

QUICK WINS

BUILDING MORE HOMES IN THE
COMMUNITIES THAT NEED THEM

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Fabian Research Report

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About the report

This report sets out the progress made by the government against its 1.5m new homes target almost two years into this parliament. It then makes recommendations for a stimulus package of 'quick wins' to ramp up the number of good quality homes built in the communities that need them.

The research involved a literature review, a call for evidence, analysis of the relevant data published by the government, and a series of in-depth expert interviews.

The report and its recommendations apply to England only.

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SUMMARY

Since July 2024, the government has undertaken substantial, necessary reforms to tackle the housing crisis and get Britain building again. It has rightly set out a target to build 1.5 million new homes in England over this parliament to expand the opportunity of homeownership and affordable housing to more people.

However, there is now a real risk that housebuilding in England falls short. Our analysis finds that:

- Just 38 per cent of the 370,000 homes needed annually were built in 2025.
- Based on current plans, the government will be around 470,000 homes short of the 1.5m target by the end of the parliament.
- On the current trajectory, 530,000 homes will need to be started in the final year of the parliament if the government is to come close to meeting its target of 1.5m homes.

Recommendations

The government should implement a stimulus package of 'quick wins' to ramp up the number of good quality homes built in the communities that need them. We need both a more effective planning system and an active state involved in unlocking thousands of homes. More social and affordable homes must be central to this package to cut housing costs for families. More accessible green spaces should be created as part of new developments to ensure we are building great places to live everywhere. This agenda will require smarter and proportionate regulation that provides clarity to communities and housebuilders, but not wholesale deregulation.

A more effective planning system

The government should:

1. **Expand the definition of well-connected train and tram stations where the default 'yes' for housing and mixed-used development applies.** The train and tram frequency threshold should be lowered to two departures an hour each way during peak hours. Stations in

the top 80 'travel to work' areas should be included within this policy. Developments on land within reasonable cycling distance of a station should be covered. Minimum density requirements for developments outside of settlements and in the green belt should be more flexible to ensure homes get built.

2. **Encourage development on golf courses in the 'grey belt'.** The national planning policy framework should explicitly state that golf courses located in the green belt meet the 'grey belt' definition by default. Development should abide by the 'golden rules' of a higher proportion of affordable and social housing, improvements to public services and infrastructure, and the provision of new or better existing green spaces. This policy should be supported by a London plan which removes the 'metropolitan open land' protections for golf courses and a commitment from the mayor of London to call-in developments on these sites.
3. **Introduce a 'right to build' for social and affordable housing in rural areas.** Planning permission in principle should exist for rural exception sites of up to 15 affordable homes, conditional on the site meeting the definition in the national planning policy framework and requirements set out in the non-statutory national decision making policy. Multi-year funding should be provided to rural housing enablers to ensure they can support rural communities build the homes needed.
4. **Require local authorities to adopt standardised housing frames and local design guides for developments in their area.** The government should set out a diverse set of England-wide standardised housing frames. Developments using them would then receive fast-tracked planning permission. Each council should be required to set out its design codes in its local plan, specifying what forms of development are acceptable, either through a whole-authority approach or with different policies in different areas.
5. **Streamline and speed up the planning application process, including how consultees provide advice.** Information requirements for outline applications should be reduced to the principles of development. The national information requirements for full applications would be updated and broadened, proportionate to different sites and development sizes. The 'free go' for a single repeat application should be restored. The timescale for statutory consultees should be extended to 31 days, with only those responsible for safety able to negotiate an extension. They should be prevented from 'gold plating' their advice, while holding objections should be eliminated.
6. **Reform how the public are involved in the planning process to ensure a more representative and effective system.** Councils should be required to proactively engage broad samples of the local community to gauge support for specific schemes and local plans.

Rigorous minimum standards for digital planning portals should be established to ensure ease of access and comment. Public responses should be limited to an allowed length and restricted to a 21-day window to reduce the volume of lengthy, low-quality comments.

An active state

The government should:

7. **Reform the borrowing rules around council housebuilding.** The majority of the debt moved to council housing revenue accounts in 2012 should be transferred to the government. Councils should be able to pay down and refinance older debt from the Public Works Loans Board. An improved preferential borrowing rate for council housebuilding from the Public Works Loan Board should be provided.
8. **Support councils and combined authorities to fully utilise compulsory purchase powers.** Several councils and combined authorities should 'pilot' the updated regulations for compulsory purchase orders, including through judicial review. They should secure direct government support to use these powers, including financial backing and liability insurance. A compulsory purchase support service should be established, providing tailored and free expertise or capacity to compulsorily purchase land without paying hope value and allocate it for development.
9. **Require Great British Rail to facilitate housing development through increased service provision and efficient land use.** An amendment to the Railways Bill should make supporting housebuilding a statutory function of Great British Railways. It should be required to identify and release surplus land to public bodies; ensure that timetabling or viability assessments of services anticipate future demand unlocked by housebuilding; and be able to approve developments on small sites that they own.
10. **Increase the height threshold for second staircase requirements to buildings over 30m, subject to a further assessment on safety.** This would return the threshold to the original height, as proposed by the previous government and the mayor of London. Other fire safety requirements should be maintained at a lower height to ensure proven safety measures are included to minimise risk. The government should also take steps to increase fire service investment through section 106 and the community infrastructure levy, complimenting existing funding.

Implemented together, these reforms could deliver an extra 87,000 dwellings a year – equivalent to raising predicted housebuilding in 2029-30 by 36 per

cent. They would also help England build over 300,000 homes in the final year of the parliament for the first time since 1969.

1. INTRODUCTION

England needs to build more homes. With 3.7m people pushed into poverty because their housing costs are so high, more good quality homes are needed to tackle the housing crisis and improve affordability. That is why Labour promised, in its manifesto, to ‘get Britain building again ... with 1.5 million new homes over the next parliament’.¹

And, in less than two years, ministers have overhauled the planning system, restored local authority housing targets, introduced the ‘grey belt’ to enable building on poor quality green belt land, reformed compulsory purchase powers, and committed to £39bn over a decade for social and affordable housing. However, almost halfway through this parliament the government nevertheless risks falling short. England built just over a third of the homes it needs in 2025, with the vast majority of councils failing to meet their housing targets. Achieving the 1.5m homes target is likely to require an unprecedented number of starts in the final half of the parliament.

The Fabian Housing Centre was set up to develop practical, progressive and ambitious ideas to build 1.5m homes, tackle the housing crisis, and create great places to live. We have four core priorities:

- **A focus on low-income families**, regardless of tenure, with the need for policy to cut the cost of housing.
- **Place-based analysis** which recognises that, while there is a housing crisis in every community, problems vary across the country – and so must the solutions.
- **Great places to live**, as delivering 1.5m new, well-built homes must create new communities and better neighbourhoods to live good lives in.
- **Smarter regulation**, not deregulation. It needs to be easier to build quickly, but it also matters what gets built, where, and to what standard.

This report sets out 10 quick wins to create a more effective planning system and ensure the entire public sector is actively encouraging the delivery of homes in every community. Implemented together, these reforms could deliver an extra 87,000 dwellings a year – equivalent to raising predicted housebuilding in 2029-30 by 36 per cent. The proposals would help England build over 300,000 homes in a single year for the first time since 1969.

What is a quick win?

In February 2026, the Fabian Housing Centre conducted a call for evidence, seeking quick or no cost reforms that could increase housebuilding in England, improve the housing market, and deliver good quality, new build homes faster. We have described these reforms as 'quick wins'.

We received submissions from over 20 organisations, including major housebuilders, smaller developers, housing associations, charities, and others. To help identify relevant recommendations, several principles were set out in our call for evidence. For this report, a quick win:

- Can be implemented quickly by the government and have a direct impact on housebuilding rates before 2029.
- Will result in a significant increase in the number of new homes being built annually for at least 10 years, rather than delivering a one-off increase.
- Does not require primary legislation, unless it can be easily slotted into bills expected to be passed during this parliament.
- Has no significant direct financial cost to the Exchequer.
- Has little or no negative impact on the quality, standard or space of new builds.

