

# Provably Popular Homes



Holding Developers to account with  
Systematic Beauty Polling

Ben Southwood and Ike Ijeh





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## About the Author

**Ben Southwood** is a former head of Policy Exchange’s Housing, Transport, and Urban Space unit—three things that he believes inherently move together in lockstep. He continued Policy Exchange’s paradigm-setting work in the housing area as part of an integrated plan to make British towns and cities clean, beautiful, and functional. Before he joined Policy Exchange, he was a management consultant at KPMG, an economics correspondent for City A.M., and for five years Head of Research and Head of Policy at the Adam Smith Institute. He has written for academic journals, every major newspaper and magazine, and appeared on every major radio station and television news programme.

**Ike Ijeh** is a head of Policy Exchange’s Housing, Architecture & Urban Space unit and is also a practising architect, critic 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.

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## Executive Summary

- The Royal Institute of British Architects, the Royal Town Planning Institute, and many other organisations agree that current community engagement processes can fail to get ‘get in all the cracks’ and reflect the opinions of everyone, especially marginalised groups.
- The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission established that the appreciation of local communities is one of the key features that determines the value of a given place or location.
- This paper proposes a new mechanism for carrying out high quality community engagement on design elements, as part of a robust and rich community engagement process in the UK planning system.
- Specifically, this paper proposes that the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities ought to poll across diverse demographics of the public to learn their opinion on new buildings.
- These polls would come after buildings were constructed, to allow appreciation of them in their real world setting, rather than theoretical renders.
- They would not be binding in planning, though planners could use these polls as part of their toolkit of measures as part of a holistic judgement of a building’s design quality and contextual value in place.
- In handing the public greater power to have their say on the built environment, the proposals would fully conform to the government’s levelling up agenda.

# Introduction: Community Design Enjoyment in the British Housing Debate

In recent decades, there has been a profound shift towards respect for the views and preferences that local communities and ordinary people have about their built environment. This principle was articulated eloquently by the Heritage Alliance in their submission to the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission:

“The core of any place value is in the appreciation of the communities living there, in their perception of what constitutes the place’s uniqueness, character, heritage and meaningfulness.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a deeply positive development. The principle of greater community design engagement is also one increasingly echoed in government housing policy. Micheal Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities State has not only consistently stressed that new housing be beautiful but that it is expressly supported by the local community too:

“People have been resistant to development because too often you have simply had numbers plonked down simply in order to reach an arbitrary target. You have had dormitories not neighbourhoods. I think it is critically important that even as we seek to improve housing supply you also seek to build communities that people love and are proud of. It is no kind of success if simply to hit a target, the homes that are built are shoddy, in the wrong place, don’t have the infrastructure required and are not contributing to beautiful communities.”<sup>2</sup>

However, there have also been serious challenges to achieving the outcomes Gove and the Heritage Alliance seek. One is that it is extremely difficult to secure engagement from across local communities. This point recurs constantly in the literature on public engagement. In its Guide to Localism, the Royal Institute of British Architects notes that:

“...people who are too often left out of the design process including young and older people, less affluent communities, black and minority ethnic groups, women, LGBT communities and individuals, as well as

1. MHCLG [now DLUHC] (2020), Living with Beauty, p. 33.

2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/michael-gove-people-robert-jenrick-government-regeneration-b999315.html>



people with physical and sensory disabilities.”<sup>3</sup>

In its best practice guidance, the Royal Town Planning Institute emphasises:

“... the need to redress the balance of public involvement and to make greater efforts to hear the views of people and groups that have been traditionally under represented.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Demos has stressed the risk that:

“Discussions may be dominated by those who have more time and resources to invest in them, who have more social capital or higher social status, who appear more confident, or are from dominant groups and so are not the subjects of prejudice.”<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to see how this might be so. Public engagement is often time-intensive, making it far easier for people without children or full-time jobs. It involves discussing topics for which most people have little specialist vocabulary, like architecture and urban design, and which they may not feel confident to debate publicly. The result of this is that public engagement schemes rarely involve more than a very small minority of local residents, disproportionately those with professional involvement in the field or in fields adjacent to it.

A second difficulty is that real engagement often falls far short of the standards laid out by organisations like the RIBA and the RTPI. Those who control and organise engagement can have enormous influence over its results through the questions they pose and the way in which they are framed. It is never easy for a layperson to debate with a specialist, especially when the specialist sets the terms of the debate.

