CREATE streets

The Create Streets manifesto for homes, hope and health

The Create Streets ‘pledge card’ for more homes, gentle density and ‘greening up’, for regenerative development, stronger towns and sustainable living patterns.

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Introduction

Here are our top sixteen suggestions to boost housebuilding, healthy places and productive and sustainable growth patterns. They largely use existing legal powers to create more homes and improve existing and new places for people, prosperity and planet. Although some do require legislation, they are deliberately designed so that most are easy to implement without legislation. They are also intended to 'go with the grain' of what most people like and will support based on the numerous local and national polls we have conducted and the hundreds of design workshops that we have run from Scotland to Somerset and from Cornwall to Cumbria.

Underpinning them all is our research over more than a decade into what people like and why and the relationships between place with public health, wellbeing, sustainable living patters and support for new homes. These have shown time and time again that there are very predictable relationships between place and what people like and where they flourish.[1] They also reveal that most British people have lost faith in the future and do not believe that new development will make existing places better. Sadly, very often they are right. We have also examined at length the English planning system which is much more 'discretionary' and higher risk than most systems internationally. This leads to much higher levels of planning risk, higher capital costs and has consistently constrained not just the supply of desperately needed new homes but also the range of self-build, custom-build and local housebuilders able to supply the market.[2]

In short, planning is categorically not the proverbial 'bad guy', but we do need to de-risk planning. This theme emerged strongly in the Office for Place conference in March this year. One delegate asked, 'how easy is it to know what you can build where? The reality is that it's not that easy.' Amandeep Singh Kalra of Be First agreed; 'our system's greatest challenge is its discretionary nature... let's remove subjectivity to set land values.' A modular house builder added; 'I cannot stress enough the importance of predictability.' How asked Andrew Taylor from Vistry, 'can we ensure that design codes speed things up and don't slow them down.' It's a fair challenge.

Many development, planning and design bodies want to spend more money on the existing system and accept as a fact of life that new development will be unpopular. The joy and intent of our proposals is that many of them rely not on increased budgets but on changed incentives and 'bringing the democracy forward' from the development control system to the local plan. There will be many demands on the government's budget and we do not judge that running a 'Rolls Royce system' largely depending on individual case by case decision-making is credible, particularly on a 'Morris Minor budget.' We should not be running a system that is so grotesquely inefficient that it requires public subsidy to build homes when there is huge unmet demand.

We do need more homes and more affordable homes but it is not just a simple numbers game. We need to think carefully about process and risk and the stewardship and creation of places to support health, prosperity and resilience. The proposals below should help deliver new towns which are better and require less land whilst making it easier to create more homes within existing settlements in the short term.

Create homes in existing places so as to improve neighbourhoods

At present over 90 per cent of the public believe that new development will make existing places worse.[3] That needs to change as we create new homes, more affordable homes and better places. Here's how.

1. *'Bring the democracy forward' and legalise new housing which people like.* Light touch approval processes should be encouraged for homes and development which are in accordance with the local plan. Part of this can be achieved by a Written Ministerial Statement, via changes in the wording of the National Planning Policy Framework and by making it easier to appeal individual decisions which contradict the local plan. We should also take far more advantage of existing but little used planning mechanisms such as Local Development Orders (LDOs) or Neighbourhood Development Orders (NDOs). These can pre-permit certain designs in certain places with the local plan and should be used alongside the new requirement for authority-wide design codes in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA). This can give councils an 'easy to implement' option to pre-permit locally popular intensification of thousands of existing streets and permit the creation of many thousands of new homes and bedrooms.[4] Parishes and district councils that are already starting to do this include Cornwall Council, the Chesham Neighbourhood Plan and the Dudley Household Extensions Local Development Order.[5]

   a. 'Legalising housing' should also be embedded as a new National Development Management Policy as required by LURA for certain area types on an 'opt in' or 'opt out' basis and linked to local design codes.

   b. More use should also be made of existing devolved planning powers. To do this the government should enact the regulations that give parish councils powers to (partially) determine planning applications where there is a Neighbourhood Plan and draft the secondary legislation that would allow the Mayor of London to make Mayoral Development Orders (MDOs).[6] Neighbourhood Planning should be maintained and encouraged to allocated sites, set design codes and enact NDOs.

