CREATE
streets

Create Streets
Briefing Paper

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February 2022

Ben Southwood
& Samuel Hughes

Create Mews
Relearning the Art of Weaving a Finer Built Fabric

Foreword by Sir Simon Jenkins

A potential transformation. By Thomas Dougherty.

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Endorsements

Society must continuously invest in our built environment to ensure well-being and to enable humankind to coexist fruitfully with nature. By 2050 the places where we live must make a meaningful contribution to the nation's net zero commitment. That means accommodating sustainable new buildings as much as possible within the built footprint of existing towns and cities to increase population densities. We must make denser neighbourhoods, closer to services that can be reached on foot or by bike, in homes that are far more energy efficient while preserving the green setting of suburbia. This paper is a serious contribution to showing how we can do this.

Ben Derbyshire, Immediate Past President of the Royal Institute of British Architects

Our 550 local campaign groups wish to see greater participation in the planning system. Planning should be done by communities, not to them by councils and developers.

The 'block plans' proposals in this paper do just that. They give residents the power to choose to redevelop dilapidated garages, alleys, and other waste-land into mews-style homes. This 'gentle density', walkable growth is the antidote to the land-hungry, car-dependent sprawl that is destroying so much of our countryside.

We would very much welcome pilots of this scheme as long as sufficient safeguards are in place to protect urban greenspace and to ensure there is a requirement to involve the most vulnerable in our society. In addition, the genuine concerns of those whose opinions are not the majority view must be considered and those who do not wish to participate should not feel pressured to be involved.

Rosie Pearson, Chairman, Community Planning Alliance

Another brilliant piece of work. My experience over the years with development proposals on tight urban and suburban brownfield largely hidden sites is that they can be just as controversial as housing estates on green fields in the countryside, and yet they really shouldn't be. The beauty of the block plans concept is that like street plans it springs from neighbours working together rather than from mutual suspicion and hostility.

Christopher Katkowski QC, Kings Chambers

Breathing fresh life into town centres and protecting green fields needs agreement and consent from local residents and communities, by building 'up not out'. This paper takes these principles from my 'Street Votes' Parliamentary Bill and applies them to fix up derelict alleys, disused garages, and other pieces of drab, run-down urban concrete wasteland. It could make our towns and suburbs greener, more alive and more beautiful, at minimal cost and fuss for taxpayers too.

John Penrose MP, sponsor of the street votes enabling bill in Parliament

Neighbourhood planning has demonstrated how local communities can make a creative, thoughtful and ambitious contribution to the future of their built environment. It is time to build on this success and support a major extension of community planning powers. The proposals outlined in this report could be part of this evolution of community rights as we seek new ways to make better use of brownfield land in our cities.

Tony Burton CBE, community activist and planner

Intensification is an excellent way to create homes while making neighbourhoods more liveable and more sustainable. These proposals outline one way in which we could make this possible more often with the support of local communities.

Alan Baxter, Director of Alan Baxter Ltd

The development system works well for enabling the delivery of large sites by large housebuilders—but the incentives are stacked against releasing the sorts of small sites on which smaller firms thrive. What's more, discretion on a case by case basis means there is a lack of the sort of repeatability that allows innovative new firms to scale quickly. This proposal will help on both counts, by releasing a large number of small sites, with rules selected by locals not officials.

Philip Salter, Director of The Entrepreneurs Network

This excellent report looks at how we can improve the use of wasted land across the country, taking its inspiration from ways of building that have been common throughout our history. Georgian builders made tremendously careful and sparing use of small urban plots, developing the finely grained urbanism that is so widely admired. This sophisticated proposal shows a way to revive that tradition.

Christopher Boyle QC, Landmark Chambers and Former Chairman of the Georgian Group (2015-2020)

Small, local builders are severely impacted by a lack of available and viable land which hinders the delivery of vitally needed new housing. The approach proposed in this report could go some way to create new development opportunities which deliver these much-needed new homes. The ability to develop underutilised, small sites would enable new housing projects specifically aimed at SME house builders. SME builders are best placed to produce sympathetic, good quality homes in sites that have been led by the community as set out in this report. What we would need to ensure is that any policy that creates new sites does not add additional planning or cost burdens onto small builders, who already face a difficult path through the planning process.

Brian Berry, Chief Executive of the Federation of Master Builders

The planning politics of densification has held back coherent placemaking and supply for far too long and therefore new, innovative strategies in line with community need are required to build the places people want. Create Mews delivers on that ambition and creates a much needed locally led supply strategy alongside local plans, not instead of them; while also democratising the barely touched Local Development Orders (LDO), that councils up and down the United Kingdom have failed to realise the potential of.

Rico Wojtulewicz, Head of Housing and Planning Policy, National Federation of Builders

Housing associations are a vital way to provide more housing for those in need. These excellent proposals could help them to improve their existing estates, housing more people, with the support of existing communities on those estates.

Jamie Ratcliff, Executive Director of People and Partnerships at Network Homes and former Assistant Director of Housing at the Greater London Authority

These proposals could help to avoid negative reactions from residents when development proposals come forward for small, windfall and brownfield sites. If they have anticipated the opportunities and planned for them, as in the recommendations in this paper, it should help to provide more homes and to give them control of such developments rather than London boroughs applying permission in principle, as in London Plan Policy H2 B5.

Peter Eversden, Chair of the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies

These proposals are a useful addition to previous work on street votes. They are an interesting contribution to the debate on how we can ensure local housing supply can become more responsive to local housing need, and bring down housing costs for struggling households.

Shreya Nanda, Economist at IPPR Centre for Economic Justice and IPPR North

One of the greatest challenges facing our country is accommodating everyone who wants to live in our most prosperous cities. As long as existing residents have a say in what gets built near them, advocates for a sustainable housing market need creative solutions to win them around. This is an important proposal that would deliver much-needed new homes with popular support, while benefiting renters who would face displacement.

Dan Wilson Craw, Deputy Director, Generation Rent

The housing crisis affects all parts of society, especially the young and those most in need. Housing associations can play a key role in providing more badly-needed homes, and these proposals offer another way for the community on their estates to partner with HAs to do that.

Reuben Young, Research and Policy Manager, Network Homes

It is abundantly clear that Britain's suburbs need to do more to help address the housing crisis. Increasing density, responsibly and sustainably, is vital if we are to build the homes we need in the places where people want to live. Our own research has shown immense capacity for gentle intensification on the forgotten and unloved backland plots and alleyways that permeate the outer edges of our towns and cities. Yet, despite these opportunities, barriers to development remain significant. Communities, who have little to gain and much to lose, are understandably apprehensive about the prospect of new homes being built in their midst. The proposals set out in this document provide a refreshing and thought-provoking alternative where the benefits of new residential development could be shared more equitably, whilst giving existing homeowners greater agency in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods.

Russell Curtis, Director of RCKa Architects and Mayor of London Design Advocate

I welcome this new report from Create Streets, which builds on last year's Unlocking the Gridlock *report by the Social Market Foundation for which I wrote the foreword. We desperately need more affordable homes for young people and young families. With housing comes security, stability, identity and space to flourish. We can and must reform the planning system, but we can do so in a way that works for everyone by giving local people the power to say no but incentives to say yes. The ideas presented in this report could help with doing that.*

Steve Baker MP

I welcome these kinds of street votes as a mechanism to enable careful densification while preserving the rights of neighbouring residents and ensuring protection and benefit to tenants. Particularly for a historic city such as Oxford, this would allow many more of the city's key workers to live within the city and be much less car-dependent without either sacrificing the city's historic scenery or building over great swathes of its current green belt.

Chris Smowton, Oxford City Councillor

London is facing a severe housing crisis and the pandemic has just added to the pressure. We urgently need to build more homes. And we need ways that genuinely involve local residents in decisions that are being made in their local area. Street votes are a good idea because they mean we can do both.

Claire Harding, Research Director at Centre for London

The housing crisis is perhaps the most serious challenge that this and future governments have to face: it denies young people the opportunity they deserve, strangles our great cities, and exacerbates other problems everywhere from social care to mental health provision. Absent 'big bang' reform, careful and well-targeted proposals such as these are our best hope of getting the homes we need, where we need them-whilst giving locals a chance to ensure they're the sort of homes people might actually cherish living in.

Henry Hill, Deputy Editor, ConservativeHome

As the Outer London Commission showed, there is immense potential to make better use of waste or derelict land near to public transport. This is a thoughtful proposal on how to do that with community support.

Prof. Tony Travers, London School of Economics

Edinburgh's glorious Old Town would be impossible to build today. NIMBY neighbours would object to every planning application and bombard council officers with complaints. This proposal, giving the block as a whole the power to decide their future, gives people back their historic right to improve their property.

Dr Eamonn Butler, Director of the Adam Smith Institute

This fascinating proposal provides a way to revive traditional patterns of intensification that created so many of our most-loved places. It constitutes an important opportunity to create more of the beautiful homes that the country needs, and to do so with the support of existing residents.

Francis Terry, Francis Terry and Associates

Block plans make sense. They would diversify the supply of sites, while helping small builders to grow, challenging the over-dominance of big developers.

Liam Halligan, author of *Home Truths*

In a planning system where the emphasis has become more on controlling development rather than enabling good development outcomes, this report highlights the incredibly important role communities can play in driving housing delivery that is locally supported, with tangible benefits that will be locally seen and felt.

Dr Riëtte Oosthuizen, Partner at HTA Architects

These proposals present a fantastic, practical way of combatting our dire housing shortage, which will improve both access to housing and affordability. And crucially they represent a way of enhancing areas in a sensitive way that is popular with locals. A win-win policy.

Anya Martin, Director of PricedOut UK

Hughes and Southwood's 'block plans' proposals for urban densification mirror their 'street votes' approach for the suburbs. Could this be the shot in the arm that Neighbourhood Planning in densely populated areas so badly needs? Some serious pilots are needed to gauge householder enthusiasm for the approach, and its scalability.

Paul Thornton, Vice Chair of the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies

Nineteenth-century mews were originally stables, and over time have been repurposed to become highly desirable and unique streets as needs have changed. Perhaps the time has come to see whether we might encourage something similar to happen to the parking alleys of the twentieth century? This paper sets out a practical proposal as to how we might do this, allowing redundant and disused spaces to be turned into valuable homes, under the leadership of existing communities.

Ben Bolgar, Prince's Foundation

Since the sixteenth century, the rapid growth of Britain's cities has been a headache for policymakers. Lots of people want to move to cities, but the existing residents do not want the extra building to accommodate them. The proposal for block plans provides an ingenious way with which to align the incentives of both groups, and in the process revive a tried-and-tested method of gently and beautifully densifying cities: to fill in the derelict spaces between plots, with residential mews and courts.

Dr Anton Howes, Historian in residence at the Royal Society of Arts, author of *Arts and Minds* and *Age of Invention*

For the last hundred years many commentators have been certain that society was witnessing 'the end of the city'. And yet, it has never quite come to pass. For all that cities have grown, changed, and sprawled, the economic benefits of agglomeration are in some senses as large as they ever were.

In fact, the growing predominance of 'intangibles'—ideas, intellectual property, branding, software, and so on—have reinforced the importance of being near those you collaborate with. San Francisco has more billion dollar tech companies than the rest of the world put together.

All this means that making sure cities have enough space for all of those who want to live and work there is more important than ever. But most ideas for allowing more homes are politically impracticable. This paper offers a rare counterexample: a way to add homes that benefit both locals and the country as a whole.

Stian Westlake, Chief Executive of the Royal Statistical Society and author of *Capitalism Without Capital*

Britain's young people have been cheated out of the opportunity to own a home for too long. Many towns and cities fail to deliver much-needed improvement under the current system. This paper gives an exciting way to help to address both of those problems.

Tom Harwood, journalist and television presenter

Hughes and Southwood's first joint paper met with astonishing success and an enthusiastic reception by the Secretary of State. This sister paper explores further how street votes can re-enable organic intensification of our towns and cities, creating better places and higher quality homes to address our housing problems. Together, they cover much of the improvements to our current planning system that are needed to enable better use of land within existing settlements.

John Myers, Founder of YIMBY Alliance and London YIMBY

Many developers have been frustrated by the uncertainty of the current system, and affected landowners often feel they have no say over development. This proposal represents an approach for a clearer and more predictable supplementary system that can better meet the needs of both local communities and developers.

Mustafa-Latif Aramesh, Legal Director BDB Pitmans, author of John Penrose MP's street votes enabling bill

These proposals promise a lot: increased housing in desirable locations; prettier and more walkable towns and cities; shorter, healthier and more environmentally friendly commutes; and a more vibrant economy. If they can deliver on half of that, they will make a significant contribution to our social wellbeing. For that reason, they deserve close consideration as the Government looks to reform the planning system.

Dr Aveek Battacharya, Chief Economist, Social Market Foundation

Britain's housing shortage makes us poorer, sicker, and stops people from having the families they want. To fix it and build more homes, we need to densify our cities. Street votes along the lines laid out here are a big step towards doing that—they would unlock huge amounts of urban land that is currently being wasted, and turn it into dense, liveable new streets. And it would put locals in control—not planners or Whitehall bureaucrats.

Sam Bowman, Founder and Editor, Works in Progress

Britain has a severe shortage of housing in many places, just like the USA. This proposal, learning from the insights of Ronald Coase and Elinor Ostrom, offers a way for locals to negotiate to allow development of badly used land. If implemented as suggested, it could make a noticeable difference to British living standards.

Prof. Tyler Cowen, Director of the Mercatus Centre, and author of *The Great Stagnation*

Housing is Britain's biggest problem. While every type of luxury and innovation has become cheaper and more accessible over the course of our lifetimes, this basic necessity is now unaffordable to the point of crisis. In London the cost of rent is now so high that it amounts to half of all outgoings, a situation comparable to pre-revolutionary Russia.

This is not just a problem, it is an existential crisis: if we do not do something about the cost of housing, our children will continue to pay ever higher amounts to live in smaller properties further from where they want to be, the inevitable result being ever more extreme and idiotic politics. As for our grandchildren—we won't have any, because housing costs make family formation impossible.

We're stuck in a near-insolvable situation where, while everyone who takes the housing job knows what needs to be done, to do so would upset his or her most important constituents. Finally, however, this paper squares the circle, by giving us a way of delivering hundreds of thousands of good-quality, sustainable homes in the places where those homes are scarcest—but without the near-suicidal political risk.

Ed West, author of *Small Men on the Wrong Side of History*

Housing and planning policy debates can have a distinct 'Groundhog Day' feeling, in the sense that we endlessly repeat the same old arguments we have been having for years, and sometimes decades. Yet in this new paper, Ben Southwood and Samuel Hughes show that it is possible to come up with innovative policy ideas that cut across the familiar NIMBY-vs-YIMBY divide. This proposal has the potential to gently densify residential areas by tapping into hidden reserves of unused and underused land. Intriguingly, it does so in a consensus-building way, which makes it more challenging, but it also means that this policy, if adopted, would have a good chance of developing the necessary staying power.

Kristian Niemietz, Head of Political Economy at the Institute of Economic Affairs

Cities can no longer rely on an everlasting supply of post-industrial sites to meet their expansion needs, and large-scale demolition of existing homes is increasingly controversial as a way of creating more space. Garages and amenity spaces are an eyesore and a magnet for crime. Using block plans to bring these back into use could deliver more homes, in a way that is socially and environmentally positive.

Richard Brown, writer and consultant, former Deputy Director at the Centre for London

Mews-style infill is a well-established and valuable form of intensification, transforming under-used spaces into good homes whilst creating a finer, more interesting and intensive urban grain. Such development can bring a new life and vitality to areas which sometimes have become neglected and indeed where undesirable things can happen. Mews-style infill developments are particularly useful for providing a rich mix of working and residential spaces: these are especially sought after now in the wake of the pandemic. This excellent and enlightened report throws welcome new light on this key aspect of our towns and cities and explains how we can achieve this more often with the support of existing communities.

