

Residential & Development

Experts assess likely impact of new national design guide

■ Guide launched at Tory party conference is intended to give residents more say in design of developments

Jessica Newman

At the Conservative Party Conference last week, housing secretary Robert Jenrick unveiled the government's new national design guide and pledged to give residents more power to fight "ugly developments".

The guide, which he said would replace "unenforceable design ideas", is part of a wider government push to encourage the design of more aesthetically pleasing developments and follows the publication in July of the controversial interim report from the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

But for all the talk of style, is there enough substance?

Jenrick claims the new design guide, which describes 10 characteristics of good design, including context, identity, resources and lifespan, will enhance the role of local authorities and allow residents to have a greater say in the design of their homes.

"Too often, new developments come at the expense of beauty, quality and design," he argues. "This shouldn't be the case and the Conservatives are determined to deliver homes that families and communities are proud to call their own."

Some experts have welcomed the guide. "It's well written and clear," says Dr Riëtte Oosthuizen, partner and head of urban planning at HTA Design.



Design commitment: Jenrick unveiled the guide at the party conference

"It is absolutely essential that good-quality design is put on a par with wellbeing and tackling climate change. We need to understand more about people's views on development through post-occupancy evaluation - this is an often forgotten element to design quality."

Pete Ladhams, managing director at Assael Architecture, agrees the guide is a step in the right direction. "When policy allows flexibility in design, that is when we can look to create fully integrated community areas for people to live, work and relax, and last week's guide offers a promising sign of strategic government planning to just do that," he says.

However, others are more sceptical, warning that the guide could be challenging to implement and open to abuse.

Dean Clifford, co-founder at Great Marlborough Estates, says: "There's no doubt higher-quality, better-designed homes would help overcome opposition on the ground of new housing. However, it is important that the new design code doesn't act as a cover for Nimbyism or add yet more complexity to the planning process."

Inherent tension

There is little new in the guide, adds Pamela Chesterman, senior associate solicitor and planning expert at law firm BLM.

"The purpose of the design guide is something that the National Planning Policy Framework has long encouraged local authorities to achieve through engagement with its communities," she notes.

Gowling WLG planning

consultant Nigel Hewitson argues that there is an "inherent" tension between the guide and Jenrick's proposals allowing homeowners to build upwards by two storeys and developers to demolish commercial buildings and rebuild them as residential.

"In neither case would the local planning authorities have any control at all over the design of the resulting buildings," he points out. "While anything that improves the design quality of our new buildings is to be welcomed, the two announcements indicate a certain lack of consistency, to say the least."

The publication of the guide follows that of an interim report by the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission suggesting that aesthetically pleasing schemes would get the green light more easily.

At the RESI Convention last month, commission chair Nicholas Boys Smith said: "Under the current system, we can and do create beautiful places, but we do it too rarely."

He applauds the new design guide, calling it a "quiet revolution" that will make it "very easy to build and for the SME self-build and custom-build markets to flourish".

Time will tell whether it has the revolutionary impact Boys Smith hopes it will have - or ultimately proves to be yet more style over substance. ■