

Living with Beauty

This summary is of key quotes from *Living with Beauty*, the final report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, published in January 2020, by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The aim is to provide the reader with a quick overview of the document. Download the [full report](#)

A changed Planning and Development Framework

The report proposes a planning and development framework which will

- Ask for Beauty
- Refuse Ugliness
- Promote Stewardship

Beauty at three scales

Beautifully placed (sustainable settlement patterns, sitting in the landscape)

Beautiful places (streets, squares and parks, the "spirit of place")

Beautiful buildings (windows, materials, proportion, space)

Eight Priorities for Reform:

Planning: create a predictable level playing field – Beautiful placemaking should be a legally required aim of the planning system, reflected in the NPPF, and local plans. Schemes should be turned down for being too ugly and such rejections should be publicised. The planning system needs to become more predictable, and more accessible to a wider range of firms, organisations and individuals to enable them to enter the development market. Planning rules should be enforced.

Communities: bring the democracy forward – the local plan process should be more democratic, with local people strongly involved; plans should be more visual, and easy for the public to understand. Attractiveness should be a primary consideration.

Stewardship: incentivise responsibility to the future. – address the short-term profit focus of the development industry. Change the legal and tax systems to encourage long-term stewardship; introduce a 'stewardship kitemark' which can end tax disincentives to a long-term approach and possibly give access to longer term finance.

Regeneration: end the scandal of 'left-behind' places. Ensure development contributes to places rather than parasitizes. Government should go beyond investing in roads or shiny 'big box' infrastructure. In central government a member of the Cabinet should have responsibility for ensuring and coordinating standards in housing, nature and infrastructure. Each council should have a Chief Placemaker as a senior member of the officer team, and a cabinet member with responsibility for placemaking. VAT on new building and refurbishment should be aligned.

Neighbourhoods: create places not just houses. Create mixed-use "real place" development with gentle density – (eg 5 stories) and streets, squares and blocks with clear backs and fronts. Permit intensification where there is public consent.

Nature: re-green our towns and cities. Plant 2 million street trees within 5 years; a fruit tree for every home. The NPPF should place a greater focus on access to nature and green spaces. Green spaces, waterways and wildlife habitats should be seen as integral to the urban fabric

Education and skills: promote a wider understanding of placemaking. Invest in the education of professionals and councillors. Crucial areas include placemaking, the history of architecture and design, popular preferences and (above all) the associations of urban form and design with well-being and health. Consider alternative pathways into architecture.

Management: value planning, count happiness, procure properly.

To make the planning system more efficient, introduce a more rules-based approach, move the democracy forward, have clearer form-based codes, and limits to the length of planning applications; digitise and automate. Moderate permitted development rights with quality standards. Change the corporate performance targets for Homes England, and the highways, housing and planning teams in central government and councils - objective measures for well-being, public health, nature recovery and beauty (measured inter alia via popular support). Measure quality and outcomes as well as quantity.

Proposals

1. ask for beauty
2. expect 'net gain' not just 'no net harm'
3. say no to ugliness
4. discover beauty locally
5. masterplan don't plan by appeal
6. use provably popular form-based codes
7. localise the National Model Design Code
8. require permitted development rights to have standards
9. permit a fast track for beauty
10. ensure enforcement
11. ensure public engagement is wide, deep and early
12. move public engagement from analogue to digital
13. empower communities
14. permit intensification with consent
15. create a recognised 'stewardship kitemark'
16. provide access to a Patient Capital Fund for schemes meeting the 'stewardship kitemark'
17. create a level tax playing field between long and short term approaches to development
18. support the right development in the right place
19. end the disincentive to public sector involvement in stewardship
20. appoint a Minister for Place
21. appoint a Chief Place-maker in all local authorities
22. regenerate 'regeneration' to being place-led
23. align tax for existing and new places
24. encourage the recycling of buildings
25. encourage resilient high streets
26. banish boxland
27. end the unintended bias against 'gentle density' neighbourhoods
28. create healthy streets for people
29. clean urban air
30. ask for more access to greenery
31. plant two million street trees
32. plant urban orchards - one fruit tree per house
33. regreen streets and squares
34. promote planning excellence
35. promote a common understanding of place
36. support design review but not from 'on high'
37. streamline planning and shift resources from development control to strategic planning partially through revolutionising the use of digital technology
38. limit the physical length of planning applications
39. support centres of excellence
40. count happiness and productivity
41. value design as well as price
42. review Homes England's remit, targets and investment timeframes
43. encourage Homes England to take a clear master developer role and consider establishing code-zone (permission in form) approach to large sites
44. Re-discover civic pride in architecture
45. Monitor the implantation of this report

Selected extracts

"We are critical of the existing practice of treating highway design as an issue separate from placemaking; we are concerned that recent government support for house-building has often failed to create successful new places; and we question the effect of the National Infrastructure Commission, which constitutes a new tier of deliberation tending to undermine existing attempts to harmonise the factors involved in placemaking."

"There is no beauty in a child having to use a car park as a play area"

"..the issue of who initiates a new town, and who oversees the masterplanning that will be needed, have not been seriously addressed, at least since the planning of Milton Keynes, one of the last New Towns in our country. There is therefore a danger that large-scale developments will slip out of any kind of integrated control, to be constructed without reference to their beauty or other planning constraints. This is indeed what many fear we are seeing with the proposed Oxford-Cambridge Arc, in which new towns risk coming into being purely as spores thrown out by infrastructure, the by-products of road and rail communication."

"The first study into the disconnect between architecture and non-architecture building preferences by David Halpern found that the consistently least popular of 12 buildings to non-architecture students was the most and second most popular among two groups of architecture students."

"The teaching of urban design principles and practice on both architecture and planning courses could be strengthened, to increase an appreciation of context and sustainable development."

"Many planning schools do no actual "designing" with their students and only teach a rudimentary design appreciation [...] urban design is typically seen as a specialism rather than a common grounding that all built environment students should cover."

"Urban design matters for health and happiness – and more people should understand why"

Appendix

Knight Frank sought to understand why landowners do not typically remain as stewards of good quality housing-led schemes on their land

e decision to participate in a high quality development has been made despite significant obstacles.