Hugh Petter, Director, ADAM Architecture and Urbanism

This development of the 'street votes' idea is a rare proposition that is liberal, conservative, communitarian and popular. By giving local people control to improve their area with new housing, these proposals could create attractive new homes and new homeowners, all the while engaging with historic traditions and ensuring local support.

Alex Morton, Head of Policy at the Centre for Policy Studies

Planning restrictiveness has created a shortage of housing in the places where people most want to live which in turn has disrupted careers, restricted business growth, weakened productivity and created a housing crisis. The beauty of 'street votes' is that it solves the problem in a targeted, sensible way in those streets where most residents welcome moderate development without affecting other areas where the residents may wish to retain the status quo. The 'block plans' proposal elegantly takes that principle to another level. The potential benefits to housing supply and therefore affordability are enormous but as Ben and Samuel explain they extend to urban design, the environment, health, economic prosperity and public finances, too. An excellent idea!

Rory Meakin, Research fellow at the TaxPayers' Alliance

Gentle densification of housing in urban areas offers a win-win for housing and the environment. It reduces car dependency, makes public transport and active travel more attractive, and limits encroachment on green spaces. I support this thoughtful proposal to create a new wave of beautiful, popular, and sustainable mews developments.

Sam Hall, Director of the Conservative Environment Network

This proposal shows how 'urban mending' can transform neglected back land into beautiful homes and spaces. While the tradition of building mews streets and small housing courts has never died, the concept of 'block plans' will give it a tremendous boost. The idea of highly focused local democracy, appealing to residents' self-interest, is a welcome alternative to a confrontational, complex and uncertain planning process, which tends to favour big well-resourced developments ahead of incremental small-scale change.

Andrew Beharrell, Pollard Thomas Edwards, author of Semi-Permissive

Sir Roger Scruton's Living with Beauty report proposed 'street votes' that would allow local communities to improve the use of their own streets. This report fleshes out how this would work for service alleys, sheds, garages, and other less valued land, potentially enabling new mews streets, a popular historic urban form that has seemingly disappeared in recent decades.

Fisher Derderian, Executive Director of the Roger Scruton Legacy Foundation

I support this proposal very strongly. It starts to roll back the terrible waste of valuable urban space occasioned by modern planning. At the same time, it gives residents real control at their own level which can not only benefit them but also add the most sustainable kind of housing. If this is taken up by communities it will revive that interest, variety and intrinsic spatial efficiency that we seem to have lost since the twentieth century.

Prof. Robert Adam, Founder of ADAM Architecture

These excellent proposals outline how to meet contemporary needs by learning from the ways in which the Georgian and Victorian mews have been traditionally adapted. Residents would have the option to make better use of waste land such as disused garages so as to improve their houses, or create new ones. This report shows that it is possible to add more homes in a way that enriches our architectural and urban heritage.

Intensification is so much better than adding to sprawl by building on new land, let alone on Green Belt land. Like retrofit, it's better for the environment. Moreover this will help growing families to stay in their homes rather than having to move when they do not want to.

Mark Wilson Jones, Chair of the Traditional Architecture Group

Suburban intensification can create neighbourhoods that are more sustainable and more liveable. Many of the world's most beautiful cities developed this way, like Valencia, Florence and Istanbul. These excellent proposals show how we could revive this process under the leadership of local communities.

Harriet Wennberg, Executive Director of INTBAU

I like these proposals a lot, philosophically, politically and practically. It seems to me a very smart way to help people to take control of development, with appropriate protections for those who do not wish to participate. This could create homes, improve neighbourhoods and empower local communities at the same time.

Will Tanner, Director of Onward

Urban land is one of our most valuable resources, but incredibly a lot of it is under utilised and wasted, often because fragmented ownership makes sensible development tricky to organise. This report shows how we could overcome this co-ordination problem—effectively providing free land where we need it most, to build more homes, revive our high streets, and improve the urban environment.

Toby Lloyd, Chair of the No Place Left Behind Commission, former Head of Policy at Shelter, and former Special Advisor to the Prime Minister

Britain today does not build enough homes, and it does not build them in the right places. We need to relearn the lost art of intensifying existing urban areas, creating homes while making neighbourhoods more beautiful, more liveable and more sustainable places. This report shows how we can do this by empowering local communities to opt into intensification where they stand to benefit from it.

Peter Franklin, journalist and policy adviser

Create Streets is proposing ingenious solutions to the housing crisis that go beyond more identikit suburban houses erected on greenfield sites. This paper demonstrates that there needn't be any contradiction between a desire to preserve urban and rural beauty, and a desire to provide new and desperately needed housing. It is possible to do both.

Louise Perry, New Statesman

Sensitive intensification creates much-needed homes while enhancing the neighbourhoods in which it takes place. It also supports walkability, mixed use and a car-free environment. This excellent report outlines one way in which we could make such intensification more deliverable, empowering local communities to opt into schemes, whilst both they and their wider neighbourhoods gain benefits from them.

Matthew Lloyd, Matthew Lloyd Architects

It is very welcome to see sustainability placed at the heart of these proposals for the UK's towns and cities. It is particularly positive to see strong emphasis on addressing whole life carbon, which will help deliver emission reductions across both the construction and the operation of any associated development. As we have seen across UKGBC's work, community-led regeneration and innovative local-decision making offer a valuable means to deliver social value, high-quality homes and net zero together, as we move to tackle both the climate emergency and build places people want to live in.

Philip Box, Public Affairs and Policy Officer, the UK Green Building Council

We have a desperate shortage of housing that is pricing young people out of good housing options and we urgently need to reform the planning system to allow considerably more homes. These proposals may be a helpful incremental part of that in addition to other much-needed reform.

Chris Worrall, Editor of Red Brick Blog and Chair of the Fabian Society Local Government and Housing Member Policy Group

The block plans suggested in this report may be a useful tool to get local support for gentle densification in English suburbs , which would support active travel and reduce greenfield land take.

Richard Blyth, Head of Policy, Royal Town Planning Institute

Foreword

Sir Simon Jenkins FSA FRSL
Past Chairman of the National Trust, former Deputy Chairman of English Heritage

Today's towns and cities do not have to be demolished to house more people. It is wholly unnecessary. The greatest—and most costly—domestic policy failure in 20th-century Britain was a belief that only through replacing old towns or building new ones in the countryside could the nation expand and prosper. The popularity—and adaptability—of old streets, old houses and old neighbourhoods was of no account. Modern living required tower blocks, slabs and car-friendly 'estates'.

This ideology, heavily backed by the construction industry, fed the authoritarian imagery of architecture's modern movement. It reigns powerful to this day. One result has been an appalling waste of reusable buildings and of the materials used to erect them. Another has been the destruction of settled urban communities and a denial of local participation in how they should evolve. Residents are mere inputs to the demographic mix, at the mercy of the top-down plan, the zone, the regulation, the rule. Should they object they are reactionary, elitist, 'not-in-my-backyard-NIMBYs'.

The loss of embedded carbon through demolition and the damaging 'carbon footprint' of new building has received scant attention from climate change activists. Planning policies ignore concepts of height or proportion, familiar to city development elsewhere in Europe. Modern British cities are scarred by isolated 20-storey towers rising over pockets of conserved townscape with no consideration given to setting.

The only protection afforded Britain's traditional urban environment so far has come from the conservation movement, aided by historic building listings and conservation areas. More recently more imaginative alternatives have been put forward, in particular a proposal that urban densities be allowed to increase where appropriate and locally acceptable. Existing cities, mostly of the 19th and early-20th centuries, were 'densified' (or intensified) without destroying the character of their streets. Extra storeys could be added, rear sites infilled, empty properties reused. Much of the vacant space in cities serves no purpose. Many residents would welcome the chance to build up or out—or create another house or back street—in place of a garage or wasted land in collaboration with their neighbours. At very least, they would like the choice.

Large areas even of a city such as London are economically inert, often because planners are waiting to amass large sites or have placed a ban on conversions or extensions. As a result London has one of the lowest building densities of any large city in Europe, largely because it has always been allowed to sprawl into its surrounding countryside. Central Paris is five times the density of central London, yet it has grown behind facades mostly of under eight storeys.

The British housing market shows a marked preference for streets and terraced houses, however densely packed. The most expensive houses anywhere in Europe are in London's conserved West End, not in luxury skyscraper blocks. Cities have no need of family-unfriendly towers, with their high servicing and maintenance costs. The same densities can be achieved by infill. Two mansard storeys can double the number of rooms in an average mews, not to mention the un-needed garage or workshop.

The proposals presented in this report have at their heart a revival of the concept of the street, not just as an architectural entity but as a political one. Local opposition to densification is usually due to it being visually insensitive and unsympathetic to a sense of civic place. The concept of street democracy—local residents preparing and voting on their street plans—offers a way out of this bind. The key lies in residents seeing some personal gain in increasing land values and in playing a part in final decisions.

Recent British planning reforms have given rural villages a greater involvement in drawing up plans for their development. Such involvement is harder to define in an urban setting, but not impossible. Coherent blocks of streets should be able to decide if and how properties can be made deeper and taller without damaging the appearance and character of the neighbourhood. Alleys, mews, side streets and upper storeys can all be brought into play. A new sort of architecture, adaptive and respectful, can be developed. At the same time, the vigour and diversity of an urban neighbourhood, famously analysed by America's Jane Jacobs, can be revived through block participation.

The work of groups such as Create Streets, Policy Exchange and SAVE Britain's Heritage has brought a new insight into how streets and buildings can be renewed with minimum fabric destruction. This insight is essentially optimistic. We do not need to consume ever more countryside to meet an ever-growing aspiration for urban living, but nor do we need to destroy townscape. Densification limits housing's carbon footprint and reduces the need for cars and mechanised transport. Its goal is simply to increase our efficiency in the use of space. It does so by offering citizens a new dimension to their democracy through an enhanced control over their environment.

One of my earliest memories as a journalist was witnessing Manchester Council's clearance of families in the 1960s from the tight-packed Victorian terraces of Moss Side. Evicted from their doomed homes, they were herded onto buses to be taken for resettlement. They looked like dazed refugees, many in tears. Their old houses were replaced—at no greater density—by blocks of flats so inhuman and poorly designed they in turn have since been demolished.

I therefore see this report as a truly revolutionary manifesto, heralding the rebirth of a new British urbanism. We need only to harness the spirit of enterprise of a new generation of city residents to gain more living room. It is a revolution that may have come too late for many lost places and lost communities. But at least it has come.

Create Mews

February 2022

Executive Summary

- The neighbourhood planning regime has been popular and successful in parished rural areas. There have also been successes in unparished urban areas, but uptake has not been as high. Neighbourhood forums can be too large and too hard to get designated. They do not always have all the powers they need.

- This paper suggests a way of complementing neighbourhood planning in urban areas: empowering individual blocks to set their own plans through a sub-variety of street vote. This could help to restore some of the traditional processes through which towns and cities evolved and added high-quality housing over time.

- Historically, our towns and cities expanded as much through organic intensification of existing plots as through outward expansion. Most historic British towns still feature lanes and courts built on the deep medieval 'burgage plots', the closes of the Edinburgh Old Town being perhaps the most celebrated example.

- Today, pressure is mounting on our skyline and our countryside, generating intense concern about inappropriate high-rise towers and loss of precious and irreplaceable green space. The time has come to revisit traditional intensification, while ensuring that we add to the greenery and biodiversity of our towns and cities.

- The recent papers *Strong Suburbs* by Policy Exchange and *Living Tradition* and *Learning from History* by Create Streets proposed mechanisms for improving and intensifying existing urban areas, under the leadership of local communities. These papers won broad support from architects, community groups, housing campaigners, planning lawyers, and heritage societies. The key strength is that no one would have development forced upon them, but they may band together locally to benefit from development if they wish.

- This paper builds on this previous work by suggesting a means of generating new development in the central areas of blocks, especially on the sites of disused alleyways, dilapidated sheds, waste ground and areas of rubbish dumped at the neglected ends of long yards. We illustrate this with recent projects from Create Streets, Peter Barber Architects, HTA Design, Pollard Thomas Edwards, Ben Pentreath Architects, Matthew Lloyd Architects, James Wareham and ADAM Architecture.

- Specifically, this paper proposes giving residents of blocks—that is, residents of those properties which encircle some area of land—the right to choose collectively to allow themselves to develop those spaces into new mews or other developments, so long as these are effectively invisible from the street, and compliant with extensive rules on design and safeguards for other residents. As well as helping to make better use of privately owned land, this may help councils and housing associations with the replacement of disused blocks of sheds or garages. Block residents may not use such block plans to change the facades facing surrounding streets, because other residents looking on to those facades will have had no chance to participate.

- Our most pessimistic modelling scenario finds that such block plans could deliver over 20,000 homes a year over the next fifteen years.[1] Block plans strongly complement street plans (from *Strong Suburbs*), as well as the 'mansard votes' in *Living Tradition*, and the extensions suggested in *Learning from History*, providing many different angles from which to approach urban enhancement. These proposals will not solve every problem on their own, but we believe they are an important and helpful addition to solving problems around housing.

- Providing new homes in this way makes much better use of our existing infrastructure and is far more sustainable in its use of embodied carbon, in its infrastructure requirements and in the lifestyles and movement patterns that it facilitates. It can also enable more sustainable and less disruptive offsite modern methods of construction. It is a 'deep green' approach to development.

1. Please see the final section of the paper for full details.

Eligible block   Typical area for development

A potential block plan.

From homes for no one to a new mews

Introduction: The history of urban development

The last half century has seen steadily mounting admiration for the old cities of Europe. It has long been appreciated that they are rich in picturesque streetscapes, charming squares and historic buildings.[2] What has come to be understood in more recent decades is that they also have a demonstrably positive effect on the health, wellbeing and sustainability of the communities that live in them.[3] Historic European cities are dense.[4] But they realise this density not through high-rise, but through a closely woven street fabric. This is what underpins their walkability, their car-independence, and their mixes of uses, while also providing adequate personal space and independence to their residents. It is a core ingredient in what makes them better places to live than the suburban sprawl and the massed slab blocks that have so often succeeded them.
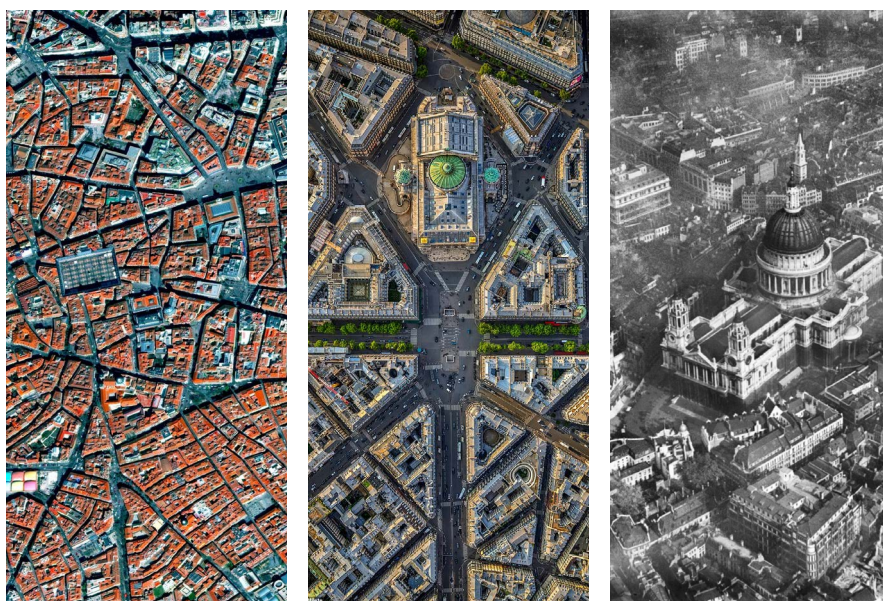
Madrid, Paris, London