The gift of gentle density

Gentle density is the 'missing middle' of place-making between the extremes of tower blocks which maximise density on a given plot and detached homes which are popular but very land-hungry. Evidence strongly shows that 'gentle density' places of terraced homes and mansions blocks with some semi-detached homes and the odd higher building are very often the best way to trade-off between the advantages of lower density living with the high productivity and more efficient land use that comes with slightly higher densities.

Done well poling and pricing shows that people prefer beautiful 'gentle density' places (think Bath or Clifton or Marylebone).

The 'gift of gentle density' is that we can create more homes on less land. For example, on the same amount of land that was used for greenfield development last year we might have built not 112,240 homes but 220,471 homes if we had developed at an historic 'gentle density' of, say, 55 homes per hectare instead of the actual achieved average of 28.

New 'gentle density' urban extension being delivered more efficiently thanks to a Local Development Order in Cornwall.[7]

Some locally popular infill housing currently being 'legalised' in Chesham thanks to Neighbourhood Development Orders. Every town should do this.[8]

2. *Legalise a new generation of mansion blocks.* Specifically, create popular mansion block pattern book templates (so called design codes) linked to the new authority wide design codes required by LURA which councils could then opt into to pre-permit in certain streets or types of place via Local Development Orders (LDOs) embedded in the Local Plan. These could intensify and beautify existing streets. The new Office for Place could commission pattern books which could then be freely usable and downloadable either on an 'optin' or 'opt out' basis.

3. *Ask the people what they like.* In both proposals (1) and (2), axiomatically, the first step in writing templates for legalised housing should be to understand what the public most like and will most support. There is strong and growing evidence about what people like which is fairly predictable much of the time on many matters of design and place. Robust Visual Preference Survey techniques and map-based online survey techniques are now available which make it increasingly easy and cheap to understand what people like, where and why. This information can and should be embedded into local plans to de-risk development in a locally acceptable fashion. The National Development Management Policies which implement LURA should require this as part of the process for 'legalising housing.' Our experience 'on the ground', for example, here in Devon, shows us that when you create places people like it is easier to get political support for more homes. Developers tell us the same.

A QUICK GUIDE TO VISUAL PREFERENCE SURVEYS

Quick guide to visual preference surveys

What is a visual preference survey?
Visual preference surveys are a simple and effective participatory design and research technique to gauge quickly and relatively cheaply the preferences of the public or a specific target group. They should focus on one design aspect with everything else held as constant as possible. Usually two to seven pairs of images are presented to gauge preferences for specific issues.

What questions can you ask?
Visual preferences surveys should be used to test public preferences for one specific issue or a linked subset of issues. These can include a building's height, façade pattern, or overall style; very specific details such as windows, doors, materials, colours, roof types or level of ornament; a street's sense of enclosure, carriageway design; or the design of or components within a public space.

Why use a visual preference survey?
Visual preference surveys can empower communities and bypass unnecessary distractions. They can help public officials, developers, and architects understand what is popular during the planning and design stage of a development. They can also be used to research public preferences.

How to make a visual preference survey?
Visual preference surveys should aim to use images which are as similar as possible. Ideally, only the elements which are compared should be different. Often images will need to be edited to align extraneous aspects such as sky colour or level of greenery which might influence the result.

How do you ask your questions?
Wherever possible, ask as tangible, specific and 'real' a question as possible. Sometimes it is right to ask "which of these do you prefer?" But normally you should relate questions to real life or to actual changes to a place:

- "Which of these buildings would you rather live next to?"
- "Where would you rather sit?"
- "Where would you rather walk?"
- "Which of these would you rather see built near your home?"

Or whatever is deemed appropriate and relevant.

A visual preference survey for buildings

- The example above compares buildings with two very different façade patterns.
- The camera angle should be as similar as possible. Sometimes two different versions of the same comparison from different angles may be appropriate.
- The buildings being compared should ideally be of a similar size.
- The weather should be similar, particularly the colour of the sky. This is one of the simplest elements to align using photo editing software.
- The surroundings should be comparable. For example, don't compare a building in a busy urban setting with a building in a green, leafy setting.
- The foreground elements should be similar, including the number of people, cars, trees or other obstacles and the amount and quality of street furniture.

