London is facing acute housing shortages of both quality and quantity which threaten the vitality of the city. The majority of new housing provision serves only those in the highest earning bracket, forcing many Londoners to live within a built environment that neither support their needs nor promotes their wellbeing. The UK’s capital city is becoming increasingly spatialised by housing affordability - with central London property prices rising exponentially over the past few years, pushing lower-income residents to the periphery of the city and emphasising the separation between the haves and the have-nots. The prospects for young people in London are increasingly compromised too, as young workers and families struggle to find footing on the housing ladder.

While affordability problems threaten the vitality and vibrancy of London’s population, poor design quality does the same to London’s streets and neighbourhoods. Faceless residential towers and poorly conceived mega-schemes erode street life and undermine the creation of strong, harmonious and enduring communities and place London’s historic architectural and urban identity under increasing threat.

How to respond to this challenge? The purpose of this report is to position the question of urban form and housing typology at the centre of the housing debate currently taking place. The key to London’s future success is not only how much we build but what we build - quality must stand alongside quantity. The report seeks to explore the terms of the debate about London’s housing: to establish clearly the nature of the housing problem facing the city and in response, to explore the viable contribution that mid-rise housing has to make to the needs of London’s residents - present and future.
Four strategies for mid-rise development in London

1. Intensification along key routes
   WHERE
   Along key transport corridors in the city.
   RECOMMENDATION
   Identify key transport corridors (existing and forthcoming) which are suitable for intensification through mid-rise housing. Devise supportive planning processes, finance schemes and land assembly strategies to enable intensification schemes.

2. Infill on small / medium sites
   WHERE
   In historic areas where the type is appropriate and in smaller brownfield sites between central London and outer suburbs.
   RECOMMENDATION
   Establish dedicated infill strategies, including accurate scoping to identify the true capacity of small- and medium brownfield sites around the city. Establish financial and planning incentives to encourage mid-rise developments to fill in the appropriate gaps in London’s built fabric.

3. Large-scale new build
   WHERE
   Large-scale sites in and around the city.
   RECOMMENDATION
   Conduct thorough feasibility studies into the potential of large-scale development sites, both within and on the outskirts of London. Should a site come forward to planning, all measures should be taken to learn from best practices in order to provide affordable, dynamic and sustainable neighbourhoods for new residents. Mid-rise housing should be considered as a tool to define central corridors of economic and transport activity in such developments. For large-scale sites within London, mid-rise stands to contribute meaningfully to an urban form which supports new streets, new communities and new pieces of city.

4. Estate regeneration
   WHERE
   Inner- and outer-London sites.
   RECOMMENDATION
   Driven by local authorities, collaborative strategies of estate regeneration should be explored. Any regeneration scheme must replace social housing one-for-one and should contribute positively to the supply of affordable housing in the city through quality housing construction and urban design which reconnects these sites with their surrounding neighbourhoods.
The enduring popularity and desirability of London’s Sloane Square, Mayfair and Notting Hill neighbourhoods speaks to the strengths of mid-rise as a form.

London’s historical mid-rise buildings, with their strong relationship to the street and popularity with residents, should be re-imagined and re-asserted as a housing type in the city.

The mansion block in particular should be celebrated as a local form to aspire to: allowing for a flexibility of living spaces, supporting shared green spaces and providing appropriate densities in sites across the city. The mansion block form, along with converted Victorian and Georgian mid-rise houses, exhibit many of the strengths of well-designed mid-rise residential buildings and promote the type of walkable, sustainable urbanism that London needs as it looks to solve its housing problems. It is crucial in the response of developers and policy-makers to the housing shortage, that density is not approached only as the domain of high-rise towers. This report does not seek to re-hash the established failings of the multi-storey estate in the capital, but rather seeks to present a forward-looking, solution-based piece of research that aims to inform future development to ensure that the failings of the past are not repeated.

While much of the report directs its attention to London, the problem of housing failures, either in quality or quantity, as well as of the ubiquitous skyscraper model that is beginning to render city skylines indistinguishable from one another, while on the ground streetscapes are brutalised - can be recognised in cities the world over. Despite the re-privileging of street-based urbanism, liveable densities and non-motorised transport as key principles of city-making, the tower-in-the-park model continues to propagate. In London, the legacy of the high-rise tower and the multi-storey estate continue to inform many areas of the city, while new skyscrapers and luxury-accommodation projects continued to be welcomed into the city - often at the expense of both the street and social integration.

The promotion of mid-rise development here should not be seen as the proposal of a kind of panacea for all of the city’s housing problems, nor the perfect solution to all the housing needs of the population. Rather, the mid-rise form is here promoted to encourage the appropriate use of a housing typology which has both proven its strength on London’s streets as well as its popularity with its population.

What are the alternatives to the glass towers which are proliferating across the London landscape, and which are coming to dominate
the imaginations of both developers and residents in their approach to new housing? This report explores what can be done to support and encourage mid-rise development in London, examining common barriers to the form and proposing a range of recommendations. Drawing on best practice examples from around the world, this report seeks to reinstate the mid-rise typology as a key housing solution for London; both historically and indeed for the future.

In the ongoing debate around housing provision in the capital, it is crucial to examine the housing types and urban form that current policy, housing standards promote and economic circumstance produce. Well-designed mid-rise buildings can offer dense, liveable housing which promotes urban vitality as well as healthier and happier communities.

I think the orthodoxy in the UK, and possibly Northern Europe, is that you know the start point is perimeter block planning, but I don’t think that’s true in the developing world and that’s what alarms me most.

There are a number of problems for developing countries that are opting for the high-rise in the middle of the plot option. The worst part of the tragedy is the socio-economic danger and the public safety danger…they’re going to move from well-supervised, overlooked streets with mixed traffic, and they’re going to remove the care and attention and concern of residents who live at the top, for life in the streets. It’s absolutely heading in the wrong direction, and it will be a disaster.

BEN DERBYSHIRE
Managing Partner, hta Architects

Housing in the UK

Historical Development

The last ‘re-housing’ boom in England, during the 1960s and 1970s, saw the rise of the multi-storey estate. Problems of scale have plagued many of these developments - from disjunction with local contexts and to underused common spaces to an uncomfortable relationship with the street, characterised by set-backs and fences. The negative impacts on residents, both physical and psychological, of the legacy of poor design, construction and management of Britain’s last housing boom has dominated contemporary housing concerns. The relative ‘ghettoisation’ of estates has continued to inform wider built environment inequality across the UK.

From the period between the early 1950s and 1980, 1.5 million homes were demolished around the UK, many replaced by poorly conceived mass housing. The argument has also been made that the 1965 Housing Subsidy Act exhibited a bias in terms of promoting multi-storey estates. This period of demolition also resulted in the destruction of a certain degree of street fabric. While those demolished houses had been oriented along streets, the new multi-storey estates were often oriented around large ‘communal’ spaces which over time would prove underused and often neglected. Today, it is estimated that 360,000 dwellings in London are in post-war multi-storey estates.

In the haste to build after the second World War, many untested, new design theories were put into practice, with the best of intentions, but with disastrous results, and I’m thinking particularly of the brave new world of housing estates, the system-built, deck-access variety, and the tower block, which quickly became sink estate all across the country - unsloved, and relentlessly, depressingly ugly, with endless wasted access of public open space and a dearth of private space.

HRH, THE PRINCE OF WALES

Unpopularity of the built form of many post-war estates, both with tenants of the estates, and with wider society, has endured across the last five decades. The resulting backlash led to something of a slowdown in multi-storey developments across the country - with only six buildings with a height over 35m being built in Britain between 1979 and 1998.

London has seen something of a return to high-rise development in the past decade - but rather than in the form of estates with provisions for social housing, London’s new high-rises are glittering towers of exclusivity and luxury living - out of the reach of the average Londoners, and unsuitable to the needs of many households. New development in London risks perpetuating ghettoisation, carving out more and more areas of the city which cater only to higher income residents.

New planning guidance issued in 2000 discouraged low-density development, thus the shift to higher-density housing developed as a matter of planning guidance, mediated by economic pressures, rather than housing preferences. From 2001, the building of individual houses declined, while the construction of flats and high-density development increased across the country. In the 2000-2008 period, the
Higher birth rates and increased real incomes drove the demand for housing. In addition to these developments, demographic trends, coupled with national policies on urban containment, have continued to do so. In 2010, the National Planning Policy Statement was modified, introducing the New Homes Bonus to incentivise local authorities to build more homes. This new provision also hoped to overcome the threat of NIMBYism inherent in devolutions of power as proposed by the coalition government through the Localism Act and related policies.

In addition to these developments, demographic trends, coupled with national policies on urban containment, have continued to do so. In 2010, the National Planning Policy Statement was modified, introducing the New Homes Bonus to incentivise local authorities to build more homes. This new provision also hoped to overcome the threat of NIMBYism inherent in devolutions of power as proposed by the coalition government through the Localism Act and related policies. The key link between poor housing and health problems continue to plague larger households. The destabilising effects of rising rent and mortgage costs, coupled with high energy and food bills are exacerbated by wage freezes in many sectors. Families are often the worst affected, with 70% of those renting or making mortgage payments with children reported to be "struggling" or "falling behind" - this is in contrast to 63% of the general population of renters and homeowners. These pressures continue to push families and lower-income residents further and further into poor quality housing, destabilising existing communities.

Problems of affordability are affecting residents across all tenures and households types, with recent research suggesting that around 9% of adults feared they would be unable to pay their rents or mortgages in the first month of 2014, while other estimates suggest that around one million homeowners could be at risk of defaulting on their mortgages and losing their homes as a result of even the smallest increase in interest rates.

For young people around the country, the lack of affordable housing is becoming evermore critical. Estimates see around 1.5 million more young people (aged 18-30) being pushed into the private rental sector by 2020, driven by increasing lack of access to either social renting or owner occupation. Further estimates show the number of young people owning their own homes to fall by 1.1 million, to only 1.3 million by 2020, while the number of young people living with their parents looks set to increase six-fold. Young families and young people on low incomes are vulnerable due to their support needs have been identified as particularly vulnerable to the current exclusionary housing market.

Furthermore, the key link between poor housing and poor health, and the subsequent costs to society, must be acknowledged. Research across the past decade has shown that factors of the built environment have direct and in some cases, life-threatening effects on health - both physical and mental. The burden of these negative effects has also been shown to fall disproportionately on low-income communities and ethnic minority populations. The segregation of lower income residents into isolated housing pockets in the city has also been linked with obesity and mental health issues. Poor housing quality in particular is linked to exposure to lead, as well as to asthma triggers including mould, moisture, dust.
London's housing affordability has been held back by the mental health hazards of social isolation. If the current poor condition of housing for minority ethnic households continues, the projected costs to the NHS are estimated at £25 million per year\textsuperscript{23}, while wider costs to society are estimated to be two and a half times this figure\textsuperscript{24}. Poor housing clearly plays a role in exacerbating physical and mental health problems. These physical health hazards are often compounded by the mental health hazards of social isolation.

Poor housing clearly plays a role in exacerbating and perpetuating existing inequalities around the country and the supply of adequate housing should stand as a top priority if we wish to achieve social justice in the built form.

\textbf{LONDON HOUSING CONTEXT}

London is currently facing a chronic undersupply of housing, coupled with skyrocketing costs, as decades of inadequate building - both in terms of quality and quantity - come face to face with the city's booming population. London's housing affordability has been held up as a key indicator of the city's struggle in accommodating its swiftly changing population. London is positioned as Europe's fastest growing city - expected to grow by one million people over the next decade. The city's property prices are increasing at an annual rate of 10% and typical property values in October 2013 are 8% higher than peak 2007 prices\textsuperscript{25}.

Recent calculations show that average house prices in Westminster, Hackney and Islington have doubled over the past decade - with average prices in Westminster rising by 114\%\textsuperscript{26}. A recent report suggested that, despite earning £3,804 more per year than the average person nationally, the typical Londoner is actually £4,027 worse off after they've paid for somewhere to live\textsuperscript{27}. Housing benefits figures illustrate the affordability crisis most plainly: in May 2013, around a quarter of a million working adults claimed housing benefit - representing a 110% increase over just three years\textsuperscript{28}

Problems of affordability are preventing a range of households from accessing home ownership – with fewer and fewer residents capable of taking the first step onto the housing ladder. The average age of a first-time buyer is currently 29 - with financial support - and 33 - without, while estimates suggest that the average first time buyer needs to save an average deposit of £60,000 in order to qualify for a mortgage\textsuperscript{29}. Other estimates put the average first-time buyers in London in the top 20% of the city's household income distribution - a clear sign of the affordability problem facing London's residents. Once housing costs are taken into account, the number of people living in poverty in London doubles - from one to two million\textsuperscript{30}. Larger and larger swaths of inner London are now simply out of reach for households earning median incomes.

\textit{In a place like London, we are moving towards a more and more polarised market place – we are going to move to the ones that own homes and the ones that rent homes, and there will be a bigger and bigger gulf between the two. London is an important creator of value and growth in the UK generally so it needs to be made as competitive as possible to provide homes for people in good quality environments to support the enterprise of the city, and the worry is that if housing isn’t supplied at the right pace then a) housing gets more expensive which businesses will be unhappy with, and b) the people living in those houses will squash up more and more and then the social problems start.}

12x \textbf{BY 2012, THE AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE WAS 12x THE MEDIAN LONDON SALARY}

I do think shared ownership and intermediate rent are key in areas further out around London, in slightly more affordable areas, is an enormously important area. But for shared ownership, there isn't much gap funding around the moment so there is a question of the extent to which local authorities can repatriate value across borders, to effectively create gap funding for those schemes to make them affordable. Shared ownership is something that should be massively grown in the London context."

