

Robert Jenrick's speech on planning for the future

Introduction

In an extended essay written over a hundred and fifty years ago, John Ruskin wrote "When we build, let us think that we build forever.

Let it not be for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for."

His powerful words – rooted in the belief that beauty underpins and shapes the values of a community – were written in support of the Gothic Revival. But they are as true today as they were back then.

Ruskin considered the hallmark of beautiful design to be instinctive admiration. The idea that when you see something beautiful, you immediately know it.

Earlier this month I visited Nansledan in Cornwall. For those of you who haven't had the chance to visit – it's an extension to Newquay on Duchy of Cornwall Land, that embodies the principles of architecture championed by the Prince of Wales.

Walking through Nansledan, I saw colourful homes, built with Cornish character and materials. A community that is walkable, green.

Just this week I was walking through Coal Drops Yard in Kings Cross – a transformed set of Victorian warehouses, which connects the gabled roofs of two coal drops to create something elegant, and something self-evidently beautiful.

A 52 column steel structure, threaded within the fabric of 19th Century buildings – a new space for people to gather, melding local history with the needs of a modern city.

It reminded me of the line written by the late Sir Roger Scruton – that "Styles may change, details may come and go, but the broad demands of aesthetic judgement are permanent".

Sir Roger knew that planning for the future was about building on the hard-earned wisdom and rich cultural heritage of the generations that have come before us, and about identifying the design traits that define local character.

But much-loved communities like Nansledan and Kings Cross have been built, not because of our current planning system, but despite it.

We are going to change that.

I'm sad Sir Roger is no longer with us, but I think he would be pleased to see the profound changes we are proposing to transform the way we build, many of which have been inspired by his life's work and the [Building Better Building Beautiful Commission](#).

This government doesn't want to just build houses. We want to build a society that has re-established powerful links between identity and place, between our unmatched architectural heritage and the future, between community and purpose.

It's because of him and other great pioneers like his co-chair – and our host – Nicholas Boys Smith, that we're at last having a national conversation about what matters to the public: building homes that are beautiful, in keeping with the heritage and character of their local neighbourhoods and that stand the test of time.

Planning for the future

Our current planning system is broken.

It doesn't deliver beautiful homes, and it importantly doesn't deliver nearly enough homes.

Local building plans were supposed to help councils and their residents deliver more homes in their area.

Yet they take on average 7 years to agree in the form of lengthy and absurdly complex documents and accompanying policies – understandable only to the lawyers who feast upon every word.

Under the current system, it takes an average of 5 years for a standard housing development to go through the planning system – before a spade is even in the ground.

Seven years to make a plan, 5 years to get permission to build the houses and slow delivery of vital infrastructure.

This is why the Prime Minister has been clear that we need an ambitious response that matches the scale of the challenge in front of us – meeting the target of building 300,000 homes per year. We are consulting on how to deliver these homes in the fairest and most sensitive way.

These are a once in a generation set of reforms that lays the foundations for a better future.

We owe it to the next generation to radically reform the existing system, so we can offer them a future where our children and grandchildren can afford to own their own home.

We were making good progress before the pandemic.

Last year we built more new homes than at any time in the last 30 years, taking the total delivered since 2010 to 1.5 million. The proportion of young

homeowners increased after declining for more than a decade.

But there is only so much we can do without reform. Since 1970 France has built 16.7 million new homes. The UK has built 8.9 million. Last year we built fewer homes per person than Poland and Belarus.

One reason why is an antiquated planning system that is holding back our country's enormous potential – a system that makes planning authorities judge every single development on a case by case basis – as inconsistent a process as it is slow.

At the heart of this challenge sits a simple fact: we need more homes – homes that our planning system has, for decades, failed to deliver.

Maintaining the status quo is simply not an option.

We need a system that can help us meet the future with confidence.

We propose a clear and transparent set of regulations: one that is faster, more consistent and easier to navigate...