One upshot of this is that, in spite of laudable efforts by many groups, much new building in Britain remains demonstrably unpopular. This has been shown by a range of visual preference surveys in recent decades, including several by Policy Exchange.<sup>6</sup> Across a range of different building types, the appearance of recent buildings is still markedly less popular than that of buildings from before the Second World War. David Halpern’s famous study, since replicated several times, found that design professionals often do not know what sort of buildings the public wants, suggesting that a lack of good data on public preferences continues to seriously hamper efforts to secure local support for new buildings.<sup>7</sup>

Overcoming these challenges requires action on many fronts, from creating opportunities for digital engagement to minimising the use of technical jargon in relevant planning documents. In this report, we propose an additional tool for this kit. The inspiration for our suggestion is a proposal made by the Planning Officers Society to the Building Beautiful Commission, that:

3. RIBA (2011) *Guide to Localism: Opportunities for Architects Part 2: Getting community engagement right*, p. 7.
4. RTPI (2005), *Guidelines on Effective Community Involvement and Consultation*, p. 8.
5. Quoted in *Living with Beauty*, p. 34.
6. Policy Exchange Hospitals and Local Government. Robert Adam (2005), ‘Architectural Preferences in the UK’, available at <https://worksinprogress.co/architectural-preferences-in-the-uk/>
7. Halpern (1995), *Mental Health and the Built Environment*.

“An electronic stand could be placed outside a new building with green to red buttons pressed by passers by, similar to tracking experience of airport security.”<sup>8</sup>

This is an extremely interesting idea. At present, the focus is almost entirely on engaging the public in the process of designing buildings or neighbourhoods. This is of course crucially important. But if, as the evidence suggests, local authorities and professionals face a shortage of information on how the public responds to buildings, it will also be valuable to know what people think of development after it is finished. It will, of course, be too late to change the building in question, but the information can be fed back into the planning process, and inform decisions in the future.

The importance of this is grounded in the deeply public nature of architecture. There may be some products where it matters only whether the private customer is happy. But this is profoundly untrue of building. Buildings do not only affect the customer who contracts for their construction, but also the entire community who must live with them: an ugly office block or multistorey car park can blight a town centre, affecting everyone who lives and works there. So a building's success is not just a matter of the customer's willingness to pay for it: in informing decisions about our built environment, we need to know how past changes have been received by the larger community, whether they have been welcomed or resented.

We therefore support the Society's proposal, and we believe it could be a valuable source of information for the planning system to work with. However, used in isolation, it does have some limitations. It is plausible that people's feelings about a building will influence not only how but also whether they press the electronic stand: for instance, people who love or hate a building might be more likely to press it than people who feel neutral overall about it.

It is also likely that there will be other selection problems. People who have low confidence in consultation processes and who believe local authorities are not really listening to them are less likely to engage than people who are confident that their opinions will be taken seriously. If we rely on this sort of data alone, we could end up with seriously misleading results, compounding some of the issues raised by the RIBA, RTPi and Demos.

Moreover, the established public consultation process used as part of the current planning system is not held in high public esteem and is perceived by many as being a largely cynical and cosmetic bureaucratic formality designed to provide the ostensible stamp of public approval rather than a genuine representation of broad public opinion.

Fortunately, there is a solution that has been developed to deal with problems precisely like these: sampled surveying. Sampled surveying is an enormously sophisticated instrument, honed over many decades by organisations that need accurate information on public preferences.

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8. Living with Beauty, pp. 121-122.

Although it is undoubtedly still imperfect, it is inarguably the best way that we have of getting quantitative evidence on what the public think: sampled election polls may be several points off, but they are still incomparably more reliable than any other method of surveying voting intention, which is why they are used by all relevant organisations in every country. In the context of quantitative social science, sampling is normally a given: any survey based on participants self-selection with no attempt to weight the results would be dismissed out of hand.

We propose that, after the construction of a large building, sampled surveys should be held on images of each of its public facades. The results would be made available to local authorities, as well as published online. This would provide decision-makers with a reliable source of quantitative data on public preferences for the first time, circumventing the selection problems faced by existing methods. And it would provide local people with clear evidence about which sort of buildings are popular and which are not.

A developer with a track record of producing deeply resented buildings might find it increasingly hard to persuade other communities to allow them to build in a similar way. The reputational damage of consistently producing demonstrably unpopular buildings would thus be considerable, and in the longer term a powerful incentive would emerge to produce buildings whose appearance the public likes better.