\textbf{BEN DENTON} Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

2011 census data reveals that the four southern regions of the country account for 60\% of all housing demand, while London alone accounts for 25\% of total demand. This level of demand, coupled with exceptional rises in land and property values, only serves to exacerbate the perceived ‘gap’ between the capital and the rest of the country. Indeed, the value of homes in London's ten richest boroughs has been estimated to be worth more than the housing stock of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland put together\textsuperscript{31}.

The relationship between housing provision and London's global competitiveness is a crucial one, and is coming under more and more strain as workers struggle to access housing in the capital. For the first time, businesses are citing housing costs above transport in their identification of barriers to growth in the city\textsuperscript{32}. With 70\% of businesses in London citing housing costs as a major barrier to growth\textsuperscript{33}. The rise of the private rental sector, coupled with decreases in owner-occupation signal underlying problems of affordability in the capital. Research has estimated that London could experience a shortfall of 50,000-90,000 homes for professionals over the next ten years. 2014 has already been identified as the year in which businesses will consider housing costs as a potential risk to their business and to their ability to recruit and retain staff\textsuperscript{34}. Talent attraction - especially for those firms looking to a younger workforce - will become increasingly tempered by problems of housing access.
There is a genuine lack of housing supply that is undermining the economic prospects of London. For London to have the jobs that it needs, it needs those people to be able to be housed appropriately and for that housing to be at an appropriate cost. The shorter the supply of housing, the more difficult it is for employers to look at London as a destination and know that they’re going to get the right level of skilled workers, and ultimately the housing shortage acts as a constraint on GDP.

ELLIOIT LIPTON
Managing Director, First Base

While London’s housing need is undoubtedly acute, estimates of exact figures remain varied. While some propose that between 245,000 and 300,000 new homes are needed to meet London’s demand each year, a recent calculation by London Councils estimated that more than 100,000 new homes a year from now until 2021 - totalling 809,000. The Mayor’s recently released housing strategy aims to deliver 42,000 houses each year forward. Despite variation in scale, all these figures sit far above the 2011 new build output of just 145,000.

The private sector has only delivered over 150,000 homes in 5 of the last 40 years - only increasing supply by 23% even during 1995-2007 boom period.

The implications of these shortages are undoubtedly a reduced quality of life for many Londoners. 11.6% of dwellings in the city having too few bedrooms for their occupants. London’s homes are the most overcrowded in the country, and are becoming increasingly strained - with overcrowding increasing by 50% between 2000 and 2009. Overcrowding is especially problematic in London’s poorer boroughs - Newham reports that 25.4% of its dwellings are overcrowded. Furthermore, the city is experiencing record levels of homelessness, with 41,250 households in temporary accommodation in 2013. The number of homeless families being re-housed outside the city by London councils has doubled over the past year - a direct result of the rising costs of private rented accommodation in London. In the twelve months up to June 2013, 789 households were housed in areas as far out as Manchester, Birmingham, Swansea and Accrington, with results for the first quarter of 2013/14 showing that the number of households placed outside London by local authorities has increased 129%.

Recent analysis of the shape of housing demand in London reveals short-sightedness in continued development of the type of luxury residential projects that currently occupy so much of London’s attention. While the bulk of demand can be identified at the lower end of the market (in the form of affordable housing and properties priced below £450 per square foot), new developments continue to target wealthier buyers, producing a disproportional amount of housing stock for the ‘New Prime’ market (properties between £1,000 - £2,000 per square foot). The current model of investment into luxury, typically high-rise, residential developments is risking oversupply in the Prime market, while failing to deliver where the bulk of future demand lies. Research estimates that 28,500 new homes are needed at the lower end of the market each year, while only 18,500 will be needed in the mid and upper core markets. These figures show that new housing supply needs to be targeted at mid - and lower income families if we are truly to address demand in the city. The market for high-end, prime developments is not sufficient to support the range of sites, house builders and financing options available in the city. Housing supply need to diversify and look to the middle market as a priority for future development.

“London residential is an inefficient market, with customers at either end of the earnings spectrum getting homes - if you’re rich or in need of support, then the state system works for you...it’s the people in the middle that the system works less well for and that is fundamentally caused by a lack of supply.

Firstly there’s unused land that could be developed...and secondly, is that land being used efficiently, could it be used more intensively or could that land be used for more than one purpose, and it’s rare that people think through multiple uses of land properly...there isn’t actually a detailed analysis of what land could be used for housing.”

ELLIOIT LIPTON
Managing Director, First Base

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<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AVERAGE UK HOUSE PRICE</th>
<th>AVERAGE LONDON HOUSE PRICE</th>
<th>PREDICTED AVERAGE LONDON HOUSE PRICE</th>
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Sources:
41 Nationwide, 2013
42 Nationwide, 2013
43 National Housing Federation, 2013
44 Mannion, F. 2013
45 Benham, J. et al, 2012
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47 Harrison, B. et al, 2013
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49 Dobson, N. 2013
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51 Savills, 2013
52 Savills, 2013
**Policy Context**

The Mayor’s new housing strategy plans to deliver 42,000 homes each year for the next ten years. Funded by £1 billion of public funds allocated to London in the national government’s summer spending review, the strategy identifies strong financial settlement with the national government as a key strength of the policy. The strategy takes as its main aims the promotion of institutional investment in new housing, increasing the abilities of local councils to build new homes, bringing forward surplus public land to encourage new builds, and the development of specialised Housing Zones.

Of the 42,000 figure, 15,000 affordable homes are to be developed each year - 40% of which will be for lost-cost ownership, and 60% will be for affordable rent. These targets, given the mere 17,000 homes built in London last year, only 6,000 of which were built by housing associations and councils, have been praised as ambitious, if not unrealistic. A London Housing Bank is to be piloted with £160 million in funding - the investments from which are set to be targeted at large vacant or stalled sites. Housing Zones, which would mimic many of the freedoms of existing Enterprise Zones are also proposed within 33 designated Opportunity Areas in the city. Ten of these zones are laid out in the Mayor’s strategy as too modest in its housing delivery aims.

While a strong degree of commitment to increasing the stock of affordable housing in the capital can be identified among Housing Authorities, local authorities and other stakeholders, many have expressed a scepticism on the commitment from both city and national government and have identified a degree of limitation in what government is willing to contribute. Many have called for greater autonomy and fiscal freedoms for local authorities to enable them to build many of the houses the city needs. While the Autumn Statement of 2013 saw the cap raised on local council borrowing, many have argued that this measure does not go far enough, with the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors concluding that: “The lack of housing supply is crippling the property market. If help to buy is to be maintained, right to buy extended, and expensive social housing sold off then the government’s commitment to building houses simply must be extended… We still believe housing is not at the centre of a coordinated property-led growth that supports a balanced regional recovery where all can access the market. The increase in the HRA borrowing cap will only make a very minor dent in the housing deficit” (2013).

Increased borrowing alone is set to produce only 3,000 affordable homes, meaning funding for additional need will have to be raised through other means (including controversial calls for councils to sell off most valuable social housing assets). Concessions on borrowing opens up a potential 300 million over the next 2 years - this in the context of the £7 billion that councils have estimated is needed in order to build 60,000 new homes.

The Mayor’s new strategy makes welcomed policy suggestions in terms of incentives to increase supply and does well to recognise the fundamental importance of this issue to the city. Questions of scale, financing and of commitment to ensuring affordability have all been raised in response to the Mayor’s latest strategy - with critics labelling the strategy as too modest in its housing delivery aims.

**Tenure Types**

Problems of supply, quality and affordability are affecting residents across all tenures in London. A present, 49.5% of Londoners live in houses they own, 25% in subsidised housing and 25% in private rented housing. As such, developments in each of these tenures affect a substantial proportion of residents and the corrosive effects of the current housing crisis need to be understood in the context of each tenure and addressed with the according detail and focus.

1. **PRIVATE RENTAL SECTOR**

The private rental sector (PRS) makes an important contribution to London’s housing offering - housing the many mobile students and workers who move into, and indeed through, the city. What is needed in the sector is an increase in both the quantity and quality of the product offering, as well as a raising of expectations from the sector which should heed a much needed call for higher standards. The sector is suffering under numerous stresses: demand outstripping supply, increased costs, overcrowding and troublesome landlords.

Private renting is the only form of tenure that is growing across England, as well as in London specifically. The sector has experienced great growth over the past decade - from accounting for 15.3% of the total London market to accounting for 25% of the market in 2011. This growth can largely be understood in relation to the increased difficulty of access to both homeownership and of social renting. At present the PRS market plays a crucial role in accommodating the young people of the city, with 60% of private renters under age of 35, only 4% over 65. By 2020, the number of young people living alone in the sector is set to increase by 1.3 million to total 3.7 million, while the number of young people living with parents in private rented accommodation will increase by approximately 170,000 to 400,000 in 2020. 874,000 couples with children are currently renting privately - an increase of more than 200% since the late 1990s. Problems of overcrowding are notorious across this tenure, with overcrowding in PRS in London increasing by 6% between 1995 and 2010. Rental prices are set to treble by 2020, with the biggest price rises set for London’s cheaper outer boroughs, forcing more and more families, young people and lower-income households to accept inadequate housing provisions.

The Mayor’s third ‘housing covenant’ pledges to “make the private rental sector work for Londoners”. This pledge is underpinned by three strategies: to support the supply of new housing in the sector, to empower consumers and to promote standards. These three strategies should be considered applicable and appropriate across all housing tenures.

International evidence suggests that incentives for landlords, including tax breaks for more stable longer-term tenancies for vulnerable or lower-income tenants, can be used to achieve more stable tenancies. Calls for large-scale institutional investment in this sector have been gaining momentum. Figures suggest that the UK needs to invest £200 billion in PRS stock over the five years in order to meet demand - with 30% of this demand located in London.

While some have pointed to an increasing desire for the tenure type as part of the reason for the increase in the sector, preference studies show that the overall preference for ownership has remained steady for the past two decades.

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**CURRENT AVERAGE POST-TAX INCOME VS. MONTHLY LONDON RENT**

![Chart showing the current average post-tax income vs. monthly London rent](chart.png)

- **82%**
- **£1,400**

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Owner-occupation for residential property in London dropped from almost 60% to under 50% between 2001 and 2011 - the largest regional drop in owner-occupation in the country - despite the city’s household numbers rising by 250,000 over the same period. Home ownership is expected to decline even further over the next decade - predicted to reach around 40% by 2025. There is much discussion around the prospects for first time buyers in London, much of it relying increasing dependence by buyers on the so-called ‘bank of mum and dad’ and the increasing implausibility of home ownership for those who do not have access to such resources. 70% of first-time buyers supported by other source.

The national government’s Help to Buy scheme launched earlier this year, due to remain in effect until December 2016, has elicited a number of responses. While some argue that the policy is too demand-side focused when supply remains the crucial issue - and fear that the policy will only exacerbate the ‘overheating’ of the market, others attribute a recent increase in new home building registrations to the scheme. Registrations for new homes around the UK were up by 19%, while privately-funded new house building registrations had increased by 23% in October 2013, according to National House Building Council figures. Despite these apparent increases in intention to build, many recognise that the extent of the housing shortage is such that even with considerable new building, acute shortages are set to remain for at least the next two years. Without a sustained, long-term increase in the supply of houses in the city, these demand-side initiatives designed to help aspiring home-owners, initiatives like Help to Buy will only serve to sustain the high house prices they pledged to help overcome. The scheme is also capped at homes costing £600,000 or less - which is out of the range of the £937,110 average price of a prime inner-London property.

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The ARM model has however come under considerable criticism. Given the extent of the need for affordable housing in the capital, the schemes definition of ‘affordable’ as up to 80% of market rents leaves much to be desired. The average affordable rent level is currently at 65% of market rent - a level of affordability still too high for many Londoners. Recent policy developments across this tenure type provide further cause for concern. Overall government subsidies for affordable housing provision have been drastically reduced. While caps on housing benefits have been introduced, the cap on what is classified as ‘affordable rent’ has been lifted - meaning that less funding is available for rents that are now more expensive. The definition of housing ‘need’ has also been widened - increasing the number of people more eligible for support (although potential direct support away from those most in need). ‘Need’ now refers not only to those most urgently in need of housing support, but also to those households looking to buy their first property but who are not able to afford it, as well as other groups which are failing to secure home-ownership. This broadening of definition reflects the growing number of London residents who do not qualify for traditional housing subsides, but nevertheless cannot afford to live in the city. While the ARM model is well positioned to cater for this group of Londoners, current caps and ‘affordability’ levels are not drastic enough to make a meaningful contribution to the overall degree of housing affordability in the capital.

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Solley Housing LONDON: A MID-RISE SOLUTION

The past decade has seen a decline in the social rental sector - from 25.7% of the market in 2001 to 24.1% in 2011. Inherent tensions exist between high land and property values in many areas of the city and the presence of social housing. While caps on housing benefits have been made that social landlords could help tackle the challenges facing young people by helping them to access private rented tenancies and offering more shared tenancy options at local housing allowance rent levels as part of a varied housing offer. 

The lack of supply of this tenure form is one of the most pressing challenges facing the city. Despite government pledges of one-to-one replacements for every unit of social housing sold, only 1,602 council home replacements started in 2012/13 and this year to date, while 10,954 council homes have been sold nationwide. The buying up of council homes without adequate replacement, coupled with new schemes which fail to deliver on social housing pledges, has eroded London’s social housing stock to critical levels. Whole zones of the city risk becoming exclusive enclaves, the existence of which threatens London’s very vitality.

Affordable housing benefits claimants than ever before are in work. The UK has taken 20 years to add 0.5 million social rented homes to total stock, the waiting list for social housing is currently around 5 million people. The number of young people living in social rented tenancies is expected to decrease over the next several years, while the number living with their parents in social rented accommodation looks set to increase by approximately 170,000. Suggestions have been made that social landlords could help tackle the challenges facing young people by helping them to access private rented tenancies and offering more shared tenancy options at local housing allowance rent levels as part of a varied housing offer.