2. For a celebrated early vindication of this, see Camillo Sitte (1889), *The Art of Building Cities.*
3. Jane Jacobs (1961), *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* N. Boys Smith, *Heart in the Right Street* (2016), Boys Smith & Venerandi, *Beyond Location* (2017), Iovene & Seresinhe, *Of Streets and Squares* (2019).
4. N. Boys Smith (2016), *Heart in the Right Street.*

These cities developed under regulatory systems that were fundamentally simple. Plot owners were allowed to build more or less what they liked on their plots, provided that they respected strict height limits, fire and building safety regulations, and sometimes rules on facade design. The outward growth of cities was constrained by the fact that virtually everyone had to walk everywhere. So when population rose, space in the city centre became more valuable, and householders found it worthwhile to use more of their plots and add storeys. In this way the finely woven urbanism that is today so celebrated developed from settlements that were originally often quite thinly populated.[5]
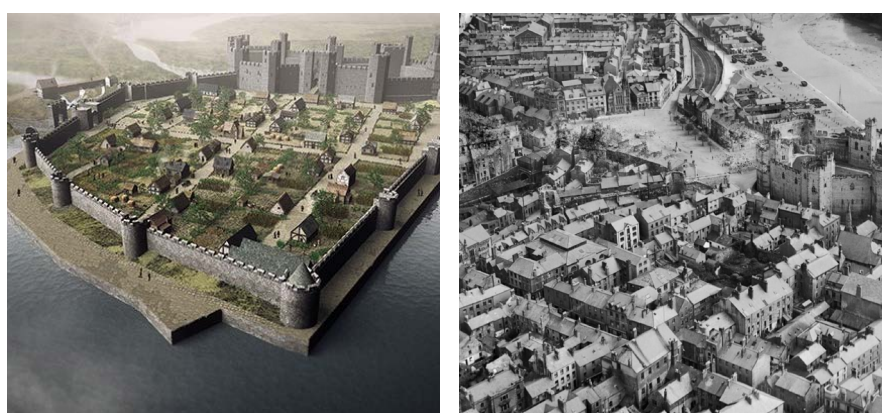
Caernarfon Castle in Wales, imagined before development,[6] and pictured in the 1930s.
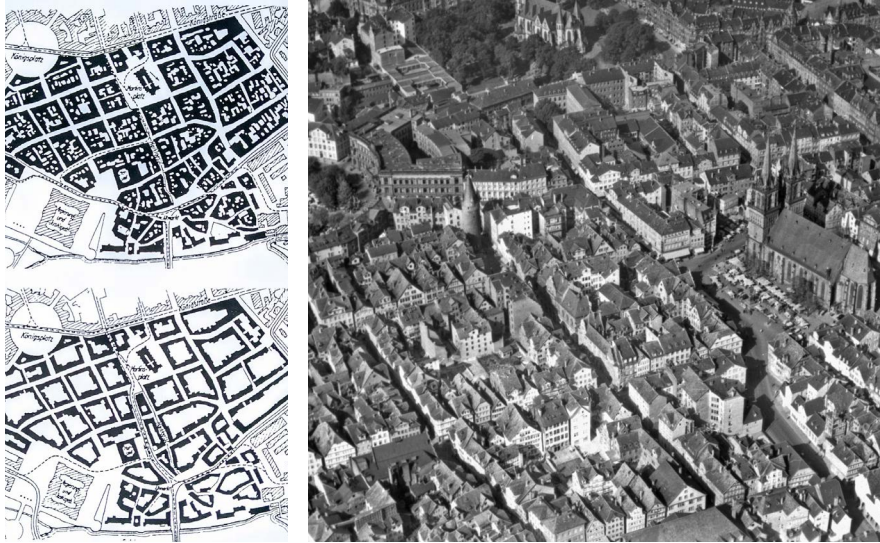
In the early and mid-twentieth century, this sort of urbanism was often deprecated, partly because it is inconsistent with universal frequent car use. Some planners hoped to stack homes into blocks and towers; many hoped to disperse them over a thinly populated 'urban landscape'. In many towns active policies of 'Entkernung' ('removing the core') were initiated, whereby all block infill behind the perimeter was demolished.[7] This was especially characteristic of German-speaking Europe, where Entkernung programmes were pursued under Nazism and continued into the postwar era.[8]

5. For historic English building regulations, see Roger Henley Harper (1978), *The Evolution of English Building Regulations 1840-1914.* For German-speaking Europe, the best source is still Joseph Stübben (1890), *Der Städtebau,* esp. appendices 1 and 2. For France, see e.g. *Atelier parisien d'urbanisme* (1973), *Règlements et tissus urbains à Paris.*
6. Uploaded by Elia Horeftaris to Wikimapia
7. Glendinning (2013), *The Conservation Movement.* For discussion of a related case in Britain, see Peter Barber (2019), 'Desolation Row: The Bulldozing of Great Yarmouth'.
8. Aerial photograph from https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/historischeluftbilder-juwelen-vor-dem-feuersturm-a-946998.html#fotostrecke-e124
7e76-0001-0002-0000-000000106871

A 1930s plan for Entkernung in historic Kassel, Germany, and an aerial plan of Kassel before it was carried out.[9]

Even in countries where existing historic fabric was less damaged, however, regulatory systems changed in ways that made it impossible to create more such fabric in the future. In the United States, the mechanism for this was the famously contentious zoning system. In Britain, it was the 1947 planning system. With limited exceptions, homeowners must apply to the state for permission to make more intensive use of their plots, and under most normal circumstances such permission would not be granted. In this way suburban sprawl is frozen forever in roughly the condition in which it was first built, prohibiting the intensification that had been normal at every previous point in our history.

At the time that this prohibition on intensification was imposed, it was expected that the need for new housing would be met through further outward dispersal, or in certain cases through high rise. Given this, a prohibition on intensification arguably made sense: intensification was unnecessary and would usually be unviable, so precluding it came at little cost.

9. From Dietmar Reinborn (1996), *Städtebau im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert.* Second picture copyright Strähle Luftbild Schorndorf, with permission

Today, however, this situation is profoundly altered. To meet the demand for housing in London through suburban sprawl alone would require building over a significant fraction of the countryside of South-East England, and for many decades it has been clear that the British people are not willing to let this happen. This is the key part of the origin of the housing shortage in much of Britain today: having closed off the old way of creating homes through intensification, we have now discovered that the dispersal with which we hoped to replace is simply not sustainable.

Those who are concerned about the housing shortage have often taken the view that the only solution lies in bursting the constraints on suburban growth that the British people have agreed since the 1940s and 50s. In this paper, we argue that this is mistaken, and that there are ways of building homes that are both more politically feasible but also better urbanistically and environmentally.

British cities have enough inefficiently used space to meet our housing need many times over: we are not suggesting it, but if London were intensified to the densities of the historic areas of Paris within the Périphérique, it would accommodate around forty million people.[10] Many British architects are ready to take up the challenge of intensification, as recent projects like Beechwood Mews, McGrath Road and Holmes Road Studios show.[11] Sherford, in South Hams in Devon, is a current and ongoing precedent in the use of evolving masterplans, which give more scope for neighbourhoods to change over time. What we need, fundamentally, is a way to make graceful intensification popular and thus possible politically.

New homes in Sherford.

10. We are grateful to Prof. Tony Travers for highlighting this.
11. For discussion of further such projects, see Peter Barber (2019), 'The Street'.

A before and hypothetical after from a Create Streets project in Chatham, Kent

In much of England, homeowners have a strong interest in receiving permission to intensify their plots, because such permissions would generate tremendous value uplift for them. For instance, the owner of a bungalow in Outer London who received permission to intensify up to Georgian densities would become an asset millionaire at a stroke.

All of their neighbours, however, would receive nothing, and would suffer the annoyance of a year or two's construction next door and a loss of light and perhaps views thereafter. Most neighbours would therefore object to any such application, and it would normally be rejected. It could easily be the case on a given street that it is both in everyone's interest to get planning permission for intensification, but also in everyone's interest to oppose that permission for everyone else—a paradigmatic collective action problem. This problem is occasionally overcome through prodigious feats of community collaboration, as in Peter Barber and the Kuropatwa brothers' celebrated Hafer Road project, but the current system makes this extremely difficult.

In a report for Policy Exchange, *Strong Suburbs*, we explored one way of getting around this. We argued that this collective action problem could be overcome through a new microdemocratic process we called 'street votes', according to which streets would be allowed to vote by qualified majority for permission to intensify up to traditional Georgian or early Victorian limits. Many streets would have a strong incentive to do so, and by doing so they would contribute to alleviating the national housing shortage. *Strong Suburbs* included extensive protections for residents in neighbouring streets, like a dual rule that building could not advance more than a small fraction of the way down the length of the plot toward them, nor rise over a shallow angled plane rising up from the boundary of the property. We suggested strict rules to make sure existing residents do not lose access to parking or suffer extra traffic congestion.

In other words, *Strong Suburbs* focussed on letting streets permit development that chiefly affects the residents of those streets. In this report, we argue for a different manifestation of the same principle: letting blocks permit development that chiefly affects residents of those blocks. Where *Strong Suburbs* included rules to stop development that would significantly affect people on neighbouring streets, the present report includes rules to stop development that would significantly affect people beyond the block's perimeter, including strict rules around parking. Both of these are traditional forms of development seen in virtually every historic town in Europe: between the two of them, they would constitute a restoration of the old way of building cities.

To understand block plans, it is best to look at a core example. Many twentieth century blocks were built with service alleys lined with garages. Over time, these garages have largely been disused, partly because cars are now more difficult to steal, but mainly because cars today are too large to fit into alleys and garages built in the interwar or postwar decades. Those alleys have thus become derelict space: indeed, because they allow burglars a discreet way to slip into back gardens, they are often a serious security hazard.

Under any historic regulatory system, these alleys would have been adapted for residential use when land prices rose, with the garages replaced with mews cottages. Today, this would be a huge opportunity for existing residents, who could use the cottage as a flat for a grandparent or child, let it to lodgers, or sell it as a small home for young professionals. It would nearly double the number of homes on the block, and it would do so in a way that was practically invisible from the streets beyond. However, for the reasons explored above, this is normally impossible within our development control system. The proposal we make here is that the residents of the block should under such circumstances be allowed to agree collectively to permit the alley to be redeveloped in this way.

Two views of a London mews.

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of empowering local communities over development. In 2011 the Government introduced the Localism Act, allowing communities to set neighbourhood plans and development orders controlling or allowing development in ways that they think would improve their area. Neighbourhood planning has been highly successful in both urban and rural areas. It has won broad respect as an important part of the English planning system, including across political parties.

In 2014, the position of the Labour party's shadow planning minister was that 'embracing localism has to go beyond devolving more powers to local government, important though that is, to really giving

communities a say in important decisions that affect them. Planning is central in mediating between competing interests and ensuring that all sides benefit as much as possible from development'.[12] And the 2015 Conservative Manifesto promised to 'let local people have more say on local planning and let them vote on local issues'.

Neighbourhood planning has often been particularly successful in small and closely-knit parished communities, as we will discuss below, generating interest in how similarly high uptake could be facilitated across the country.

Block plans offer a way of extending the localist project behind neighbourhood planning, and helping it to flourish in the urban areas where careful intensification has most potential. The key difference between block voting and neighbourhood planning is simply that blocks are far smaller, typically with tens rather than thousands of households. By making democracy more localist, we could extend its reach, complementing the existing system of neighbourhood planning.

Localist approaches like neighbourhood planning, street plans and block plans also conduce to more beautiful ways of building. The owner of a building bears the entire cost of embellishing it, but its beauty is a blessing to all those who pass it. This is why a completely free market typically leads to beauty being underdelivered: homeowners are incentivised to provide only so much beauty as maximises value for them, rather than maximising value for the neighbourhood as a whole. Urban beauty is thus a paradigm example of a collective good, which will not normally be attained purely through the pursuit of individual self-interest.

A famous set of exceptions to this underprovision of beauty are London's Great Estates. Great Estates were large neighbourhoods in which all the freeholds were owned by just one family. An ugly building destroys the value of its neighbours: since the Great Estates owned those neighbours too, they had a powerful interest in preventing this from happening. For this reason, the Great Estates carefully curated each property with a view to preserving and enhancing the place value of the neighbourhood as a whole. [13] The result is many of the world's most prized and beautiful neighbourhoods: Marylebone, Mayfair, Belgravia and Chelsea.

12. Blackman-Woods R (2014) Planning reforms. Labour and Localism: Perspectives on a new English Deal. London: The Smith Institute, pp. 62-69.
13. Simon Jenkins (1975), *Landlords to London.*

Mid-rise in Marylebone.

Reinstating such concentrated land ownership is neither possible nor desirable. Block plans, however, offer a way of replicating its effects under modern conditions. As part of the block plan process, residents set a design code governing any permitted building. Because design is thus determined at the level of the neighbourhood rather than the individual plot, residents will be incentivised to maximise value across the neighbourhood as whole—rather than maximising it on each individual plot, potentially to the detriment of its neighbours. Block plans, implemented through street votes, thus offer a middle way between an architectural free-for-all and the imposition of rules by the state, potentially yielding a generation of popular and beautiful urban architecture.

The debate on planning in Britain has been distorted by a series of false assumptions. It has been assumed that the interests of existing communities are irreconcilably opposed to those of the next generation, seeking homes of their own. And it has been assumed that the protection of the countryside and the skyline is inconsistent with creating the homes that that generation needs. On this view, planning reform is a matter of zero-sum struggle: if development is to happen then the political strength of existing communities must be shattered, the green belts must be burst, and steel towers must rise over our old cities.

The argument of this report is that these oppositions are false. The experience of many centuries shows that we can meet our need for new homes by making better use of existing urbanised land, rather than spreading our cities yet further. But to do this, we need to find ways of letting existing communities opt into this better kind of development, by giving them control over that development's form and by offering them a share in the benefits. In this paper, we outline one way of doing so.
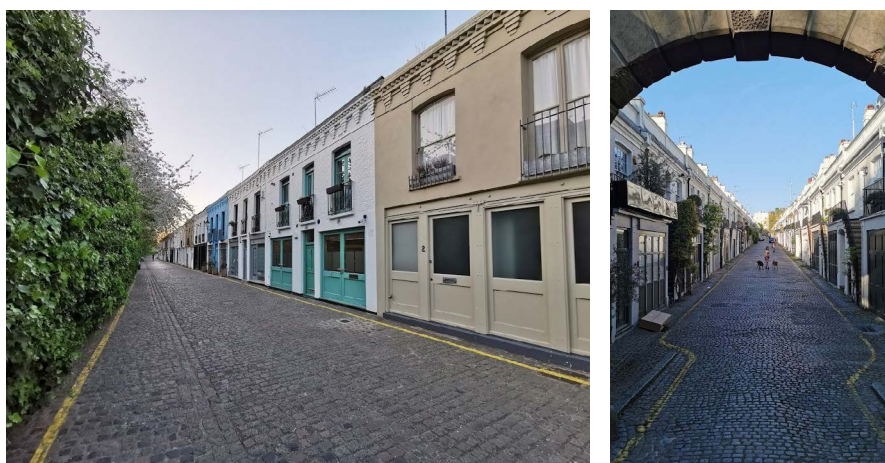

A mews in London.

Community-led Solutions

1. Historic traditions of housing construction and infill

In the previous section, we described the long and successful tradition of making better use of existing land by gracefully adding more housing within existing settlements, in England and other countries. That tradition has created some of the most loved towns and cities around the world. Far more people speak lovingly of Edinburgh's Old Town, York's Shambles, or Brighton's Lanes than of any sprawling twentieth century housing schemes, dictated from above, that have failed to adapt organically over time to the needs of those who lived there.

The social scientist Elinor Ostrom won her Nobel prize for creating a new field that studies how communities manage their common resources, exploring the conditions under which they are able to reach consensus among themselves.[14] In general, they are successful provided that they are given the space and the power to devise their own rules, with no straitjacket imposed from above. The vast majority of today's successful urban fabric was developed gradually over time, rather than being imposed by some national set of rules.