2. ENGLAND'S HOUSING SHORTGAGE

Despite the significant reforms made by the government, the number of homes completed in England remains below what is required to meet the 1.5m new homes target. This section briefly sets out the position almost two years into this parliament.

Housebuilding to date

According to the government's own 'indicative local housing need' target, the country needs to deliver over 370,000 homes a year.² It will take time to ramp up to this level. But it is important to acknowledge that housebuilding was far below this target. In 2025.

- Just over 142,000 homes were completed in England – equivalent to 38 per cent of the indicative annual housing need.
- Not a single English region built more than three-quarters of their target, with the north-east closest (72 per cent) and London the furthest away (18 per cent).
- Only 8 per cent of local authorities met or exceeded the number of homes required, with 11 per cent building 10 per cent or less.

FIGURE 1: THE NUMBER OF HOMES COMPLETED IN 2025 WAS JUST 38 PER CENT OF WHAT IS REQUIRED TO MEET THE INDICATIVE ANNUAL HOUSING NEED TARGETⁱ

	Number of homes completed in 2025	Indicative housing target	Percentage of housing target completed in 2025
East Midlands	16,000	26,000	63 per cent
East of England	22,000	45,000	47 per cent

ⁱ Completions data for the regions in this table do not match up to the number of homes completed in England. This is because there is a discrepancy in the official data published by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We have used national-level data for England, and then the data for regions.

London	16,000	88,000	18 per cent
North-east	8,000	11,000	72 per cent
North-west	16,000	35,000	45 per cent
South-east	25,000	71,000	35 per cent
South-west	15,000	40,000	38 per cent
West Midlands	12,000	30,000	40 per cent
Yorkshire and Humber	11,000	25,000	42 per cent
England	142,000	370,000	38 per cent

Source: Table 213: permanent dwellings started and completed, by tenure, England (quarterly) published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; Table 217: permanent dwellings started and completed by tenure and region (quarterly) published by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. The data is rounded. According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, this is a 'leading indicator' of housebuilding and the only data available soon after the quarter end. We have no other data that covers the majority of 2025 from the government.

Outlook

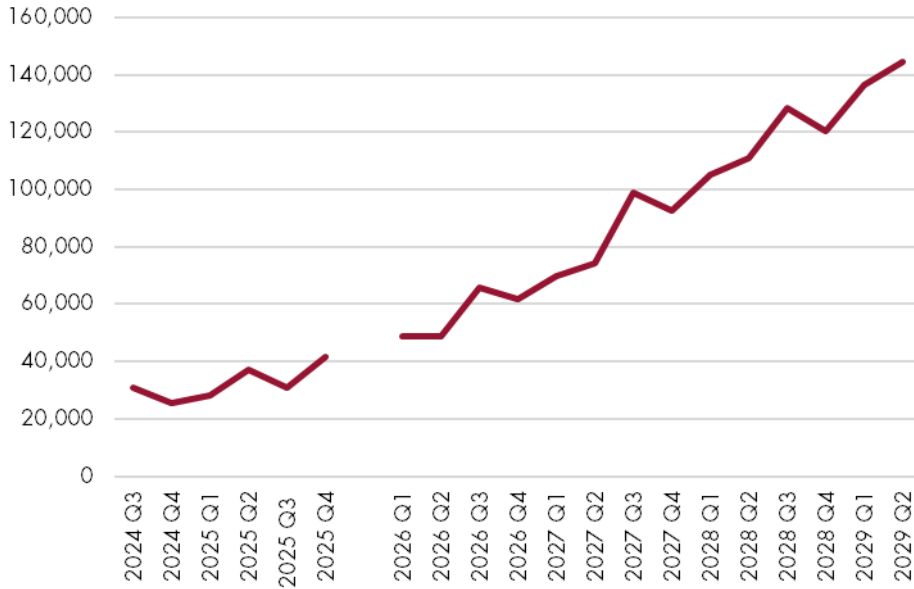
As the government's reforms are fully realised, housebuilding rates will increase. In March 2026, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimated that the number of homes completed annually across the UK will rise sharply towards the end of the parliament.³ The OBR suggests England will build around 240,000 new homes in 2029-30.⁴

However, England is still likely to fall far short of the 1.5m new homes target. Assuming England continues to build the same share of the UK's homes as it has over the past five years, the OBR predicts that around 1.03m homes will be built between 2024-25 and 2028-29.ⁱⁱ And it remains uncertain whether any year of this parliament will deliver even 300,000 new homes in England – a less ambitious but still creditable target.

To achieve 1.5m housing *starts* in this parliament, there would need to be 530,000 homes started in the year before the election. This assumes the largest increases, in absolute terms, occur in the final two years of the parliament. Such a rate of housing *starts* would be around 76 per cent higher than the current official record of 301,000 set in 1972-73.

ⁱⁱ According to the Office for National Statistics, the UK has built 970,000 homes between 2020-21 and 2024-25. Over 813,000 of those were built in England, equivalent to 84 per cent.

FIGURE 2: TO REACH 1.5M NEW HOUSING STARTS IN A SINGLE PARLIAMENT, AROUND 530,000 HOMES WOULD NEED TO BE STARTED IN THE FINAL YEAR BEFORE AN ELECTION.



Note: Starts data for 2024 Q3, 2024 Q4 and 2025 Q1 are from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We have made additional assumptions as the basis for the scenario: that the parliament runs for five years, and that the 1.5 million target is met. We have also assumed that most of the increase in starts occur towards the end of the parliament considering the time it takes for reform to have an impact. We also largely assume that starts in Q4 of a year are lower than the subsequent quarter, reflecting the seasonality of starts largely evident in the data before the government took office.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The government has made significant progress towards its housebuilding target, and many more homes will be built as a result. As we head towards the halfway point of this parliament, the government needs to build on this progress and do more.

The government should now implement a stimulus package of ‘quick wins’ to increase the number of good quality homes built in the communities that need them. They need to both make planning smarter and more efficient – not just simply deregulate. And they need to build an active state that supports housebuilding.

A more effective planning system

To deliver 1.5m new homes, the government needs to increase the number of planning permissions granted over the course of this parliament. Ministers recognise this, and have delivered major reforms to the national planning policy framework (NPPF) in 2024, and further changes that will be implemented later this year following a consultation.

But with only 262,000 planning permissions granted in 2025, further reform to planning is required to ensure sufficient consents are given.⁵ Building on the NPPF reforms, the government must also improve the consultation and application process. The planning system overall should make quick decisions, based on proportionate information provided by developers and consultees. And it should support homes that are affordable in the places that need them most. Otherwise, planning will remain one of the most significant barriers to the delivery of new homes.⁶

The government should:

1. Expand the definition of well-connected train and tram stations where the default ‘yes’ for housing and mixed-used development applies

Challenge

Unused or underutilised pieces of land around train stations are important places to encourage housing development. New housing on such sites can help people to afford homes in communities well-connected to good jobs in

growing city-regions. In the green belt, this land is often the most obvious place to build, and building on such sites should be encouraged.

The government's default 'yes' for housebuilding near train stations is an important and positive policy. It covers both stations that are part of existing settlements and stations that are 'well-connected' but outside existing settlements or part of the green belt, as set out in S5 and GB7 of the draft NPPF. The current proposal would:

- Create a strong presumption in favour of development in places where the policy applies, including in the green belt. Developers will still have to submit planning applications for the site and comply with, for example, requirements to be well-designed and improve the natural environment.
- Cover land within a "reasonable walking distance" of a train or tram station. This is not explicitly defined in the NPPF. However, the Minister for Housing and Planning has informally defined this as roughly 800 metres, or a ten-minute walk, from a well-connected station.⁷
- Require developments around stations within existing settlements to have a minimum density of 40 dwellings per hectare, and developments around well-connected railway stations outside settlements a minimum of 50 dwellings per hectare.⁸
- Define well-connected train and tram stations as those located within the top 60 travel to work areas defined by gross value added (GVA), with a frequency of four trains or trams per hour overall, or two trains per hour in any one direction.