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Industry Recommendations

Increasing housing supply across all tenures is the most comprehensive and widely-accepted response to the current unsustainable housing market. Proposed strategies to achieve this aim, however, differ markedly across various fields, as well as across the local-national spectrum. Despite these differences, there exists consensus that without an increase in housing stock, the problems of affordability, accessibility and integration are all likely to continue unabated. Wide calls for increased certainty around factors of supply in the housing market, chiefly land supply, planning policy and construction standards, need to be heeded if the country’s supply of new housing is to be increased at the necessary pace.

The following recommendations set out current proposals touted in the housing industry to increase supply in London’s housing market. These recommendations deal only with the quantitative aspects of supply - laying out how more homes can be built. Suggestions of the specific forms or typologies that this housing should take, or of the wider urbanism principles this housing should aspire to, have been largely absent from mainstream debates on the problem.

INCREASE THE RANGE OF INVESTMENT CHANNELS INTO HOUSING PROVISION

A range of investment channels are crucial in order to speed up the supply of new housing. These channels include direct central government funding, new allowances for council borrowing and investment, new government guarantees, as well as institutional investment channels and the Mayor’s proposed London Housing bank, are key in establishing productive avenues for housing provision. Numerous calls have been made to make more land available in both the private and public sector.

MAKE MORE LAND AVAILABLE IN BOTH THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR

The swift release of land for development remains one of the primary enablers to increasing supply in London. Studies estimate that the government owns around £330 billion of land and property around the country, with the public sector holding up to 40% of developable land and around 27% of brownfield land suitable for residential development. Wider UK estimates suggest than British house builders have enough land to build 1.5 million homes. The government has recently launched a ‘Right-to-Compete’ scheme, allowing the public to challenge the use of government-owned land should they believe that the land could be put to better economic use - including for housing.

In seeking to make more industrial/brownfield sites suitable for development, some have argued that the urban development corporation model - as exercised in the London docklands development and Stratford Olympic site - should be promoted. Studies in other countries that have successfully increased certainty around factors of supply - laying out how more homes can be built. Suggestions of the specific forms or typologies that this housing should take, or of the wider urbanism principles this housing should aspire to, have been largely absent from mainstream debates on the problem.

CASE STUDY: SAN FRANCISCO, USA

Following more than a decade of strong growth, San Francisco presents another city facing critical housing affordability problems. With a population approaching 1 million residents, and a population density of 17,687 people per square mile, San Francisco is struggling to keep its housing stock affordability as demand outpaces supply. In earlier years, the city was downzoned in an attempt to preserve existing densities following intense pressure from citizen groups. This restrictive planning environment, coupled with an influx of new residents given the city’s primary role in the Silicon Valley nexus, has seen housing supply lag, and prices rise. The past two decades have seen San Francisco produce an average of only 1,500 new housing units annually.

Rather than embrace strategies of densification, the city attempted to divert regional growth elsewhere, while the city’s walkable neighbourhoods, attractive built form and urban amenities continued to attract residents. The rising value of land in the city driven by housing demand - has, as in London, resulted in extraordinary pressures on affordable housing. Research estimates that below-market-rate units each require a $250,000 subsidy from the government. If the city sought to provide subsidized housing for 10,000 households, these efforts would come with a price tag of $2.5 billion. Residents on medium incomes are struggling to find space in the city, while swathes of the city risk becoming exclusive zones for the wealthy, counteracting initial efforts by residents to keep the city’s mixed character.
‘Land release, not just land supply, is a big issue in London. Around 50% of land with residential consent is held by people who have no intention of building the homes. I think the public sector should take a more active role in intervening there. We have sites in Westminster that have sat there for twenty, thirty years, empty... big sites that you could put three to four hundred homes and create great places. There’s no worry from a landowner that someone is going to step in and force them to do something, and therefore, in a market like Westminster, where if property value go up by 15%, the land value probably goes up by 30% - hanging on to land and doing nothing is a good way of making money.

To address that issue, you could encourage landowners to release their land through tax regimes, or those sorts of initiatives. Local authorities and the GLA do have the powers to drop in and look at CPO’ing [Compulsory Purchase Ordering] bits of land. The worry of a piece of land being CPO’ed will force people to try and move a scheme through to development. I think in some selected areas, even that pressure of the public sector doing that might encourage landowners to partner with other people to deliver housing supply.

I think there needs to be some prioritisation, so housing zones are a good example. There are lots schemes that are all over the place which can provide thousands of homes and they just need an additional push. What we know is that if you apply a bit of focus in an area, the output that you can deliver in that area are enormous. Focus is really important, and housing zones are a good example of that.”

BEN DENTON Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

EMPOWER RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES TO ACCESS THE HOUSING THEY NEED

Calls have also been made for a more consumer-oriented housing market, which would place home-buyers and communities in a stronger position to influence the form and design of their future homes and neighbourhoods. RIBA [Royal Institute of British Architects] has noted that home-buyers and renters suffer from limited choice and that the marketing of homes lacks the basic standards of transparency that the average consumer would expect from any product.

The issue of overseas home ownership has often dominated the housing shortage debate. The Home Builders Federation recently announced their intention to offer new homes to UK residents and foreigners at the same time - replacing the current practice in which homes are offered to foreign buyers first in apparent effort to get projects funded. Eleven homebuilders, including Barratt Development Plc, Taylor Wimpey Plc and Telford Homes Plc have agreed to this new policy in an apparent bid to reposition UK buyers in the market.

Initiatives like this might serve to keep some properties in the hands of British citizens, but do very little to address the problems of affordability which are most restrictive in helping citizens access property.

BEN DENTON Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

LINK HOUSING TO LONG-TERM ECONOMIC RECOVERY

A long-term housing strategy for London which links new housing supply to wider economic growth should be pursued and supported as a matter of urgency. House building has been championed by many as an effective counter cyclical intervention which could produce a variety of both economic and social benefits. Previous research shows that every £1 spent on construction generates an additional £2.09 of economic output - a higher return than most other sectors, including banking and finance. Of every £1 spent in building, 92p stays in the UK, and of every £1 spent by the public sector, 56p returns to the Exchequer (of which 36p is direct savings in tax and benefits). If Britain invested as much in housing as France or Germany, £35 billion could be added to UK construction output.

INCREASE THE DIVERSITY OF THE HOUSE BUILDING SECTOR

The UK’s increasing inability to keep up with housing demand should be considered alongside decreasing diversity in the housing delivery sector. The mix between private and public providers, as well as between high density and single dwelling unit builders has become increasingly narrow - with the housing sector now increasingly reliant on large-scale house builders. These builders often require larger sites, a certain type of business model and will be subject to similar cyclical pressures, restricting overall levels of supply in the market. At present, 70% of all private sector output in the market is the product of a small number of large-scale builders. The largest seven private house building companies alone have around 40% of the market in new homes.

The high price of land and the planning process has steadily eroded the diversity of house builders operating in London. Since 2008, the number of small house builders in operation (producing between 10 and 30 units per year) has halved, while the number of large-scale builders has increased slightly. In 2012 alone, 70% of all new housing starts in London came from only 27 companies.

Subsequently, decreased levels of competition erode the incentive for builders to focus on design standards and has the potential to erode the quality of new homes. Many large building companies have vast land stocks which were purchased at high prices before the 2008 crash. Weakened balance sheets, coupled with increased banking liabilities...
and a considerable adversity to risk in the sector at present have created significant economic obstacles in the provision of the housing London needs.

This narrow diversity of suppliers risks the ability of the sector to respond adequately to demand. Widening the range of players in the house-building market ranges from schemes to assist small-to medium house builders, to allowing for self-build to contribute to its full potential through supportive planning policies. International house builders, primarily from the Far East, have also been promoted as part of a widened mix of housing providers. Government intervention in the market since 2007, while high in cash terms, has been captured disproportionately by major house-builders and has elevated short-term concerns over long-term reform.

“When you look back and see that housing was delivered at higher levels - there were just more players in that market place. There were the small builders, there were the public sector bodies… there’s not one answer, it’s just that everyone needs to be pushing in the right direction to be stimulated to deliver homes. For local authorities, the incentive about getting involved is that it either saves costs or it makes money for you, so I think there is a need [for incentives]. Even things like New Homes Bonuses have been really positive, because local authorities can now see that as a result of getting planning consent, they get cash incentives.

One of the issues there is just about encouraging as many people to enter into that marketplace as possible and reducing the barriers of entry to that marketplace. So in terms of planning, it’s not planning itself, but the amount of technical work you need to do to get to planning consent is potentially a barrier to new entrants coming into the marketplace.”

BEN DENTON Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

To expect the current range of housing providers to meet the current shortcoming in supply is beyond viability, and thus an expansion of housing providers and builders is crucial. The delivery capabilities of Housing Associations and local authorities should both be re-invigorated, and here restrictive fiscal regulations from national government need to be reviewed. Special purpose vehicles which allow local authorities to develop their own landholdings or other land released onto the market should be pursued.

One of the most repeated calls is for housing associations to be able to reclassify the £14.8bn social housing grant currently classified as government debt, converting this figure into equity held by the government which housing associations will then be able to borrow against. This reclassification could result in the capacity to fund over 80,000 new homes by 2021.

USE FINANCIAL REFORMS TO INCENTIVISE THE BUILDING OF NEW HOMES

David Lunts, Executive Director of Housing and Land at the GLA, has suggested that by looking at projects from a different angle - that is, seeking to making funding and support mechanisms fit the project, rather than the other way around - that developments might be able to be sped up. The proposed London Housing Bank might have a key role to play here in its capacity to breathe new life into stalled projects.

The borrowing capacity of local authorities is another supply-side strategy that has found many supporters. Many have argued that, rather than underwriting demand through ‘Help to Buy’, the government should focus its efforts on supporting increased supply capacities at the local level. The reclassification of local authority housing debt as investment has the potential to boost housing output substantially. Studies estimate that such a reclassification could result in local authorities being able to borrow up to £20bn across the next five years, unlocking between 170,000 - 230,000 new homes.

Suggestions have been proposed to incentivise builders and developers to accelerate development schemes, including further land value tax schemes - allowing government to capture gains from record-level housing prices to support transport and education infrastructure in the city.

Political, social and economic pressures are resulting in a strong push for new housing starts across the capital. The form they take will be crucial in determining London’s future. The quality, design and size of new and existing houses cannot be overlooked in considering the current crisis.

The Construction Products Association (CPA) predicts a 2.7% growth in construction in 2014, rising up to 5.1% in 2016. Government statistics for England reveal a 45% increase in planning applications for major residential developments (greater than 10 units) for the three months leading up to June 2013, as compared to the same period for the previous year. Despite this, Simon Rubinstein, chief economist of RICS, notes: “we are still way behind in terms of building enough homes to meet the nation’s growing housing need and overall construction projects are at a historical low...in the face of this challenge, it is particularly concerning that we are already receiving reports of some skill shortages as well as capacity constraints for some building materials such as bricks” (2013).

Demands for mansion taxes and for new developments to be marketed to Londoners first before offering homes up to overseas buyers is not sufficient to address London’s dire housing need. Giving Londoners first access to new residential developments which are neither affordable nor suitable to their housing needs to begin with does little to address the supply problem in the capital. Taxing empty properties does not necessarily result in more homes for Londoners – especially if those taxes are collected at the national level, and if the housing models that these taxes are directed into is a failing one.

We need to build differently — to offer up a different housing model which can be produced by a range of investors and builders, and which can ultimately be accessed by a range of Londoners.

To focus only on quantity is to commit to a short-sightedness which will ultimately harm not only residents, but London as a city itself. The degree of investment that will be channelled into housing in the capital over the next decade provides a crucial moment to lay bare the ambitions of London. Aspirations for longevity, affordability and vibrancy should be held high. Londoners deserve homes fit for the needs of today, adaptable for future needs. Beautiful, well-connected, enduring homes for all.
Mid-rise development creates the potential of a new market that is capable of housing hundreds of thousands of people in the coming decades...it makes a huge contribution to raising the quality of life throughout our region by improving daily living, working and transport life cycle choices of existing residents.

Paul J. Bedford, 2013

Mid-rise developments present the city with the opportunity to achieve both a range of housing choices for London’s increasingly diverse population, as well as offering up a liveable urban streetscape which is currently neglected by so many new residential developments.

Mid-rise Definition

For the purpose of this report, mid-rise is classified as a building of between 5-8 storeys. This definition allows for considerable density levels as well as flexibility in the type of accommodation that can be offered—without venturing into levels around 10-12 stories which present more difficult economic models. This height level also speaks to London’s mansion block legacy—a form which has proven both popular and enduring in the city.

Importantly, residential densities should not be considered within a vacuum—rather should be understood in relation to surrounding context. As such, mid-rise can also be defined in terms of right of way (R.O.W.). Mid-rise developments can be defined as those buildings not taller than the R.O.W. of the streets onto which they face. This definition allows for a flexibility and adaptability according to street context—with wider roads allowing for taller buildings which do not overwhelm the streetscape and speak to the existing fabric of the area. Mid-rise targets—tied to density targets—can be identified according to different layouts and different trade-offs associated accordingly. A degree of adaptability, taking cues from relative urban contexts, can be built into defining the mid-rise form.

Mid-rise is usually achieved with stacked walk-up townhouses or flats, and at the higher densities scale, lifts and corridor-accessed units will be necessary. Estimates state that 4-storey stacked walk-up townhouses can produce up to forty dwellings.
per acre, and that a combination of mid-rise and high-rise residential construction can achieve densities of well above 75 dwellings per acre. Building typology, parking requirements and construction types are all key in defining the form of mid-rise development and as such constitute carefully considered elements of any development.