Elinor Ostrom's insights about successful community management of common pool resources remain relevant today. In fact, they tell us much about how we can create better streets, with community support. Those successes are still possible today, both in England and elsewhere.

Two mews in London.

14. See esp. Elinor Ostrom (1990), *Governing the Commons* and (1994) *Rules, Games and Common-Pool Resources.*

2. Community-led successes today

In general, the English planning system makes community leadership difficult. Most decisions about development are made by higher tiers of local government who are in turn extensively constrained by rules set by central government, and small communities have only very limited powers to set rules themselves.

Despite the structure of the planning system leaving only limited power to local groups, there have been a handful of interesting and suggestive successes in community-led development, generally involving enormous effort by pioneering groups of residents. On land bordering the River Lune by the village of Halton, near Lancaster, a co-housing community built 41 homes for themselves to Passivhaus standards.[15] In Hafer Road in Wandsworth, another group of eight families decided to redevelop their deteriorating block of flats, creating better homes for themselves and eight new homes for other families to fund the scheme.[16]

As discussed in *Living Tradition*, twelve householders living in Victorian terraced houses with dilapidated and inconsistent parapets in London's Primrose Hill decided that they needed more space for growing families. They unanimously agreed to add another floor behind an appropriately-designed mansard roof, creating additional bedrooms. There is considerable scope for such graceful improvements to the urban form, entirely in keeping with the best traditions of English architecture.[17]

The Create Streets paper *Learning from History* tells the story of how a Haredi Jewish community in South Tottenham facing severe overcrowding worked with the broader local community to develop a strict design code that enabled extra floors so long as they fit in with the existing heritage buildings. Over the years this policy has been in force, it has enabled hundreds of Victorian terraced houses in the tiny neighbourhood to add perhaps a thousand extra rooms, with strong community backing.[18]

15. https://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk/about/homes.
16. https://www.standard.co.uk/homesandproperty/buying-mortgages/if-it-failed-we-d-all-lose-eight-clapham-neighbours-demolished-their-council-block-rebuilt-their-homes-at-double-the-size-and-ingeniously-built-a-few-more-to-pay-for-it-a107891.html
17. S. Hughes. (2020). *Living Tradition.*
18. B. Southwood. (2021). *Learning from History.*

In all these cases, however, planning decisions ultimately lay with the local authority, so local communities were able to take the initiative only to the extent that the local authority had the resources and the desire to be the driving force.

Further afield, mechanisms have been developed that give more genuine power to communities. These have in turn allowed a much larger number of people to benefit. Community-led schemes built 35 per cent of the new homes in Tel Aviv in 2020.[19] One opt-in scheme in Seoul accounted for more than half of the condominium apartments built in the mid 1990s.[20]

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As well as showing the potential of community-led housing development, these foreign schemes also have many lessons about what not to do. In particular, successful community-led schemes should empower the residents themselves, not merely absentee landlords. Rules must be set carefully to ensure an improvement in the urban fabric, not a deterioration; and they must ensure that any spill-over effects on other neighbours are kept to an absolute minimum and are generously compensated. Such schemes must make a substantial contribution to improving the life of the whole community. Where development delivers value, it must share its benefits with the community, whether by the provision of better transport, better services, or some other advantage.

Overall, one crucial advantage of such community-led solutions is that they can avoid the challenges of blame avoidance that can face higher officials. Members of communities know one other, and they can invest the time to discuss and tweak any proposals until a broad consensus is reached. When the vast majority are in favour of given enhancements, those few who might prefer no change at all may be more content to defer to the needs of the others where proposals are careful to at least do no harm. In contrast to community-led schemes, the schemes brought forward under the current planning system often inspire strong objections.

19. https://capx.co/how-tel-aviv-boosted-new-homes-by-half-and-what-it-tells-us-about-fixing-housing/
20. https://capx.co/seoul-searching-does-the-korean-capital-have-the-solution-to-the-housing-crisis/

In other words, decisions through a broad consensus with ultra-localist direct democracy generate a democratic mandate that is much stronger and more robust than any that planning officials could create on their own.[21] Community-led development can be correspondingly more ambitious in what it decides.

Recent examples in Tel Aviv, Seoul, and across the UK show clearly: given the right powers and carefully set rules, many small communities will use them to make the most of where they live. We need to empower them to do so.

Woodside Square, by Pollard Thomas Edwards.
Reprinted by kind permission.

21. For more examples see the work of Patsy Healey, for example Healey, Patsy (2015). *Citizen-generated local development initiative: recent English experience*. International Journal of Urban Sciences.

3. Successes and challenges of neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning was introduced in the 2011 Localism Act. It allows parishes in rural areas and 'neighbourhood forums' in urban ones to set their own 'neighbourhood plans' through holding a referendum. While some measures in the Act such as Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Build Orders have not seen widespread adoption,[22] neighbourhood planning has been highly successful. Neighbourhood planning frequently helps to improve areas for those who live there, creating friendlier and more walkable streets, while consensually adding new homes that enhance rather than detract from the existing urban fabric. One excellent live example is the work of the Arches Neighbourhood Group in Chatham who are putting in place a neighbourhood plan, a local design code and working on a Neighbourhood Development Order for a large town centre site.

Although neighbourhood planning has had some important successes in urban areas, it has tended to be easier in parished rural areas, where uptake has correspondingly been substantially higher.[23] Although this has improved recently, the Government's data from 2020 show that fewer than a tenth of neighbourhood plans are in unparished areas, and the vast majority of the areas with no neighbourhood plans are in urban areas.[24] Only three per cent are in London, home to around 12 per cent of the country's population. They have also mainly been created in well off areas where there is more capacity and wherewithal to overcome the difficulties of getting going.

22. Neighbourhood development orders were in turn derived from Local Development Orders, introduced by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.
23. Nicholas Boys Smith (2016). Is Neighbourhood Planning flourishing or withering? And how can communities do it better? Conservative Home. See also Brookfield, K. (2016). Getting involved in plan-making: Participation in neighbourhood planning in England. Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy.
24. Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England. Final Report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. (May 2020).

It can be hard for neighbourhood forums to achieve designation where the local authority is opposed. We are aware of one case where a council in an urban area redrew the proposed Neighbourhood Area boundaries in such a way as to invalidate many organising members of the Neighbourhood Forum, thus invalidating the entire process. The Neighbourhood Plan was never able to proceed. Larger forums can make coordination and agreement more difficult, and in some cases they are drawn without sufficient geographic identity. Some communities, especially those without professional support, have also faced challenges writing their neighbourhood plan and building the understandably required evidence base to justify their policies.[25] Neighbourhood planning has also faced difficulties after adoption. Some communities have had their plan successfully adopted, only to see it ignored in planning decisions that they had only limited means of challenging. This has often happened despite a wealth of professional experience within their own membership. Still others have found that policies they wanted to set governing their local affairs were overruled by a 'strategic' policy of a higher authority.

These challenges have constrained the degree to which neighbourhood planning has enabled intensification in urban areas. Advocates of the current planning system often make the mistake of assuming that so long as a mechanism for community-led development exists, there is no problem. This does not take into account the enormous coordination costs and organisational difficulties that currently stop these mechanisms being used. Removing these difficulties is fundamental to successful reform in this area.

The proposals advanced in this report should be seen as a complement to neighbourhood planning, not a substitute. Neighbourhood planning must continue to play a central role. The proposals made here are intended further to enhance and augment its reach and effectiveness.[26] Both approaches have an important role to play in empowering communities and finding ways of improving settlements that are crafted by local people rather than being imposed upon them.

25. Parker, G. and Salter, K. (2017) 'Taking stock of neighbourhood planning in England 2011-2016'. Planning Practice and Research, 32 (4). pp. 478-490.
26. For discussion, see Neighbourhood Planners London (2017), *Shaping the Future of the Government's Neighbourhood Planning Support,* available at https://140d5992-3079-4eb8-bf8d-7a7c1aa9d1df.filesusr.com/ ugd/95f6a3_6d433f629db144dc8a483c475817d935.pdf.

4. Community-led infill: block plans

We suggest the creation of a new mechanism to allow smaller communities to identify areas of waste land through another variety of street vote. With careful rules to ensure no loss of greenery or biodiversity and no damage to the environment, communities should be allowed to decide what graceful enhancement to permit, within a tight framework to ensure no harm to the wider area.

The typical example is the neglected twentieth century alley. Often built for the much smaller cars of the 1930s or 1950s, the former garages, no longer large enough for vehicles of today, have often declined into dilapidated sheds languishing at the distant end of a long, narrow garden. Even those large enough for modern cars are often shunned by the owners, because the unsupervised blind alley is an enticing target for car thieves.

In many cases it could be beneficial to replace such buildings with attractive mews cottages, covered with green roofs to increase the greenery and biodiversity of the area. The extra eyes on the street could turn the alley into a friendly mews where children can safely play. The development could create a home for a grandparent who wishes to live nearby; a home for adult children who cannot yet afford to buy unaided; or perhaps a property to sell or rent. In different ways all enhance the supply of housing and may also serve better to connect families across the generations.

Two further mews in London.

Such change cannot be imposed overnight at national level. Some communities will want it, and others will not. Communities which do not feel the need for change can bitterly resent change that is thrust upon them. For change to be successful, local residents must feel that it is their choice, designed and selected by them. For this to *feel* true it needs to *be* true. Each neighbourhood where such poorly used land exists should be allowed to make their own decision and to take forward any plans in their own time. The effects on the neighbours on nearby streets must be kept to an absolute minimum.

This report therefore argues that groups of residents of homes that completely surround such an area of land may, if they wish, adopt a 'block plan' governing the use of that area, within limits to avoid negative effects on the wider neighbourhood. If they so wish, residents may choose to use these block plans to allow gentle intensification in currently unused or underused areas within the block. Because their houses surround it, the effects on others outside the ring of houses should be minimal so long as spill-over effects such as traffic and environmental concerns are rigorously controlled.

Such change should only be allowed where there is a strong majority in support: we suggest a triple majority of current residents, households and longstanding residents, with a requirement of at least two-thirds support. We suggest careful rules to guard against loss of light to nearby gardens. We suggest protections for tenants and car-free requirements to ensure no additional pressure on parking and to ensure that pollution is thereby reduced, not increased, by such development. And we suggest generous contributions for local infrastructure to ensure that the whole neighbourhood and wider area are enhanced by any such change.

To be clear, each homeowner would remain free to act on their own time under the permissions to build thereby granted, which would be permanent. There would be no compulsory purchase, no 'drag along', and no compulsion to act. In time, companies may spring up to help local residents with such development, just as they have for Auxiliary Dwelling Units ('ADUs') in California and elsewhere. Reproducible locally sympathetic codes will allow for modern methods of construction ('MMC') to do more of the construction off-site, with a matter of weeks of on-site disruption and inconvenience, compared to the months or years that is common now. Creating a new mews will take time and care. But that has often been the case in history. The historic fabric of Canterbury, Chester or Ludlow was not created overnight. Politically viable intensification is worth the wait.

Two small brownfield developments in Ludlow, Shropshire, designed by James Wareham. Reprinted by kind permission.

Detailed proposal

The details below are greatly inspired by the proposals in Policy Exchange's *Strong Suburbs*, and in turn by the work of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, the 'supurbia' proposals of HTA and Pollard Thomas Edwards, Alex Morton's report *Why Aren't We Building Enough Attractive Homes*, the research of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, the work of Sir Peter Hall, and a range of other campaigners for better housing including John Myers.[27] We offer heartfelt thanks to all of the contributors for the time they generously gave in helping us to develop these proposals.

We consider block plans to be a hugely important complement to street plans. Without block plans, the full panoply of traditional means of organic intensification of land use will not be available, and the resulting urban layouts will not achieve their full potential.

Agreeing on a block plan

1. Any 'block' can hold a vote on creating a block plan. A 'block' is a contiguous area of plots bounded by streets, roads, motorways or railways, or more than one such area so long as a continuous area of multiple blocks can be formed by doing nothing more than adding a street that runs between any pair of blocks along at least 30m of their respective boundaries. The 'block' for the purposes of the vote must have at least six individual residential buildings on it.

2. To make agreement easier in convoluted or enormous blocks, there should be a means to subdivide them, while replicating the natural insulating effects that streets provide around existing blocks. The owners of any contiguous set of plots which would divide the overall original block into two parts separated at all points by a gap wider than 6 metres can opt to form a 'buffer' which then acts like it is a street separating the two sub-parts. This allows each of those two parts to vote as a separate block for the purposes of the provisions below. More than one subdivision may be formed.[28]

27. Samuel Hughes & Ben Southwood (2021), *Strong Suburbs;* HTA Design LLP (2014), *Supurbia: a study in urban intensification in Outer London;* Pollard Thomas Edwards (2015), *Transforming Suburbia: Supurbia Semi-Permissive, Alex Morton (2012) Why Aren't We Building Enough Attractive Homes.* We thank in particular YIMBY Alliance for its detailed legal proposals developed in 2018 and 2019.
28. Even where buffers have been created, proposals can always be brought forward, and voted upon by, the full block as a whole.

a. The 'buffer' plots will not be eligible for any permissions granted for either of the two blocks on either side.[29]

b. We expect that such owners will only consent to form a 'buffer' plot if other owners have reached an agreement with them to ensure that they are made whole for any inconvenience. There are further protections for the sub-blocks on the other side of such 'buffers', outlined below.

Buffer plots   Block plan
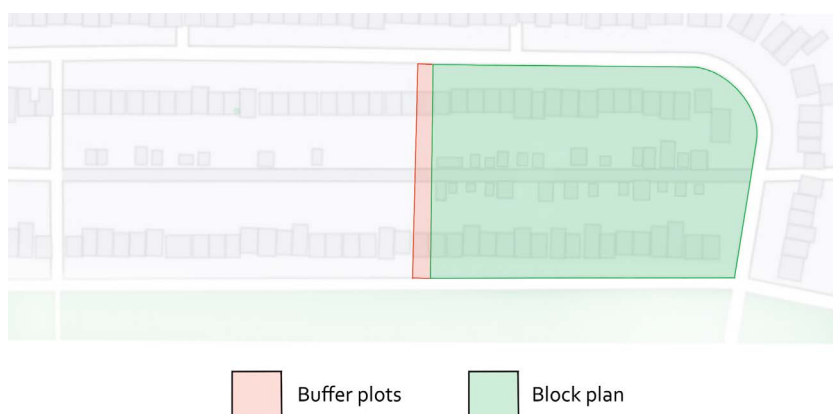
3. A proposal must be submitted to the local planning authority (LPA) by 20 per cent of residents or persons resident in six different homes on the block, whichever is more. A specified fee will be payable.

4. If the proposal complies with the rules applying to such votes, the vote is conducted by the LPA. At least two months in advance of the vote, a letter must be sent to each voter and posters must be prominently displayed locally informing residents about the upcoming vote. A second reminder letter must be sent no less than one month in advance of the vote. Except where otherwise specified, votes should be conducted in accordance with existing procedures for neighbourhood plan referendums. The introduction of the possibility of writing such block plans should be widely publicised nationally to ensure residents of blocks are aware of the opportunities they may have.

29. They remain eligible for any permissions granted to the whole block

*Two new mews-type developments by HTA Design.
Reprinted by kind permission.*

5. All block residents on the electoral roll are eligible to vote in this form of street vote. Each commercial property[30] also has one vote, exercisable by the ratepayer. Nobody apart from block residents and ratepayers is eligible: absentee landlords and residents of other blocks are thus not included. There must be at least twenty households on the block (or the combined block, if more than one block has been combined for the proposal).

6. The block plan is adopted if (a) at **least two-thirds of eligible voters** cast votes in favour; (b) a resident in each of at least half of the eligible households voted in favour; and (c) of those registered to vote at those addresses for at least three years, at least half voted in favour.