This change – which was previously recommended by the Fabian Society – is a significant step forward. Estimates predict that enough land could be covered by the default 'yes' to build more than 630,000 homes.⁹

However, this policy now needs to go further. There are several constraints:

- Defining well-connected areas based on so few travel to work areas excludes areas across England that have strong links to major economic hubs but are not themselves centres of significant productivity. Even if a town has strong rail connections to two or more economically productive cities, it is not considered well-connected if it is located outside one of the top 60 travel to work areas by GVA. This is contrary to the policy intention of ministers to "help connect people to towns and cities, and open the door to new job and education opportunities".¹⁰ And it risks entrenching economic inequality by restricting development in smaller, well-

connected towns while simultaneously promoting the expansion of already well-performing towns and cities nearby.

- Requiring well-connected stations to have existing, constant high levels of train or tram services will exclude places with great potential. There are a significant number of places that have the most potential for new homes but currently have a small train or tram travelling population across the whole day – and therefore fewer services. Stations in such places will often meet the threshold during peak times, but not across the day, as rail operating companies operate lower frequencies during off-peak hours. They would be excluded from the ‘default yes’, even though they would be considered ‘well-connected’ at the times that matter most.
- A prescriptive level of homes per hectare makes sense in larger communities and towns to maximise the opportunity of densification near train stations. However, requiring high levels of density around train stations in well-connected towns and villages might lead to unsuitable developments – or indeed no applications in the first place, since housebuilding at this scale may well be unviable. Lower density developments could still make a real difference to housing supply, the sustainability of communities, and the ability of people to access well-paid jobs in our most productive places.
- The 800m or ‘10-minute walk’ boundary could be interpreted as the limit of the default yes policy, even though it is not set out in the current draft NPPF and should be a judgement made according to local circumstances. This approach would not take account of the fact that people use other sustainable modes of travel to reach railway stations, particularly cycling. It is also overly restrictive: 76 per cent of people who use rail live more than a 10 minute walk from their nearest station, and 70 per cent of all residents in England live more than a 15 minute walk away.¹¹

With a few small tweaks to the government’s proposed reforms, the government can better reflect genuine connectivity, ensure places that need homes can build them, and ensure all local economies can grow.

Solution

The government should expand the definition of well-connected train and tram stations outside of existing settlements where the default ‘yes’ for housing and mixed-used development applies. The national planning policy framework should be amended to:

- **Lower the train and tram service threshold.** Stations would fall under the policy if they had at least two departures an hour each way during peak hours, effectively between 6:30-9:30am and 4-7pm.

Planning policy should be clear that connectivity is determined by peak use, not limited by reductions in services throughout the day.

- **Expand the number of travel to work areas.** This should include the top 80 economically productive areas, rather than the top 60. More areas would now be included by virtue of being well-connected to economically productive places, rather than inclusion being based on existing economic patterns. Places like Cheltenham (close to Birmingham), Barnsley (close to Sheffield), and Colchester (close to London) would now be covered. The government should also identify additional settlements that are outside of the top 80 areas where the default yes should apply based on a comprehensive assessment of their rail connectivity.
- **Reduce the minimum density requirements for developments outside of settlements and in the green belt.** Developments around well-connected railway stations outside settlements and in the green belt should not be required to meet the 50 homes per hectare requirement to secure the default yes. The NPPF should make it clear that developments around train stations, particularly in the green belt, are strongly encouraged with a lower density target. The government should consider making this target indicative, allowing planning authorities and developers to determine if lower density is more appropriate for their local community – and the character of the local area. Planning authorities would not be able to set a higher density target than in the NPPF. Developments inside settlements around well-connected stations would remain at the current proposed density target.
- **Include land within a reasonable cycling distance of a station.** This would mean developments within around 1.2km of a train station would be covered by the policy. The NPPF should set a clear minimum distance is for the purpose of this policy to minimise uncertainty about when the ‘default yes’ applies. Councils should be able to have some flex to include sites further away from stations than this minimum if they wish. Lichfields estimates that this would double the land that could be considered to have a default yes under the NPPF.¹²

Estimates suggest these four measures would unlock 73,000 hectares of non-built up land for around 2.2m homes near train stations that have easy access to jobs, growth and opportunities. They would deliver more effectively on the intent of the government than the current NPPF proposals for the default yes around train stations. The measures could unlock an extra 22,000 homes annually.

2. Encourage development on golf courses in the 'grey belt'

Challenge

Britain has over 1,800 golf courses – more than a quarter of Europe's total. They take up roughly 2 per cent of land in the UK, equivalent to an area larger than Greater Manchester or the New Forest. In London alone, there are 93 golf courses which cover a larger area than Waltham Forest.

Golf courses take up significant space in urban areas that would be ideal for development but are currently restricted by planning law. They are often part of the green belt or classified as 'metropolitan open land' in London, both designed to prevent urban sprawl and protect valuable green spaces.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, they should not be considered green spaces that need additional protection because they are:

- **Exclusive.** Golf clubs tend to restrict access to a small number of people at a time, and many are closed off to the public if they are not members. For example, one estimate suggests that Greenwich park in London alone has 83 times as many visitors annually as Dulwich and Sydenham Hill golf course, which is of a similar size and nearby.¹³
- **Not biodiverse.** While golf courses may be adjacent to open spaces and woodlands, they do not contribute to biodiversity. Golf courses are regularly pruned to provide a curated environment. Far from havens for nature, they are often the opposite due to the heavy use of fertilisers, pesticides, and herbicides. These chemicals can contaminate soil and waterways, threaten local wildlife and risk ecological harm in communities.¹⁴

Ultimately, the additional regulations for golf courses protect developed land that is not truly green, diverse or publicly accessible, and prevent development that could see more people benefitting from nature and affordable housing in urban communities.

To ensure already developed land in the green belt is used effectively, the government has introduced the term 'grey belt'. Land falls under this designation if it does not prevent the sprawl of existing communities or preserve the setting and special character of historic towns. To be granted

ⁱⁱⁱ Metropolitan open land seeks to preserve London's status as a liveable city, and must be clearly distinguished from a built-up area, must include open air facilities that service a significant proportion of London, contain features of metropolitan value, and be a link in the green infrastructure network.

permission on the grey belt, a development should also meet the 'golden rules' meaning:

- A higher proportion of affordable and social housing.
- Improvements to public services and infrastructure.
- Provision of new or better existing green spaces that are accessible to the public (something previously recommended by the Fabian Society).¹⁵

The grey belt acts as a 'safety valve', allowing for homes to be built on land that makes little contribution to nature and green spaces – especially where there are insufficient useful brownfield sites. It is a critical component of the government's plan to build 1.5m new homes. There is compelling evidence that golf courses should be considered 'grey belt' for the purposes of planning policy, enabling developments on them so long as they comply with the golden rules.

Solution

The government should encourage development on golf courses in the grey belt. The national planning policy framework should explicitly state that golf courses in the green belt meet the grey belt definition by default where they do not 'strongly contribute' to restricting urban sprawl, preventing the merging of neighbouring towns, or preserving the setting and character of historic towns as set out in policy GB2.

Access to green space, affordable housing and public services and infrastructure should be prioritised. Development on such sites would only be permissible where it satisfied the 'golden rules', which require developers to improve public access to green space – creating genuinely accessible nature and biodiversity at the heart of communities. This would give local communities the confidence that lifting planning restrictions on golf courses will improve access to nature and green space for residents

The next London plan should remove the metropolitan open land status for golf courses. This would eliminate extra protections for this land beyond the national planning policy framework. The mayor of London should commit to using his call-in powers to approve any proposed development that meets the golden rules (where relevant) and which are identified as part of the "H2" zone, which means they are ideal for development given their proximity to transportation and town centre boundaries.¹⁶

In London alone, these reforms could unlock development on more than 1,400 hectares of golf course land – and could lead to more than 85,000 dwellings in total.¹⁷ We estimate this could lead to an additional 860 homes

annually – and deliver greener, more biodiverse communities with spaces that people can genuinely access.