Mid-rise buildings can be categorised by building typology, site typology and building innovation. Building typology categorisation includes mixed-use and office or institutional uses, minimum height, residential at grade and historical precedents. Site typology includes deep sites (where site depth is not constrained, varies by R.O.W. width) and shallow sites (where site depth is limited, varies by R.O.W. width). Finally building innovation includes outdoor space, floor plan and corridor configuration and parking.

Crucially, mid-rise residential development can offer a variety a housing units and configurations. The development of mid-rise residential units is key in addressing the lack of larger-sized units in high-rise developments that are suitable for family living. Developments along urban corridors can offer units which boast frontages on both the high street, as well as rears areas facing adjacent neighbourhoods. The potential to offer families suitable configurations, nearer the amenities of the city, is a key strength of mid-rise development. Similar arguments have been made in terms of housing provision for seniors also wishing to locate closer to amenities such as retail and healthcare.

"The highest residential density I’ve found in London, in terms of plot ratio, is Albert Hall Mansions. I’ve not found anywhere else that achieves that…I think it’s 4:1. The reason for that is because it’s more or less solid. It’s got a few light wells that go right down to the bottom and every apartment has got a big bay window and a nice view…and they go for huge amounts of money - highly desirable. Let no one say that thinking about density held value back there."

BEN DERBYSHIRE
Managing Partner, hta Architects

Mid-rise housing: London’s Legacy

London has one of the lowest density rates of any major city around the world, and undoubtedly needs to densify in order to meet the level of demand facing the city, and in turn manage the affordability problems plaguing residents. How this density is achieved is key too. It is crucial in the response of developers and policymakers to the housing shortage, that density is not approached as solely the domain of high-rise towers. Nor should the quest for more housing result in sprawling suburbs which make poor use of precious land around the city. Neither vertical sprawl nor horizontal sprawl will provide London with the inclusive, sustainable communities that the city needs in order to thrive. In pursuing solutions to London’s housing problems, it is crucial that we learn from the lessons of the past and strive to build homes that themselves will stand the test of time.

One of London’s greatest architectural legacies is the mid-rise residential building. Whether the mansion blocks of Maida Vale or the converted Victorian houses of Sloane Square, well-constructed, beautiful mid-rise housing is one of London’s greatest assets. Mid-rise housing of this type provides London with much needed density, while the inherent strength of the form’s relationship with the street supports enlivened neighbourhoods. The mansion block type in particular has proven its capacity to be adapted to the residential needs of a variety of households. One of London’s greatest architectural legacies, the mid-rise mansion block should be embraced as the capital looks forward to how it will house its ever-growing population.

London’s historic mid-rise housing presents a form that is recognised and celebrated by local residents and should be presented to both developers and future residents as a local best practice that have proven its worth and popularity over time.

“Lives change. And if you come up with a single archetype with no real gardens and all of that sort of stuff…it becomes less sustainable for people to stay in that area. In coming up with a mid-rise solution, catering for the people that in due course are going to want a garden or a bit of an outdoor space is really important. If you look at some of the great examples of mid-rise across London, historic examples like Maide Vale, they work fabulously well, they had communal outdoor space…that model works really, really well. Everyone would aspire to grow up in Maide Vale and in places like that.”

BEN DENTON Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

"We simply cannot afford to repeat these mistakes, but this time in a 21st-century guise. In fact I would go so far as to say we must not repeat such mistakes. We owe it to the people of this country to do infinitely better...to try to learn from the past and take the best ideas forward as we build what will become tomorrow’s heritage today.

HRH, THE PRINCE OF WALES
Mid-rise buildings can be designed in a number of different ways to accommodate green space, street-facing entrances and higher floors which are stepped back, supporting a sympathetic relationship with the street and neighbouring buildings. Well-designed mid-rise buildings can offer shared amenity spaces, a close relationship with the street, as well as private spaces which can be adapted to the needs of different residents.
Mid-rise: Building Social, Economic & Environmental Value

Mid-rise residential developments offer a range of wider urbanistic benefits, given the form’s relationship to the street.

The form has been shown to contribute substantially to the goal of ‘complete streets’ around the world. Complete streets are supportive, inclusive locations for both residential and commercial spaces and thrive on the mid-rise model of retail uses at grade and residential uses above. Density of both supply and of use is key in the creation of resilient, flexible streets in our cities. Without the addition of more people, the potential for adaptability, transformation and rejuvenation of our streets remains limited. A-grade retail is often given primacy in mid-rise schemes - encouraging walkability diversity of amenities and vibrancy of place. Mid-rise buildings exhibit a great strength in their compatibility with existing neighbourhoods. Directed by strong design guidelines, mid-rise development can serve existing neighbourhoods without alienating the street level or compromising on the aesthetic integrity of an area.

“I think the most important thing is streets and street life…I think Londoners now demand streets and they demand that their city should be developed as an extension of the network of streets and I think that’s a really powerful and important, actually democratic, principle because I think as citizens of London, we expect access to all areas on ground that is in public ownership and that is policed by consent, and therefore, it’s our space. And I think that’s what streets give you, because there’s a language, but also because there’s a whole kind of legislative framework which enables streets…

We have a democratic expectation of access to all areas and also streets that are publically owned…and I think that’s the guiding principal. Above all, I think what makes great cities is great streets. The perimeter block, I think, is a subsidiary point, because it is the perimeter block that is easily built and serviced from streets. For me, the first thing is streets, and the second thing is, well what do you build in the blocks. If you build up to the back pavement in the blocks, actually I think a street network is incredibly forgiving…

The other thing that streets do for you is provide you with permanent access for the long-term renewal of the perimeter block…it’s just a brilliant solution to an endlessly sustainable city.”

BEN DERBYSHIRE Managing Partner, hta Architects

Ecologically, mid-rise housing also has the potential to contribute positively to the future of our city. Mid-rise housing can be built using more ecologically-friendly, locally-sourced materials, especially in contrast to the glass and steel high-rises currently rising around the city. Sustainable water and energy infrastructure systems can also be supported by mid-rise developments. Furthermore, in the compact communities that mid-rise housing supports each person uses less energy, and emits less carbon dioxide, than comparable residents in more sprawled out communities. Walkability and shared services are key here, and indeed rely on density to flourish. Taking advantage of existing redevelopment opportunities in brownfield sites and small-scale infill sites are all key in tackling sustainable growth in the city and in providing locations for mid-rise developments. Accommodating future growth within already urbanised areas, as well as in strategic suburban nodes, is key to achieving smart growth. Midrise, dense schemes should seek to avoid resulting in a kind of ‘compacted suburbia’, but rather should engage with the notions of climate-responsive adaptable housing forms.

CASE STUDY: PARIS, FRANCE

One of the most admired cities in the world, Paris is often noted for its mid-rise housing stock that supports both residential density as well as lively, walkable neighbourhoods. Most of the old city is made up of a uniform building height of around 6-storeys - a form which has endured across decades. During the Haussman era, apartment buildings were required to be no taller than 6-storeys on average, and the current urban form of the old city is reflective of this legacy. The form has supported the continuous ground level active street frontages that support economic vitality and encourage a spread of urban amenities. The average density of Paris’ traditional mid-rise neighbourhoods is around 52,590 people per square mile. In the densest area of the city, the 11th Arrondissement, the city houses 40,000 inhabitants per square km arranged along a network of straight streets, the Parisian mansion block, often arranged around a private courtyard, typically produces 92 dwellings per acre. Parisian mid-rises provide attractive, flexible homes, make the most of urban infrastructure and amenities, and have allowed for sustainable communities to take hold in the city.

Aside from favouring mid-rise in its building regulations, Paris is also taking admirable steps to manage rent levels. The Parisian mayor and Director of Housing at Conseil de Paris introduced a rent control policy in 2012 in order to support mixed communities in the city. The policy proposed to cap rents as a percentage above a median rent level in set geographical areas, a stronger variation on London’s ‘Affordable Rent’ model of up to 80% of median rent levels. The city is building around 6,000 homes for social rent every year, to be offered at 30-50% of average market rates, and has also committed to raising the percentage of homes available for social rent in the city to 25%. Crucial too, is the regulation that 45% of social homes provided should be family-sized (3-bedrooms or more), ensuring that families have the space they need throughout the city.

The city has first option to buy buildings when the come up for sale, and since 2010 has purchased 377 of the 1,030 uninhabited homes that have been identified for social housing around the city. Larger housing subsidies also allow the city to change lower social rents - in 2012, the average capital subsidy for a family-sized home was £50,000, compared to the average £28,716 subsidy for an equivalent property in London’s 2011-2015 affordable homes programme.
Many people believe, erroneously, that the only way to achieve environmental efficiencies in development is by building very tall buildings. Indeed, improving the average density of building in England is critical to getting location efficiency, which reduces automobile use and greenhouse gas emissions, as well as minimising land take. These efficiencies only begin to be achieved at 17 units to the hectare, when public transport becomes feasible, and begins to tail off at densities above 70 units per hectare—this is because achieving environmental gain is a function of density, access to public transport, and walkable, connected streets. Pedestrian street access becomes more difficult at higher densities, indeed there is also a question about whether London’s overstretched public transport network can actually support greater density at the centre. Creating visual pollution is not the answer to achieving greater efficiency. These locational efficiencies can be achieved easily by traditional English building types including the 4-5 storey terrace and 6-10 storey mansion block...in fact, its worth remembering that Kensington and Chelsea, which so far lack tower blocks, is the densest London borough.

HRH, THE PRINCE OF WALES


Crucially, the mid-rise housing typology is also one which brings a wider variety of house builders into the housing market. London’s house building market has become increasingly narrow over the past decade, with only a handful of mega-builders producing the majority of London’s new housing stock. The nature of the high-rises in development around the capital means that not only is the final housing offering exclusive a few, but so too is the building process. By contrast, mid-rise developments are easier to build and require less specialisation—opening up the housing supply market to a greater variety of builders. Promoting more mid-rise housing in the capital means supporting small and medium builders and opening up more opportunities for British businesses to contribute to the capital’s future growth.

There is a need for flexibility and adaptability in our housing stock. Sprawling suburban greenfield sites and high-rise studio flats can provide only so much by the way of flexibility. Taking advantage of existing redevelopment opportunities, of existing brownfield sites and small-scale infill sites are all key in tackling sustainable growth in the city and in providing locations for mid-rise developments. Accommodating future growth within already urbanised areas, as well as in strategic suburban nodes, is key to achieving smart growth. Mid-rise, dense schemes should seek to avoid resulting in a kind of ‘compacted suburbia’, but rather should engage with the notions of climate-responsive adaptable housing forms.

Ecologically, mid-rise housing also has the potential to contribute positively to the future of our city. Mid-rise housing can be built using more ecologically-friendly, locally-sourced materials, especially in contrast to the glass and steel high-rises currently rising around the city. Sustainable water and energy infrastructure systems can also be supported by mid-rise developments. Furthermore, in the compact communities that mid-rise housing supports each person uses less energy, and emits less carbon dioxide, than comparable residents in more sprawled out communities. Walkability and shared services are key here, and indeed rely on density to flourish. Taking advantage of existing redevelopment opportunities in brownfield sites and small-scale infill sites are all key in tackling sustainable growth in the city and in providing locations for mid-rise developments. Accommodating future growth within already urbanised areas, as well as in strategic suburban nodes, is key to achieving smart growth. Mid-rise, dense schemes should seek to avoid resulting in a kind of ‘compacted suburbia’, but rather should engage with the notions of climate-responsive adaptable housing forms.

Key to advancing the growth of mid-rise is the recognition of the realistic development potential of identified areas for intensification in the city. Engaging with the realistic development potential of underutilised or ill-utilised plots within London’s existing urban boundary will help to establish the case for mid-rise development. Smart development is not merely a question of how development happens, but also where it happens. Equally crucial is the recognition of the need for holistic, long-term thinking around urban development.

1. INTENSIFICATION ALONG KEY ROUTES
   i. Along key transport corridors

2. INFILL ON SMALL/MEDIUM SITES
   i. In historic areas (usually in Central London) where the type is appropriate
   ii. In smaller brownfield sites between Central London and outer suburbs

3. LARGE-SCALE NEW BUILD
   i. Large-scale sites in and around the city.

4. ESTATE REGENERATION
   i. Inner- and outer-London sites

While much of the debate around London’s housing needs has pitted these options against each other in an either/or argument, it is key to recognise this debate as a false one. All of the above strategies will need to be engaged in order to meet London’s housing needs. One strategy alone cannot be held up as the panacea to the complexities of London’s housing challenges. The four strategies outlined below offer a variety of timescales and of investment requirements which engage with all sectors of the housing delivery market, and more importantly, which seek to meet the needs of all of London’s residents.
Intensification Strategies

Much of the discourse around mid-rise development is closely tied to notions of ‘intensification’. Urban intensification can be understood as a strategy which aims to accommodate regional growth through the redevelopment of land within the existing urban areas. This strategy involves the improvement and increased use of existing urban infrastructure and services, rather than the introduction of new infrastructure and services on the urban fringe.

Intensification (including the promotion of mid-rise development) looks to reduce the impacts on the natural environment and improve the livability of existing city regions, while reducing the pace at which greenfield sites along the urban boundary are developed. The reduction of car-reliance, greenhouse gas emissions and of the consumption of non-renewable resources are all broad targets of intensification schemes.

“"In those places where more ambitious urban development is appropriate, these are principles of planning which again can make sure that new development is adding to communities in this country. Such principles include well-designed public spaces, a mix of shops and services within walking distance, values of hierarchy, legibility, and proportion, integration of high - quality private, social and affordable housing. And by incorporating these qualities, we are applying the lessons tradition teaches us - about how better neighbourhood design improves the lives of those who live in new developments.”