7. If a proposal fails to pass, no new vote may be held for at least three years.[31]

8. The costs of holding a vote will be **reimbursed to local councils** by the Treasury. The cost to the Treasury will be greatly outweighed by increased revenues from stamp duty and other increased tax revenues.

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30. The number of separate premises should be assessed in the same way as for business rates.
31. Permissions granted through a block plan cannot be revoked through a subsequent vote, but, if they so choose, residents may hold further votes on extending those permissions.

9. Although the cost of preparing a proposal should be low, residents will often wish to consult with local architects, or commission architects to prepare drawings for them (see below). The Government should consider creating a fund to cover modest costs involved in this, especially if pilots are run. This fund could be accessed by application from the same number of residents required for a valid proposal. The Government may wish to offer grant funding of £10,000 each to the first 1,000 eligible blocks that apply. This will help to ensure all socioeconomic groups have the ability to participate from the beginning, while a support ecosystem for block plans is evolving.

10. Block plans may be written for blocks of socially owned homes just as they may be on blocks of privately owned ones. This may help councils and housing associations with the renewal of disused blocks of sheds or garages. As with blocks of privately owned homes, proposals can only be submitted by residents. See also the provisions on tenant protection below (in paragraphs 41 and 42).

Hansom Mews, before and after, reprinted by kind permission of ADAM Architecture.

Exclusions

11. Listed buildings remain protected: modifications to **listed buildings** are not permitted.

12. To preserve architectural heritage, **pre-1918 buildings** are excluded: blocks may not propose modification to buildings built before 1918.[32] If there are known to be sites of archaeological interest on or next to the block, local planning authorities, in the process of checking the proposed block plan prior to referendum, may impose a requirement for archaeological surveys.[33]

13. Building on **undeveloped Green Belt land,**[34] **parks or agricultural land** is not permitted using these provisions.[35]

14. **National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Areas of Special Scientific Interest** are excluded.

Legal effect

15. After a successful vote, the block plan is effective to grant permission to build on the conditions and strictly subject to the design rules in the block plan, in the same way as a Neighbourhood Development Order or Local Development Order.[36] This is intended to benefit residents by simplifying the process, while benefiting local planning authorities by relieving them of the burden of many small applications. Legal provision should be made to ensure that national or local rules on construction management apply to restrict working hours and deal with construction, traffic and other spill-over effects.

16. Plots subject to both a successful block plan and a street plan may make use of the permissions granted through both proposals, unless one such proposal expressly excludes all or part of the other.[37]

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32. Residents in high-amenity areas typically expect to continue living on the block for many years, and they are much less likely to support disruptive change unless a very strong case can be made that it will improve the area's amenity still further. We can best trust the residents themselves to guard the quality of where they live. If more protection is desired for conservation areas, it could also be required that Historic England should approve any proposed block plan in a conservation area before it is put to vote, based on a character survey which must be funded by the proposers.
33. Such surveys must be carried out before development, as must any archeological excavations if they are indicated.
34. This protection should also extend to undeveloped Metropolitan Open Land.
35. This does not affect other present or future provisions bearing on building in the Green Belt.
36. Of course, the local planning authority remains able to grant permissions for other development consistent with the local development plan in the normal way.
37. To the extent it is presently unclear following *Hillside Parks v. Snowdonia National Parks Authority* [2020] EWCA Civ 1440, this point should be clarified through legislation or otherwise.

Content of proposals

17.   Proposals must include a **design code** governing (a) the **number of storeys**, (b) **plot use** and (c) the **facade treatment** (e.g. materials, window-to-wall ratio). For example, residents could permit development of nothing except one-and-a-half storey mews cottages, of strictly limited floor size, with facades strictly conforming to the style of nearby houses. There will be restrictions on the maximum number of storeys and on the maximum plot use that residents can propose to allow, discussed below. The code must be sufficiently precise and unambiguous that whether or not it has been complied with can be determined in a mechanical fashion without application of taste or judgment. Blocks may include a full design specification, completely determining what individual residents are allowed to build, but this is optional: they may also allow scope for individual creativity as residents prefer.

18.   An easy to use **template** design code should be provided by the Office for Place. Proposals may be based on this template, or they may work from a template of their own. The Government should investigate all possible opportunities for facilitating the coding process through the latest advances in digital technology. Each adopted design code must be provided in machine-readable format to the Office for Place, with contact details for the rightsholder and, if desired, terms on which copyright consent will be granted for re-use. The Office for Place will put those details into a publicly available database to build a store of learning on how to solve these problems in different contexts, and to allow the spreading of planning and design coding best practice around the country. Use of such codes will remain subject to copyright, although no design code may be adopted as policy unless the rightsholder has granted copyright consent for construction on that street according to that code, subject to payment of a fee set by the rightsholder at no more than a maximum set by the Office for Place.

19.   The Government should consider funding the Office for Place, the RIBA, or civic society organisations to run a series of **competitions** for design codes that are (1) tailored to different regions, (2) in different architectural styles, (3) of different floor heights and (4) complying with the regulations governing block plans. Winning codes could then be made

available digitally for use in block plans at no cost. Blocks should however remain free to modify these elevations or to prepare entirely new elevations of their own, potentially in collaboration with local architects, with the sole proviso that these elevations must comply with the national regulations governing block plans. On no account should a style be imposed by the state.

20. The Office for Place should support blocks in preparing codes by, for example, providing free or very cheaply available regional or sub regional pro-formas which could be used or adapted if wished.

21. Subject to the protections for other residents set out below, the proposed elevations or codes may supersede design codes and other specifications set out in other applicable development plans, excepting rules on facade design (other than aspects of facade design rules that would affect built volume) in neighbourhood plans.

22. Proposals may include other rules governing the size and number of dwellings.

23. To ensure proper ventilation, every habitable room must have an openable window to the outside. Such windows must have a total area of at least 5 per cent of the floor area of the room.

24. Proposals may set out a **code of construction practice** to be imposed as a planning condition.

25. For the avoidance of doubt, proposals will only comprise the proposed code(s) and rules. No evidence base or statement of reasons is required.

26. The following rules set out the maximum that may be permitted by each block plan proposal, which is of course free to permit less. The rules rely heavily on light planes above which no building is allowed, like the building regulations of many historic cities, such as Paris and London. Light planes have been used in so many building codes because they constrain development based on how much it affects streets and other properties. Our light planes are dramatically stricter than the light planes used in London and Paris, reflecting shifting considerations around what is considered appropriate.

a. All development must be incapable of being touched by a line elevated 20 degrees from the horizontal stretching from any boundary of the block with each surrounding street (i.e. with the pavement, unless there is none) unless there is an intervening building other than a fence or wall,[38] in which case the line should be raised without rotation until it just touches the top of the building between each relevant street and the development in question, or would just touch any building permitted under an applicable street plan.[39]
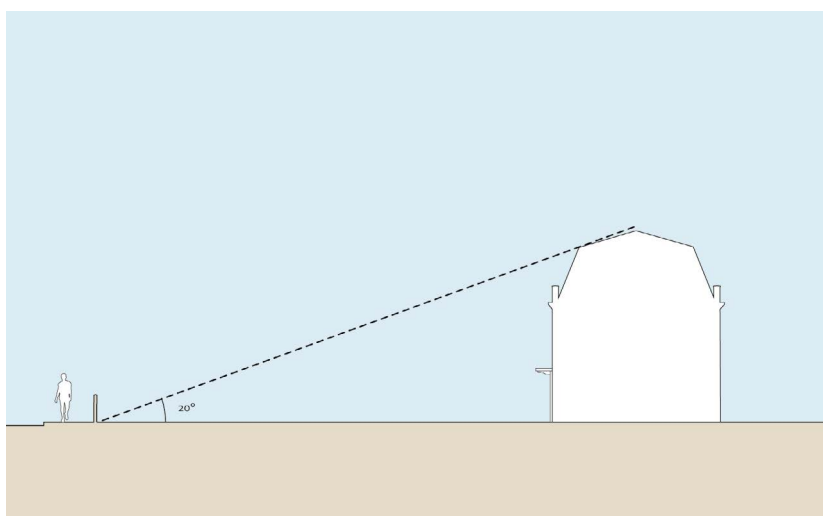
20 degree light plane running from the plot boundary to protect people living or walking outside the perimeter of the block.

b. Existing fronts or sides of houses must not be changed if they face a public street.[40]

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38. Unless that wall is fully opaque and existed prior to entry into force of the block plans legislation.

39. Powers should be reserved to create additional protections for amenity in case the policy is used for unintended purposes.

40. If properties wish to change their visible fronts or sides facing a public street, they must use the existing planning permission system, or do a street vote for a street plan, rather than a block plan.
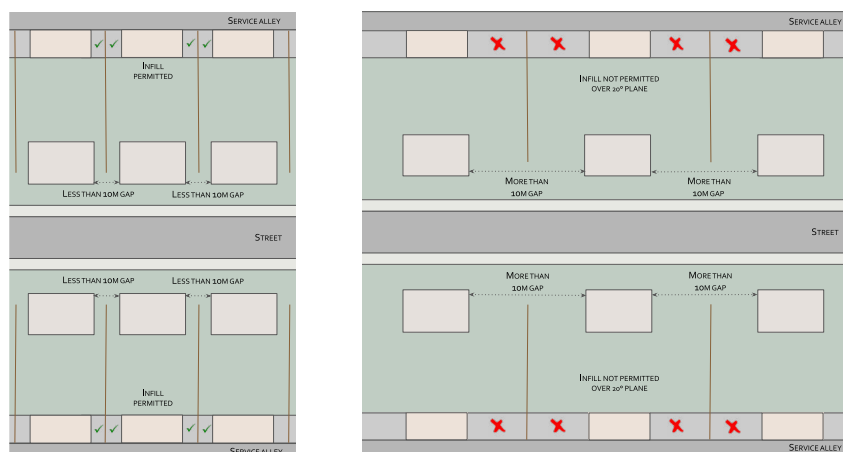
Infill not permitted over 20 degree plane where the gap between houses is greater than 10m.

c.   Infill is permitted where existing or permitted buildings do not form a complete barrier between the new building proposed under the block plan and the streets surrounding the block, but only if the area where the infill is proposed is already completely enclosed by buildings, hedges, fences or other opaque objects of at least 1.7m in height, except for gaps of at most 10m, and the infill either:

   i.   Falls below any line drawn from the boundary with the streets adjoining the block but not passing through an existing wall or building, elevated at an angle of 20 degrees above the horizontal, or:

   ii.   Fills in a gap between buildings of less than 10 metres, and if so:

   •   It must not be higher than any existing house within 10 metres.

   •   It must be recessed at least 10 metres back from the facade of the existing house that faces the street along which the relevant gap presents itself.

   iii.   The 20 degree angled light plane in (a) will then apply as if any such infill had existed at the time the block plan was made.

Woodside Square. Reprinted by kind permission of Pollard Thomas Edwards.

d. The provisions in subsections (a) to (c) above do not apply on plot boundaries with motorways or railways. However, all development must be under a light plane elevated at 20 degrees from the horizontal from the boundary of any residential plot on the far side of the motorway or railway, or from the top of an intermediate embankment if that is higher. The same light plane will apply from the boundary of any undeveloped Green Belt or Metropolitan Open land, parks or agricultural land, including National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Areas of Special Scientific Interest. This is to prevent inappropriate visual intrusion into virgin countryside.

e. Development must lie under a light plane stretching up from each boundary between plots at an angle of 70 degrees above the horizontal, waivable by the owner that each successive plane is protecting as in (g) below.

f.   A plane angled up at 40 degrees from the boundary of other plots on the block, waivable in turn by the owner of each plot as in (g) below, should be used to protect privacy: the railings of any terraces above that plane must be set back at least 1.5m from the edge, and any windows above that plane must be translucent up to 1.8m above the internal floor, and not openable below that height; fire exits as required under Building Regulations must be provided by other means. Windows in side walls that face neighbours are not permitted closer than two metres from the plot boundary without that neighbour's consent. This rule follows street plans, to avoid future controversy about overlooking and loss of light, and to eliminate fire risk.

g.   In the case of two blocks divided by 'buffer' plots, development on the voting block must lie under a light plane stretching up from the boundary of the non-voting block at an angle of 30 degrees above the horizontal, which can be waived by the owner of the protected plot adjacent to the buffer plot. If it is waived, the light plane rises from the boundary of each successively more distant plot, each of which can in turn waive that light plane.

h.   These light planes will in some cases permit the addition of floors in areas of the building plot that are set far back from the street. Such floors would be invisible from the street due to the light plane rules. In addition to those rules, nowhere on a block may building be permitted that is more than 9 metres higher than the highest existing building on the block or permitted under an applicable street plan.

Three designs suitable for a mews, by Ben Pentreath (L and C) and George Saumarez Smith (R)

27. A principle underlying street votes is that we can fundamentally trust local people to prefer better design over worse. However, inevitable statistical fluctuations in small groups may mean that occasionally a block decides to adopt designs that are hugely controversial in the broader community. To allow the wider community some stake in those rare occasions, there may be a case for a fallback mechanism, so long as it is based on a clear and observable vote on provably popular design and does not restrict the vertical or horizontal extent of the development planned in the block plan.[41]

West Green Place, for Pocket Living by HTA Design,
by whose kind permission this is reproduced.

28. The minimum ceiling height in any new building created pursuant to a block plan should be 2.5 metres.

29. Existing legal **rights to light** are unaffected. The Government should implement the Law Commission's recommendations on rights to light.

41. If this was judged necessary, one method might be for the relevant parish or neighbourhood forum (if any) to be given notice by the local planning authority of the proposal within two weeks of the proposal being filed. The parish, neighbourhood forum or local planning authority may each give notice no later than one week after the vote on the block plan is held that they intend instead to impose a design code replacing elements of the block plan. If they do so, the legal effect of the block plan is suspended for six months to allow such replacement codes to be adopted by referendum in the case of the parish or neighbourhood forum and by decision in the case of the local planning authority. No evidence base for such design codes shall be required. The alternative codes must not be more restrictive as to the vertical and horizontal extent of building permitted than the proposals approved in the street vote. Eligible voters are as described in section 5 above. The proposers of the block plan may appeal to the planning inspectorate on the grounds that the replacement elevations are unreasonably restrictive or unreasonably expensive to implement compared to existing materials used in buildings in the area.

30. In addition to these totals, residents may propose to permit **basements** under the new dwellings within the permitted footprint, lit by excavated 'areas' and/or a lowered ground level, similar to standard practice in Georgian and Victorian terraces. Areas must be at least 1.5m in width. Houses in Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) with fewer than 20 inhabitants per hectare, or within 100m of an MSOA with fewer than 20 inhabitants per hectare should be excluded from this provision, given the lack of precedent for such forms in rural areas. There should be special provisions for compensating neighbours for the inconvenience of digging basements, detailed in the section on compensation provisions below. Such basements will, like all development above, be required to comply with building regulations.

31. To protect leaseholders where there is a separate freehold owner, a freeholder must obtain leaseholder consent to carry out development pursuant to permissions under the block plan, in the following circumstances:

    a. Through consent of each leaseholder where that leaseholder:

       • Has windows facing such new development and any part of such new development will be visible from that window above any line drawn outwards at any compass angle from the base of such windows and rising upwards at 30 degrees from the horizontal; or

       • Owns a flat, at least part of which is on the floor directly below such new development; and

    b. By vote of all leaseholders forming part of the same freehold where such new development will require temporary or permanent use of any part of the common areas of that freehold property for construction or otherwise.

32. Development pursuant to the block plan must involve no net loss of retail or commercial space.

The sort of moderate density that fits on a mews. Reprinted by kind permission of Ben Pentreath Architects.

Compensation

33. Owners who do not wish to develop (or are unable to do so) may elect after the vote to be compensated by developers as per the provision for corner houses in Strong Suburbs, paragraph 80.3,[42] but must repay the compensation with interest if they subsequently elect to develop.