... a system that moves us from blueprints in a council basement, to interactive maps at our fingertips...

... a system that draws on the views of our communities, not just the 1% of people who have the esoteric knowledge to navigate the arcane and protracted world of planning processes.

It's about smarter more intelligent regulation, for a more rational, predictable and popular system.

About building the homes our country desperately needs by unlocking land and new opportunities, bridging the generational divide and recreating an ownership society.

And about providing for younger and future generations who deserve the same opportunities as those who came before them – security and a stake in society. This sense of generational duty and obligation is what defines and guides our proposals.

Simplifying the system

Our current plan making process is not just complex – wasting time and money – it is also opaque. Nothing better illustrates this point than the current model of developer contributions.

Negotiations between councils and developers—where big developers have greater firepower to get what they want—cannot be relied on to provide what we really need.

The current system unfairly advantages bigger builders who are able to muscle smaller builders and construction companies out of the market.

This is bad for home-building, bad for small builders, and bad for Britain.

Thirty years ago, SME builders accounted for 40 per cent of new build homes. Today, it's just 12%. That's the lowest of any country in Europe.

Our proposed National Infrastructure Levy will simplify the system of developer contributions by setting a set rate, making it more streamlined and transparent, departing from the constant negotiations and renegotiations that render our current system so inefficient.

And by raising more revenue than under the current system, it promises to support the vital infrastructure we need to not simply build houses but also create communities.

So we are breaking the stranglehold of the big hitters in the market by reducing those barriers to entry, because small builders don't just hold the key to delivering more homes, they also have the innovation and new ideas we need.

It's no coincidence that self-build and modular construction techniques have struggled to gain a foothold under the current system. The system simply hasn't allowed it to. That's going to change.

This timely reform will help small builders sit alongside the big players, driving the creation of jobs and growth to power our recovery.

Not only will simplifying the system help SMEs, but it will help residents in the communities they help to build.

While the current system excludes residents who don't have the time to contribute to the lengthy and archaic planning process, local democracy and accountability will now be enhanced by technology and transparency.

A shocking statistic for you – only 1% of local residents engage with the creation of their local plan.

So we are moving away from notices on lampposts to an interactive, and accessible map-based online system – placing planning at the fingertips of people.

The planning process will be brought into the 21st century.

Communities will be reconnected to a planning process that is supposed to serve them, with residents more engaged over what happens in their areas.

Building Greener

We will not just be building more and building better, but we will also be building greener and more sustainably.

Protected land will be just that – our Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and rich heritage – will be protected as the places, views and landscapes we cherish most and passed on to the next generation as set out in

our manifesto.

We're protecting our green spaces, and we're also enhancing them. We will build environmentally friendly homes that will not need to be expensively retrofitted in the future, homes with green spaces and new parks at close-hand, where tree lined streets are provided for in law.

A new 'sustainability test' will apply to local plans to make sure they are consistent with our rigorous sustainability goals.

There will be more building on brownfield land, to stop unnecessary building on valued green space.

We are mandating net-gain for biodiversity: to leave our natural environment in a measurably better state than beforehand.

I appreciate the urgency of delivering a sustainable planning system with green foundations, and just how important this is for our country's future.

That is why we are strengthening the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) to better support climate change mitigation...

...why we are adopting a streamlined approach to assessing environmental impacts.

...and why we are bolstering our approach to energy efficiency standards to help meet our world-leading commitment to net-zero by 2050. The UK is the first major economy in the world to pass a net zero emissions target into law and our Future Homes Standard will help to meet this.

Last year we consulted on proposals as a first step towards net zero homes. From 2025, we expect new homes to produce 75-80% lower CO2 emissions compared to current levels.

These homes will be 'zero carbon ready', with the ability to become fully zero carbon homes over time as the electricity grid decarbonises.

It represents real action to protect our environment and tackle climate change.

Building Beautifully

I want us to build beautifully, while preserving our heritage and our natural environment. And thanks to many of you – we have a clear plan for how to do it.