Key obstacles from global case studies to redeveloping brownfield sites include competition from greenfield development, uncertain planning processes, problematic public perceptions about brownfields, and uncertainty around remediation processes which often involve various levels of government. Policy makers in London should take heed of these barriers, ensuring that the processes around remediation and planning for brownfield development are clear and simplified, and that the appropriate support is provided across the governmental agencies concerned. Explicit targets for both brownfield redevelopment and greenfield development will aid in promoting both forms through providing certainty for developers.

Research on housing demand research has concluded that new supply must target London’s outer boroughs - increasing supply in the ring around central London from Zone 3 and beyond. Developers involved in brownfield development also advocate for financial tools to incentivise the process. Whether these take the form of grants, tax assistance or loans, these tools can be used to reduce the costs associated with the risks of brownfield development and should be given serious consideration as part of London’s efforts to densify within its existing urban boundary.

London is prime to consider a strategy of transport-led intensification. Plans for Crossrail 1 and 2, coupled with the future extension of existing rail services should provide momentum for corresponding housing strategies. The capacity for existing transport corridors to accommodate greater housing densities should be established, and a number of key corridors identified around which intensification schemes can be proposed. The mayor’s new housing plan has been called transport-centric—a labelling which fits well with intensification strategies. Director of housing for the mayor of London, Richard Blakeway, recently recognized that housing opportunities around new Crossrail routes and stations should be given particular attention. Alongside these calls, Blakeway also cited the capability of new housing to stimulate

CASE STUDY: VANCOUVER, CANADA

Vancouver’s Cambie Corridor Plan has been implemented over the past few years as a strategy to accommodate growth and provide an alternative form of urbanism to the high-rises dominating Vancouver’s downtown. An existing transport corridor is set to be filled in with buildings of four or more storeys, with 12-storeys defined as the general top out level. The strategy has been planned in alignment with the opening of a new transit development - the fully automated rapid transit Canada line, which runs along the corridor.

The Cambie Corridor Plan is a land use policy, which seeks to take advantage of the building blocks of transit connectivity, land availability and housing demand. The policy also seeks to provide a land use strategy that optimises the investment in transit that the city has committed to. The creation of complete communities is a guiding principle of the strategy, supported by walkable and cycleable neighbourhoods that are linked seamlessly into public transit provisions. Core aims of the strategy are to focus community activity around transit stations and areas which display opportunities for public amenities, to provide a variety of housing choices to residents, coupled with a range of pricing models, and to ensure job space and diversity.

Mid-rise buildings, coupled with rail transit and district energy systems are being billed as the new North American best practice. In the case of the Cambie Corridor, residents were most accustomed to single-family homes or bungalows, but mid-rise developments provided a level of density that was both politically viable as well as palatable for new and existing residents of the area. With the aim not to overwhelm the existing neighbourhoods, development heights are stepped down as the distance from transit points increases, resulting in peripheral areas with gentler densities. The plan embraces long-termism, with a 30-year outlook and aims to introduce around 14,000 more residents along the corridor, resulting in a net density of around 110-170 units per acre.

“That’s a transition for us because our development industry, and even the marketplace, has come to expect that densification will mean towers with views. I often hear that’s what sells in Vancouver, that’s what the market expects. On the other hand, our mid-rise projects do very well in the city. They can be more sustainable. They can even be more affordable, and they are more acceptable to the public, [which] tends to be more negative to height than they are to density...that helps with our entire discourse on densification in the city.”

BRENT TODERIAN
Vancouver Planning Director
As a planning strategy, mid-rise intensification policies must follow from clear, dedicated transport policy. Intensification strategies are well-motivated by environmental concerns of suburban sprawl and do well to stimulate interest in infill developments which support nodes of urban vitality.

Transport extension strategies including plans to extend the Bakerloo line beyond Elephant and Castle, the extension of the Northern line and ambitions to extend the DLR line to Bromley, are all set to contribute substantially to the prospects of new London residential hubs, and would set out clearly the routes and sites for mid-rise intensification. Access to public transport amenities has proven time and time again to be a key consideration in the selection of sites for mid-rise development. Proximity to transit options acts a natural draw for mid-rise development, creating almost self-identified sites which in turn should be bolstered by supportive planning policies as well as financial incentives.

London Councils argue that if the land around the eleven tube and railway stations which are on greenbelt land were to be developed within ten hectares, that more than 7,875 new homes could be produced with existing infrastructure links. Key here is the desire to capitalise on existing infrastructure, especially given proven timeframe of current infrastructure expansion projects. The urgent need for new homes in London means that we cannot rely on large-scale new developments and new infrastructure projects to provide a catch-all solution at a given future date - progress must be made annual to contribute meaningfully to new housing starts.

As a planning strategy, mid-rise intensification along transport corridors offers a strong long-term strategy in its ability to provide a diversity of new housing, to support local retail and services, and to boost transit ridership. Through the correct policies, the process of intensification through the promotion of mid-rise development can be closely associated with the supporting of city centre walkability, reducing city vehicle embodied energy, promoting energy efficiency in building construction, and the promotion of energy efficient apartment living.

“It’s so low the density of suburbia…it’s ridiculously low…10% of the footprint of suburban London, you supply all 2/3rds as a whole, from the point of view of what it can yield up by way of additional supply. The number that I hand out is that if you double the density of only 10% of the footprint of suburban London, you supply all of the housing London needs for the next 20 years…there are all sorts of birds you can kill with one stone…there are all these poorly function high streets with significant ratios of vacant retail property, with hard to let residential accommodation above them, which would be ideal places for downsizers to live in and they would come from under-occupied, poorly performing semi-detached, inter-war housing that is certainly reaching the end of its sustainable life and so there’s a really interesting dynamic that one would postulate.”

BEN DERBYSHIRE Managing Partner, hta Architects

A consideration of mid-rise intensification efforts around the world suggest that where take-up has been low, the shortcomings has not been of the form itself, but rather supportive financial and market considerations. International case studies suggest the primary obstacles to such a strategy include competition from greenfield sites, risks associated with an uncertain planning process, the cost of remediation, as well as public perceptions around brownfield. Developers have advocated a range of financial tools to incentivise: grants tax assistance, loans in order to address risks of remediation process. These tools are rarely part of the mid-rise discussion.

A policy of transport corridor intensification through the promotion of mid-rise densification promises to deliver more housing appropriately, to uphold urban design principles which privilege residents, and to allow more people access to existing amenities and contribute to the vitality of sites around London.

**RECOMMENDATION** IDENTIFY KEY TRANSPORT CORRIDORS (EXISTING AND FORTHCOMING) WHICH ARE SUITABLE FOR INTENSIFICATION THROUGH MID-RISE HOUSING. DEVISE SUPPORTIVE PLANNING PROCESSES, FINANCE SCHEMES AND LAND ASSEMBLY STRATEGIES TO ENABLE INTENSIFICATION SCHEMES.

**CASE STUDY:**
**TORONTO, CANADA**

The City of Toronto has identified mid-rise buildings (from 5-11 storeys) as a means to address the future growth of the city. The mid-rise form has been promoted as the desirable form for intensification along the identified routes in the city. Toronto's Urbanising the Avenues policy initiative seeks to promote and support urban intensification through mid-rise development. The policy identifies almost 300km of property frontages along urban corridors in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). These Avenue sites are identified as being generally underutilised and which can be successfully made denser - while still privileging liveability factors - through mid-rise developments. Projections under the initiative indicate the potential for a new mid-rise housing market approaching several hundred thousand units for the regional area, and that the initiative could make a substantial contribution towards meeting the policy goals of regional and local Official Plans, particularly with respect to the goal of ‘complete streets’. If half of the identified sites are developed in line with mid-rise recommendations, the Avenues could accommodate 250,000 new residents. Studies of the Avenues initiative recommended as-of-right zoning for mid-rise development based on built form criteria, expedited approval processes and a reduction in development charges and fees in order to encourage developers to take up the mid-rise form as outlined in the policy.

At their best, Avenues can serve as a community focal point, complete with community-oriented retail and services, supported by a residential population housed in sensitively and well-designed buildings.

**City of Toronto Official Plan Review (2012)**
Infill Strategies

Unused or underused sites within London’s existing urban fabric are key in meeting London’s housing needs in a sustainable way. Small and medium size brownfield sites within existing urban fabric present a range of development projects which stand to contribute substantially to London’s housing shortfall. Mid-rise developments have the capacity in sites like these to contribute substantially to density figures, while contributing positively to the existing urban realm, rather than alienating it.

Sites of two hectares or less within London’s existing built areas hold great potential for housing provision. Rarely considered in calculations of available land for housing projects, these small sites have the advantages of pre-existing communities and urban infrastructure into which new housing can be designed. Advocates for this housing strategy have argued that the constant supply of small sites, coupled with the opportunities of old buildings, has the potential to meet London’s housing needs for at least the next 25 years. The environmental benefits of repurposing buildings are also considerable. Research has shown that the building of each new home can use as much energy as required to run all the heating and electricity in that home for 40 years. An urban infill strategy also reduces pressures to expand out of the bounded edges of the city, reducing problems of development sprawl. The conversion, upgrading and remodelling of existing dwellings, coupled with small scale infill projects presents the perfect opportunity to engage small builders and local suppliers in meeting the needs of first-time buyers, low income households and those who privilege a more urban lifestyle.

While not all brownfield sites are appropriate for mid-rise development, the form presents a strong compromise between density and desirability. While few sites are appropriate for the type of high cost skyscrapers that are populating London’s Zone 1, a wealth of potential exists for mid-rise in Zones 2 and beyond, effectively acting as a segway between the high-rise centre and the low-rise suburbs. Indeed, the mayor’s office has called for significant contributions to the housing stock to be made in Zones 3-6, the form of which should provide for a range of housing options that cater to the varying needs of London’s residents. Mid-rise also has the capacity to contribute appropriately to historic areas of London’s centre where historic forms and aesthetics cannot be compromised by high-rises. Here, mid-rise presents the most considered approach, and one that is more likely to gain the approval of existing residents. The market for exclusive high-rises is limited outside of London’s prime centre, and as such another form needs to be championed - one which supports community building, strong urbanistic values and a good quality of life for residents. Mid-rise development answers this call.

London’s extensive public transport network favours urban infill projects as many have cited a quality and dependable surface transit system as crucial in the success of mid-rise development. A strategic focus on existing sites within London’s urban fabric will allow for a greater proportion of new houses to be located in areas with established access to existing infrastructure, supporting sustainable patterns of development.

Key here too is the low transport operational energy use by denser, central city households (up to 51% less than suburban counterparts). Studies show that a density and diversity of facilities is sufficient to encourage a higher level of pedestrian activity and to discourage car ownership. Research has noted that the average city apartment household uses just 10% as much energy as the average suburban household.

Research suggests that the capacity of small-to-medium brownfield sites to contribute to housing numbers is often underestimated. In previous years, government statistics suggested that up to 77% of new development is being realised on previously developed land, while local level estimates suggested that 40% of new housing can be delivered on such sites. The GLA has estimated that there is capacity in London for 360,002 new homes on existing sites, while other studies suggest this capacity to be much greater - with the potential to provide over 60,000 new homes. Small sites of less that 0.25 hectares alone capable of providing 33,000 new homes over the 10 years. Previous research into brownfield capacity suggests that 45% of small sites have not come forward for development, despite being identified for development almost a decade earlier. An underestimation of the capacities of brownfield sites risks more greenfield land being sacrificed than is necessary to increase housing supply, and furthermore, risks undermining redevelopment prospects for existing brownfields.

Infill strategies can help to sustain existing vibrant neighbourhoods or indeed enliven other areas of the city which stand to benefit from a denser mix of residents, retail and amenities. Infill strategies can produce walkable neighbourhoods through the provision of such density. UN-based studies reveal the economic value of walkable neighbourhoods. An economic analysis of neighbourhoods in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area reveal that neighbourhoods that score higher in walkable measures also attract higher office, residential and retail rents and support higher retail revenues and resale residential values. These findings should encourage developers and investors to seek out sites with greater walkability potential, usually existing sites around transit amenities. One skyscraper does not walkability make, and developers too should be encouraged by these findings to consider the benefits of the creation of walkable streets, rather than focusing on importing density alone. Furthermore, the clustering of walkable places results in great economic returns in these areas that an isolated walkable area achieves on its own.

This analysis makes the case for the development of walkable districts, and encourages a citywide, holistic view of transit and walkability. These findings also suggest that planning authorities should incorporate assessments of walkability in strategic economic development plans, and that policy and planning effort should be made to overcome obstacles to walkability.

Despite a rise in the demand for walkable neighbourhoods close to the amenities of the city, walkability research suggests that private and public sector barriers continue to complicate this form of development. Municipal policies, public funding biases, and planning policies continue to favour low-rise, suburban-style developments, exacerbating the uncertainties that financial services have in underwriting higher density, mixed-use urban developments. Research has noted that the real estate finance industry current lacks the experience and institutional commitment to deliver mixed-use, walkable sustainable mixed-use projects.

Neighbourhoods with poorer walkability features were also shown to correlate with residents with lower educational attainment and lower income levels. Once again, the inequalities of the built form signal, and exacerbate, a range greater of social and economic inequalities.