A visual preference survey for public spaces

- The example above compares two public squares of a different size.
- Be very clear about the primary focus of your comparison. Is it the size of the public space? The sense of enclosure (the ratio of height to width)? Is it the number of trees? Or the amount, positioning or quality of street furniture? Ideally, test only for one element in your comparisons.
- Depending on your focus, try to control for as many variables as possible. This will minimize the risk of accusations of a bias.
- For example, if the focus is on the size of the public space, the amount of trees and greenery should be similar and the surrounding buildings should be of a similar size, materials and level of ornament. If it is the level of greenery, the size of the space, the nature of the buildings and the amount of traffic or people should be similar.
- Again, in all cases it is important to match the weather and sky colour.

Some examples

A visual preference survey comparing architectural styles for public buildings

A visual preference survey on the positioning of benches in public spaces

A visual preference survey on the presence of people in public spaces

A visual preference survey comparing public arcades

What the public like can readily and efficiently be ascertained…

.. and is fairly predictable most of the time.

4. *Reinvent 'box land' for more homes.* 'Box land' is the single storey low intensity light industrial and big box retail land that is currently being built to sprawl along our motorways and the edges of our towns and cities. It meets important economic needs but is incredibly wasteful of space and expensive to create and service. As Create Streets and others have shown many times, it can often be reinvented in such a way to maintain existing uses but also allow it to 'grow' into real places by mixing in 'gentle density' homes and by creating safe and attractive walkable streets. We can use again existing mechanisms such as Local Development Orders and authority-wide design codes to pre-permit acceptable and sustainable intensification of 'box land' into a standard template of walkable and tree-lined roads and locally popular rise medium rise gentle density homes and mansion blocks with garden squares. Doing this does not just create new homes, it can also increase the available council tax take for councils and relatively reduce their liabilities for highways maintenance by improving their 'tarmac to tax' ratio.

From low-intensity retail 'boxland' to high intensity places with homes and shops

5. *Put housing targets back into the system.* In late 2022 the Government diminished the role of targets in the English planning system. The undoubted effect was to retard the development of local plans and major applications. Create Streets saw this ourselves in our own work where several schemes were delayed. Unless the concept of a planning application is abolished, there is no alternative to having top-down targets in the planning system. They should be re-emphasised in the National Development Management Policies and more speedily after the election via a Written Ministerial Statement. As explained above, what new buildings look like and how they integrate should be far more locally determined. Top-down targets. Bottom-up definition of what development should be and how it can support existing local neighbourhoods. It should be very clear in policy that the government will intervene assertively using national policies and pattern books if local authorities do not have up to date plans in place.

Improve existing places helping them become greener, safer to move through and more prosperous.

6. *Let the people grow! Green up our streets and squares for healthier neighbourhoods and cleaner air.* Enact specific primary legislation, and make better use of existing rights in the Highways Act to give parishes, neighbourhood groups and residents the right to plant and maintain some street trees and other urban greenery 'as of right' in certain pre-approved types of street or public space where they do not preclude safe use of the highway by others. This should be backed up by a new guidance published by the Department for Transport. Consider enacting the suite of policies and changes to guidance set out in Create Streets's September 2022 report, *Greening Up*.[9]

Street trees and urban greenery are an asset not a liability and improve health, happiness, local prosperity and environmental resilience.[10]

7. *Build on our 'road belt' and restitch our left-behind towns.* Most of our poorest neighbourhoods are scarred by fast and wide urban dual carriageways running through or alongside them (over 80 per cent in one study).[11] Many (not all) of these roads serve no wider transport purpose and merely act pointlessly to speed up cars for a minute or a few seconds but not meaningfully to speed up journey times whilst ruining air quality and rendering the neighbourhoods they sequestrate measurably less prosperous. Wherever possible towns and neighbourhoods should be restitched and such wide roads turned back into streets with more street trees and more homes, shops and offices. This would improve air quality and liveability. The Department for Transport and Homes England should identify opportunities to 'reclaim' the road belt and this should be a national programme of investment as set out in our papers, *Moving towards growth* and *Restitching our social fabric*.[12]