Such surveys would provide a clearer depiction of the public's attitude towards the built environment that is being created for them and will afford those responsible for fashioning that environment the opportunity to ensure that future interventions are more closely aligned to the public's wishes.

The potential to have their views shape their environment in this way could massively empower and encourage members of the public to play a significantly more active role in the development of their local communities than the planning system currently allows within the present, limited public consultation process. Such moves are central to the government's levelling-up agenda where community incentivisation and enfranchisement are seen as central to increasing socio-economic growth and cohesion.

It should go without saying that external appearance is far from the only thing that matters about a building, and hence that it would be wrong to judge them on this feature alone. Accordingly, it is important that this proposal is not misconstrued as some kind of architectural beauty pageant or popularity contest that sensationalises aesthetics for a performative public poll.

However, the visual aspect that buildings present onto the public realm is important and councillors, planners, architects and engaged laypeople need more reliable information on the public's views on this, to consider alongside the many other kinds of data relevant to a planning application. Our proposals would give them that information, thereby helping to create a built environment that is welcome to those who live in it.

Finally, while we envisage that the survey takes place after a building has been completed, we would welcome the adoption of similar more robust sampling and consultation methods during the planning application process prior to construction. Again we do not in any way wish to determine planning applications by binding public votes, this would mark a contrived and unseemly diminution of artistic integrity and statutory authority.

But in order to truly galvanise the public consultation process and ensure that levels of public confidence in it and our planning system are significantly increased, we encourage councillors, planners, developers and architects to subject their proposals to more rigorous pre-application sampling and engagement methods to more accurately gauge public opinion about proposed changes to their public realm.

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# Detailed Proposal

Every time a building over a certain size or height threshold is built, the Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) must contract one of an approved list of pollsters to run a sampled visual preference survey on the public's view of the building's appearance. This must be based on developer-provided images of the actual building from certain prescribed angles. The public's opinion must be recorded in the form of a rating out of ten. This information must then be readily accessible on the internet for local authorities, councillors and the public to access.

1. Eligibility. When a large or tall building that has received planning consent is completed, and comes into occupation or use, this policy is triggered.
  - a. We consider a build as 'large' when it has usable space of [1,500 sqm or more]. 1,500 sqm is the level at which class E properties cannot be converted into housing without getting full planning permission.
  - b. 'Tall' buildings are those [taller than 18m].
  - c. This will not apply to buildings developed under permitted development, or buildings given full planning permission via the 'street votes' or 'mews votes' mechanism suggested in Strong Suburbs.
  - d. Government may wish to consider also polling on a randomised sample of smaller buildings.
2. Photography. The developer must submit photos of each publicly visible facade to DLUHC. In the case of terraced buildings, this will mean only one photograph; in the case of a freestanding building on a plaza, it may mean four or more. It is important that the developers do this themselves to avoid a situation in which they can claim that any unfavourable rating was the result of the local authority's photographers being biased against them.

However, there will need to be regulations governing the photographs developers can submit to avoid their providing manipulated or otherwise biased images. The acceptability of images will be judged by DLUHC, who will have the right to refuse images that do not conform to regulations. Images must be:

- a. Taken from a normal pedestrian standpoint in the street;
  - b. In colour, without unusual filters or enhancement;
  - c. Taken within two hours of noon;
3. Context. The developer must also submit at least one additional long-range image showing a fair and reasonable depiction of the development set within its wider streetscape, cityscape or skyline context. The view should not be unduly obscured by trees or sunlight glare. The same graphical conditions identified above would apply and again DLUHC will have the right to refuse images they deem to be unrepresentative.
4. Scoring. DLUHC must survey the public on each of these photos individually. The results will not be aggregated into an overall 'building appearance score', which would presuppose an implausibly fixed weighting for the relative importance of each facade: the public can make such judgements for themselves in each case.
5. Contracts. DLUHC will put out individual tenders to British Polling Council members, based on a standard repeatable, simple, and identical contract.
  - a. Each time [500] members of the public<sup>9</sup> will be asked to rate a batch of facades out of ten. The exact question should be 'how much do you like the appearance of this side of this building, out of ten.'
  - b. DLUHC should put batches, as they arrive, out to tender with British Polling Council members. They must take the lowest bid offered, since the work is undifferentiated. The pollster must return the poll within three months.
  - c. A guide price might be [£1 per 15 rated facades per person, so DLUHC might expect to pay £500\*1/15 (or £33)] per building that meets our threshold of height or size. It is hard to work out how many buildings this would apply to each year, but it is unlikely to be more than several thousand, since the great bulk of construction orders are private housebuilding, with small individual buildings.
6. Results. The results of each poll must be added, at least monthly, to a continually updated live table hosted on data.gov.uk, which is available online in html as well as in xls or csv format.
  - a. At the very least, it must record local authority, all ratings, polling average rating, developer, and architect/architectural firm. These will promote transparency, accountability, and accessibility.
  - b. In addition, it may be beneficial to include project cost,

