

# More and better homes – the opportunity of self-build

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The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has [announced](#) sweeping reforms to the planning system in England. Re-energised by the need to [‘build back better’](#) following COVID-19, the well-established myth that it is planning permission that is primarily responsible for stagnating the delivery of new housing in the UK, has re-emerged.

Seemingly immune to [evidence](#) of over a million plots of land currently standing empty despite being granted planning approval, the narrative here is that government bureaucracy (rather than chronic market failure) is the problem. Not only at risk of undermining democracy by circumventing important checks and balances, this myth is more than ideological fiction; it is in direct opposition to reality. In light of [recent research](#) carried out by academics at the University of Edinburgh, here we discuss the implications of this for our strive to deliver better quality, more sustainable and energy-efficient homes.

The role played by local authorities in granting planning approval is a powerful opportunity to inject a great level of dynamism into the housing system and in doing so resist the increasing [standardisation](#) of inefficient, unsustainable housing. Rather than being too slow then, we argue that, actually, planning permission is a system that operates too quickly in the UK. It is a system too eager to approve large-scale housing projects that deliver placeless neighbourhoods of poor quality, cookie cutter homes, [vulnerable](#) to the challenges of the times (e.g. COVID and the climate emergency). Existing approaches to delivering new homes speculatively (where the house is constructed without engagement from the eventual occupier) are no longer fit for purpose. We need an alternative.

Often mistakenly seen as the purview of the wealthy or the focus of reality tv, self-build housing can be this alternative and offers a multitude of benefits beyond simple delivering a more bespoke home for the owner. Our findings show how self-build projects allow home construction to interface with a more thoroughgoing understanding of homeowner demand, attuned to the particular needs of people and their communities.

This is instead of the dominant system's reliance on the market speculations of volume house-builders. Rather than waiting for the market to tell us that there is indeed demand from people for a roof over their head, we should instead put decision-making on a variety of housing and community benefits, in their hands. The rewards of more energy efficient homes, more walkable neighbourhoods, and higher quality communal recreation space, are best realised by those able to reap the benefits themselves.

Enabled by forward thinking local authorities, [exemplars](#) in experimental housing procurement can be seen to boost the delivery of not only more homes, but better ones. In doing so, they fill the '[build-out](#)' gaps created by large housebuilder monopolies of development sites. Focusing on projects at contrasting [scales](#), our research shows that, by intervening in the 'traditional' housebuilding supply chains at various points, local actors, including councils, can open up the spaces for 'social innovation' and in doing so unlock access to, among other things, more sustainable housebuilding technologies. Replicating and mainstreaming such projects however (more speed, more scale, and less dependence on local innovators and serendipitous fortune) will require considerable enablement on the part of government. It will require a willingness to not only pursue ambitious targets for both more and better homes, but to devolve the decision making required for these aspirations to be mutually realised on the ground.

Instead of focusing on approving more homes then, we should put in place frameworks that ensure land already approved for housebuilding is built upon, and provide local authorities with the requisite powers to ensure this. We should also be incentivising existing land owners to work with both local authorities and with people who aspire to build, live, and work in their communities, rather than with those who seek to take advantage of the [extraordinary uplift](#) in land values, currently associated with the granting of planning permission. A resilient housing system relies upon a progressive policy environment, freed from an overbearing politics that panders to the ideologies of land ownership and private profit. It is time for a housing system that grants freedom to individuals to construct the energy efficient, sustainable, resilient homes that they desire. If we want both more AND better homes, then it is not merely time to build, build, build, but time for more builders, builders, builders.

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## References

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