

Responsibilities of housing developers

Westminster Hall debate

11 December 2024



Background

- Increasing house building and reforming the planning system have been made priorities for the government. In tackling these issues, government must also consider its commitments to the addressing climate and nature crisis, ensuring homes are fit for the future and that development works with nature, not against it.
- The government has set a target of building 1.5 million homes in England before the end of this parliament, an aim that was reiterated during Keir Starmer's Plan for Change [speech](#) last week.
- A Future Homes Standard is being developed to decarbonise homes, due to be published early 2025.
- A Planning and Infrastructure Bill is expected next year to reform the planning system to "get Britain building". With competing interests for a finite supply of land, there is an urgent need for coherent strategic and spatial planning across England. The planning system should drive positive action on climate and nature, as well as the country's housing and infrastructure needs.
- The UK has been facing a housing crisis for many years. The National Housing Federation [suggests](#) nearly five million households will live in unaffordable homes by 2030 if action is not taken by government to build more affordable homes. This month, house prices hit a [record high](#), with the average home in the UK costing £298,083.
- More than a million homes in England have been given planning permission in the last 12 years but [have not been built](#) by developers.
- The government has legally-binding targets to [halt the decline in nature](#) and to [reach net zero](#) greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It has also committed to protect at least 30 per cent of land and sea for nature by 2030

How can we decarbonise new homes?

- Emissions from residential buildings [accounted for](#) a fifth of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK in 2022. The Climate Change Committee [says](#) the country will not meet its climate targets "without near complete decarbonisation of the housing stock".
- New homes must be fit for the future. They should be well-insulated, designed to run on clean power, and built in locations with good public transport and active travel links.
- Due in early 2025, the Future Homes Standard, is pivotal to ensuring new builds will not require retrofit in the years to come.
- Despite strong cross-party consensus, with [79% of MPs in support](#), recent government statements have suggested that solar panels will not be included as a default requirement for all new homes under the standards.
- This would be a missed opportunity as building homes to low carbon standards saves households money, as well as reducing emissions. Research from MCS Foundation [found](#) people living in a typical three-bedroom house semi-detached new build would save an average of £1,341 a year if it was equipped with solar panels, a heat pump, high-grade insulation and battery storage.

How can we build homes fit for the future?

- New homes must also be suitable for the more volatile weather the UK faces as a result of climate change. The [United Nations' Emissions Gap](#) report puts the world on course for between 2.6°C and 3.1°C of warming by the end of the century, so homes must be able to cope with more severe flooding and extreme heat.
- Developers must adopt a 'passive cooling first' approach to designing homes, with awnings and shutters providing shade and cross ventilation designed in. Without this approach, homes will become reliant on air conditioning, which is expensive, increases energy use, and produces heat waste that creates urban heat islands.

Building with nature

- A healthy natural world is essential for a thriving economy and society. With the right approach, housing developers can work with nature, boosting wildlife and habitats whilst also delivering much-needed homes. The incorporation of nature rich spaces in new housing developments must become the norm, not an exception.
- London Wildlife Trust and Berkeley Homes [partnered](#) on the Kidbrooke Village development near Greenwich, building 4,800 new homes whilst also creating 35 hectares of semi-natural open space for residents and to enjoy and wildlife to thrive.
- Barratt Developments is [working with](#) the RSPB on the Kingsbrook development in Aylesbury, where 2,450 homes will be built alongside measures like hedgerows, hedgehog highways and insect-friendly planting.
- To ensure developers take a more nature friendly approach, The Wildlife Trusts [recommend](#) that small-scale low-cost nature interventions like bat, bird, and bee bricks are set as a requirement, helping species like swifts whose 62% decline is driven by lack of nest sites.
- Biodiversity Net Gain became mandatory in 2024 for most developments and has huge potential to support nature's recovery. From November 2025 it is likely to be expanded to major infrastructure projects. The RSPB recommends that major developments use a tariff system where developers pay into a pot to be administered by a government agency so delivery can be delivered strategically. This could be much quicker and easier to navigate while securing much better outcomes for nature.
- Development should be avoided on protected nature sites, ensuring our most precious wildlife is protected, whilst avoiding the need for developers to deliver costly compensation to mitigate environmental harms.
- To speed up the planning process, more ecologists are needed in Local Planning Authorities. Even before the introduction of Biodiversity Net Gain, only 5% of planning authorities [believed](#) they had sufficient ecological resources to adequately scrutinise planning applications.

Suggested interventions

- Will the government introduce a legal requirement for solar panels to be installed on all new build homes?
- Will the government provide Local Planning Authorities with dedicated funding to enhance their ecological expertise to speed up the planning process?
- How will the government ensure new homes are built to cope with our future climate, particularly more severe flooding and extreme heat?