34. Neighbours not on the block should be entitled to compensation as per the provisions in Strong Suburbs, detailed proposal clauses 54 et seq.[43]

35. There should be an index-linked liquidated damages provision for construction inconvenience if a neighbour chooses to excavate a basement within two metres of the boundary. It could be set at a fixed percentage premium over the cost of renting a replacement for the inconvenienced neighbour's house for the duration of the basement works. It could be mutually waived by two adjacent neighbours.

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42. 'Corner houses receive the same compensation rights as houses not on the street, except that they must refund that compensation if the second street also has a successful vote and the corner house goes ahead with development using the resulting permission.'

43. 'Generous compensation provisions should be put in place for neighbours on other streets in the rare circumstances where they lose asset value due to the implementation of street vote permissions. Neighbours on other streets should be eligible for compensation if the implementation of a street vote causes building over a 30 degree angle of elevation from the boundary of their plot (see diagram 8). Below this losses in asset value will be negligible.'

Parking

36. If a controlled parking zone exists or is created in the future, any dwelling extended or rebuilt using the permissions granted through the block plan should be entitled to a maximum of one resident parking permit. In the case of properties that are subdivided after block plans, the household developing will nominate which dwelling will hold this permit, failing which they are all car-free. Residents of properties that have not been altered using the new permissions retain existing parking rights. Car-free requirements are common in urban apartment developments, so this model is well-tried. Block plans should be subject to the requirement that there is no net loss of public parking (whether commercial or privately owned) and that the point(s) of access along the street to such parking should not change without separate planning permission.

37. In areas in which controlled parking zones do not already exist, local authorities will be encouraged to introduce them should a need to do so arise. The Government should consider requirements to ensure that nearby residents of other blocks, not eligible to vote on the block plan, are not subject to parking charges as a result of controlled parking zones created by reason of the block plan. The levy payable to local authorities will cover the cost of doing so.[44]

38. A further possibility is to allow individual streets the right to make themselves controlled parking zones by a supermajority vote to protect themselves against any possible spill-over effects from a block plan. In most cases local authority action should make this unnecessary, but such a right would provide a further guarantee against parking overspill.

39. Streets and blocks should be encouraged to establish car clubs and ride-sharing schemes, and the Government should consider ways in which it could actively support this. The Government and councils should support the use of bicycles, electric bicycles, and electric scooters as alternatives to car use on post-vote streets.

44. In cases where this happens, residents of neighbouring streets not involved in the block plan should be able to claim parking permits for free until they move; new residents moving in would then be subject to normal charges.

40. Note: one implication of this is that intensification through block plans will normally initially only be possible in areas with good existing public transport: in car-dependent areas, car-free redevelopment will often be financially unviable. The revenues that block plans generate for local authorities, regional mayors, and central government will enable them to improve transport links, making intensification viable in further areas in the future. It will also help justify business cases when applying for national funding for such schemes.

Beechwood Mews and Moray Mews, designed by Peter Barber.
Reproduced by kind permission of Morley von Sternberg

Tenant protection

41. The permissions granted in an adopted block plan may be used on a given building only if:

   a. No tenant has been resident in the building within the last two years; or

   b. Each current tenant, or, in the absence of a current tenant, the tenant(s) in any tenancy in the prior two years has:

- Given their consent;

- Been paid one year of rent at the highest rent paid by that tenant in the prior year;[45] or

- Been allowed to live rent-free for one year in that dwelling.

42. Such payments will help many tenants afford deposits of their own, allowing them to become homeowners themselves if they wish.

Environmental provisions

43. A 'zero net whole life carbon condition' should be imposed on all building work, meaning that builders will have to minimise gross carbon emissions in construction, optimise energy efficiency in buildings, and offset any emissions that they do produce.[46] Because demolition and rebuilding involve emitted and embedded carbon, this should encourage the production of adaptable buildings with longer lives.

44. Denser settlement patterns and the measures discussed below to discourage car ownership will lead to lower levels of driving and higher levels of walking, cycling and public transport use. Given the vastly lower greenhouse gas emissions involved in these transport modes, this constitutes a crucial environmental benefit.[47] Some estimates suggest the largest individual change most people can make to their carbon emissions would be by living in a walkable neighbourhood.

45. Each development must result in a net biodiversity gain overall; and show a ten percent increase when the Government's proposals on that point are implemented. The proposals voted on would have to ensure that they committed to delivering biodiversity net gain prior to, or at the same time as, or within two years of commencement of any development. Whilst the biodiversity net gain would legally have to be delivered for any project (on-site, off-site or by way of a central government "biodiversity credits" system), the specific enhancement or mechanism would be specified in the proposals being voted upon.

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45. Assessed monthly or weekly, depending on how the rent is paid.
46. See UKGBG, *Net Zero Carbon Buildings: A Framework Definition* (2019) for discussion of this definition.
47. Cf. Bento et al., 2005. The Effects of Urban Spatial Structure on Travel Demand in the United States. *Review of Economics and Statistics,* 87(3), pp.466-478; Brownstone and Golob, 2005. The impact of residential density on vehicle usage and energy consumption., *Journal of Urban Economics,* 65(1) , pp.91-98.

46. Rights under common law nuisance and enforcement of existing property rights give protection against diversion of underground watercourses onto the landowners' land. Obtaining planning permission through a block plan does not affect property rights or other related causes of action; a developer should seek to agree some commercial agreement in relation to the property rights which may be affected.

47. A requirement of no net loss of greenery[48] and no net loss of rainwater soakaway within the area covered by the block plan should be made, so for example if any green space is built on, green space of equal or greater size could be created elsewhere within the same block. The normal way of achieving this is likely to be terrace and roof gardens. Ground-level surfacing must be done with a permeable material allowing rainwater to flow through into the soil. The choice of permeable material should match the appearance of the existing palette to create a coherent streetscape. Green roofs also provide a space-efficient means of storing and slowing the flow of rainwater, reducing any additional burden on existing drainage and sewer infrastructure.

48. To ensure access for emergency services and rubbish collection, pedestrian access must be retained directly from the perimeter street, as in traditional court and burgage developments in British villages. Developments will usually come to an agreement with the council on an alternative system, with individual or collective bins on the new mews street created out of the alley. However, as a fallback in the rare absence of such agreement, rubbish should be required to be disposed of via the front of the plot onto the perimeter street (or, where there is an 'island' plot, via another plot onto the perimeter street). There must be an ability for bins to be kept at the back except for a short window before collection time. Those provisions may be varied by a planning application to the local planning authority in the normal way.

Funding local services

49. Most of the time, development enabled by street votes on block plans will be small scale and spread out over extended periods, meaning that it will make only a relatively small contribution to population movements within and between areas. In the long run, increases in the number of dwellings will lead to increased council tax and business rate revenues, which will help to contribute to covering some of the cost of local services. In the short run, the Government should promptly expand funding for the increased running costs of education and healthcare

48. I.e. gardens, parks and fields

in the area, if new homes are built and new people move in.[49] Expanding local services also involves one-off capital investments, such as new school buildings and local transport infrastructure. In this section, we explain how this should be provided for.

50. Properties extended or created through this policy will sell for a substantially greater value than the original property. This value uplift should be taxed to support investments in local infrastructure. The mechanisms through which Government captures a share of value uplift to share with the community at large are currently in flux, but whatever the eventual system, it is important that locals are confident that small scale development enabled by street votes on block plans will benefit them. Today, most contributions are made via the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and via Section 106. If these systems are retained in future, then councils should be allowed to levy a new form of CIL, charged at a maximum of 20 per cent, on uplift of value generated by homeowners through the permissions generated by block plans, net of out of pocket costs, payable on sale of occupation of any new development, even when they would normally be exempt. If, instead, England moves to a system with an 'infrastructure levy', then this should be extended to developments pursuant to a block plan at that 20 per cent rate even where they would normally be exempt, under exactly the same terms as CIL would have been. If England, in addition, institutes a building safety levy (the 'developer levy') then it may also be appropriate to apply this to these developments pursued by developers.

   a. In areas with a city region mayor, such as the West Midlands or Greater Manchester, 10 per cent of the funds raised by this levy should go to the city region administration in question, to help fund transport and other infrastructure governed at that level. City regions should be encouraged to direct investments towards areas with the most need, and towards those seeing the most development.

   b. Five per cent of the funds raised should be reserved for and shared between any street associations, as described in *Strong Suburbs*, that apply to streets forming the perimeter of the affected block. This should be set aside so streets can use the funds toward popular improvement: improving road surfaces, planting trees, keeping up other public greenery, and dealing better with street lighting. This should be set aside for at least three years, after which, if there is no street association to claim the money, it can be added to the sums in (c) below.

49. In most cases existing mechanisms for allocating funding on the basis of capitation will lead to this automatically, but the Government should monitor closely any exceptions to this.

c. Twenty per cent of the funds should be reserved to be spent by the local planning authority on projects nominated by any parish or neighbourhood forum/fora containing the block. Where there is no parish or designated neighbourhood forum for three years after the funds are received, the funds should be released to the local planning authority.[50] The funds in (b) above and this section may be invested in bank deposits, in gilts or, if the relevant parish, association or forum requests it to provide funding for maintenance or other ongoing expenses, in global equity index tracker funds.

d. Where the LPA rules on an application for planning permission on a post-vote block, (a) it should be able to certify in its decision that it would not have granted the full permission sought without the block plan having been passed, and (b) in such circumstances the levy will apply as above. To minimise litigation, recourse against such certification should be limited to judicial review or, if more litigation is seen as tolerable, to appeal to the Upper Tribunal (Lands Chamber).

51. Many local services are provided by local authorities. In some cases, however, they are provided by other institutions. Most secondary schools are run by Multi-Academy Trusts and GP surgeries are privately run. In these cases the local authorities should collaborate with other local institutions to ensure that any necessary investments are made, for example, by giving bonuses to GPs who set up in their area. Government should consider whether any new guidance needs to be issued to facilitate this.

52. Local authorities should collaborate with railway providers (and, in the future, Great British Rail) and regional transport authorities such as Transport for the West Midlands and Transport for the North to provide additional railway services if needed, both drawing on their shares of the aforementioned levy revenues. They should collaborate with bus providers, or use their authority over their franchised bus service, to provide additional bus services and designate further bus lanes if necessary.

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50. Where a local authority receives an application for designation of a neighbourhood forum within the three year period but that application is rejected, the three year period should be extended until a neighourhood forum has been designated. Where more than one neighbourhood forum covers the streets forming the boundary of the block, the local authority shall divide the funds between them.

53.   Note: our modelling indicates that, even on highly conservative assumptions, local authorities will be major financial beneficiaries of block plans. This will ensure that local people who do not live on the block itself will benefit indirectly from such plans, due to improvements in local services that they will fund. In some cases, we predict that councils could earn tens of millions of pounds extra every year through expected block plan intensification.

A mews in London.

Other Benefits
Building beautiful

In recent years, a new movement has begun to stress the importance of beauty in new development. This began with contributions from Policy Exchange, starting in 2013 with *Create Streets* by Alex Morton and Nicholas Boys Smith. Since then, it has been taken on by a range of think tanks, including the Adam Smith Institute and Legatum Institute, as well as Create Streets.

At the core of this movement lay the insight that much new development was unpopular with existing residents, and often with society at large. It was already well known that the postwar practice of replacing Victorian streets with slab blocks and towers was unpopular, and that this is one reason why it has largely ceased to happen. What Morton, Boys Smith and others showed was that the form of much new development remains unpopular today, and that this was a key part of why locals had 'NIMBY' attitudes and opposed new housing in their area.

By 2017-18, this 'Building Beautiful' agenda was accepted by the Government, and mentioned in speeches by Prime Minister Theresa May, Transport Minister Sir John Hayes, and other politicians. Housing Secretary James Brokenshire also established the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, initially chaired by Sir Roger Scruton. The Commission eventually reported in January 2020, under new housing secretary Robert Jenrick. Its final report Living with Beauty laid out the most comprehensive case yet for the importance of beauty in the urban realm. Both Mr Jenrick and his recent successor as Housing Secretary, Michael Gove, have endorsed the report and its findings. Politicians across political divides have been supportive.

Replacing dilapidated sheds lining derelict, insecure alleys with new mews houses via block plans will translate the government's existing agenda into transformative action. This will happen through two main mechanisms: the inherent beauty of the mews as an urban form, and the incentive structure created by the voting mechanism that we propose.

Circus Street, Edinburgh, an old and famous mews.

Inhabited mews are traditional urban forms that are popular with the British public for their beauty. They are some of the most photographed parts of British cities, popular with tourists as quaint or charming representatives of historic urban fabric. Although they were originally designed for carriages, after residential conversion they are largely car-free: they thus constitute one of the only postmedieval examples of human-scale, pedestrian-oriented residential urbanism. Even recently built mews tend to be more popular than other new developments, perhaps due to the aesthetically forgiving nature of the form.

The most important reason that block plans will promote beauty, however, is through the need for block plan proposers to win over a large majority of the voting residents. The design codes will need to be as broadly acceptable as possible to survive a vote and maximise value. Just as the owners of the Great Estates could charge higher rents per property if those properties were in a beautiful area of high quality, residents will have an incentive to consider not just the beauty of their own building, but the beauty of the block as a whole, when drawing up the plans. Compared to the results of the conventional planning process, block plans should internalise externalities and create incentives to build aesthetically popular buildings.

Saving parks and the green belt

British cities are noted around the world for their rich supply of parks, commons, and greens. The British public are very attached to these green spaces, as they generally are to the green belts around British cities. Without the 1935 introduction of constraints on ribbon development, and then establishment of these green belts after the 1938 Green Belt (London) Act, their further establishment in the late 1940s and their expansion throughout the postwar era, British cities would have undoubtedly sprawled almost endlessly into the countryside through low-density urban extensions.[51] This would have been considered a great failure of urban policy by much of the electorate. In the eyes of the general public, preserving green spaces around cities is one of the chief successes of planning policy.
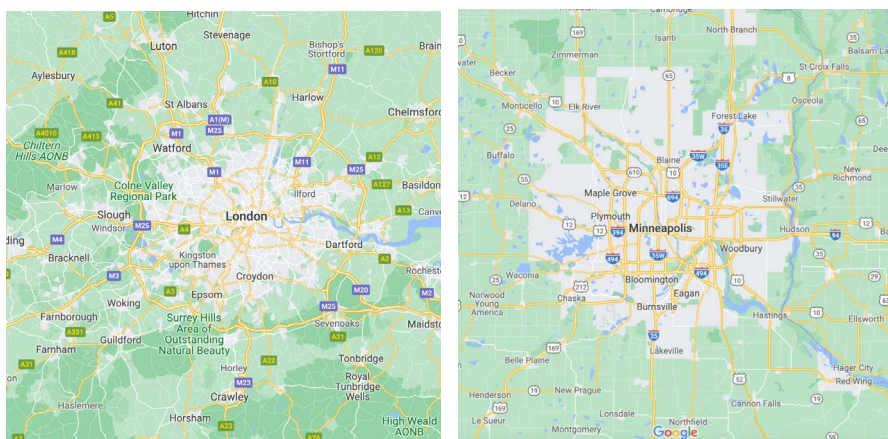
London (pop: 9.7m) and Minneapolis-St. Paul (pop: 3.6m) at the same scale

However, the protection of the countryside has not, hitherto, been matched with a successful policy to enable high-quality developments that do not use more green spaces. Consequently, as populations and incomes have risen, there has been increasing pressure on these spaces. Virtually every local area around the country has experienced cases where developers aimed to concrete over a local school sports field or other scarce and valuable green space.

Block plans should help relieve this pressure. Every home created on a new mews or court development is one that need not replace virgin green fields or green belt. Addressing the scarcity of housing with popular developments such as mews will lower demand for unpopular urban extensions.

51. For more on the history of UK green belts, see Create Streets & Legatum Institute (2018) *More Good Homes*

Protecting the skyline

Cities across the UK have seen their skylines develop steadily over centuries. London's skyline was quite uniform until the Second World War, with only St Paul's Cathedral visible above many miles of mid- and low-rise urban fabric. William Blake famously wrote of conversing with the 'spiritual sun' upon Primrose Hill, from which St Paul's can still be seen today.