RECOMMENDATION

ESTABLISH DEDICATED INFILL STRATEGIES, INCLUDING ACCURATE SCOPING TO IDENTIFY THE TRUE CAPACITY OF SMALL- AND MEDIUM BROWNFIELD SITES AROUND THE CITY. ESTABLISH FINANCIAL AND PLANNING INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE MID-RISE DEVELOPMENTS TO FILL IN THE APPROPRIATE GAPS IN LONDON’S BUILT FABRIC.
CASE STUDY:
Highbury Gardens, London

The Highbury Gardens scheme on Holloway Road in Islington, one of London’s northern boroughs, illustrates well the immense potential of mid-rise infill projects. The development is comprised of 119 one, two and three bedroom homes built around a communal landscaped courtyard. Previously a brownfield site, the £5 million development was delivered by First Base, in partnership with the Homes and Communities Agency, Southern Housing Group and The Prince’s Foundation, highlighting the importance of collaboration between the public and private sectors in bringing well-designed homes to the capital.

The Highbury Gardens scheme looks outside itself, seeking to contribute to the wider regeneration of Holloway Road, and to find support with local neighbours. The scheme responds to its context through a strong reference to the best of London’s vernacular architecture, while designing for functionality and sustainability. 20% of the energy demand of the development is met by on-site renewable energy, and the entire development achieved Level 3 on the Code for Sustainable Homes.

Designed by Porphyrios Associates, Highbury Gardens was awarded ‘Best New Place to Live’ in the 2012 London Planning Awards, and ‘Best Affordable Housing Project’ at the London Evening Standard’s New Homes Awards. The development was designed for physical and cultural longevity, rather than short-term turnover.

Key to the success and appeal of the development has been its emphasis on mixed tenure. A complementary mix of private homes and shared ownership schemes ensures that the scheme can offer a range of housing options for a variety of residents. Highbury Gardens presents a visionary scheme that defies the pessimism of the current housing market, which increasingly segregates residents based on their level of income. The scheme proves that thoughtful, beautiful mid-rise infill schemes are viable and should be championed.

BEN DENTON on Highbury Gardens:
“It’s a lovely human-scale, and it works fabulously well. And it’s amazing how people go around that scheme and they love it. Everyone says, this is the sort of place I’d love to live. They think it’s a private scheme—when we say it’s about 60% affordable and 40% private, and people are really thrilled by that. And it just shows, that wasn’t an expensive scheme, it was just thoughtfully thought out, very traditional architecture with a modern building behind. We know if we said ‘that’s the sort of scheme we’d like to put here’ people would go ‘I love it’; because it’s a bit of London, it’s the sort of naturalness of London.”

ELLIOT LIPTON on Highbury Gardens:
“Highbury Gardens worked as a mid-rise scheme because it is in a location where that height was guided by surrounding buildings. The site benefited from local planning guidance that indicated that residential of that certain height would be acceptable. We knew at Highbury that we were going for that building form - the question was how could we deliver a building that was sympathetic to it and that actually didn’t look monolithic in its creation and we chose to do that by using a mix of building shapes, of building heights and of building fabrics to try and break down the building so that it appeared as a series of smaller buildings, even though we had the efficiency of one building and through doing that, we actually managed to get a relatively high density on the site, without affecting our neighbours.

The other perspective there is that by doing that we actually could also create a community that worked...and we could create a community that worked because of the shared public space in the middle and a good mix of family accommodation size and we have a good mix of people of different income groups.”
Large-scale new builds often command the most public and political attention when considering proposed solutions to London’s housing needs. This category of development refers to both large-scale projects within London, as well as developments proposed outside of London’s borders.

Large-scale development sites within London have often courted controversy. The highly complex process of redeveloping land under the economic and social pressures of a city like London demands both enlightened planning, as well as long-term strategic support from government, investors and planners alike. From the Olympic site in Stratford, the Convoys Wharf scheme, to the redevelopment of Earls Court, a number of large-scale schemes have faced contestations at local or wider city levels. Failures to address local needs, to accommodate existing community assets or to speak coherently of Earls Court, a number of large-scale schemes into existing urban fabric. Wider sites also present the opportunity to achieve densities with mid-rise blocks which meet the density figures than isolated high-rises do, to create traditional street networks which support smaller scale retail, active frontages and communal green spaces.

While it might be tempting to assign all necessary new housing supply to sites outside of the capital given the challenges encountered in building inside London’s boundaries, undertakings of this scale must be cautioned with considerations of time, viability and desirability. The potentialities for long-term strategies are key - striking a counter-point to the short-termism that has informed so much new development in London. Politically volatile, and economically sensitive, large-scale developments must be built around consent, benefit from local insight, and take as their goal the creation of desirable urban forms which will enable communities to grow and prosper in the long term. Here, mid-rise can be used strategically to define primary corridors of economic activity and transit, as well as provide appropriate densities which allow new developments to use precious land resources strategically and sustainably.

Large-scale developments of this type are also subject to time-consuming planning and approval processes, and are vulnerable to economic downswings as well as political turnovers. The development of Ebbsfleet Valley, a large site in North Kent, illustrates this volatility well. A site formerly used for industrial purposes, the Ebbsfleet Valley scheme proposed to support a new community of 40,000 through the provision of 10,000 homes. Due to take shape over two decades, the scheme formed part of the larger Thames Gateway strategy. This wider strategy, reaching across an area which covers east London, north Kent and south Essex has the capacity for 200,000 new homes which could house around half a million people.

Ebbsfleet International station, a high-speed railway line which opened in 2007, was intended to serve as a lead for the larger development scheme, providing services to continental Europe as well as into London’s Kings Cross daily. One phase of the scheme, the Eastern Quarry development, received planning permission in 2007, but following the 2008 financial crisis, the development failed to progress and has been resigned to a what-could-have-been scheme. Undertakings at the scale of Ebbsfleet need a degree of political and economic momentum that can be sustained through downturns - and the acute need for housing in London and indeed the greater South East, might just be able to provide such momentum.

**Recommendation** conduct thorough feasibility studies into the potentialities of large-scale development sites on the outskirts of London. Should a site come forward to planning, all measures should be taken to learn from best practices in order to provide affordable, dynamic and sustainable neighbourhoods for new residents. Mid-rise housing should be considered as a tool to define central corridors of economic and transport activity in such developments. For large-scale sites within London, mid-rise stands to contribute meaningfully to an urban form which supports new streets, new communities and new pieces of city.
Research on multi-storey estates across the capital reveals a set of deep flaws time and time again. Poor quality buildings, poor use of space, poor maintenance and poor integration with surrounding areas all contribute to the dissatisfaction of tenants and unpopularity of the type across numerous housing preference studies. Studies show that even with socio-economic conditions held equal, multi-storey housing is associated with a number of poor social outcomes. While costly maintenance, high service levies and high rents can produce extremely high-quality, desirable living spaces, London’s history of multi-storey estates has cast a dubious light as to the appropriateness of these housing forms for the majority of the population. Social tenants make up 21% of all households in Britain, but 79% of those live on the 5th floor or above, and children in social housing are 16 times more likely to live on or above the 5th floor than children not in social housing.

The poor quality of so many estates built during the 1960s has been proven time and time again, with problems of insulation, damp, poor light and other maintenance issues having plagued residents for decades. The poor assembly of many of these estate sites approaches the end of their means through building tower blocks to heights beyond which the panels were intended for. In the haste to build after the second World War, many untested, new design theories were put into practice, with the best of intentions, but with disastrous results, and I’m thinking particularly of the brave new world of housing estates, the system-built, deck-access variety, and the tower block, which quickly became sink estate all across the country - unloved, and relentlessly, depressingly ugly, with endless wasted access of public open space and a dearth of private space.

A desire to move away from this housing type, which has come to embody the housing divide and inequality of the built environment in London, has ignited a variety of calls for estate regeneration. The poor use of space on many of these sites has left large tracks of land underused and rendered unnecessary, and the possibilities for housing more people in better quality housing deserves serious attention. Estate regeneration, cannot, however, become a mechanism for sterilisation. Schemes which push lower income residents to far out rehousing facilities, which drastically reduce the number of affordable homes on a given site and which fail to protect mixed tenure ambitions, only compound the economic and social problems facing London. Instead, estate regeneration needs to consider first and foremost the needs of existing residents. The capacity of many estate sites to accommodate greater numbers of residents within a more enduring and supportive built form is deserving of political attention in the city, but this cannot come at the expense of what these estates originally offered - affordable housing across the city.

Indeed, the threat of vast areas of London being pulled out of the reach of so many Londoners has never been so strong and the ambition of mixed tenure communities never more deserving of civic and political attention. Multiple re-imaginings of estate sites have come to the fore in recent years, especially as the building stock of many of these sites approaches the end of its (historically short) life span. Virtually every scheme employs mid-rise typologies in order to re-stitch estate sites into their surrounding neighbourhoods, to support re-instated street networks and to provide residents with the type of housing they have expressed preference for. More ground level units provide for the needs of the elderly and disabled, while the spatial arrangement options of more units allow for more privatised and shared green spaces. Various research exercises have proven that densities do not have to suffer as a result of employing the mid-rise form.

Estate regeneration is an endlessly complex, sensitive and vulnerable process. It also presents an opportunity for bold visions of inclusivity, for commitments to quality building stock for all and to re-instate those urbanistic principles which support happier and healthier communities.

RECOMMENDATION 

DRIVEN BY LOCAL AUTHORITIES, COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES OF ESTATE REGENERATION THROUGH SHOULD BE EXPLORED. ANY REGENERATION SCHEME MUST REPLACE SOCIAL HOUSING ONE-FOR-ONE AND SHOULD CONTRIBUTE POSITIVELY TO THE SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN THE CITY THROUGH QUALITY HOUSING CONSTRUCTION.

People don’t want housing estates... they don’t want that kind of physical and social disjunction between the city that they own and privatised space with weird built form…. they just don’t want it anymore, and there’s no reason why they should have it.

BEN DERBYSHIRE

Managing Partner, hta Architects

In the haste to build after the second World War, many untested, new design theories were put into practice, with the best of intentions, but with disastrous results, and I’m thinking particularly of the brave new world of housing estates, the system-built, deck-access variety, and the tower block, which quickly became sink estates all across the country - unloved, and relentlessly, depressingly ugly, with endless wasted access of public open space and a dearth of private space.

HRH, THE PRINCE OF WALES

Barriers to Mid-rise

Despite the variety of opportunities for the strategic use of mid-rise development to meet London’s housing needs as outlined above, numerous barriers serve to prevent the form from being realised as it should in London. It is the case in identifying the barriers to this form that we find the strongest disincentives overlapping with most acute shortages in the market in terms of housing preferences. London’s market position, its planning system and its productive capacities are not aligned with the creation of residential schemes that accommodate the scale, diversity or vitality of London’s population.

“The dominant message about anything other than family accommodation, anything other than houses, is it suitable for family accommodation? (ie. can I put three-bedroom properties there and what are the implications of that going to be?). The second is a desire for an active street frontage - to make sure we’re not creating dead streets and we’re not creating streets that encourage antisocial behaviour...

Each of these is actually a solvable problem. When you look internationally, you don’t see these problems. So internationally, it is perfectly acceptable that families live on the fifth floor or the sixth floor...they have to have appropriate space, they have to have appropriate storage and they need play areas - which can be a community play area.

What we do know is that it is possible to deliver incredibly good housing that mixed different occupants from different backgrounds in a cohesive community...if you want to do that, some of the secrets are about trying to create a scheme with no visual differentiation between the product, trying to create a scheme with one management scheme so that everyone is treated equally so that no one can see any of the differences between the product. Where genuinely we’ve tried to make the building affordable to anyone no matter what class they’re of.”

ELLIOPT LIPTON Managing Director, First Base

Planning Barriers

Planning delays are often cited as a significant obstacle in attracting developers to mid-rise development projects. Uncertainty in the planning process, and the associated costs, acts as a disincentive to developers engaging with the mid-rise form. Third-party appeals are also cited as potential planning obstacles in the success of mid-rise schemes. The unpredictability of municipal or local planning approval processes is one of the most often cited barriers to developing mid-rise products. There is a dire need for greater certainty in planning approval processes and for faster processes.

Predictable policy and development application processes will aid the speed of housing delivery considerably. Studies of previous intensification efforts have indicated a preference for official status in city plans or in planning processes. In the London context, the city’s local authorities, with their devolved planning powers, might be better positioned to direct planning policy towards the mid-rise form.

The pre-zoning of land is often presented as one of the strongest disincentives overlapping with most acute shortages in the market in terms of housing preferences. London’s market position, its planning system and its productive capacities are not aligned with the creation of residential schemes that accommodate the scale, diversity or vitality of London’s population.£

The problem of where we are now versus thirty years ago, the cost of putting in a planning application is enormous, and therefore, it squeezes out the number of people who can afford to put in a planning application, and that’s why...there are less players now.

BEN DENTON
Strategic Director of Housing, Regeneration and Property, Westminster Council

An absence of a state-led vision for high street regeneration, or transport corridor development, and uncertainty around major high street infrastructure items continues to undermine confidence around certain forms of densification efforts.

Lack of infrastructure and public amenity planning can hamper viability of intensification efforts and thus planning support for mid-rise strategies should not be narrowly defined. Transit options and amenity accessibility often enable intensification, infill and large-scale new builds to the same degree as supportive housing policies.

Often, planning systems are more adept at dealing with the use or subdivision of land at the edges of cities, rather than with the redevelopment of existing urban areas, therefore dedicated intensification and infill strategies, as well as estate regeneration schemes, should be the attention of specialised, considered policies or design guidance proposals. Even identifying an intention to pursue intensification or infill schemes can assist in firming up policy imperatives.