3. Introduce a ‘right to build’ for social and affordable housing in rural areas

Challenge

Rural areas across England tend to have high house prices and poor availability of affordable homes. In particular, there are not enough affordable homes for families and young people. Research by the Fabian Housing Centre found that fewer rural local authorities were affordable for homeownership than urban ones.¹⁸ Just 8 per cent of homes in rural areas are for social rent, compared to 21 per cent in urban areas.¹⁹ For villages, the need for affordable housing is 50 per cent greater than in urban areas outside London. This is partly caused by a lack of building in rural areas, particularly social housing, as well as high house prices more broadly.²⁰

The planning permission process for small schemes is one of the main barriers to increasing affordable and social housing – but the government is improving this situation. It is too risky, complicated, and expensive for providers and community groups. Planning rules too often treat rural areas as places where development should be prevented. This undermines rural communities’ opportunities for future growth and fails to consider that such communities may need more housing to tackle affordability challenges.²¹ For years, the national planning policy framework has ruled out the provision of affordable housing on small sites in most rural areas. However, draft NPPF proposals will change that – recognising that small developments, which include affordable housing, could be transformative for the viability of villages and their public services.²²

Rural exception sites are also important, but underused. These are an essential route to enable the building of affordable homes on land that has not been allocated in the local plan for residential development. This means the land is secured at a lower price, making it financially viable for social housing.²³ Usually, these sites will provide 100 per cent affordable and social housing in perpetuity, largely on sites of under 15 homes.²⁴ But despite their potential, fewer than a fifth of local planning authorities have used rural exception sites for affordable housing.²⁵ There has been a 61 per cent fall in the number of homes completed through rural exception sites since 2015-16 – down from 1,020 homes to 530 in 2022-23.²⁶ The draft NPPF provides a non-statutory ‘national decision making policy’ (NDMP) for rural exception sites, but more can be done to reduce the risk, cost and time involved in gaining planning permission for these schemes.

Rural housing ‘enablers’ have also been introduced. In 2023, the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs committed to funding rural housing enablers across England. They provide communities, councils and housing associations with access to trusted, independent expertise and capacity to support small-scale social and affordable housing supply.²⁷ Between 2023 and 2025, the government provided £2.5m to support these organisations – and the funding has been extended to March 2027. One estimate found their pipeline of schemes could deliver more than 2,100 homes.²⁸

Solution

The government should introduce a ‘right to build’ for social and affordable housing in rural areas. There should be planning permission in principle for rural exception sites up to 15 affordable dwellings. Only rural exception sites that meet the draft NPPF’s definition and requirements set out in the relevant non-statutory NDMP would qualify for a simplified planning process, or a ‘planning passport’ for housebuilding. Amendments to the Town and Country Planning (Permission in Principle) Order 2017 and to the draft national planning policy framework are required. Further detail on how local authorities could deliver this permission in principle would be in the national planning practice guide (NPPG), with local plans reflecting this guidance.

This would result in a streamlined, two-stage route to securing permission, particularly for housing associations, housing co-operatives, and community land trusts. Unlike the existing planning permission in principle mechanism, applicants would need to set out the tenure mix of homes at the first stage – as well as the location and the number. Requiring proposals to set out tenure from the start would ensure such developments are only for affordable and social housing supply – and cannot be altered.

Following local plan adoption in more areas, the government should consider extending permission in principle for 100 per cent affordable housing sites in rural communities to cover local plan allocated sites.

To maximise the number of additional new homes, the government should ensure rural communities, councils and housing associations have access to a rural housing enabler. By providing multi-year funding for rural housing enablers, the government can put them on a permanent footing and support communities and organisations that want to tackle high housing costs in their area. We estimate around £4m over the next three years would be adequate.

This ‘right to build’ would reduce up-front risk and cost for affordable housing providers, enable community groups to bid for land and funding

with an expectation they will be able to deliver, and speed up the planning process. It could unlock an extra 4,000 social and affordable homes annually in rural areas.

4. Require local authorities to adopt standardised housing frames and local design guides for developments in their area

Challenge

Good quality design matters for those who live in new homes and for those who live in the wider community where development happens. Good design improves health and wellbeing, reinforces a sense of place that matters to people, and can create safe, accessible public spaces across an entire development.²⁹

But housebuilding is often held back because councils are too specific, variable, or unclear about their design requirements. As a result, developers face uncertainty about what constitutes an acceptable home design, and what forms of development are considered appropriate in particular places, including with regard to height, density and site layout. The need to engage or consult on every component of the design takes time and adds to the cost of development before a spade is even in the ground.³⁰

The tendency of councils to require small changes to similar schemes from the same developer further adds to design costs and prevents economies of scale across the supply chain. This particularly impacts SME housebuilders, who lack the capital reserves to absorb ongoing costs without generating revenue through sales and are less able to commission bespoke design solutions for each individual site.³¹

In theory, this system is meant to ensure nicer homes are built, yet it has failed to produce interesting, well-designed homes that garner public support.³² A more rules-based approach could provide greater certainty about acceptable forms of development, while still allowing flexibility over architectural character and local identity.

There are numerous examples of standardisation and design codes being used effectively in ways that English housing policy could learn from:

- **Croydon.** In 2019, Croydon council introduced a 'suburban design guide' for small sites. Housebuilding dramatically increased, with delivery on small sites doubling compared to before the policy was introduced.³³ However, the policy was scrapped in 2022 following a new party gaining control and local opposition to the policy.³⁴ A key

strength of the Croydon approach was that it provided greater certainty about what forms of development were acceptable on suburban sites, reducing negotiation and planning risk for developers.

- **US.** Around 40 jurisdictions in the US have some form of pre-approved building plans, including Seattle, California and South Bend in Indiana, although no major city has adopted them. These plans are intended to shorten the design and discretionary approval phase without undermining build quality or compliance with regulations. They have mainly been used for single-family homes and ‘accessory dwelling units’ – effectively, additional units built in the yard of, or attached to, an existing home. The most successful programs have resulted in a noticeable increase in new homes, cut overall development costs by up to 2 per cent, and increased densification.³⁵ There has been little political pushback.
- **Ireland.** In 2025, the government identified standardisation of design as a critical component of increasing housing supply, cutting construction costs, and delivering innovation through modern methods of construction. From January 2026, all new social housing projects will utilise greater standardisation as part of a programme to increase the number of homes built for social rent by 50 per cent.³⁶
- **New South Wales.** The state government launched nine new low- and mid-rise apartment building pattern books, designed by an architect and adaptable to specific sites. Projects that use these designs can access fast-tracked planning approval.³⁷ The New South Wales government hopes these ‘pattern books’ will support the construction of 112,000 homes over the next five years.³⁸

Croydon, the US, Ireland and New South Wales demonstrate the value of standardised housing types and the importance of clear design codes governing layout and form. The government should learn from these examples. By determining what kinds of developments are appropriate, and creating clear definitions of well-designed, high-quality forms of development in different locations, the government can create certainty. This shift would reduce risks and costs for developers and ensure local planning authorities engage appropriately, building on existing steps to create a more predictable, rules-based planning system, including through an updated model design code. The government should deliver stronger direction to give confidence to developers while ensuring local flexibility and community and local authority satisfaction with the quality of new build designs.

Solution

The government should require local authorities to adopt standardised housing frames and local design codes for developments in their area. The government should set out a diverse set of England-wide standardised housing frames for different types of homes and require local authorities to set out their own design codes in their local plan.

