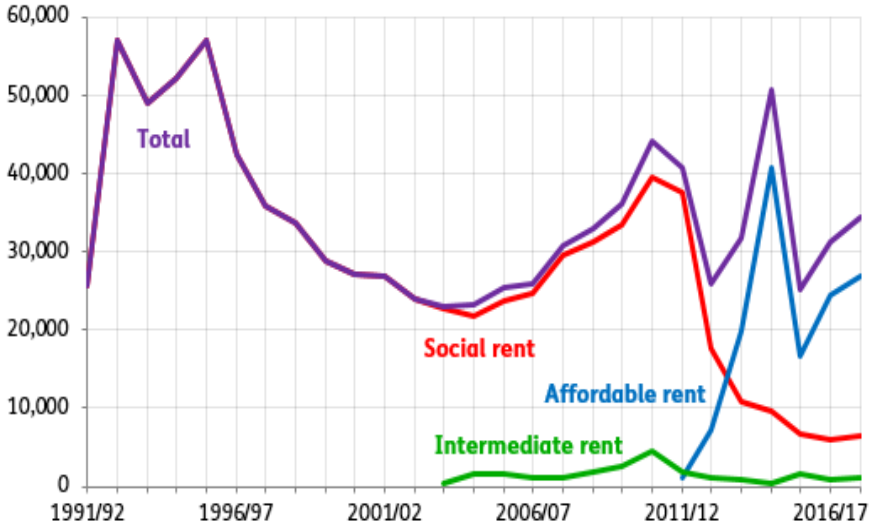
To a degree these are international trends and U.S. data indicates that their own income-house price trajectory has charted a similar course to our own over the past 50-year period and is forecast to remain in place indefinitely. But due to the unique nature of the UK housing market, the greater role house prices play as a broader indication of economic wellbeing and the popularity of London property in particular as a relatively stable target for international investment, the UK market is likely to be even more vulnerable to the acute affordability pressures these acute economic imbalances enable.



For all these reasons, it is now commonly accepted that the UK housing crisis is as much an issue of affordability as it is supply. In response to this, since the Coalition Government of 2010-15, there have been concerted efforts to provide affordable housing to ameliorate the economic pressures imposed by high house prices. Affordable housing comes in various forms but all of them must offer prices at no more than 80% of market rates. However with market rates historically high in hubs like London and Cambridge, this has only made minor inroads into addressing the affordability issue that remains at the crux of the housing crisis.

Social housing changes over the years

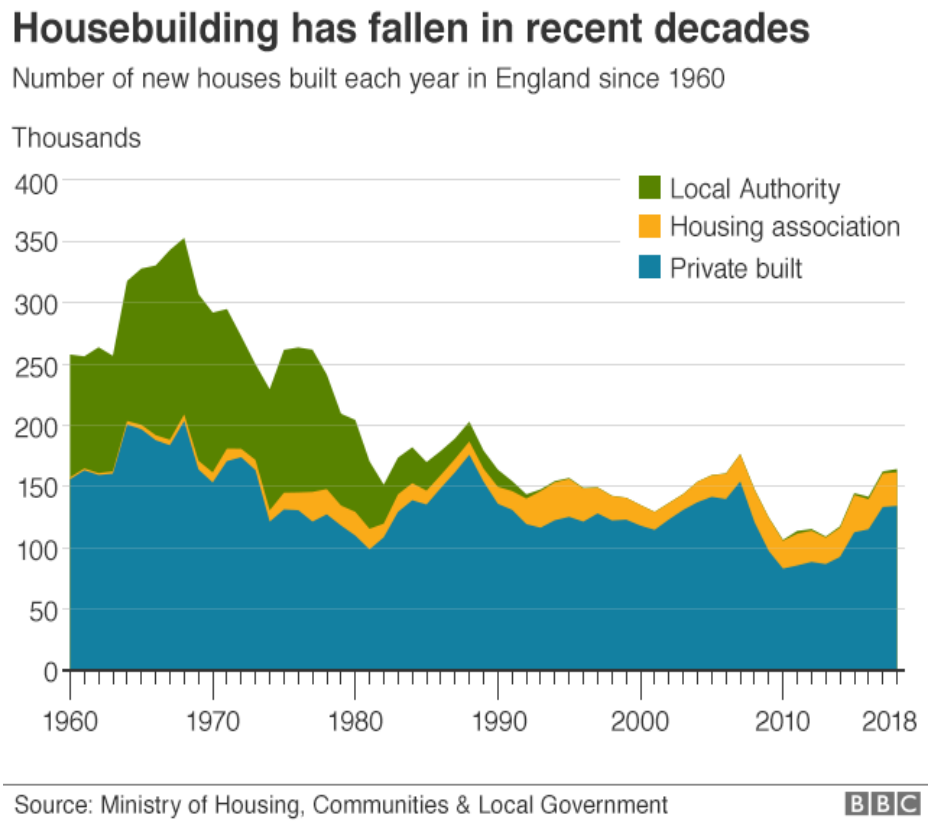
Newly built and acquired affordable homes provided each year for social, affordable and intermediate rent in England, 1991/92 to 2017/18