“The economic pressure of the site does force people to try and maximise what they can get on the site…so you end up in this odd trade off, where actually in order to maximise the land value, you end up building a taller building or proposing a taller building. The disadvantage of that same taller building though, is that it might be less popular in the community. And so you’re trying to get this balance right…there are some points in the process where these issues are naturally at odds with each other, where you have a landowner who is interested in their position only, they go for value maximization

One set of pressures of local communities, another set of pressures is wanting housing/land value maximised...and the third set of questions: what are the requirements of the housing that we’re placing? Affordability is not a very difficult formula...what’s interesting about this country is that we’re now beginning to regulated minimum sizes and not taking account of the fact that we have different audiences....so the needs of a
1-bedroom person in employment is very different from the needs of a 1-bedroom person who is currently out of employment, or is in training or who is bringing up a child, and treating them all as the same seeks to simplify a very complex process.

Another way is to clarify, frankly, what it is that we’re debating in the planning process. Are we agreed that this is a very complex process.

Managing Director, First Base

Elliott Lipton, Managing Director, First Base

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CASE STUDY:
COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Copenhagen is often considered a model of sustainability and forward thinking urban planning. A world-leader in cycling provision, the city has promoted and sustained a strong cycling culture since the 1860s. The city’s urban form supports a network of attractive streets and a dynamic transit mode which has come to define the city.

The 1980s saw a period of re-urbanisation in Copenhagen, where the density of the city was intentionally increased through government policy. The government supported densification policies with a focus on mid-rise developments which supported existing infrastructure and spoke coherently to existing urban fabric. The strategy proved successful - the Østerbro district of the city, comprising primarily of 5-6 story residential buildings. saw a population density increase of 5.9% - exceeding the average density of Copenhagen as a whole. The area also supports a number of key city amenities and has, through its commitment to the mid-rise form, sustained an attractive, vibrant set of neighbourhoods.

Copenhagen often tops sustainability rankings, accolades which cite the quality of the built environment, as well as the urban form of the city which encourages compact, low emissions behaviour. Copenhagen is also known as a champion of urban liveability - the city’s coherent urban structure, its attractive streets and its walkable neighbourhoods contributing meaningfully to these rankings. Mid-rise buildings play no small part in enabling both of these strengths - enabling both environmentally friendly urban living, as well as beautiful neighbourhoods which are cherished residents and visitors alike.

The expense of elevators, noise abatements measures, loading and garbage requirements, in addition to the costs of poured concrete over 4-storeys all contributes to higher construction costs. Designing efficient footprints on tight sites can be more difficult than with larger developments, one of the factors hindering a number of infill projects.

Land is a crucial factor in determining the economic value of a mid-rise development - both in terms of cost and in terms of scale. ‘Ready-for-market’ land parcels are key here as fragmented ownership can act as a strong deterrent for developers. Difficulties in aggregating land into viable plot sizes can serve to deter developers seeking to embark on urban infill or intensification projects through mid-rise development. The uncertainty and holding costs associated with the timeframes of land assembly are key here. Poor economic scales for smaller developments can also serve as a deterrent. Land with residential planning permission can be worth hundreds of times more than farming land, almost doubling the cost of a new house.

The scarcity of land has also resulted in a narrowed and uncompetitive building industry. House-builders are devoting an increasing portion of their resources to sourcing sites that hold the potential to gain planning permission. At present, even the smallest rise in house prices fuels large increases in land values - encouraging land speculation rather than development.

Parking and elevator requirements are among the most commonly identified construction cost barriers. Parking requirements can demand precious space on tight sites, while underground parking costs can render developments unviable. The provision of efficient public transit options, which speaks to the greater goal of sustainable urban neighbourhoods, can aid in lessening parking requirements, as can policy which takes as its aim the reduction of reliance on private vehicular transport.

The importance of local retail spaces for successful densification schemes means that, just as with transit, policies and planning processes should be in place to support the creation and maintenance of such spaces. Ar-grade retail is the most preferable and recognisable form within new mid-rise developments, enlivening streets and promoting walkability. Local retail often too becomes adopted as community amenities - providing spaces for residents to meet and share experiences. Retail also contributes to the diversity of amenities in new communities, as well as to the economic diversity and resilience of a given area.

As building requirements and standards are often different according to usage, the inclusion of retail spaces in new mid-rise developments can be undesirable to developers. Unfairness with retail regulations and leasing practices can lead to retail being viewed as a liability in new developments.

Land value is only really the result of what somebody thinks they can do with it, and I suppose that tends to be in the centre of town, and if you’re in the centre of town logic says actually you’re likely to expect to live at higher density, to have a bit less light, you’re next to a tube station...it’s more logical to have more people there. You’re in an urban situation, and unless you’re in a massive conservation situation, where you’ve got stunning, contiguous, historic environment that you don’t want to put something weird into, then actually it seems logical to me to build something taller.
Finance Barriers

Finance requirements can act as a strong disincentive for developers looking to embark on mid-rise projects. As mid-rise units and apartments cannot be built, or typically sold, in increments, financing demands from banks - who require a certain level of ‘pre-sale’ commitments - can be a deterrent. Developers are often reported to be unwilling to accept this level of financial risk - especially without certain and supportive policies in place. Presale requirements can also constrain innovation in the field as investors with an interest in ‘standard’ products with a proven return are often more likely to invest in projects than owner-occupiers themselves. Reluctance from banks to finance new or different projects plays a role here too.

A consideration of possible financial incentives to encourage mid-rise development reveals both direct and indirect incentives. Direct incentives, such as the abatement of property taxes or development charges, are quick to implement but are often controversial. Indirect measures can include local authorities assisting developers with plot consolidation, and the provision of interest-free loans to assist in funding the non-residential elements of mixed-use, mid-rise projects. Developers used to the single family home or high-rise model have yet to embrace the mid-rise form, and thus supportive financial models which predict pricing and timing are often not as developed as for other residential forms.

Political Will & NIMBYism Barriers

Despite a common acknowledgement across the population in cities like London, Toronto and Sydney of the need for ‘smart’ growth in the face of growing urban populations and the shrinking availability of land, strong rational and emotional drivers continue to drive opposition to ‘intensification’ developments in city neighbourhoods. The identification of a type of public ‘sullenness’ around change in established neighbourhoods is key in exploring how mid-rise developments are presented. The feeling of bearing a disproportionate share of the costs of growing urban populations fuels a degree of anxiety. Support for smart growth can often stand side by side with opposition to higher density developments in existing neighbourhoods.

Adjustments by planners and politicians in the face of local opposition or developers’ demands often lead to compromised ‘smart growth’ developments which can be dismissed as mere tokenism to the ideals of sustainable and liveable development. Market constraints and land cost pressures can result in similar compromises. The priority to satisfy local constituents at the expense of densification goals often results in a disjunction between general policies promoting smart growth and specific projects which become caught in local conflicts.

A step change is needed in order to re-establish the mid-rise form. Political will is fundamental to this change. Political leadership is crucial in framing important choices facing today’s cities - decisions that inevitably involve trade-offs, and which demand a high level of clarity and decisiveness.

NIMBYism (A ‘not-in-my-backyard’ attitude which often opposed development) is only intensified when local stakeholders feel disassociated. Concerns can include: loss of neighbourhood character, increased traffic in the area, increased parking on streets, loss of privacy, concerns of infrastructure capacity, loss of open space and fear of gentrification.

“...if anything more needs to be done... maybe the Mayor... needs to stand on a platform and say: for the avoidance of doubt, if you want to get high density built in London, this is the form we want. I’m not sure if everybody has quite understood [the value of streets].... maybe people haven’t quite clocked what an effective mechanism a street is at every level... its not just an aesthetic thing, its not a nostalgic thing, it’s a highly effective template for constant urban renewal in the most sustainable and affordable way. There is nothing better that has ever been invented.”

BEN DERRYSHIRE Managing Partner, hta Architects

Housing Preference Barriers

Housing preference research often reflects a mismatch between desired housing type and existing stock. This mismatch can be traced to old building stock that is not being used optimally as well as to the failure of new housing stock to meet the desires of households.

The ideal of a large detached house near the centre of the city is often at the heart of housing preference findings. This ideal type gets to the heart of housing preferences: a valuation of good sized rooms and a desire for some form of outdoor space, while simultaneously valuing the convenience and dynamism of the city. Despite this, mid-rise housing can be seen to respond well to the desires of households.

The prevalence of ‘increased density’ are often met with suspicion and a degree of despair by local residents. While “high density” conjures up images of poorly spaced high-rise towers which do little to ameliorate themselves with their local context, much can be done to illustrate different potential configurations of medium and higher densities. Perceptions and experiences of density are ultimately informed by design quality and layout, and as such these elements hold the key to better introducing increased densities in neighbourhoods throughout the city. Engaging with various configurations, including mid-rise buildings, presents opportunities to explore how much-needed densities can be increased without overwhelming existing streets.

Housing preference studies also reveal a distinct preference for mid-rise over high-rise when it comes to rental accommodation. The public perception of increased density should not be approached as set. Acceptance of density can be affected by location and design as well as by the expectations of neighbourhood change and the ability of new schemes to offer economic and social benefits. The desire for more flexible internal spaces should be key in the consideration of the mid-rise form. As household types and family forms vary, the spatial needs of these groups change, and the flexibility of well-designed mid-rise housing is well poised to meet these.

Public engagement and participation need to be embraced in conjunction. This policy in order to promote densification. Studies suggest that policy can prove ineffective in affecting changes in public choices around residential preferences. Wide disparities between intensification visions and the densification of built form can exacerbate the poor public perception of densification schemes.

Studies on British housing preferences reveal a distinct disinterest in more compact built forms, despite widespread recognition of the benefits of denser urban communities. The best way to overcome these prejudices is well-designed, strategic housing developments which take local character into account and do not alienate residents from their neighbourhoods. Wider promotion of the need for densification and of the threats to London if such policies are not pursued well also do well to turn more Londoners in favour of denser neighbourhoods. Accordingly, if the current crisis of housing affordability in the city is understood to be tied to current supply problems, more can be done to pursue residents to accept new housing developments. Previous experience with intensification strategies around the world suggest that public education and participation projects can successfully aid the integration and acceptance of new housing units within existing neighbourhoods.
Developers ultimately react to the demand evident in the market, but a mere demand for density is not enough to ensure the type of sustainable, enduring housing that the capital needs. Demand must become more articulate - pressing developers and policy-makers to deliver not only the numbers of housing the capital so badly needs, but too the quality of housing that will ensure of greater quality of life for new and existing residents around the city.

**CASE STUDY:**
**SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA**

The South East Queensland Region is one of the fastest growing regions in Australia, with population growth driving greater demand for housing and employment. The South East Queensland Regional Plan for the 2009-2031 period anticipates that 50% of new housing demand over next 20 years will be accommodated through urban infill developments. These developments will be achieved through both mid- and high-rise developments. This vision forms part of the Liveable Compact Cities Project, and has been proposed and supported by the region’s Council of Mayors. The strategy aims to utilise three pillars: policy, practice and the market, to achieve sustainable, smart growth for cities in the region. The mid-rise form championed by the Liveable Compact Cities Project is between 5-10 storeys, coupled with associated access to communal facilities and private open spaces.

Recent research in the region has seen the housing demand shift away from suburban detached dwellings in favour denser modes of living closer to city centres. These shifting preferences, as noted in cities around the world, suggest that people are opting for a type of lifestyle and amenity provision that is better served by more urban settings. Researchers note that the typical house in Australia has evolved from the “Australian Dream” home, with a sprawling footprint, to a more urban form of living, with associated dwelling sizes and public open spaces. An ageing population, coupled with an increase in single person households, has also influenced this shift away from suburban detached dwellings.

**Overcoming Obstacles**

1. **Learn from global best practices which have produced successful mid-rise neighbourhoods around the world**

   Admired cities around the world have engaged with the mid-rise form, and planning strategies which support the form can be identified. Moving from a view-based planning process, to one which gives builders more certainty about building typologies and expectations would go far in supporting a more productive housing sector. Cities in Canada, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries have all embraced development plans which promote densification where areas of economic activity is already ongoing, based on accurate assessment of infrastructure capacity, while promoting particular design standards and guidelines which ensure that new development does not alienate existing communities or corrupt existing streetscapes. A considered study of these strategies and accompanying planning regulations and financial support schemes would benefit housing strategies in the UK.

   The demand for housing in London is not driven by a desire to live in any particular kind of housing - it is driven by a desire to live in the city itself - to benefit from its numerous amenities, its diversity of experiences and its wealth of opportunities. The quality of life associated with this desire - as well as the impact on the city itself - is determined by the form the built environment takes. The relevance of urban design principles, including legibility, adaptability, has been well established across planning and urbanism literature - and to a degree by the public - but the question remains of how these principles manifest in the economic reality of today’s property market. Reflections on the experiences of other cities in addressing housing shortages, in promoting mid-rise strategies and in maintaining quality alongside quantity can illuminate London’s current debate.

2. **Encourage inward investment into intelligent mid-rise developments, rather than high-rises which only cater for a minority of households**

   The slew of high-rise developments which are currently finding space in London are typically high-cost, foreign funded, private developments which offer housing out of the reachs and needs of the average Londoner. The mid-rise housing type offers up a less known model of development which is potentially less easily approached by international investors, aiding in the differentiation of our housing stock and creating a space for smaller developers and investors to enter the market. The comparatively low cost of mid-rise projects also goes a way in the promotion of affordable housing, as developers are not forced to seek the returns necessary to cover the costs of the type of glass tower populating Canary Wharf, for example.

   Mid-rise developments speak to the legacy of some of the most popular housing in the country. The mid-rise mansion block has the potential to stand as a good English type - a housing model to take pride in and embrace as a housing type that accounts for the needs of a variety of residents, that privileges community and which support vibrant streets and neighbourhoods.
Engage with financial and construction cost support strategies which promote mid-rise schemes and in turn support a wider range of house builders.