These housing frames should be developed in consultation with stakeholders, housebuilders of different sizes, and public opinion. The government could, like the Labor government in New South Wales, undertake an international design competition to inform this process.

The government should then introduce a reformed planning rule for these standardised housing frames. It would mean a development adopting them would secure fast-track planning permission through a simplified process. Developments complying with these standardised frames would not be subject to consultation or possible rejection by planning officers and committees based on the design of the properties built – although they would remain subject to all other relevant planning processes. Schemes not utilising these frames could still be deemed acceptable but would not be eligible for fast-tracked planning permission through this route. These simplified rules would apply across England. They should not be limited to small sites, and every local authority should be required to adopt all or several of these frames. The standardised frames would establish default acceptable house-type designs, help reduce design and construction costs, and support modern methods of construction.

In addition, councils should be required to set out distinct local approaches to design codes within their local plan, following public consultation. They should define what forms of development are acceptable, relating to height, distances between homes for privacy and light, density and site layout. Effectively, they would cover other elements of design not covered by standardised frames. These should be advisory guidance, providing fast-tracked planning permission through a simplified process. This proposal represents a stricter requirement on local authorities than the government's current proposal for the draft NPPF, which only 'strongly encourages' design codes. The NPPF should enable councils to adopt either a whole-authority approach or different policies in different areas, whether through supplementary planning documents or local development orders.

The measure could lead to the delivery of over 17,000 homes annually by cutting the cost of development, reducing uncertainty, and supporting innovative, modern methods of construction that can be scaled up.

5. Streamline and speed up the planning application process, including how consultees provide advice

Challenge

A smooth and efficient planning application process is critical to housing policy. Planning decisions can profoundly affect people's lives, whether positively or negatively, influencing health, wellbeing, safety and a place's identity. Those who make decisions need the right information at the right time. Good decisions generate confidence in the planning system from residents and developers and ensure homes are built in the right places at the volume required.

The planning system today is far too costly and complex, with significant delays common. Decisions take too long, and the average time to reach a decision has increased substantially: while the number of applications submitted has actually fallen since 2014, determination periods have more than doubled.³⁹ Just 20 per cent of all major planning applications (more than 10 homes) were determined within the statutory period of 13 weeks after submission.⁴⁰ The system is heavily reliant on extensions, which adds to the uncertainty for developers – particularly SMEs. And negotiations between developers and planning authorities are taking longer to conclude, with the average Section 106 agreement taking an extra 100 days to approve in 2024-25 compared to 2022-23.⁴¹ This serves to depress the number of planning applications, worsen the viability of development, and slow the delivery of new homes.

At every stage of the process, the volume of information required has risen dramatically. Since 1990, the cost of commissioning the required evidence for outline planning applications has increased by nearly five times.⁴² This creates a disproportionate amount of work for both applicants and planning authorities. Some of this information is critical to making good decisions, but much of it is unnecessary, especially to establish whether a development is acceptable in principle. Furthermore, the amount of information developers must provide varies massively across local authorities, as their validation requirements can determine what information they want beyond a national list of information.

While statutory and local consultees are an important part of the process, there are bottlenecks at all stages:

- Planning authorities too often make unnecessary referrals. Over a third (38 per cent) of referrals to the Environment Agency are unnecessary, as are 30 per cent to Natural England and 15 per cent to Historic England.⁴³

- Even where referrals are appropriate, the reasoning is not always clear. This requires consultees to review lengthy applications to discern the purpose of the referral.⁴⁴
- Consultees take far too long to provide feedback, failing to comply with their statutory timescale.⁴⁵ They also often issue holding objections automatically, which are then withdrawn at the last minute.⁴⁶ The use of these objections creates uncertainty and prevents a planning authority from considering the development until a response has been issued.
- Consultees do not strictly adhere to their remit, and provide advice that goes beyond what is required to make a scheme compliant with regulations.⁴⁷

The government has undertaken a consultation on the role of statutory consultees to ensure they provide appropriate feedback quickly, but it has not yet announced reforms in response.

Furthermore, since December 2023, applicants are charged for all repeat applications. Previously, applicants reapplying for planning permission within 12 months of submitting a previous, similar application were not charged a fee, subject to certain conditions.⁴⁸ This 'free go' system incentivised developers to incorporate amendments following local engagement.

Solution

The government should streamline and speed up the planning application process, including how consultees provide advice. Every part of the process should be reformed to minimise the burden of applications, ensure local authorities can make the right decision quickly, and get homes built.

To improve the planning application process and ensure local authorities get the right information at the correct time, the government should:

- **Reduce the information requirements for outline applications.** Outline applications should be required to set out just the principles of development, including the number of homes. Councils should be prevented from frontloading information requirements at the outline stage if not practically or legally required – particularly for small sites. Based on this information, planning authorities should be able to decide about whether a development is acceptable *in principle*. The national scheme of delegation should set this out to minimise complexity, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and ensure greater consistency of service. If an applicant wishes to take the development forward, they would be required at the next stage to set out further

details on reserved matters as required by the local planning authority and relevant national planning policy.

- **Update the national information requirements for full planning applications.** There should be a new, broader list of information requirements for planning applications on key matters that planning authorities need to consider. This list should be proportionate to different types and sizes of development, as well across broad geographies, covering only matters that are relevant in the determination of applications. It should adopt aspects from existing local validation requirements to ensure that all planning authorities have the information they need. It should be accompanied by a national validation checklist as well as guidance on what constitutes high-quality evidence to avoid delays. Following this change, the government should limit, or remove entirely, the ability of local planning authorities to set separate or ‘gold-plated’ local validation requirements.
- **Restore a ‘free go’ for a single repeat application.** If a development is rejected or withdrawn, the same applicant should be able to resubmit a planning application within 12 months for something of a similar character on the same site, but with improvements to satisfy concerns, without paying a fee. This would require an amendment to the Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England)) regulations. Councils should be allowed to deem the ‘free go’ as relevant for setting applications fees at the level of cost recovery. England would be brought back into line with Scotland and Wales, which provide the ‘free go’. After the reinstatement of the free go, developers would be encouraged to engage locally with councillors, officers, the community and consultees rather than proceed directly to appeal.⁴⁹
- **Improve local planning authority referrals.** The government should provide standardised templates for planning authorities to use when making referrals to each statutory consultee, which clearly outline the reason for seeking advice. New templates should be accompanied by decision trees outlining when a referral is appropriate and guidance for matters relating to each statutory body. To ensure planning authorities use this information effectively in light of a shortage of technical specialists, there should be a broader programme of mandatory training on planning law to strengthen in-house expertise, brought into force through secondary legislation under section 53 of the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. Local planning authorities should also have additional funding to help with resourcing constraints.
- **Standardised section 106 agreements and model planning conditions.** The government should introduce standardised templates for agreements and conditions relating to the planning

process. It should proceed swiftly with its plan to publish a template section 106 agreement outlining the clauses expected for any agreement relating to sites below 50 homes.⁵⁰

- To ensure statutory consultees provide useful advice to local planning authorities throughout the planning application process, the government should:
- **Reduce the number of statutory consultees.** The government should implement its proposals to reduce the number of statutory consultees, announced in March 2025, and maintain its pause on the formation of new ones for the remainder of this parliament.
- **Prevent ‘gold-plating’ of advice from statutory consultees.** Government guidance should require consultees to only comment on matters relating to the development that are material to their area of expertise. Any conditions suggested by consultees should be limited to what is necessary to make it acceptable in terms of planning – rather than going beyond that.
- **Extend the statutory timescale for comments from 21 days to 31 days.** Statutory consultees would have more time to comment on planning applications, secure any additional information they need, and provide relevant feedback to encourage high quality developments. Statutory consultees would be barred from negotiating an extension to this timescale unless they are responsible for providing feedback relating to the safety of a scheme (Highways England or the Environment Agency, for example).
- **Eliminate holding objections.** Statutory consultees would no longer be able to automatically hold up planning decisions for an unspecified amount of time. Currently, consultations often delay planning decisions without legitimate cause. If statutory consultees need critical information, they should use the extended timescale to secure it from either planning authorities or developers. To prevent applicants taking too long to provide such information, a failure to provide requested details should be noted by consultees in their advice.