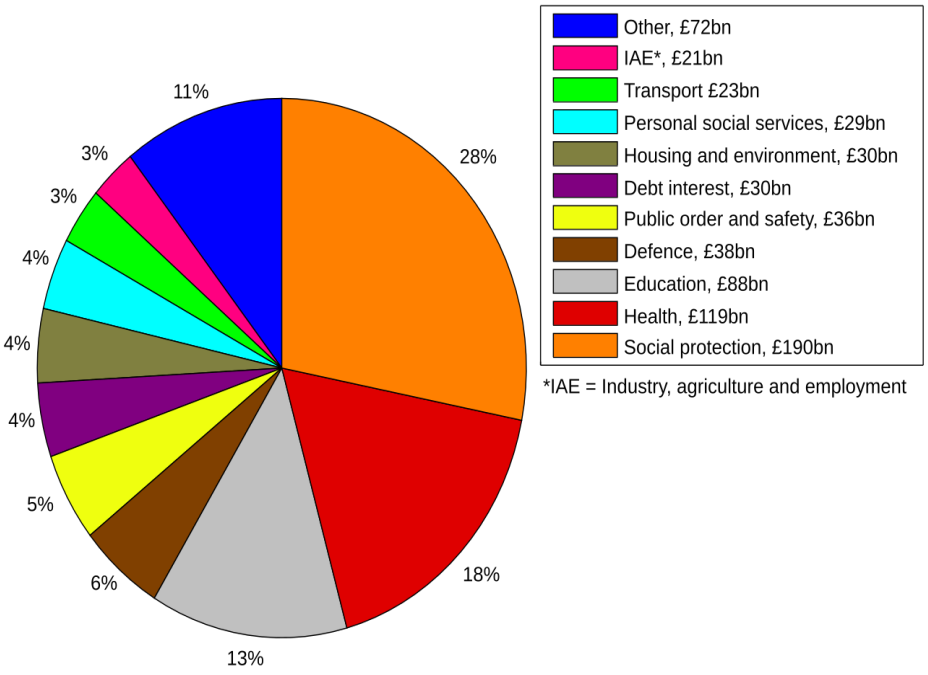
*Social rent is typically 50% of local market rates, intermediate and affordable rent up to 80%.

Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Live tables on affordable housing supply, Table 1009, October 2018

Another measure designed to address affordability has been the rise in housing associations. These are non-profit organisations accredited as Registered Social Landlords and established to provide housing for the poorest in society. Their origins go back as far as the Peabody Trust set up by visionary London-based U.S. philanthropist George Peabody in the mid-19th century. Housing associations have now largely assumed much of the social housing provision once delivered by council housing and since the early 1990s they have built more social housing in Britain that councils themselves, the first time this has happened since the 1930s.



There is further affordability dimension to the housing crisis and it does not just involve individuals struggling to afford to buy houses but a public sector struggling to afford to fund the rapidly accelerating fiscal burden the housing crisis imposes on the public sector. This comes principally in the form of housing benefit. At present housing benefit appears to assume a relatively slender proportion of Britain's total welfare budget, less than 4% in 2022.



But the housing crisis is forcing more and more people who qualify for housing benefit to rent from a private sector which has witnessed unprecedented rent rises in recent years. This means the housing benefit bill is increasing to cover higher private rents a process which, if it continues at its current rate, could see housing benefit expenditure more than double to £71bn by 2050[46]. Some have argued that the only way to counter this is to build more council housing to ensure that housing benefit is no longer required to meet an overheated private rental market that has been subjected to profligate recent price rises. Additionally, it clearly makes greater fiscal sense to spend public money on the capital investment of council housing which (subject to Right to Buy) will remain a public asset in perpetuity) rather than using it to subsidise private landlords.

46. https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/housing-benefit-bill-to-hit-71bn-by-2050-58815

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