Since the Second World War, and with the repopulation and growing economic success of major British cities since the 1980s, there has been an enormous amount of high-rise development in London, and a substantial amount in other parts of the UK. But British people tend to believe that such development is inappropriate in many locations, and many ten- or twenty-storey towers near suburban high streets face intense opposition.

Pressure for such development largely exists because it has been impossible to find other ways to successfully meet UK housing demand, especially in and around the cities with the most severe shortages. In cities like Paris, where there is greater gentle density, including far greater use of development with mews and courts, it has been possible to completely ban new towers from the centre of town. It seems unlikely that the flow of new tall buildings will stop completely in certain places, but we will have more freedom to decide when and where these enhance skylines, rather than detract from them, if we are under less intense pressure to add homes.

Sacré-Cœur over Paris and St. Paul's within London's City

By opening up an extra route to delivering new homes, block plans will relieve this pressure, and thereby help us to safeguard our historic skylines.

Walkable settlements

Walkable cities are more widely appreciated today than in the era of urban planning that prioritised the needs of motorists. Exploring a city by foot and enjoying its amenities is a pleasure for both tourists and residents alike. Cities such as Barcelona, Rome, Tokyo, and Florence have achieved global popularity and fame in part due to how pleasant it is to walk along their streets, discovering new things at every corner.

Walkable York on a sunny day.

Planners today increasingly aim to make walking safe and convenient, giving residents the option to live car-independent lives. This 'people-first' approach comes with benefits for sustainability and the environment, and positive consequences for population health. Walkable, car-independent cities are also more friendly for the vulnerable in society, especially older people, while children are freed to play in the streets. Young professionals, meanwhile, can collaborate more easily and for longer periods of time in high-density cities, as their time spent commuting is reduced.

Mews are, inherently, pedestrian-first spaces. The sorts of streets created will normally be accessible to delivery or emergency vehicles, but they are not wide enough for high-speed driving. Cars will usually need to give way to pedestrians. They have no space for on-street parking nor, normally, for garages, meaning that in most cases mews developments will be car-free. Of course, this will limit the impact of block plans in areas far from public transport infrastructure, high streets and town centres. But this should not be seen as a disadvantage. Mews development is by its very nature bound to be in the right kind of places for development generally—near to existing public transport and high streets. Or by intensifying suburbs, it may make public transport more viable.

New mews and courts are no panacea for walkability, but the places where mews are common tend today to be the most walkable areas in England. Residents of cities that contain a large number of mews- and court-like developments, such as Tokyo and Osaka, make many of their journeys on foot. Accordingly, we are confident that through creating more mews, block plans will encourage more walking within our towns and cities.

Sustainability and reducing carbon (net zero)

The place where someone lives can make an enormous difference to their carbon emissions. People living in more extreme climates require more heating or cooling, as do people living in poorly insulated older homes. Low-density suburbs require more air conditioning, more heating, and vastly more use of cars. By contrast, traditional urban layouts like terraced houses or mansion blocks are far more sympathetic to walking, cycling, and utilisation of public transport. People living outside cities in the UK produce 50 per cent more carbon per capita.[52]

At least until all of this powered transport and heating is done with low or zero carbon energy sources, reducing them will be a high-impact way to reduce carbon emissions. Block plans should lead to more homes within walking distance of amenities and of public transport infrastructure, often in terraced houses that use less energy for heating and cooling.

52. Quinio and Guilhermes (2021) *Net zero: decarbonising the city.*

In doing this, mews developments will relieve pressure for other more environmentally expensive development types. The most obvious example of this is low-density suburbs, which consume greenfield 'lungs' and impose car-dependence on their residents. But it is also true of tall towers with concrete cores, which involve substantial embodied carbon in their construction. Offering an alternative to these is one of the chief advantages of the block plan proposals.

Block plans could help achieve net zero in another way. One of the most important ways of reducing energy demand is retrofitting existing homes, both with modern insulation and with electric heating sources. Unfortunately this is often expensive. By providing substantial liquidity to both homeowners and public bodies, block plans could help to cover the costs of retrofitting, thereby making a further important contribution towards net zero emissions.
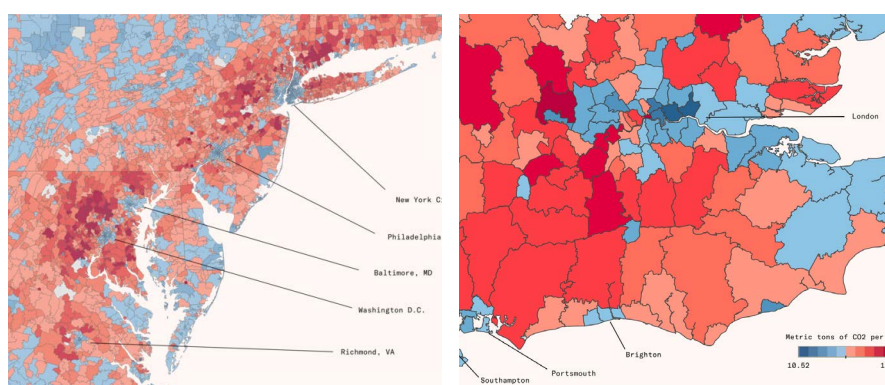
People living in areas of greater density in the centre of cities tend to emit less CO₂ than those living in suburbs and exurbs.

Public transport, active travel and modal shift

Most value in the world today is created by people working together. Natural resources like oil, or agricultural land, are still responsible for a substantial share of what we consume. However, most production is only possible with humans collaborating in complex configurations.

Ultimately, the most valuable ingredient in an iPhone is not the rare trace metals it uses, but the ingenuity of the teams who designed its hardware and software. In general, collaboration requires co-location—physically being in the same place—to be most effective. The rewards to co-location are what economists call 'agglomeration benefits'.

Recent decades have seen repeated predictions that new communication technologies—the mobile phone, the fax machine, the internet, and then Teams and Zoom—would reduce agglomeration effects by allowing people to work together remotely. So far this has not happened: in fact, agglomeration effects have remained vital.[53] We are human animals. Despite our technological advances, physical proximity continues to matter for us. The continued value of living near and working with others is shown by higher urban productivity and the continued buoyancy of inner city rents and house prices.

How near you need to live to others to collaborate has, however, changed enormously due to better transport. Before the train, nearly all travel within cities was at walking speed. When building heights were capped at around six storeys by regulation, as well as by construction technology of the day, this limited the population size of cities.

Most Medieval and Renaissance cities were less than twenty minutes' walk from one side to the other. Only the largest pre-railway cities, such as early nineteenth-century London, grew larger than this, when the economic benefits were so large that they justified the long journeys. By the 1800s, London had amassed a population of over a million. But before modern transport, this meant many City workers had to walk an hour each way into London.

The omnibus and the first railways changed this. Medieval suburbs were settlements clustered directly outside the city walls. By dramatically increasing the speed of transport, railways meant that people could, for the first time, live much further away in suburbs or even outside London. Of course, these homes did need to be clustered around the train station, since once you got off the train you were once again restricted to walking speed or an omnibus—barely faster than walking.

Trams and metros such as the London Underground created contiguous suburbs as well. With stops closer together than train stations, they permitted America's famous 'streetcar suburbs', 'Metroland' along London's tube lines, and indeed suburbs across the industrialised world. The 'effective size' of a city—the population who could readily commute in to work at peak times—could grow further.

53. Glaeser, E. L. (Ed.). (2010). *Agglomeration economics.* University of Chicago Press.

In London's case, this meant population growth from 1m to 7.5m in a century, creating the world's first modern metropolis. All of these 7.5m were 'in range' of the others to collaborate

The car further extended this range. Whereas transit infrastructure inherently reduces effective distance in specific directions between stops, the car can range in all directions without being restricted to specific stopping points. This led to development that spread out—or sprawled—widely and at low density. Nineteenth and early twentieth century suburbs were characterised by 'gentle density', with good walkability and a mix of residential, commercial and civic uses. By mid-century this ceased to be the case: suburbs became far more single-use and car-dependent. When roads are free at the point of use, adding more cars means creating more congestion. Eventually the competition from cars and buses and the resulting congestion (along with many other factors) made tram networks financially unviable, and they disappeared across Britain, further reinforcing the tendency towards car-dependence.

Since the disappearance of trams, the decline of cycling, and the spreading out of cities, which makes walking unviable, most cities in the UK have relied heavily on single occupancy cars for nearly all of their commuting. About 85 per cent of car commutes have no passengers other than the driver.[54]

Relying on single occupancy car transport for commutes works when cities have lower population density. In the mid-to-late twentieth century, all of the UK's larger cities saw significant population declines, especially in inner city areas. This was partly due to deliberate anti-density policies by government, and partly due to suburbanisation led by the private market. Now that cities are roaring back into life, with growing urban populations, many more of whom can afford to own a car, so congestion is rising.

Congestion is not just annoying: it has enormous economic costs. To collaborate with someone most effectively, you need to be able to get to the same place as them. But commutes in cities like Birmingham become extremely time-consuming during rush hour. The true economic size of a city is the number of people who are 'within range' of one another for collaboration. In the UK cities that rely heavily on the car, and thus face enormous congestion during rush hour, this economic size is far below their official administrative size.

54. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/nts09-vehicle-mileage-and-occupancy

The Centre for Cities, in an excellent recent paper *Measuring Up* by Ant Breach and Guilherme Rodrigues, estimates how much damage this lack of transit options is doing to British cities, and suggests some ways to turn the situation around.[55] The authors compare Britain's nine largest cities after London with similar cities on the continent. They find that British cities systematically have lower 'effective size' than continental cities, with far smaller fractions of Britons able to get into the centre to the best-paid jobs than are Europeans. At peak times, our cities do not have the agglomeration benefits they should.

The paper's main result is striking. Undoubtedly British cities outside London have seen poor investment into their transport networks. However, a more important issue is that very few people live near the stops on the public transport networks they do have. On the Continent, land within walking distance of stations with convenient commutes is typically built up to moderate or high densities; UK train stations are often ringed by fields of rapeseed or golf courses.

Suburbs of Leeds and of Valencia at the same scale. Many more people live within walking distance of suburban train stations in Valencia than do in Leeds.

Their rough estimate implies we are forgoing agglomeration benefits worth tens of billions every year, largely due to a lack of traditional 'gentle density'. What's more, it is precisely the towns and cities the UK government wants to level up that are losing out most. As we saw, British cities have responded to the existence of the car by spreading out enormously. Increasing services or opening new stations will have little impact if too few people live nearby to take advantage of them. In fact, Breach and Rodrigues show that even if Leeds did extend its public transport so it had the coverage of Marseille's, its population is so much more dispersed that this investment would not solve its transport problems. The greater problem, for Leeds, is a lack of density clusters around existing or potential stops. We need to create more 'gentle density'.

55. Ant Breach and Guilherme Rodrigues (2021), *Measuring Up*.

This policy is part of the solution to this problem. Mews developments will bring more people within range of existing infrastructure, and thereby allow more Britons to live car-independent lifestyles, making more journeys by foot if desired. This could increase the effective size of cities, enhance agglomeration effects and support levelling up. Shifting modal share away from cars by giving people better alternative options is a Government priority that block plans would support.

Sites for small builders

The Government wishes to increase the role of small builders, self-builders, custom-builders and modern methods of construction. The British development market is certainly uniquely concentrated.[56] This matters because smaller builders can be more flexible and responsive, increasing competition and able to use the smallest brownfield and infill sites effectively. Most larger volume builders tend to focus on repeatable large-scale greenfield development. Smaller builders can also better tailor their product to local tastes, reflecting local vernaculars and needs that are locally popular.

There are some regulations under which the cost of compliance varies with size. The cost to small firms is small, and the cost to large firms is large. For example energy efficiency rules, regularly updated in the UK, require compliance with lighting and air tightness standards. These are normally variable costs. There is an element of the cost that is fixed: finding a supplier of the relevant materials and working out the rules will cost about the same for smaller and larger firms. But by far the most significant added cost from this regulation is the added cost per unit from using more expensive (and energy efficient) techniques and materials. This sort of regulation will not in general tilt the playing field towards larger firms.

By contrast, the cost of complying with some regulations varies very little with firm output. For example, the Code for Sustainable Homes requires a similarly costly report for projects building five dwellings as those building 50 or 500. Even where there is some increase in cost by size, it is not proportionate: there is usually a reduced cost per dwelling or per unit built.

56. Boys Smith & Milner (2020), *Where will Thomas and Rebecca live?*

A third type of regulation is in principle unrelated to firm size, but in practice makes it harder for smaller firms to compete. For example, in the UK smaller car parks require proportionally more onerous ventilation than large ones.[57] Since smaller firms simply do not have the capacity to take on large site projects, even if there were no further stumbling blocks, this restriction would reduce the fraction of projects completed by small builders or self-build.

Finally, large firms are better placed to deal with complexity and uncertainty in the system. Complexity functions like a fixed cost—regardless of the cost of actually complying with any regulations. Discovering how to comply with regulations will cost a similar amount for all firms. However, larger firms will be able to spread this cost among more units. Uncertainty and risk can easily be spread across 1,000 projects. On average, the randomness will even out due to the law of large numbers. But for a small firm, a planning rejection after huge financial and time investment can mean financial ruin. This is why insurance exists: if your factory burns down that is a huge cost to you, but an insurer can easily cross subsidise paying for these costs based on the premia from all the other factories that do not burn down.

Given the theoretical considerations, and the general empirical literature for all sectors, it is unsurprising that we now have such a concentrated housebuilding sector in the UK. The current situation is summarised well by a 2017 Home Builders Federation report: just 12 per cent of new-builds are by small builders; the size of the average permissioned scheme is up 17 per cent even over the last decade; huge numbers of smaller firms closed during the recent recession; and the delays and uncertainties in the system have had knock-on effects on lending, further restricting the ability of small firms to build. By contrast the biggest three builders—Barratt, Persimmon, and Taylor Wimpey—are together building more than a third of the overall total, and not unreasonably, driven by the same uncertainty in the planning system, land banking hundreds of thousands of plots in order to ensure they can continue to build in the future.

57. Tulloch, R, (2017). Missing teeth—why is it easier to build small sites in France than in England?". Create Streets

The gap in self-build housing, where households both plan and inhabit a house, is even larger. Whereas in France around 40 per cent of housing is developed through self-build, in Britain it is closer to ten per cent. In Japan, which achieves a house-building rate around 12 times that of the UK, three quarters of newly built houses are commissioned by private individuals and built on their own land, for around 400,000 personalised and customised houses per year. Like France, Japan has a clear rules-based system where it is easy for smaller builders and even individuals to know in advance whether any prospective development project they had for their own land would be approved.