As a result of these changes, statutory consultees would be incentivised to engage proactively with applications, focus on the most important ones, and prevent unnecessarily complex or extensive advice. To ensure this, a set of performance metrics should be introduced for statutory consultees.

The government should also undertake a similar reform programme for local consultees, particularly highways authorities, water companies and local flood authorities. Similar expectations to provide high-quality, focused and speedy feedback or engagement over applications should be introduced.⁵¹

This package of measures would reset the planning application process, ensuring that more high-quality homes can be delivered in the right places. It could unlock around 16,000 homes annually.^{iv}

6. Reform how the public are involved in the planning process to ensure a more representative and effective system

Challenge

Public engagement is essential for designing communities and developments that reflect local needs and desires. It is also a statutory requirement: residents must be notified and provided with 21 days to submit their comments on applications before decisions are finalised.⁵²

Despite this legal requirement, engagement levels remain critically low. In May 2025, only 6 per cent of people in England had objected to a planning application in the last 12 months, and a mere 3 per cent had submitted a supportive statement.⁵³ Those who have participated have often only done it once.⁵⁴ Just over a quarter (29 per cent) of self-proclaimed Yimbys ('yes in my back yard') and 38 per cent of Nimbys ('not in my back yard') have never commented on a planning application.⁵⁵

There are several reasons for this low rate of participation. Planning consultations have the following features which prove challenging:

- **They exclude key groups of residents.** People who might want to participate often lack the time to draft responses, attend consultation events, or join planning committee meetings.⁵⁶ Those with more time (older, richer, highly educated, home-owning residents) are statistically more likely to respond to planning applications and to oppose development. Those most negatively affected by a lack of housing (young people, renters and disabled people) are more likely to abstain from participating due to a lack of time.⁵⁷
- **They are unnecessarily complicated or hard to access.** Many people are excluded due to a lack of knowledge. One survey found that 52 per cent of respondents did not know how to take part in consultations regarding developments in their local area.⁵⁸ Planning portals can also be difficult to navigate, and information on applications can be hard to access, which creates additional barriers to responding.

^{iv} This is based on increasing the number of permissions decided within the statutory 13 weeks increases from 4 per cent in 2024 to 10 per cent since 2017 – and calculating the percentage increase as a proportion of planning permissions in 2025.

- **They inadvertently prioritise objectors over supporters.** Some councils fail to make it easy to register support for a scheme through the planning portal, with the assumption that anyone who wants to leave written feedback wants to provide negative comments. Many councils only allow time for the applicant, the local councillor and an objector. There is no systematic requirement to ensure supporters for a scheme can speak with an equal weight to objectors.⁵⁹
- **They do not seek a representative sample of views.** Local authorities lack the proper infrastructure to test whether those who respond to planning applications are actually representative of their wider community. Fourth-fifths (80 per cent) support a new requirement for councils to seek the views of the wider community before making a planning decision.⁶⁰ A lack of representative evidence incentivises councils and councillors to listen to the most extreme opponents of housebuilding, even though a majority (55 per cent) generally support new buildings or developments in their local area, compared to only 33 per cent who oppose them.⁶¹

Despite such a small pool of respondents, dealing with responses delays decision-making and overburdens planning authorities. This is because:

- **Local residents frequently submit comments outside the 21-day statutory consultation window.** Comments often come after the deadline and after statutory consultees respond. Nevertheless, local authorities are required to consider and respond to these late submissions. This leads to changes to schemes being demanded late in the application process and prevents swift decisions being made.
- **The use of AI is leading to more and longer submissions.** The use of planning specific or generic AI is helping people find reasons to object simply because they want to block a development. One company has reported that objections increasingly look like a 'greatest hits' of planning objections, which often have factual inaccuracies.⁶² More and longer submissions prioritise quantity over quality when it comes to engagement. They also create more work for already over-burdened officers as they try to record, summarise and respond to submissions.⁶³

Solution

The government should reform how the public are involved in the planning process to ensure a more representative and effective system.

This would represent a fundamental shift from the current system, in which councils primarily consider the views of those who proactively comment on proposals.

The government should:

- Require councils to proactively engage broad samples of their local communities to gauge support for specific schemes and in plan-making. First, pilots should be undertaken to identify the best mechanisms and ensure the process does not delay the planning process further. As part of this shift, local authorities should be required to consult with households on the social housing waiting list, even if they are not located directly near the development. Councils could also consider using contact details gathered for council tax (as they are allowed to use the data for purposes critical to their work as an authority). This would require an amendment to the planning practice guidance to incorporate statistically representative community feedback in the creation of their new local plans.⁶⁴ This new proactive engagement should be seen as a complement to traditional consultation processes.⁶⁵ Participants might be given a small financial reward to incentivize engagement, with additional funding for councils to pay for this.
- Launch a public campaign to raise awareness about how to participate in the planning process. The government should launch a series of short videos about how the planning process works, how to find your local planning authority and navigate local planning portals, and how to provide a good consultation response. This should be accompanied by a wider marketing campaign – like the ‘warm and fuzzy’ campaign developed by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero – with ads about the importance of public participation in the planning system and signposting to the resources developed by government to make public participation easier.
- Set rigorous minimum standards for digital planning portals to ensure ease of navigation and access to application information. Portals should be effectively neutral between allowing residents to comment positively or negatively on schemes. New minimum standards should be clear that all local authorities must enable residents to register support for schemes, and provide guidance to local residents on how to make supportive statements.
- Restrict public responses to a defined window. Comments submitted on schemes by members of the public after the 21-day consultation period has closed should be disregarded by local planning authorities. They should not be required to respond to these comments or give weight to them when making decisions.
- Limit the length of public responses. Councils should introduce word limits to reduce the volume of lengthy, low-quality responses that must still be considered. These limits should be proportionate to the scale and complexity of the planning application and be clearly communicated to the public through guidance on submitting a response. These limits would ensure that respondents focus on the

most important points concerning a development. Respondents would still be able to use AI, but not in such a way that it overwhelms the planning system.

- Declare the use of AI. The Planning Inspectorate's guidance on the use of AI should be extended to public responses to planning applications. This would require respondents to declare that they have used AI in their responses and to identify where it has been used.
- Give equal weight to supporters of and objectors to a scheme at the planning committee stage. In the national scheme of delegation, the government should require councils to apply the same radial standard for supporters and objectors, and guarantee time for a supporter of a scheme to speak at the relevant planning committee where available.

The above changes will enable better decisions to be made that are more reflective of the needs of local communities. It is hard to quantify how many extra homes this might result in.

An active state

Meeting the 1.5m new homes target will require more than just reform of the planning system. Every part of the public sector will need to play their role, from councils who can build directly and have land assembly powers, bodies who own land, and regulators who have a significant influence over the cost of building.

This set of recommendations focuses on creating a state that actively encourages those who want to build good quality homes in the places that need them. The government should:

7. Allow councils to borrow more to build homes for social rent

Challenge

There has been a dramatic shrinking of the capacity of councils to build homes for social rent in England. Right to buy and major stock transfers through the decent homes programme reduced the number of councils willing to build – and the number of homes they completed. In 2024-25, councils built less than two per cent of new homes in England – compared to 44 per cent in 1969-70.⁶⁶

Just 164 councils now have a housing revenue account, which ringfences the rents paid by local authority tenants to fund housing services and new

building.⁶⁷ And these councils are struggling. According to Southwark council, in March 2026, half of stock-owning councils that responded to a survey were at risk of being unable to balance their housing budgets by 2029-30 – and 41 per cent expect to cancel, pause or delay developments.⁶⁸

While the social and affordable homes programme, the long-term rent settlement and the effective end of right to buy will put council housing finances on a more sustainable footing and help build more council homes, current borrowing rules act as a barrier. Councils have long had access to a preferential borrowing rate for housebuilding through the Public Works Loan Board. During the 2000s, the Board's general interest rate was typically around 0.15 to 0.2 percentage points above the government's borrowing costs. Between 2010 and 2024, however, the rate for council housebuilding has fluctuated wildly: hiked up in October 2010, cut in 2012, increased in 2019, reduced in 2020 and cut again in 2023. The result has been less generous lending terms than in the early 2000s and significant uncertainty, with councils routinely assuming interest rate hikes when determining investments. This reduced the viability of developments.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, councils cannot access the 0.1 per cent interest rate loans offered by the new National Housing Bank.