Reclaiming our road belt for more homes and more prosperity in Rochdale

Rochdale: from wide road to urban street

8. *Move free. Stop highways departments from preventing beautiful streets and reducing housing delivery.* Making it easy to get about towns and cities in as many ways as possible boosts prosperity, high streets and health whilst improving air quality and also making it easier to build more homes thanks to the 'gift of gentle density' as set out in our report, *Move Free.* The Department for Transport should encourage gentle density style housing and walkable streets by adopting Manual for Streets as policy. The default for highways adoption should be for tree-lined streets, with fine grained roads, not wide swathes of asphalt. Streets should be designed for the residents who live there to walk around not as a bypass for traffic. More specific recommendations are set out in set out in our detailed accompanying policy note, *Move Free*.[13]

9. *Create civic and public buildings which elevate and don't degrade their neighbourhoods.* We need to reinvent the entire process we've used for designing public buildings over the last century. Very few have touched the public soul. Very few will still be with us in 100 years' time. We need to let the public back in to judge what civic buildings should be like. Too many 'design competitions' have led to public buildings the public often dislike at worst or are unenthused by at best. This is largely due to the 'design disconnect' divergence of taste between the wider public and professional designers. Instead of running circular and inward-looking design competitions, judged by designers for designers with the people's preferences shut out, we need to ask: what do the public love?[14] Where do they want to be? What will sing not just

of our time but of all time? What is of this place not of any place? What will the public not oppose but clamour for? And, for large buildings, what will be cherished and preserved in 2500 or 3000 as we cradle and care for Salisbury Cathedral or Westminster Abbey? As set out above, fortunately, the process of discovering what people cherish is much quicker and easier to do now. Online platforms, real-time engagement, generative visual AI all mean that we can play with concepts and gauge public responses with a breadth, ambition and precision that was impossible even a few short years ago.

Creating homes more easily in new beautiful and sustainable 'gentle density' new places.

10. *Stop using obscure highways modelling mistakes to ban new homes, instead use vision-led transport modelling.* At present, unintentional and obscure mistakes made many years ago in standard highways modelling methodology are effectively making it twice as expensive to create new homes by requiring needlessly expansive and expensive fast and wide road infrastructure for new homes. The Department for Transport and Homes England could and should immediately ban this so called 'Predict and Provide' approach by refusing to fund and adopt roads created under this approach which is acting as a break on new homes. By relying less on expensive new roads and more on walking and cycling infrastructure we can create twice as many homes on the same land in better, more popular and more sustainable places which promote healthier lifestyles. The full suite of policy tweaks that would enable this are set out in our paper, *Stepping off the Road to Nowhere*.[15] This would hugely help the delivery of new towns and new urban extensions as we have set out in detail in our recent note, *Becoming a nation of townbuilders.*[16]

11. *Create new neighbourhoods and new towns at 'gentle density.'* Through the use of existing planning tools, such as LDOs and Design Codes we can pre permit new settlements that replicate the success places such as Nansledan and Poundbury rather than relying on the standard PLC housebuilder model. The Office for Place should lead on the development of a pattern book of gentle density house types such as town houses, mansion blocks, terraces informed by local preferences. New tools created by LURA offer additional opportunities; firstly locally led development corporations and new CPO powers offer a way of laying our new settlements and funding infrastructure while creating opportunities for self-builders and SMEs to deliver homes. The introduction of National Development Management Policies (NDMPs) is an excellent opportunity to push back against existing local plan policies that make gentle density all but impossible. A new NDMP for Gentle Density should be created that includes:

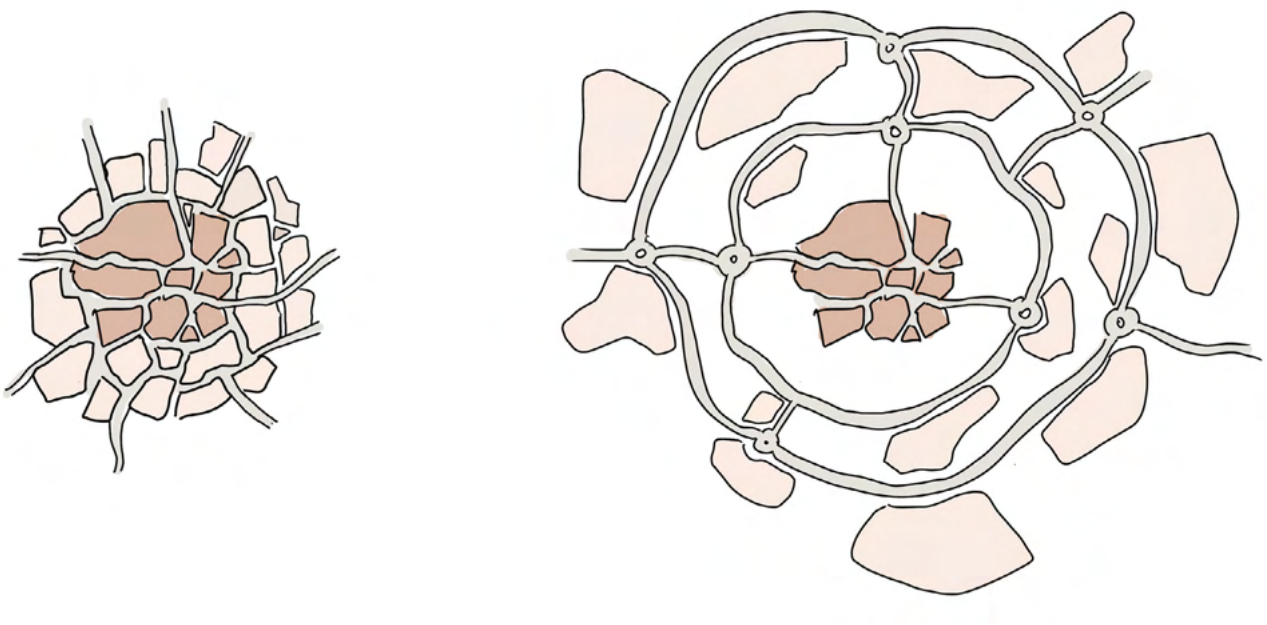
a. Reduction of the back-to-back distances to 12 metres or less to enable more compact, fine grained street and block patterns. Currently, some planning authorities require 20 or event 30 metres.

b. A requirement for 'car lite' development with parking maximums, particularly where developments are well served by public transport, or new facilities will be provided.

c. Clear numerical guidelines for development, with a minimum quantum of commercial or flexible floor space, minimum densities and minimum building heights.

d. A requirement for essential social infrastructure to be accessible to all on foot or bike. New schools should be located centrally and green space and greenery should be interwoven into the fabric of new towns.

New places should be created centripetally not centrifugally. New urban extensions and regenerative investment should be regenerative not parasitic, energising not dissipating, creating new homes supported by trains, trams and active travel.



Create new places 'centripetally' not 'centrifugally'

12. *Create trams.* If we are to decarbonise transport, cut air pollution, and boost urban productivity and growth then reliable and fast public transport is critical. We have unintentionally made it nearly impossible and very expensive to create new trams. British trams are two and a half times more expensive than French trams per mile and almost three times as expensive as German trams.[17] This is due to details in the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, The Streets Works (Sharing of Costs of Works) Regulation 2000 and the Transport and Works Act 1992.

    a. These should be changed to remove the cost and time burden of utility negotiation so that telecoms and electrics do not move by default, only metallic gas and water pipes are moved and waste water pipes are not moved but manhole covers are instead aligned as is normal in other countries.

    b. The cost of diverting utilities from tram projects to utility companies should also be rebalanced though changes to statutory instruments.

    c. The current Transport and Works Act (TWAO) approval process should be devolved and a 'TWAO light; process should be created to remove the 'heavy rail' regulatory asks which are needlessly imposed on what should be street-based trams.