I really welcomed the 45 propositions made by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission earlier this year. Many of these recommendations have been reflected in our White Paper.

One of which is the concept of design codes and pattern books. We can point to examples around the world of successful design codes, but some of the best examples are here in the UK. This is the idea that helped build some of this

country's most beautiful and liveable places, like Bath, Belgravia and Bourneville.

I don't want beauty to be the preserve of the privileged few. Too often in the past, less affluent residents have been the guinea pigs of experimental architecture, much of which failed disastrously – I think of the demolished tower blocks of Glasgow's Red Road, or Robin Hood Gardens here in London.

Many of those post-war commercial buildings in our towns and cities lie empty today, the victims of the changes we are witnessing on our high streets – as the move online necessitates as great a reimagining of places as the advent of the motorcar did, but lets hope a more successful one.

We want to re-build these communities rooted in what people really love: vernacular styles that speak to their culture, heritage and identity.

Most people live in places whose form and character they did not choose.

We want that to change.

That means rethinking our entire planning system from first principles. The community sets the terms. They get to decide what gets built and what doesn't. And where new developments are in line with the local design codes, we will be bringing forward a 'fast-track for beauty'.

It's a fundamental transformation of the way we deliver homes. Just as home ownership offers people a stake in society, popular consent offers people a stake in their communities.

For me, the key change here is the point at which residents can get involved. From the very start.

Inputting at the stage of preparing plans and design codes gives them real influence over both location and design. It's about the chance to proactively participate, rather than reacting to something you don't like on an ad hoc basis.

And we will be setting up a new design body to support the work of communities and local authorities, helping them translate the visions of their communities into local design codes. I'm delighted Nicholas Boys-Smith will be taking this important work forward, chairing our steering group, and look forward to working alongside him.

The group will be taking a hard look at what is needed to empower communities to demand better design, locally and across the whole country.

He brings vast experience in this area: already working with many communities to set local design standards, supporting the development of the White Paper..

... and of course, his fantastic work co-chairing the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

In the words of Sir Roger: "Good things are easily destroyed, but not easily

created.”

Our changes will avoid a repeat of the ill-fated programme of demolition and destruction pursued by governments of the past that resulted in thousands of well-built, pre-1919 terrace houses being needlessly destroyed.

Today, developers are rediscovering the value in the renovation and refurbishment of Victorian terraces.

Like the Welsh Streets of Liverpool, streets that were under serious and needless threat of being knocked down, today they are part of a new wave of regeneration and renewal.

And the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission’s report underlines just how important our heritage assets can be to local communities.

We have asked councils across England to draw up lists of buildings of cultural and historical value, so we can empower local people to nominate heritage assets which are important to them and reflect their local area and identity.

Which is why I’m so pleased Charles O’Brien – the renowned architectural historian and commissioner at Historic England – has accepted the newly created role of Heritage Advisor to spearhead this work.

Supported by a team of modern day monuments men, Charles will help English counties identify more buildings which need protecting.

I’m pleased I can call on the expertise of both Nicholas and Charles, as we work to take our ambitious plans forward over the coming weeks and months.

Equally, I’m looking forward to hearing the views of many others, including those of you listening today, and colleagues and councillors of all stripes.

We are conscious of the difficulties and complexities. There are no quick and easy remedies for longstanding ills. But nevertheless, we have the resolve and the determination to respond to a supreme national need!

This is, as my predecessor Harold MacMillan said to Cabinet, when he began his task of building the homes the country needed in the 1960s, “a new and inspiring adventure”.

I recognise the importance of getting it right, and of listening to the opinions of everyone who wishes to engage constructively and who genuinely shares our desire to build homes and to build these well.

Who shares our vision for a planning system that awakens and unbinds our country’s potential, while championing beauty and sustainability.

A system that, as Ruskin said, our descendants will thank us for in years to come.

That is what Planning for the Future means to me.

Thank you.