Written evidence submitted by Portsmouth School of Architecture and Radian Group

1. We hereby respectfully answer the call for evidence invited by the House of Lords Select Committee on National Planning Policy for the Built Environment. This written evidence is part of the outcomes from a research and innovation collaboration between Radian Group Limited and the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture in the area of custom build and urban design, focusing on how the definition of frameworks for the design and delivery of custom build housing can be interrelated with urban design codes in order to achieve recognised qualities of place and organisational coherence. Named participants in the project are Ms Andrea Smith (Radian), Dr Fabiano Lemes de Oliveira, Mr Dan Blott, Dr Silvio Caputo and Ms Rebecca Cooper (UoP).

Custom build

Q6. What role should the Government play in seeking to address current issues of housing supply? Are further interventions, properly coordinated at central Government level, required? What will be the likely effect upon housing supply of recent reforms proposed for the planning system?

2. We welcome the fact that the government is promoting custom build as a means of increasing the supply of new homes. Custom build refers to hybrid models whereby individuals or groups work with a specialist developer to help deliver their homes, along the scale between self-build and traditional development.

3. There is strong evidence to suggest that there is the capacity and demand to increase the number of custom-built housing projects in the UK. Although a recent survey found that over half of respondents reported they would be interested in developing a custom build home in the UK, custom build accounts for less than 10% of overall new housing supply. This is in stark contrast with elsewhere in Europe, where custom build is relatively commonplace. Harnessing this untapped potential can make a significant contribution to the housing supply both in terms of quantity and quality of homes.

4. An obstacle preventing this leap is that the current custom build market is fragmented and lacks profile, making it difficult to navigate for many. Raising awareness of the benefits of custom-build for the clients, developers and the public in general is needed; as well as guidance on the processes involved in such undertaking.

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2 National Custom and Self Build Association - NaCSBA (2011). An action plan to promote the growth of self build housing, 2.


4 National Custom and Self Build Association - NaCSBA (2011). An action plan to promote the growth of self build housing, 5.
Q7. How do we develop built environments which are sustainable and resilient, and what role should the Government play in any such undertaking? Will existing buildings and places be able to adapt to changing needs and circumstances in the years to come?

5. Through the formation of a consumer-centric process, clients inherently feel valued and more invested in the end product. As a consequence, as was the case of Vauban, a shared overall vision developed through strong level of participation may push for higher quality of design, both of buildings and open spaces, and for enhanced environmental performance.

6. This tends to lead to more socially sustainable and resilient communities. Those living in custom build projects move on average only once every 25 years, compared to the national average of once every 6 years.  

7. Living in the same house for over 25 years poses challenges of family growth and shrinkage, and the associated need for more or less space. Consideration for possible custom build expansion and retraction of homes catering for the specific needs of residents through their lives should be given at planning stage.

Q12. How effectively are communities able to engage with the process of decision making that shapes the built environment in which they live and work? Are there any barriers to effective public engagement and, if so, how might they be addressed?

8. Place quality is the central preoccupation of the Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment. Whilst in traditional development, developers tend to focus on controlling costs and profitability often at the expense of design quality, custom build neighbourhoods offer a contrasting alternative. It has the potential to substantially contribute to better design quality and place making in the country.

9. Creating strong communities has been a key objective in UK housing policy for a long time. A crucial structural weakness of the speculative housing model points to the fact that the end users are not involved in the process, one of the consequences being that social relationships with neighbours do not start until the spatial structure of the community has been built. Custom build housing on the other hand starts creating communities by forming relationships during the actual process of making place.

10. Strong involvement of future residents from the onset and throughout all phases of the development in the co-design of their homes and communal spaces, as exemplified by the case of Vauban in Freiburg, is a key factor in enhancing the levels of satisfaction, sense of belonging, community and identity.

11. The co-design process needs to be effectively led and managed. There is evidence to suggest that having too much choice may result in confusion rather than satisfaction,

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leading to a more time consuming and stressful process for the client. Clear goals, timelines, expectations and limitations need to be agreed early on.

12. Limiting the co-design process to customised modifications of dwellings may fail to attain neighbourhoods in which communities develop a long-lasting sense of ownership. Conversely, custom build projects in which the masterplan was co-designed tend to result not only in a good provision of dwellings but also in a successful public realm (and public spaces) for local communities and the city at large.

References


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