Written evidence from Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe, Lord Best, Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope and Lord Porter of Spalding

We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. This submission sets out a proposal for the creation of a new Lords Select Committee to look at the places we live in, the communities we build, and how we use the land around us. We do not suggest a specific title for this new committee. However, a Select Committee on Place Shaping or Creating Great Places could be two possibilities.

In this submission, we suggest what such a committee’s remit could cover. We demonstrate the case for this new committee by setting out the current and long-term relevance of this remit. We demonstrate our belief in its suitability to the manifest expertise of the House of Lords. This submission does not offer any judgement about the nature, characteristics, and effectiveness of the current committee system. We are aware that you have already received considerable written and oral evidence in this regard.

The case for the new committee and its remit

All the major UK political parties share an ambition to build around 300,000 homes a year. Despite this consensus, for decades, we have been falling well short of this target. So much so, that the National Housing Federation and Crisis recently identified a shortfall in England of four million homes. Efforts to build the homes we need will continue, rightly, to dominate policy making and analysis.

While we suggest that current and future barriers to house building should not be out with the committee’s remit, its major focus should instead be place making. In the effort to drive up supply of new housing for current and future generations, we agree with the House of Lords’ ad-hoc Select Committee on the Built Environment (2016) that a holistic view is beneficial. Where should the new homes go? What form should the new housing take?
What makes a great place to live? Are local councils and other locally-based anchor institutions like housing associations sufficiently empowered to be the leaders and guardians of place? Do we have the land, finance and skilled labour to achieve the scale of delivery the nation needs? How do we improve existing places to make them great, and build new great places?

Under this broad remit, we envisage the new Select Committee wishing to also consider:

- the impact of place and the built environment on physical and mental health and social and cultural life,
- sustainable development,
- quality and design,
- location,
• planning powers,
• land use, and how to value and classify land,
• impact on the lived experience of residents, including their voice within their communities,
• the actors involved in shaping and sustaining great places,
• ability to address intergenerational unfairness,
• infrastructure support for development, and other components,
• ability of places to adapt and expand over time.

In going beyond a remit of the built environment, a committee on place or place shaping will be able to look at the social, health, economic and infrastructure aspects that interact with housing, land and people to build great places. Places without appropriate services or spaces and structures for social interaction and social relationships, for example, are more likely to lead to social isolation and depression, which significantly increase mortality rates (Marmot, 2010). The role of councils, with powers over many of these elements, and other local anchor institutions like housing associations, will be fundamental to the comprehensive consideration of place shaping issues.

**Suitability of the new committee to the House of Lords**

The cross-cutting nature of the proposed committee’s suggested remit would make it suitable to the Lords’ tradition of non-departmental Select Committees. This would also be a way of retaining its distinctiveness to the Commons’ Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee, which we believe is important. We are keen to advocate a complementary committee, not a duplication.

The House of Lords currently lacks a permanent committee focused on domestic social policy. We would argue that the remit we envisage would bring large swathes of policy into scope, efficiently under a single umbrella, for deliberation and scrutiny. In covering the interaction between a broad range of policy themes, we would also argue that such a committee would fill a scrutiny gap left by the tendency to look at issues in siloes.

Such a committee would play to the strengths of the membership of the House of Lords. The committee’s remit would reflect the breadth of members’ expertise, in local government, housing, planning, design, architecture, infrastructure, development, social structures and public health. Social scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and planners could bring their knowledge and experience to bear. Questions of place are universal, but play out differently in urban and rural, northern and southern contexts. We envisage the committee having a UK-wide framework. It should look at experiences in the devolved nations, and what policy lessons might be transferable.

The breadth of the Lords’ membership will enable all perspectives to be given informed consideration. Significant numbers of Peers have a
current or historic association with local authorities and housing associations. Both act as local economic anchors, embedded in their communities. This deeply rooted sense of place, the social ties which develop, the investment by tenants and constituents of meaning into places, are at the heart of the sorts of issues that we feel such a committee should consider. Able to investigate national policy and funding decisions, the committee will be well-placed to recommend necessary reforms to empower, enable and support councils and other locally-based actors such as housing associations to meet their aspirations for their communities.

A committee for today and tomorrow

A committee on place shaping could appropriately address today’s pressing concerns, for example, how to meet a housing need gap of four million homes, or how to ensure interventions into the public realm bring existing and prospective residents on side. It would also enable questions of sustainable development and future proofing to fall within scope. For example, housing for older people, smart cities, carbon neutral homes and transport, modern methods of construction, shared living, and developments in flexible working.

Creating successful ‘places’ is more than just building quality houses, important though these are. It requires the provision of all the facilities for a good quality of life (RICS, 2016). We hope that the Liaison Committee will respond positively to our proposal to apply the Upper House’s varied and detailed knowledge to the many influences which shape our varied communities and make great places.

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