Historic debt has also destabilised housing revenue accounts. In 2012, councils took responsibility for paying £29bn of historic debt representing the investment made by central government to build housing stock. The debt is owed to the Public Works Loan Board, and was meant to be sustainable based on assumptions about government policy, income and expenditure made at the time. However, repeated changes to the social rent settlement, higher than expected maintenance costs, and increased discounts under right to buy have made the debt unsustainable.⁷⁰ And since 2007, councils have been penalised from repaying or refinancing any debts earlier than planned, even if doing so would cut interest costs.⁷¹ Instead of building new homes, the cost of servicing existing debt is swallowing a significant proportion of the housing revenue account, and the new long-term rent settlement – which is largely funded through local housing allowance payments to tenants.

Solution

The government should reform the financial rules around council housebuilding. Steps should be taken to stabilise housing revenue accounts and provide access to additional loans at low interest rates and extended repayment periods.

Building on the rent settlement for social housing, the government should:

- **Share the burden of unsustainable historic debt from pre-2012.** The majority of the £29bn moved to councils in 2012 which is still unpaid should be transferred to central government. Councils would see their interest payments fall, reducing the pressure on the housing revenue accounts. This debt is already included within the headline measure of the national debt, so shifting the debt obligation will not alter how much the nation owes overall.⁷² The Treasury would be able to refinance this historic debt more easily at a lower interest rate than councils, which would reduce the overall national cost of servicing the debt – and ensure government expenditure through the long-term rent settlement is not going on historic debt repayments.⁷³
- **Enable councils to pay down and refinance older debt from the Public Works Loan Board.** Councils should no longer be penalised for repaying their debts early, especially through new borrowing at a lower interest rate. Just as the government regularly refinances its debt, it should allow councils to do so.⁷⁴ Councils would still be required to repay the value of the principal of the loan, ensuring the Public Works Loan Board is adequately compensated.
- **Provide an improved preferential borrowing rate for council housebuilding from the Public Works Loan Board.** New borrowing for housebuilding through the housing revenue account should be pegged at 0.15 per cent above the central government's borrowing costs. There should be a long-term commitment to this interest rate, mirroring the decade-long commitment to the social and affordable housing programme and reducing the interest rate assumed by councils when making decisions about investment.

These reforms to stabilise housing revenue accounts and provide access to additional loans at low interest rates could unlock around 7,500 council homes for social rent.

8. Support councils and combined authorities to fully utilise compulsory purchase powers

Challenge

Compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) are a critical mechanism to enable councils and combined authorities to purchase land for a price that allows affordable and social housing to be built. They can enable infrastructure that makes sites viable for development or unlock those that have been stalled.⁷⁵ These powers can be used to reduce the complexity of land assembly while ensuring landowners are compensated fairly for the purchase.

However, compulsory purchase powers have been underutilised for decades by local authorities. In 2025, just 20 English councils applied to use

their powers. There are two reasons they have been underused. First, the law is exceedingly complex and fragmented with the entire body of regulation affecting compulsory purchases consisting of 382 separate provisions – creating two different alternative mechanisms for acquiring authorities to implement a compulsory acquisition.⁷⁶ Second, the requirement to compensate landowners on the basis that planning permission might be granted in the future (so-called ‘hope value’) rather than paying a price linked to current use.⁷⁷ This dramatically inflates land values, increases the costs of acquisition substantially, and creates significant risk of lengthy and expensive legal proceedings.⁷⁸ It minimises the viability of compulsory purchase to deliver affordable and social housing.

We have seen reform to encourage greater use of CPOs by both this government and the last. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 allows authorities acquiring land to remove hope value from compensation if doing so is in the public interest. The land acquired must be for the provision of housing or regeneration schemes which include affordable and social housing.⁷⁹ The secretary of state must agree with the removal of hope value in most cases. The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 further reforms the process to make it faster and more efficient. This includes delegating decisions to remove hope value to acquiring authorities if there are no objections and allowing parish, town or community councils to use these powers.⁸⁰ These reforms are important and could make a significant difference in the delivery of housing.

However, there is currently little appetite among public bodies to use their CPO powers or to disregard hope value.⁸¹ The remaining constraints are:

- **Capacity.** Using CPOs still requires considerable resources, particularly for large-scale regeneration and land assembly for new communities.⁸² Nearly 15 years of austerity mean many local authorities lack the capacity and capability to use CPOs – and there is little external expertise to assist.⁸³ Combined authorities will struggle to build up adequate expertise for the infrequent use of the powers.
- **Risk.** As these new powers are untested, public bodies lack the confidence to use them. They are wary of judicial review and significant legal costs stemming from a misinterpretation of the regulations. Landowners who may be subject to a CPO also deserve greater clarity over when a public body can use their CPO powers.

While further reform of CPOs may be required, the immediate priority for the government is to ensure that the current powers are used effectively to deliver thousands of new homes each year.

Solution

The government should support councils and combined authorities to fully utilise compulsory purchase powers. The government needs to address both the capacity and risk constraints by direct intervention.

The government should identify a set of English councils and combined authorities in 'pilot areas' to test the updated regulations for compulsory purchase orders, including removing hope value in the public interest – and, if required, establish case law through judicial review. This would give public bodies and landowners greater clarity about the use of compulsory purchase orders.

These areas would already have identified the land needed to deliver large-scale regeneration of housing estates and town centres or build new communities with the potential to help their area prosper and grow. The pilots would secure direct government support to use their CPO powers, including financial backing and liability insurance to cover any legal costs from the judicial reviews occurring under the Acquisition of Land Act 1981.⁸⁴ Since the secretary of state must confirm the removal of hope value is in the public interest, the government would be supporting purchases that have a reasonable chance of surviving judicial review – reducing any legal risk.

Local authorities should also be able to access tailored, free expertise to compulsorily purchase land without paying hope value and allocate it for development. The government should establish a 'compulsory purchase support service' to help councils and combined authorities use their powers effectively. The service would supply specialist teams of lawyers and planners to provide independent advice. They could be embedded into a local authority on a short-term basis to support specific projects. The new service should be modelled on the Council Housebuilding Support Service, which has a budget of £6m for 2025-26 and is delivered by the Local Government Association.⁸⁵ It would strengthen public authorities when negotiating with landowners, incentivising the latter to sell at lower prices to avoid delays, uncertainty, and the use of CPOs.

Addressing the capacity and risk constraints of councils could unlock around 4,000 extra affordable homes each year.⁸⁶

9. Require Great British Railways to facilitate housing development through increased service provision and efficient land use

Challenge

Development around rail and tram stations is crucial for addressing the housing shortage. The government has focused on encouraging development around train stations, as set out above. The amount of land available for housebuilding will now be directly linked to the number of rail services that a place has. And the national planning policy framework does allow less busy stations to be considered under the default yes for housing if they 'have a reasonable prospect of being served due to planned upgrades or through agreement with the rail operator.'