Economics by and large presents the biggest barrier to mid-rise development. Market conditions, often exacerbated by the other barriers identified here, present the development of mid-rise schemes, particularly at the small - to medium-scale. As such, government needs to respond in kind, considering a range of economic incentives to promote mid-rise schemes in strategically identified sites. As the form becomes more prevalent in new developments and general economic conditions strengthen, these financial incentives can be scaled back as appropriate. What is needed at this point in time is a kick-start - a laying bare of priorities for the future development of the city, coupled with planning, financial and political support for these priorities. London needs to see successful, attractive mid-rise developments take hold in order to foster a greater sense of the potential for sustainable development in the city.

Case studies and interviews suggest a range of financial strategies that can support mid-rise schemes. Tax reform options are oft cited, with suggestions of property tax exemptions over a given period to kick-start development at identified sites, as well as tax incentives allocated to particular types of schemes. Disincentives around land hoarding can also be implemented through taxation schemes. Many calls have been made to explore a mechanism with could channel funds from borouhgs with higher property values to subsidise affordable housing in the city’s outer borough where land is cheaper and more abundant91.

Comprehensive study to determine the construction costs of each of the density strategies outlined above is crucial in assessing viability models and in identifying leverage points for support. Transparent information around the costs and charges of each development strategy would be key in establishing an environment of greater certainty for housing providers. Construction costs often present barriers to the deliverability of mid-rise schemes. An increase in the resources and labour available to the construction sector specialising in mid-rise projects could help incentivise the form. Exploring alternate methods of construction, including wood-frame construction and modular off-site methods, has also been identified as key in approaching questions of affordability, especially for smaller development schemes. Engagement with new low-cost materials for higher density schemes will further inform viability models for the schemes outlined above, and stand to positively affect the affordability problems the city faces. Comprehensive comparative studies around the costs of upgrading existing buildings, against those of building new infrastructure will also aid in the costing of densification strategies.

Promote planning policy clarification and efficiency in order to incentivise mid-rise development.

The costs of submitting a planning application and the lag associated with the planning process are often prohibitive to smaller players in London’s housing market, often disinsentivising those who are inclined to produce mid-rise schemes. Increasing the ease of application and reducing waiting times for applications that meet densification aims would provide strong mechanisms to shape housing provision.

Incentives in local planning schemes can include the discontinuity of non-conforming uses, the requirement for a diversity of housing types and assisting with the amalgamation of lots to enable sites suitable for mid-rise developments. The establishment of statutory timeframes for feedback on non-planning consents would also serve to streamline the planning process.

**CASE STUDY**

**EXPLORING WOOD-FRAME MID-RISE CONSTRUCTION**

Wood-framed mid-rise structures have seen a surge in support in recent years. Longstanding challenges to permitting wood-frame construction to greater heights are rooted in concerns from fire chiefs over increased safety risks. Wood-frame construction can offer substantial cost savings over poured concrete structures for the 6-storey type - translating into more affordable homes. Studies have estimated savings of between 15-20% of construction costs - variable according to requirements like parking and fireproofing92. This type of cost saving is the type of code change needed to kick-start the mid-rise market in a city where high-rise have become something of a default type. New wood-based construction solutions include light wood frame construction (up to 6 storeys), heavy timber frame buildings (up to 10 storeys), cross-laminated timbre applications (up to 10 storeys) and hybrid construction methods.

The use of wood-frame construction methods for mid-rise development can boast the following advantages93: low energy usage in relation to concrete structures, an ease of insulation to high standards, requiring less energy in construction and emitting less carbon. Cross-lamination timbre construction is being increasingly adopted in mid-rise developments around the world. Advantages include shorter construction times, minimal waste and noise during construction, competitive costing, the use of renewable materials, good seismic and fire performance.

Changes to the British Columbia Building Code in 2009 permitted the construction of wood frame buildings up to 6-stories, up from the previous limit of 4-stories. The changes in building code have been noted as having an immediate positive impact on the local economy. Similar changes have been championed in Ontario, with an eye to ‘unlock the potential of the new mid-rise market’. Predicted benefits of permitting wood-frame construction to this height include an increase in jobs, in affordable housing, in taxation and a minimising of the carbon footprint of building construction.

The dilution of technical standards and minimal house space standards mean that housing quality is increasingly dependent on individual developers and project specifics, rather than beholden to enforceable independent standards. The Mayor’s latest housing strategy proposes to “continue a dialogue” to determine how best to ensure appropriate space standards, and requires all new homes to conform to existing design standards.

Towards the end of 2013, it was announced that all existing standards required by local authorities would be put out of commission, requiring councils to review any local plans that require standards above the minimum level. While seeking to reduce building costs for volume house-builders which could enable the building of more homes, this increase in quantity risks long-term sustainability if new homes are not liveable, flexible or enduring. A short-termism is present here which threatens the longevity of London’s housing stock, reducing requirements for quality down to the lowest common denominator. Senior GLA officials have warned that if the current national housing standards review compromises London’s existing space standards, that developers will have an even freer reign on development in the capital and the potential for poor housing standards will only be exacerbated.

Standards and building codes, especially those tailored to the specific needs of a particular locale, have a key role to play in the promotion of certain forms and in the prevention of poor quality housing which enervates the quality of life its residents. If London’s proud mid-rise legacy is to be upheld and promoted, guidelines and standards for the form need to be revisited and simplified so that developers and investors can engage with the form more easily.

“If you look at Paris... this sort of building typology exists and works well, it meets the requirements of the city, and everyone gets on, and it’s a very good use of land without creating some of the taller buildings that can raise concerns. Development isn’t just about the buildings, or the open spaces, we know what matters is place-making... the buildings become secondary so you can have buildings at the Highbury [Gardens] scale that fit as part of the community and part of the urban fabric. We need to be clearer that there is a housing typology of mid-rise that works, that delivers significant benefit to the local community, that allows front doors on streets, but also encourages economic returns. The extra development costs often associated with mid-rise schemes can be recovered through higher unit rates achieved by employing quality design techniques.

“Keep communities at the heart of redevelopment in order to ensure that London produces the housing Londoners want.”

As the economic and political pressures for new housing continue to grip the city, London risks sacrificing quality for quantity. Ambitions for community-led development and fair consultation processes are often stunted by the high stakes of development projects which pit developers, local authorities and residents against each other. Expanding the type of sites, housing forms and housing providers that contribute to London’s housing market can alleviate this pressure.

Quality engagement strategies which bring together a variety of stakeholders, which set clear communication channels and which allow for genuine integration of feedback into development plans are fundamental in achieving local buy-in, establishing trust and ultimately in ensuring the viability of schemes. Community engagement helps to keep public and private interests accountable and should foster a sense of ownership which aids the integration of new neighbourhoods.

Consultation with residents and local stakeholders is the surest way to calibrate the integral aspects of any redevelopment in order to ensure that London’s housing market can accommodate the challenges of the future and the needs of our other cities with a pock-marked skyline.

If we look at London’s skyline and compare it, say to Paris where up to now building heights are regulated far more precisely, we are immediately struck by how much less it is protected here than abroad. The current debates about tall buildings here in London would have been unnecessary and superfluous in Paris where tall buildings have been concentrated... outside the historic area which of course continues to attract tourists and their spending power. And in Berlin too, where an immense programme of reconstruction and regeneration has gone on...the city leaders have insisted upon rigorous limitations to the height of new buildings. These kind of approaches can help to achieve a far more coherent sense of harmony and civic self-confidence than the alternative, free-for-all that leaves London and our other cities with a pock-marked skyline.

HRH, THE PRINCE OF WALES

*New Buildings in Old Places*, 2008

ELLIO LIPTON MANAGING Director, First Base

Use design guidance and building standards to promote quality development which speak to London’s great mid-rise legacy and preserve London’s built identity.

Stronger design guidelines and building standards are crucial directing the development of good quality housing which is key to thriving, healthy communities. In order to avoid mid-rise schemes which deprive residents of the space, light and beauty that support a good quality of life, design guidelines and best practices must be established. A key message from previously failed projects is the ability of one ‘high-value’ compromise to reduce the quality of living across an entire residential development. Compromises on room space, on light levels or on green space can severely compromise the success of residential projects.

If quality design techniques are employed, the development values of sites can be retained or improved through mid-rise schemes, producing both enduring beautiful homes, as well as encouraging economic returns. The extra development costs often associated with mid-rise schemes can be recovered through higher unit rates achieved by employing quality design techniques.

“...developers and investors can engage with the form more easily...”

056 HOUSING LONDON

A MID-RISE SOLUTION

057
Invest in infrastructure which supports the feasibility of new mid-rise developments and allows communities to thrive.

Policy alone, without appropriate amenity investment, will not be enough to ensure the scale and form of development advocated here. Investment in public transport, parks, open spaces, streetscape improvements and cultural amenities is perhaps one of the strongest strategies available to authorities to encourage development and to support mid-rise housing demand.

The draw of new mid-rise developments, whether they be in existing neighbourhoods or large new sites sit depend to a large degree on these amenities. Without the upgrading and expansion of London’s tube and rail network, intensification strategies targeted along transport routes will not gain the critical momentum to ensure long-term success. Furthermore, the upkeep and expansion of London’s urban green spaces is crucial. These are key amenities which draw in demand and sustain communities through the provision of spaces to meet, play and share experiences. Libraries and public markets demand much the same attention given the key socio-cultural role they play in community development.

A careful consideration of the capacities of our water and sewerage systems is absolutely vital in the consideration of macro-scale infrastructural investments. London’s ancient sewerage system is set to undergo large-scale refurbishment, but pressures on the system must be eased through the implementation of better water use management practices. The use of sustainable urban drainage systems, for example, should be absolutely imperative in any new development in and around London, helping to manage water flows more efficiently, with simultaneously promoting greater biodiversity in our neighbourhoods.

Relentless growth without strategic, responsible planning is simply unsustainable. Every homes, street and neighbourhood contributes both to the vibrancy of the city, but too to the pressures weighing down on its infrastructure. Every effort should be made to promote sustainable development which does not place unnecessary pressures on London’s existing assets.

We have endured for far too long the prevailing lack of courtesy within the public realm and the time has come to reinvent good manners in the way we build. Can it not be modern to do to others as you would have them do to you? First of all, [we need] recognition that sustainability actually means building for the long-term, 100 years, rather than 20 years.

Secondly, because of this, it is worth building in an adaptable and flexible manner, reassessing and reusing existing buildings wherever possible. Thirdly, it is worth building in a manner that fits the place, in terms of materials used, proportion, layout, climate ecology and building practices. Fourthly, it is worth building beautifully in a manner that builds upon tradition evolving it in response to present challenges and utilising present-day resources and techniques. And finally, it is worth understanding the purpose of a building, or group of buildings, within the hierarchy of the buildings around it and responding with an appropriate building type and design.

Doing this often implies the composition of a harmonious whole, rather than the erection of singular objects of architectural or corporate imperatives.

Such principles, in my experience, tend to create added social and environmental value, as well as commercial value. They apply whether building anew or adapting existing buildings. We all need to consider the meaning of heritage and recognise that sustainability is achieved by creating buildings that people will both want to use and be able to sue efficiently 100 years hence.

IRHN, THE PRINCE OF WALES

*New Buildings in Old Places*, 2008

Conclusion

London is facing threats to its vitality and vibrancy as a result of its failure to supply its population with the housing they need and deserve. A lack of affordability threatens to cripple the capacity of so many to keep London as their home, as well as the capacities of businesses to thrive and grow in the city.

Current patterns of residential development are not sufficiently catering for the variety of need in London, resulting in the increasing ghettoisation of both the poor and the rich. The mixed-tenure, diverse communities that London needs to thrive are increasingly under threat as entire areas of residential development move further and further out of reach of the average Londoner. While the current housing crisis has demanded much attention across all fields, the debate has largely focussed on aspects of quantity - crucial as they are - while largely ignoring the aspects of quality which will determine if new buildings and neighbourhoods will provide the type of housing that residents want and in which sustainable communities can take root. We are at risk of repeating the mistakes of the past by not reflecting on the type of housing our planning, political and economic systems is enabling. Building just for quantity, without a strategic and sustained focus on quality will only exacerbate London’s housing problems and indeed will result in the reoccurrence of these problems in the not too distant future. A long-term view, which privileges the needs of communities of residents across all ages groups and income streams, and which seeks to engage meaningfully with existing urban environments is the best way for London to rise above the current housing pressures.

Mid-rise residential housing, with its deep historical London legacy, has a key role to play in this long-term vision. Mid-rise has proven to create social, economic and environmental value and has successfully supported urban communities around the world. Through reflection on our past achievements and failures in the housing provision, coupled with a desire to learn from best practise of the world, London can once again adapt the mid-rise form as its characteristic housing offering.

Barriers of planning, of land and construction costs, of financing and of political will and public perception will need to be systematically tackled if the mid-rise form is to be successfully promoted in the city. Adopting supportive financial and construction cost strategies, widening opportunities in the house building sector and investing in key macro-infrastructure projects are all key in overcoming the obstacles that quality mid-rise housing faces in the capital. Furthermore, promoting design standards and including communities in the planning process will go far in ensuring that the new housing we build truly meets the needs of its future occupants.

The type of housing we are building, or indeed failing to build, in London demands urgent attention. Housing which meets the needs and promotes the well being of all residents in a city should be a fundamental right all of who live in a city and an aspiration for all housing policy. London risks turning its back on too many of its residents through failing to address the fundamentals of its housing crisis. If we are to build the homes, streets and neighbourhoods that will contribute positively to the future of the capital, London needs to take a more considered view of its housing stock and of the needs of the many that make their homes in the city. Without a fundamental shift in the way housing is being produced in the city, London stands to lose so much of the vibrancy and identity that has held it up as one of the world’s greatest cities. As we look forward to the future of the city, we need to take concrete action now, through providing quality, affordable, housing, that will enable the vision of the future we wish to see: inclusive, sustainable and harmonious.


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