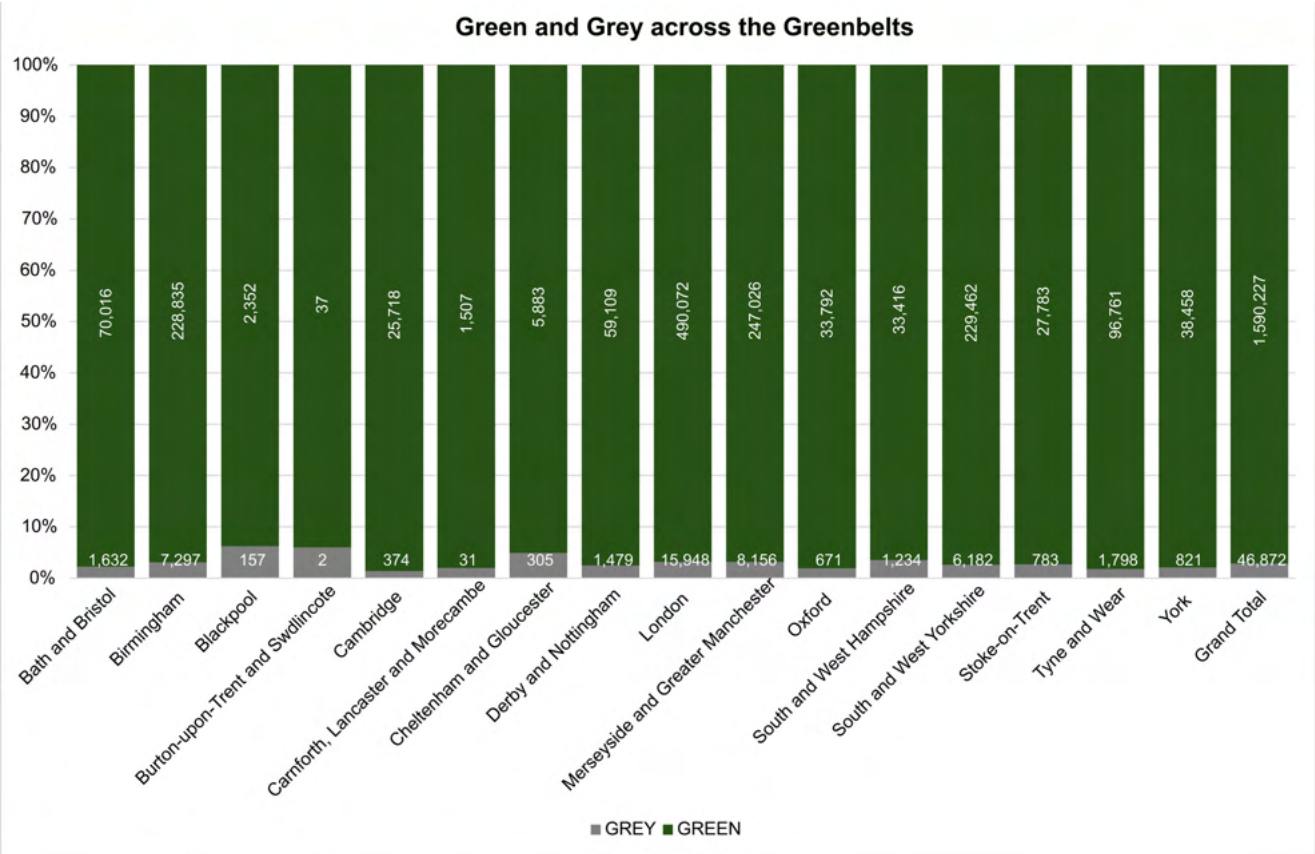
    d. The Department for Transport should also create a specialist delivery unit responsible for trams, metro and light rail within its new public transport directorship.

Trams can readily fit back into the web and weave of our bustling, historic centres boosting their ability to move people about pleasantly and quickly. But we have made them much too hard and expensive to install.

13. *Create Greater Cambridge*. Our forthcoming report, *Greater Cambridge*, falling back in the love with the future sets out how linking the land value uplift from a web of new tram lines and new train stations to walkable mixed-use, gentle density developments could create between 183,000 and 214,000 homes by 2050 not through our usual model of drive-to cul-de-sacs at very low density. Cambridge, as the report will explain.

    'There are several reasons to expand Cambridge. It will help solve Britain's chronic lack of homes. It will revive declining living standards for those struggling to afford a home or move to where they wish to work. And it will give Cambridge the laboratory space it needs to retain its international leadership in research, technology and life sciences, with all the immense opportunities that this brings for enterprise and innovation in Britain. However, done with love and ambition, and with the high courage that will be required to break 'business as usual', Greater Cambridge can also help the British people to 'fall back in love with the future', showing that new places can be the equal of the old. We can make Greater Cambridge by far the finest urban extension to any city anywhere since 1945, an example that will be emulated all over the world.'

