LONELY NATION

Part 3: How to tackle loneliness through the built environment

November 2024

CSJ The Centre for Social Justice

Contents

About the CSJ

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the United Kingdom (UK) who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Acknowledgements

Foreword

Loneliness is a modern-day tragedy. It reflects the absence of meaningful relationships, community, neighbourhood and belonging that are common experiences across Britain today. The CSJ has shown that nearly six in ten adults experience loneliness at least some of the time, rising to seven in ten among the 18-24 age group. Whilst the debate on the pressing need for many more homes is welcome and overdue, chasing housing targets cannot be the sole ambition. Creating neighbourhoods and communities matters as well and has many components.

In *Lonely Nation Part 3*, the CSJ demonstrates the importance of the built environment for tackling loneliness. By emphasising the way in which attractive and walkable places can foster community and connection, the CSJ underscores the necessity of maintaining an unwavering commitment to quality as well as quantity.

This report illustrates how the nature of the built environment is an issue of social justice. It is not limited to taste or subjective preference. The most economically deprived are often pushed to live in degraded built environments, without the features or public services that contribute to healthy and happy lives.[1] In the 20th century it was the poorest who were placed in cheaply built high-rise estates that were poorly constructed and maintained, too often associated with social isolation and crime.[2]

The CSJ also unearths the lack of control that many feel over the future of their communities. The majority of adults (62 per cent) surveyed by the CSJ say that they have no meaningful say in how their community changes and develops over time.[3] The number is higher among those in the DE social grade (66 per cent).[4] The CSJ shows how the government can restore agency by devolving power directly to community groups, town and parish councils. Agency is the pathway to belonging. This report outlines how government can entrust communities with significant new responsibilities. It recommends supercharging neighbourhood planning, increasing the supply of community led housing and introducing a new Community Right to Buy to help empower local communities with a sense of ownership.

Only by rebuilding the community institutions that constitute the social fabric can the government hope to tackle loneliness. Loneliness cannot be solved with technocratic or statist solutions. Instead, government should support communities with a new sense of moral purpose and the control and resources to create thriving communities which design out loneliness. Ending loneliness in the UK will depend on strengthening the bonds of civil society locally. This work is already happening across our communities. The government can learn from the goodwill and service of grassroots charities, voluntary associations and social enterprises that are tackling loneliness on the frontlines. This report shares the stories of some of the most effective community groups in our country.

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1   Royal Town Planning Institute, Poverty, place and inequality, May 2016, p. 2.
2   Building Better, Building Beautiul Commission, Living with Beauty, January 2020, pp. 30, 45.
3   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.
4   Ibid.

We welcome the recommendations outlined in this report. It is our responsibility today to build places that support happy, healthy, dignified and less lonely lives. Thoughtful planning with a renewed focus on sustainable placemaking, built with people in mind, can restore the heart back into community life in Britain. The reimagining of placemaking with infrastructure and a sense of 'the good society' at its core must take centre stage. Otherwise, we risk building our way into the social problems of the future. The current parliament could prove to be the most significant for the built environment in decades. What legacy will we leave behind?

Margaret Mullane MP
Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

Nicholas Boys Smith MBE
Founder and Chairman of Create Streets

Executive Summary

Britain is a lonely nation. CSJ polling finds that nearly six in ten adults feel lonely at least some of the time.[5] This equates to 32 million people.[6] Over one in five adults (22 per cent) say they feel existentially lonely, a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world.[7] Loneliness is a public health emergency. The effects of loneliness and social isolation have been shown comparable to smoking, obesity and physical inactivity.[8]

This report shows how the government can tackle loneliness through the built environment, defined in this report as the man-made structures and features that viewed collectively, form the places in which people live. For example, buildings, parks, streets and squares.