Block plans would generate just this sort of completely predictable planning permission, without a long and uncertain discretionary process. What is more, blocks around the country are likely to reuse the best plans to reduce costs and guarantee attractive outcomes. That will mean avoiding many of these costs which tilt the playing field to benefit large volume builders and will mean a greater share of self- and small builders in the UK construction mix. It would also help boost modern methods of construction, by enabling more consistent and repeatable designs.
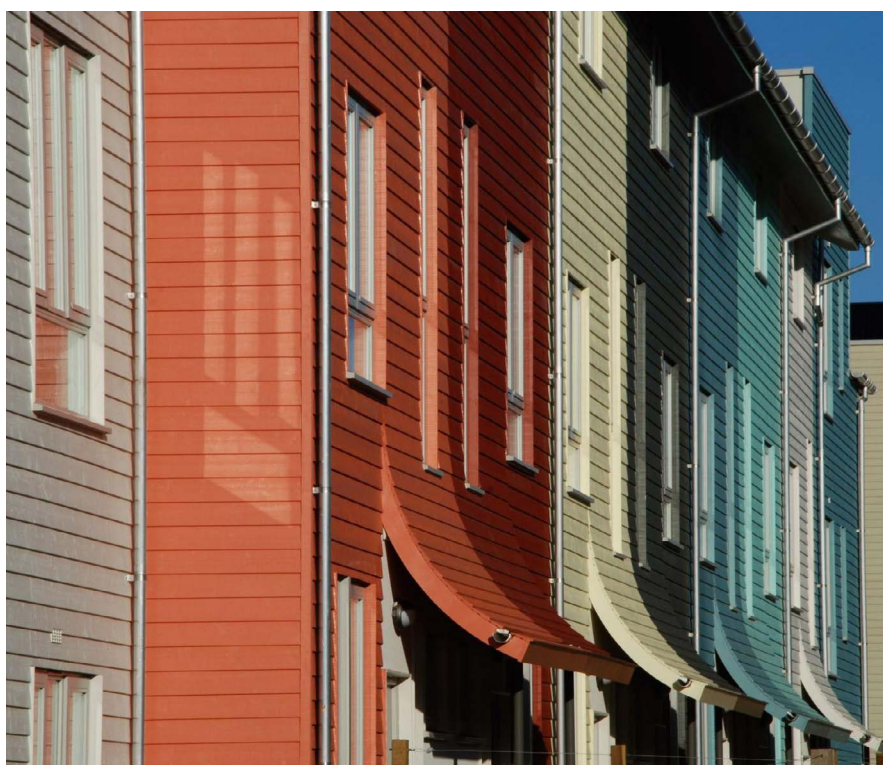
Vernacular gentle density. With kind permission of Matthew Lloyd Architects.

Modelling: what is the size of the opportunity?

There are many garages, garage alleys, sheds, disused backlands, and other dilapidated concreted-over areas in the UK. For example, a recent study of just council-owned garages in London suggested there was space for as many as 64,000 homes on the sites of those garages.[58]

To build our own model, we used official data on the number of garages from the Office for National Statistics. The ONS data does not break down garages into types of garage. However, we need to work out how common different types of garages are in order to make our estimate. Garages attached to a detached house facing the main street on which the house has its address will not be accessible through this policy, which is about developing backlands and alleys. Block plans will mainly be useful in cases where there are separate detached garages on an access alley, as are commonly seen in 1930s neighbourhoods.

The ONS does have data on how many homes of different typologies have garages. Therefore, we can roughly estimate the number of available garages by estimating how many of a given typology's garages will be of the relevant type. For example we estimate that 75 per cent of terraced houses with garages will have appropriate detached garages, but only five per cent of detached houses with garages will have the appropriate sort of garage.[59]

We ran various spatial modelling case studies of areas with garages to work out how much extra concreted space is generally available around garages: we make three estimates for this across our three scenarios.

58.https://www.theplanner.co.uk/news/london%E2%80%99s-empty-garages-could-provide-16000-homes-research

59.Data on these fractions does not exist so our numbers are conservative estimates based on consultation with architectural historians. For example, practically every single British terraced homes with a garage will have a detached garage, as the ground floor garage is an extraordinarily rare typology in British terraced houses. But we assume only ¾ in this case. It is similar for other cases.

Garages

Sheds

Access alley

Interstitial zone
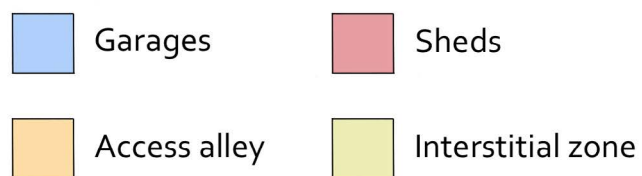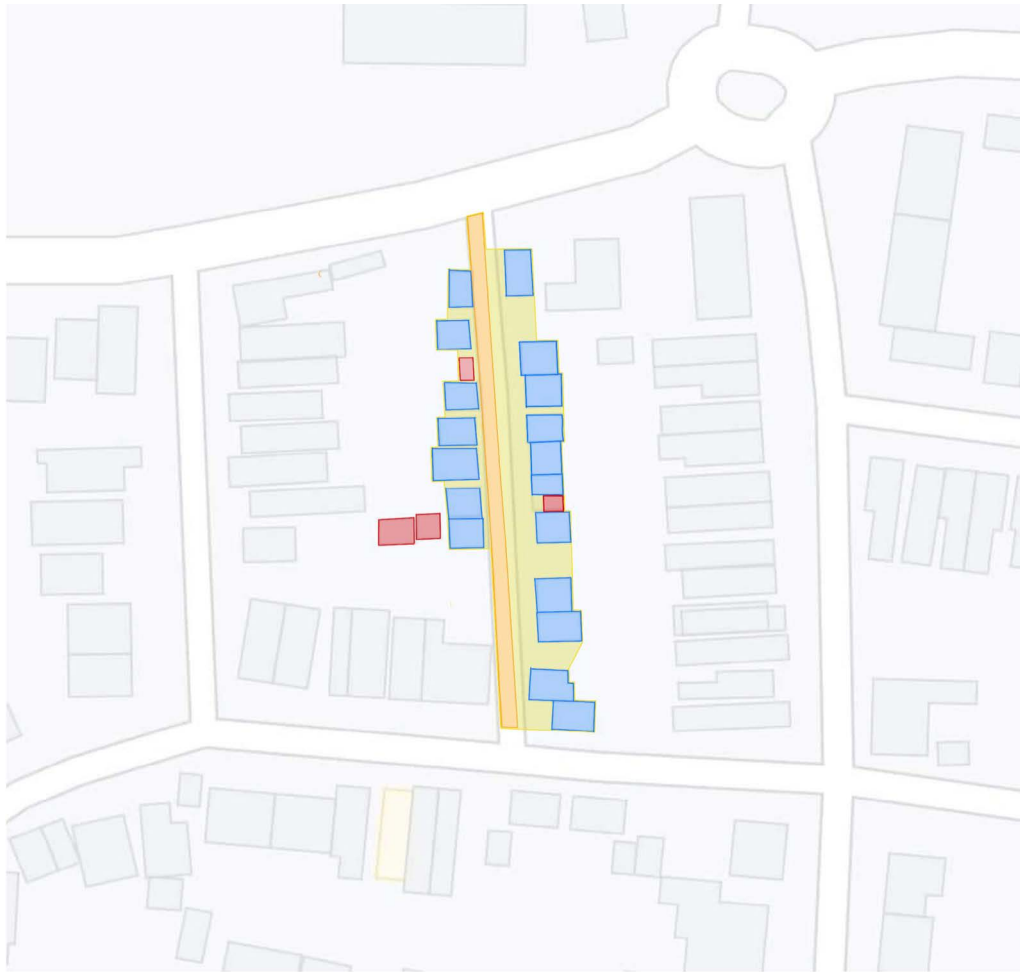
Key intensification spaces

The idea of block plans is that residents will replace structures currently sitting at the ends of their backyards, backing onto a service alley. The central example of this is garages, highlighted in red on this diagram. There are also several other land uses backing onto alleys that residents might choose to redevelop, including underused sheds and concreted interstitial spaces (highlighted in orange and yellow respectively). We combined this with data on local house prices and the amounts of various typologies (semi-detached, detached, bungalow, terrace, flat) that are in a given area.

We then generated three scenarios, with varying levels of conservatism around how much space would be available, and how much take-up there would be, given availability.

- In our most pessimistic scenario, we assume that relevant garages are only 16 sqm on average,[60] and that there is only 16 sqm of extra wasted land available per garage, on average. We assume that sheds are only 4 sqm. We assume that only those sites with compelling financial viability will tend to use the rights: in this scenario that means where average house prices for the local authority area are over £5,000/sqm. We assume that the standard development will be a two storey mews cottage with a mansard roof. This ends up meaning that 13 per cent of eligible residents decide to use the right over the first fifteen years. In total, this results in just under 330,000 new homes at the average size, or just under 22,000 per year on average—in practice there would be more completions in later years and fewer in earlier years as applications of the policy 'ramped up'.

- In our central scenario we assume that there is on average 20 sqm available per garage, along with 20 sqm of extra wasted land, and that development will go ahead in areas where prices are over £4000/sqm.

- In our optimistic scenario we assume there is 24 sqm available per garage, as well as 24 sqm of concreted over or interstitial land, and that building will go ahead where prices are £3000/sqm or more.

60. There is no official or high quality data on average garage size. Some estimates are on Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garage_(residential)#In_the_United_Kingdom and on supplier websites, for example
https://www.easterngaragedoors.co.uk/news/average-garage-door-size-in-the-uk/

The full results of our scenarios are below.

Scenario	Space Available	Take-Up Over 15 Years	Total Homes Built	Homes Built Per Year
1. Pessimistic	223,702,639 m2	13%	329,741	21,983
2. Central	279,628,298 m2	19%	620,181	41,345
3. Optimistic	335,553,958 m2	30%	1,179,402	78,627

A mews in London.

61. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/58-02/0161/210161.pdf

Pilots

- The protections listed above, coupled with the onerous voting thresholds, should mean that adoption will initially grow slowly, which will give plenty of time to amend the implementing regulations for the scheme as necessary.

- However, if pilots were deemed sensible, any of the 'street votes' schemes—street plans, block plans, mansard extensions and upward extensions etc—can be piloted with implementing legislation after only small tweaks to the single enabling clause in John Penrose and Bob Blackman's Presentation Bill,[61] which could readily be incorporated into a bill centred on levelling up and regeneration.

- Designating specific geographic areas (for example a single borough) for block plan pilots is unlikely to provide a sufficiently representative sample. It would be better to allow the Secretary of State to designate for the pilot a number of blocks that have expressed interest, up to a maximum of (say) 100. Discretion should be reserved whether to include a block in the pilot, in case of previously unforeseen problems surrounding that block's participation.

  - A tweak to the enabling clause would allow the Secretary of State to designate a limited number of eligible blocks for a vote under the pilot scheme, if they have proposed a block plan that complies with the implementing legislation. The Government should offer assistance with such proposals as described below, probably via the Office for Place.

- The Strong Suburbs report estimated a circa three per cent for the take-up rate as a fraction of total eligible streets, and that was forecast to take over a decade. (That would still generate hundreds of thousands of homes because of the large scope for adding high-amenity homes by gentle densification.) It is impossible to be certain but the take-up rate for block plans may be similar. In the first year, just one or two boroughs might not yield enough blocks for an effective pilot.

    - Note that 'street votes' schemes may, like neighbourhood plans, take several years and various successful examples to get going at scale.

- We do not think that pilots based on existing legal mechanisms such as LDOs or call-ins will work because of problems of legal uncertainty, the substantial additional work for the individual residents and the local authority, and the controversy and resentment that that may create.

    - It should be stressed that there are powers under the current system which could theoretically lead to community-led suburban intensification, using neighbourhood or local development orders. One of the fundamental mistakes that has been made is assuming that it is enough that such mechanisms exist, without taking into account the enormous coordination costs and organisational difficulties that currently stop them being used. Removing these difficulties is fundamental to successful reform in this area. A large part of the problem lies in the extensive costs, procedures and uncertainty of the current system.

    - Many of the pilots previously carried out by the Department have been for schemes such as Neighbourhood Planning that are not designed to produce substantial additional housing. The more homes that are intended, the more essential is the community-led fine detail and certainty to avoid disruption, difficulty and backlash. That is why new permitted development rights have generally not been piloted through call-ins or LDOs.

    - According to our legal advice there is insufficient basis in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 for adequate pilots of the 'votes' schemes.

- One option would be to appoint an external body ('the Contractor') to administer pilots. In summary, the pathway for a resident is:

  - Nominate their block;
  - Encourage their neighbours to nominate too;
  - Get selected for assistance;
  - Prepare proposed block plan with help;
  - Get designated for vote under the pilot;
  - Vote;
  - Implement permission if and when they each decide.

Overview

1. The rules applicable to each pilot are published in plain English and the Contractor advertises the pilot widely.

2. Interested residents can nominate their street or block (depending on the pilot—hereafter just 'block') via a simple web form and tick box.

3. Residents are given a web link and QR code that they can share with other residents of their block so that they could nominate as well.

4. Blocks with a high proportion of nominating residents that are eligible for the scheme will typically be selected for assistance to prepare a proposal for the pilot.

5. If the area is selected for assistance, the Contractor will help residents to prepare a proposal for a block plan.

6. If a valid proposal is successfully prepared within six months after assistance is granted, the Secretary of State will generally designate that block for a vote under the scheme.

7. The Secretary of State may also consider for designation for a vote any block plans that are prepared without assistance.

8. Covered residents are notified by post (and by email, if signed up) that a vote is going to go ahead, and what its rules will be.

9. For the pilot we recommend that the Department should pay the local authority twice the otherwise applicable CIL rate for that type of development in that location, after a successful vote.

    a. In the long run the infrastructure levy on block plan permissions will provide a more-than-sufficient flow of funds to LPAs to supply needed infrastructure. The pilot payment will cover those needs, given the levy will not be set up during the time of the pilot, as well as any additional frictional costs experienced by LPAs dealing with new procedures for the first time, thus helping to minimise any possible backlash.

    b. The Department should offer funding for each affected LPA to institute controlled parking zones on streets surrounding the pilot block with free permits to the residents of those streets, to prevent risk of parking congestion.

Nomination

10. Interested owners and residents should be invited to use a simple web form to nominate a block (including their own address) to be the pilot area, and tick boxes to nominate which pilot scheme(s) they wish to apply to that area.

11. The Contractor will confirm addresses by checking against the electoral roll and/or with the Land Registry and by posting a form that must be returned by the nominator. If a different nominated area boundary would be more likely to be eligible the Contractor may indicate that.

12. The Contractor will provide any person who nominates an eligible block with a web link to forward to other residents and owners in that block, so that if they wish they can also nominate their block to demonstrate support. Their addresses will also be confirmed by the Contractor as above.

13. The Contractor may prioritise for consideration for assistance (and the waiting list) blocks nominated by the highest fraction of addresses within that area, as evidence of higher likelihood of a successful vote, and blocks where there is no risk of damage to local amenity for any previously unforeseen reason. The Contractor will note such reasons, for potential mitigation via amendment to the final scheme.

14. If the Contractor determines that the block is (a) eligible and (b) does not pose previously unforeseen risks, it notifies the landowners and residents by post that that their range of addresses is eligible for assistance to prepare a proposal under the scheme and sets out details of the rules of the scheme.

15. The Contractor may not have any financial interest in any land affected by any scheme receiving assistance or submitted for designation for a vote under the pilot.

Preparing a proposal

16. The first 100 blocks confirmed to be eligible should each be given six months to propose the elements of their block plan and offered technical assistance through the Contractor to do so.

17. After the 100th, eligible blocks will be told that they are in a waiting list until enough of the first blocks have missed their six month window to make a proposal (a set of elements required for the block plan).

18. The rules will set out how many and which residents must submit a proposal for the scheme, and the rules with which a proposal must comply to be valid. (For block plans, this should be as set out above; other 'votes' pilots such as mansards could also follow the respective report.)

Designation for a vote

19. The Contractor determines whether a proposal (whether it has received assistance or not) is valid according to the published rules of the pilot. It will forward valid proposals to the Department and recommend those which in its view have a high likelihood of success and a low level of risk. The Secretary of State may prioritise such schemes for designation under the pilot.

20. If a street prepares a proposal determined to be valid by the Contractor which is not designated for a vote under the pilot, the Department will reimburse the proposers for out of pocket expenses incurred in preparing the proposal and the application, up to a maximum of £50,000 per block. This allows the Secretary of State to decline to include the block in the pilot in previously unforeseen circumstances without discouraging applicants. The applicants may also seek to use their proposals, free of charge, in a neighbourhood plan, to encourage the local planning authority to incorporate them into policy in the local plan, or to use them in joint or individual planning applications.

Local authorities

21. The pilot rules should confirm, as an incentive for local authorities, that successfully adopted block plans will be given full credit in assessing whether the local plan is up to date in meeting local housing need.

Image acknowledgements

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