Great British Railways (GBR) will therefore have a significant influence over planning and housing policy from 2027 onwards. If it ensured that every station in the top 60 travel-to-work areas currently operating between 32 and 63 services a day increased their service provision to more than 64 a day, it would unlock land for up to 680,000 additional homes under the current draft NPPF.⁸⁷

However, GBR is not expected to facilitate housing development. There are three concerns:

- **Little incentive to promise upgrades in advance.** GBR is unlikely to agree to upgraded rail infrastructure and frequencies until development is committed to or already occurred. Existing rail companies rarely agree, with decisions largely out of the hands of local authorities who may want to build more homes.⁸⁸ And under the Railways Bill, there will be no incentive for the organisation to agree – creating a catch-22 that will prevent homes being built in places that need it.
- **Focused on capacity risks.** GBR risks becoming like other infrastructure providers, such as Thames Water and Anglian Water, who frequently object to homes due to additional demand they would create.⁸⁹ Great British Railway's accountability requires it to prioritise current passengers over future rail users when making decisions.
- **Inefficient land use.** GBR may not use their land effectively. In 2025, the government announced Platform4, a programme to use surplus railway land to deliver up to 40,000 homes over a decade starting in Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Cambridge. It will dispose of surplus land and attract private investment. However, more needs to be done to enable more affordable and social rented homes on

land that is close to train stations and surplus to requirements for the railways.

Solution

The government should require Great British Railways to facilitate housing development through increased service provision and efficient land use. The Railways Bill should be amended to make supporting housebuilding across Great Britain a statutory function of Great British Railways. It should be required to work closely with councils, strategic authorities, the devolved administrations, and Platform4. GBR would be required to consider this duty when making decisions around existing infrastructure, investment in future stations and lines, and passenger services.⁹⁰ The duty would inform its approach to planning applications around stations where the default yes to development applies.

To hold Great British Railways to account, the government should set a specific multi-year target for the number of homes it facilitates through additional services or using its land effectively. For example, Great British Railways could support the delivery of at least 30,000 homes over the first five years of its existence. This could be part of the ‘long-term rail strategy’, which Great British Railways will base its business plan on. To achieve this target, Great British Railways should:

- Be required to identify and release surplus land, in the first instance, to combined authorities, councils and other public bodies that will deliver new, affordable homes.
- Sell surplus land to housing associations and private developers if no public body is interested.
- Have limited planning permission powers to approve developments on small sites that they own, subject to meeting the relevant local authority design guides. This would put GBR in a similar position to development corporations. Such powers could be conferred through an amendment to the Railways Bill.
- Ensure that timetabling and viability assessments of services anticipate likely future demand unlocked by housing development.

With the above target and powers, GBR could support the delivery of 6,000 homes a year.

10. Increase the height threshold for second staircase requirements to buildings over 30m, subject to a further assessment on safety

Challenge

Following the tragic Grenfell tower fire in 2017, the previous government implemented substantial changes to fire and building safety regulations to protect people living in tall buildings. As part of this package, the government amended Approved Document B of the building regulations to mandate second staircases in all new English and Welsh residential buildings over 18 metres in height.⁹¹ This height was adopted primarily for administrative alignment with the definition of a 'high-risk building', rather than specific focus on building safety. The government initially consulted on a threshold of 30 metres.⁹² And this threshold is lower than Australia (25m), France (50m), and Ireland (60m).

Second staircases provide an alternative means of escape for occupants and an additional access point for firefighters, while also reducing congestion during an evacuation. Some residential buildings should have them, but the case is much stronger for buildings over 30 metres. The government's own impact assessment found:

- **Only a marginal safety impact occurs below 30 metres.** For properties between 18 and 30m, 0.4 residents per building on average would avoid becoming trapped in a major fire due to the second staircase. Just 0.004 fatalities per building would be avoided. For buildings between 30 and 50m, the figures are 0.4 fewer residents trapped and 0.006 fatalities avoided. It is above 50m where the second staircase has the most impact, preventing 1,083 people per building from being trapped – and avoiding 10.8 fatalities. As the previous government argued 'there is no evidence that shows a single staircase [in] existing tall buildings ... [is] unsafe, if designed and maintained correctly'.
- **Significant building safety improvements have reduced the likelihood of a fire and the need for a second staircase.** New-build flats in tall buildings are far safer than existing stock due to post-Grenfell measures. A ban on combustible materials on external walls and sprinkler requirements mean the likelihood of a 18m+ property experiencing a whole building fire is 1 in 50,000 – compared to 1 in 6,750 for existing stock.⁹³ And in the event of a fire, new-builds feature vented stairwells, robust compartmentation, wet risers, and sprinklers keep stairwells clear of smoke. Below 50 metres, other measures deliver a greater fire risk reduction than a second staircase.⁹⁴

- **Evacuation through a second staircase is unlikely to occur.** When the Fire and Rescue Service attends fires in buildings 18 metres or higher, “mass evacuation [of all residents] via the stairwell is an extremely rare occurrence”.⁹⁵ Between 2010 and 2022, there has been only one instance where more than 250 people needed to be evacuated from a building with four plus storeys and just three instances where it was between 101 and 250 people. There is a preference for evacuating some residents to a lower floor or instructing residents to stay put. And where mass evacuation does occur, the Fire and Rescue Service has “been able to evacuate everyone via a single stairwell”.⁹⁶

Given the marginal safety improvements of a second staircase in tall buildings below 30m, the additional costs of the policy are difficult to justify. The government’s impact assessment at the time anticipated that lowering the threshold from 30m to 18m would increase costs by roughly £1.2bn. However, this assumed that ‘no net internal area or saleable floor area’ would be lost following the implementation of the policy on the basis that developers would simply buy more land or reduce the size of flats rather than reduce the number of homes or the height of buildings.⁹⁷

In practice, the 18m threshold has decreased supply and viability, especially for mid-rise developments, with a knock-on effect for affordable housing delivery and regeneration. One estimate suggests the second staircase regulation has added £22,500 per flat onto the cost of building new flats in buildings over 18m.⁹⁸ Developers have responded by avoiding buildings over seven stories high unless they are in tower blocks of significant height. They have often been unable to purchase more land or reduce land costs to improve the viability of developments as the initial impact assessment assumed. Urban logistics companies, self-storage providers and retail parks all frequently buy or sell land at higher prices than developers can afford to deliver homes that comply with regulations. This results in land being used for non-residential purposes.⁹⁹ As a result, the impact of the second staircase is estimated at between 18,000 and 23,000 homes lost annually, with London and other major cities the hardest hit.¹⁰⁰ In November 2025, Ealing council scrapped a regeneration scheme to build 564 homes with Peabody because the second staircase requirement meant it was no longer viable.¹⁰¹ Such projects are crucial to increase densification, alleviate the housing crisis across England’s major cities, and support the country’s lowest-income earners.

Solution

The government should increase the height threshold for second staircase requirements to buildings over 30m, subject to a further assessment on safety. As part of the ongoing review into high-risk buildings, the

government should assess the safety impact and viability improvements associated with raising the threshold for second staircases to 30m.¹⁰² Unless the assessment determines the current regulations are proportionate based on the evidence, the government should amend Approved Document B of the building regulations. Other requirements around vented stairwells, extensive compartmentation and sprinklers should be maintained at a lower height to ensure proven safety measures are included to minimise risk.

This amendment would return the threshold to what was previously proposed by central government and the mayor of London.¹⁰³ Raising the threshold would bring England and Wales closer in line with international practice without undermining fire safety or the ability of households to evacuate.

The government could also increase fire service investment through section 106 agreements and the community infrastructure levy on tall buildings. Just £25m has been received by emergency services through Section 106 since 1990.¹⁰⁴ There could be an explicit requirement for developers who build tower blocks over a certain height to contribute financially to the fire service through the planning system. This would enable increased investment in fire stations, fire engines and other equipment or infrastructure needed to accommodate the increased demand these homes may create. However, this funding should complement – not replace – existing government support for the fire service.

Assuming most properties lost under the current regulations are in mid-rise buildings, raising the threshold to 30m could unlock around 10,000 homes.[∇]

[∇] The impact assessment on the introduction of second staircases in residential buildings estimated around 55 per cent of tower blocks would be between 18m and 30m.

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