9. It is considerably more expensive to poll by county than to poll across the country as a whole or by region. It is worth considering doing the polling by region or county, in case local preferences vary, and in case buildings have important contextual details (e.g. ashlar may be more appropriate in Bath, whereas redbrick may be more appropriate for Manchester). If it is 50% more expensive, this may be worthwhile; if it is 200% more expensive, this may not be worthwhile. Evidence suggests that preferences do not vary enormously across the country, so the cheaper and easier national option may be preferable.

coordinates, and electoral constituency, if these are inexpensive and easy to record.

- c. While demographic information will be essential on the part of the pollsters, to make sure preferences represent the whole community, it may be that this information is, for individual buildings, invalid due to low sample size. This information should be recorded and kept, but it may be appropriate to restrict releases of it to annual or other data bundles.

7. Impact. The Government should amend the National Planning Policy Framework to allow local planning authorities to take the results the system generates into account when making decisions about buildings.

- a. They may, for example, use past results for visually similar buildings to judge whether the appearance of a proposed building is likely to be popular, which should in turn feed into the decision of whether to grant or refuse permission.
- b. They may alternatively use past results for buildings by that architect or developer to judge whether the appearance of a proposed new building is likely to be popular among local people, and thus whether to approve or reject the application.

## Conclusion

We live in an age of instantaneous public opinion. In line with the instant gratification and user convenience that are an increasingly prevalent features of our modern society, the X-Factor generation can vote for its favourite musical artist by telephone, social media can instantly poll thousands of online users without a polling company in sight and more British people than ever before are voting in general elections by post from the comfort of their own homes. There are obvious advantages to intensively garnering public opinion and this paper already refers to many of them; more community engagement, more democracy, more enfranchisement and more representation for those that might once have bene under-represented.

But there are challenges too. Public opinion is unrepentantly mercurial, Victor Hugo's famous dry quip that his singular recommendation of the Eiffel Tower was that it was the only place in Paris from which it could not be seen still provides a salutary anecdote about how opinions rarely stay the same. Public opinion also ignominiously circumvents professional expertise, while the latter may have played a disproportionately significant role in the successes and failures of our towns and cities, that is not to say the former enjoys a natural immunity against error. Additionally, more often than not it may also lack the academic resilience to fairly assess what can sometimes be complex urban and socio-economic interventions.

Which is why the proposals contained within this paper seek to find an equitable balance between the two. The polling recommendations still allow the professional and quasi-judicial integrity of the planning system to be maintained with ultimate planning decisions still taken by officers and committees in line with established legislation.

But for the first time, the proposals will allow these decisions to be potentially informed by a far greater level of public opinion and community engagement than is currently the case, conspicuously inviting residents and the wider general public to informally share their views in order to allocate themselves a more powerful and direct hand in actively and democratically shaping the communities that surround them.

This increased level of public engagement is critical to rebuilding and maintaining public trust in a planning system that all too often residents feel deliberately ostracises them. Deep scepticism about poorly attended consultation exercises has arguably served to sever the public from the planning system it is supposed to be served by and risks needlessly



antagonising residents and immunising architects and developers from proper public scrutiny of their output.

And this is why this scrutiny, at a time when the building is complete and can be witnessed interacting with its context in real-time rather than on paper, could prove to be such a positive exercise. Not only because it will give the public a chance to have their say without the uninformed speculation that would inevitably colour their opinion of unrealised works, but because it will give planners, developers and architects vital data on how the public responds to their work and what interventions change the nature of that response. Within the right hands, this information could be instrumental in delivering a successful built environment and public realm that not only serve the needs of their users but reflect the desires and aspirations of them too.



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