14. *Create beautiful and popular new homes and buildings on the grey belt.* Create Streets analysis of the green belt shows that just three per cent of the green belt, covering a total of 46,871 hectares, is 'grey belt'. This 'grey belt' includes previously developed areas, ex-industrial sites, quarries and some other some amenity uses. If just under half of was developed at 'gentle density we could deliver around 1.5 million homes.[18] This would only mean development on 1.3 per cent of the entire English green belt. Further analysis has shown that there is enough developable land (including the lowest quality agricultural land) within 1.2km (3/4 of



a mile) of existing train lines to provide up to 3 million homes.

The Government should make it much easier and lower risk to build on the 'grey belt' in ways that are as locally acceptable as possible including:

a. *Legalising 'grey belt' development.* New development in many 'grey belt' areas should be pre-permitted at 'gentle density' to support new homes and encourage efficient land use. Any pre-permitted new development must follow local design codes which are provably popular.

b. *'Near for far' swaps.* National policy via National Development Management Policies should make it easier to permit development on green belt closer to transport links or local centres provided additional green belt is substituted elsewhere.

And stop making things worse!

15. *Don't ban sash windows and large windows.* Overzealous lobby groups and their supporters are currently attempting to make large windows and sash windows much harder and more expensive to build in a misconceived attempt to prevent people falling out of windows in response to overheating homes (which is actually so rare a problem that there is no data on it). Larger and nicer windows are becoming much rarer, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods where the extra costs of meeting new regulations is unviable. This unintended design apartheid is highly regrettable. It serves no purpose in sustainability or public health and makes it harder to create new homes in which people wish to live and which rhyme with the old. It is perfectly possible to create safe and sustainable windows which are also joyful. The state should not ban large and sash windows and elements of the recent foolish and inequitable Part O Building Regulations should be reversed.[19]

It's time to stop design apartheid. New Part O Building Regulations are effectively banning sash windows and large windows above the ground floor, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods[20]

16. *Stop street scars.* By mistake (no one intended to) we have made it very difficult for councils to prevent utility firms ruining our streets with the heartless removal and non-repair of historic cobbles and York stones when they conduct utility repairs. This tells neighbourhoods that they don't matter and their aspirations pointless. It is due to an error in the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 which gives utility firm a needlessly long six months to effect repairs and risibly low £2,500 maximum fines if they don't. It is not working. This should be reversed though a combination of legislative and regulatory change as set out in detail in our paper, *Street Scar*.[21]

Some of Britain's numerous street scars. Many last for years or indefinitely. Some simple changes to the statutory regulation of utility firms would permit councils to stop this nonsense and reclaim sovereignty of our streets.

Endnotes

1 See summary here: Smith_Pages-from-2021_JPL_Occasional_Papers_13_Print-2.pdf (createstreets.com)
2 See summary here: Where-will-Thomas-and-Rebecca-live_v3.pdf (createstreets.com)
3 Public lacks trust in developers | The Planner
4 This could include the right to create new mansard roofs as set out in our paper, Living Tradition and as supported in the new National Planning Policy Framework. Available at createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Living-Tradition.pdf
5 See Neighbourhood Design Code, Chesham - Create Streets and Householder Extensions Local Development Order.
6 These are under (Paragraph 61L (4) of Schedule 9 of the Localism Act 2011) and Section 61DA of the TCPA (1990).
7 More information at: https://www.createstreets.com/employees/a-place-to-call-home/
8 More detail on this scheme is available at: Neighbourhood Design Code, Chesham - Create Streets
9 Available at Greening Up - Create Streets
10 Photos. Meristem Design, Abundance London.
11 This is true for ten out of the twelve least prosperous neighbourhoods in England. restitching-our-social-fabric.pdf (createstreets.com)
12 Available here: Moving Towards Growth - Create Streets and restitching-our-social-fabric.pdf (createstreets.com)
13 Both available at: New report: Move Free - Create Streets
14 See Chavez, Milner, 'Architecture for Architects', Urban Design Ideas (2019), pp.32-43.
15 Available at: Road to Nowhere - Create Streets
16 Available at: Labour launches plan for New Towns Code - Create Streets
17 See Britain's infrastructure is too expensive
18 Based on a gross density of 70 homes per hectare.
19 More details on this can be found here: Recommendations-for-building-regulations.pdf (createstreets.com)
20 Elevation: Peter Hunt Architects
21 Available at: Street-Scar_010224.pdf (createstreets.com)

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