The built environment is associated with loneliness. The 2018 loneliness strategy recognised the role of planning and housing in building a less lonely society.[9] In 2021, the London School of Economics (LSE) found that involvement with community led housing schemes were associated with reduced loneliness as well as greater trust and belonging.[10] In 2022, the Campaign to End Loneliness highlighted the quality and interconnectedness of the built environment as key elements that reduced the likelihood of loneliness.[11]

The Labour government's mission to build 1.5 million homes over the current parliament will leave a lasting legacy for the built environment in Britain. This comes at a time when there has been significant scrutiny over the quality of new-build housing. A poll for the Chartered Institute of Building found that 32 per cent of consumers would describe new-build housing as poor quality, 41 per cent described it as lacking character and 48 per cent described it as overpriced.[12]

It is therefore unsurprising that so many people are unsupportive of new housing development. CSJ polling found that 62 per cent of adults say they have no meaningful say in how their area changes and develops over time. 52 per cent say that local people do not have enough power to block new housing development.[13]

5   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.
6   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024 and National Population projections by single year of age, projected year 2024, via Nomis, October 2024.
7   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.
8   World Health Organization, Social Isolation and Loneliness, n. d. Accessed: www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demograph-ic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness.
9   Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, A Connected Society, October 2018, p. 42.
10   The London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Those little connections': Community-led housing and loneliness, November 2021, p. VI.
11   Campaign to End Loneliness, Tackling loneliness through the built environment, October 2022, p. 14.
12   Chartered Institute of Building, New-build housing – how regulation can improve the consumer journey, December 2023, p. 6.
13   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Our polling shows that people who are lonely often are more likely to feel negative about the built environment and those responsible for creating it. Out of adults who felt lonely often:[14]

- 53 per cent said architects and planners are out of touch with what local people want the community to look like. **This equates to 3.2 million people.**
- 52 per cent disagreed that buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community. **This equates to 3.1 million people.**
- 51 per cent disagreed that the buildings are generally beautiful and nice to look at. **This equates to 3.1 million people.**
- 26 per cent disagreed that their home was a nice building. **This equates to 1.6 million people.**

Out of all adults surveyed:[15]

- 49 per cent said architects and planners are out of touch with what local people want their community to look like. **This equates to 27 million people.**
- 43 per cent disagreed that buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community. **This equates to 23.7 million people.**
- 38 per cent disagreed that the buildings are generally beautiful and nice to look at. **This equates to 20.9 million people.**
- 15 per cent disagreed that their home was a nice building. **This equates to 8.3 million people.**

The government has a problem. It needs to increase public support for new housing development, or it will create long-term political problems for itself. By failing to increase the quality of development in line with the preferences of local people, the government will not only run into trouble at the ballot box, but also risk creating the social problems of the future, including loneliness.

One of the most important features of the built environment recognised to have an association with loneliness is access to green space from the home in which a person lives.[16] CSJ analysis of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (Understanding Society) found that out of all adults who had access to green space:[17]

- Fewer than half (41 per cent) said they felt lonely at least some of the time.
- Over half (59 per cent) said they had no feelings of loneliness.

This relationship reverses for adults who had no access to green space.

- Over half (56 per cent) said they felt lonely at least some of the time.
- Fewer than half (44 per cent) said they had no feelings of loneliness.

Our analysis also identified a statistically significant relationship between loneliness and access to green space. People who had any access to green space (inclusive of private or shared gardens, balconies, rooftop gardens or terraces, and other outdoor space) were statistically significantly less likely to be lonely than those who did not have access to green space.[18]

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14   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024 and National Population projections by single year of age, projected year 2024, via Nomis, October 2024.

15   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024 and National Population projections by single year of age, projected year 2024, via Nomis, October 2024.

16   Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Tackling loneliness evidence review: main report, March 2023.

17   CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13.

18   CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13 (OR: 0.65, Confidence interval [0.57, 0.74]).

This report shows that to meet its ambition to build 1.5 million new homes, as well as tackle loneliness, the government should embrace beauty, design codes, access to green space, neighbourhood planning and community led housing, particularly as tools to regenerate Britain's most disadvantaged places. Planners, architects and others responsible for creating the built environment also need to do much better to regain public confidence.

Whilst the government's mission to build more homes is an economic one, it must remember that the built environment is fundamental to the social fabric and impacts community life, belonging and social connection.

Recommendations

1. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is right to keep beauty as a fundamental aim of the planning system alongside sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework and should consider keeping more references particularly to neighbourly and beautiful placemaking.**

2. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should set a specific expectation that would require Local Planning Authorities to accept by default planning applications on brownfield sites if they have been prepared using a local design code** unless specific exclusions apply, with an ambition of moving towards a more automatic approval of applications that are compliant.

3. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should set a specific expectation that would require Local Planning Authorities to accept by default planning applications if they meet the conditions outlined in neighbourhood plans** unless specific exclusions apply, with an ambition of moving towards a more automatic approval of applications that are compliant.

4. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should replace the Community Right to Bid with two new Community Right to Buy powers modelled on the provisions that exist in Scotland**. These are the:

   a. Community Right to Buy (Pre-Emptive): The Community Right to Buy (Pre-Emptive) should replace the Community Right to Bid and be modelled on the version that exists in Scotland, giving community groups the right of first refusal on land with a registered community interest. The moratorium period preventing a sale should be set at 12 months giving the community group the opportunity to prepare a bid.

   b. Community Right to Buy (Compulsory): The Community Right to Buy (Compulsory) should give community groups the right to compulsory purchase land that is wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected and if the purchase is deemed to be in the public interest.

5. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should require every local authority to produce a community ownership strategy** including the following priority areas:

   a. **Strengthening the Community Asset Transfer** by requiring every local authority to have a policy in place as well as to review assets available for transfer as part of future asset management plans. Local authorities should also be expected to agree to Community Asset Transfer requests unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal.

   b. **Expand eligibility for empty and/or abandoned property grants** to community led housing projects that are not registered providers of affordable housing but can demonstrate a social benefit.

c. **The CSJ echoes the New Economics Foundation in calling for local authorities to have powers to be able to introduce a Community Right to Buy (Right of first refusal to registered providers and community led housing organisations)** for a limited set period when residential properties are put up for sale in a particular area. This would be aimed at areas where there is little interest from residential home buyers, a large number of empty homes and high numbers of privately rented properties. It would give a competitive advantage to registered providers of affordable housing and community led housing organisations.

6. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should launch a targeted Community Housing Fund with £78 million committed over four years.** The fund should be targeted at the 150 most deprived local authorities in England and not be limited to registered providers of social or affordable housing. Community led housing organisations that are not registered providers but offer affordable rented accommodation and can demonstrate a social impact should be eligible for funding. To be eligible for funding, all groups should have to demonstrate that there is an affordable housing need in their area. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should consult with community led housing providers on the best way of structuring a refreshed fund. The fund should also be available for acquisitions projects.

7. **The Regulator of Social Housing should require registered providers who are disposing of social housing dwellings to give the right of first refusal on properties to other registered providers and community led housing organisations in the local authority area for a limited period of time.**

8. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should allow community groups to bid for the purchase of housing assets within the Community Ownership Fund.**

9. **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should require local authorities to regularly assess their ability to make capital loans available to community led housing schemes as well as capital grants through Section 106 funds and Right to Buy receipts.**

10. **The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should launch a refreshed loneliness strategy that builds upon *A Connected Society* and include commitments to tackle loneliness through the built environment**

Introduction

In 2018 the UK led the way in publishing the world's first ever cross-government loneliness strategy, *A Connected Society*. The UK was a world leader in recognising loneliness and social isolation as one of the most pressing public health issues in the 21st century. The strategy was designed to lay the foundation for a generation of future work, "a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes", were the words of the then Prime Minister, Theresa May.[19]

Sadly, the UK is not making enough progress to end loneliness in our lifetimes. Indeed, loneliness is growing and intensifying as a problem. In *The State of Loneliness 2023*, the Campaign to End Loneliness found that over half a million more people were chronically lonely when compared to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the pandemic having a serious long-term impact on loneliness trends.[20]

The government's strategy to tackle loneliness has been focused on three overarching goals.[21]

1. Reduce stigma by building the national conversation on loneliness, so that people feel able to talk about loneliness and reach out for help.

2. Drive a lasting shift so that relationships and loneliness are considered in policymaking and delivery by organisations across society, supporting and amplifying the impact of organisations that are connecting people.

3. Play our part in improving the evidence base on loneliness, making a compelling case for action, and ensuring everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions through challenging times.

It was the right decision for government to pursue these aims in 2018. The strategy followed on from the work conducted by the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission which published its final report in 2017. The Commission identified a lack of national leadership on loneliness and a limited evidence base.[22] Five years on, in 2023, the government said they had made good progress delivering against all departmental commitments and would continue to work towards the three objectives outlined above. One example of learning over time has been the launch of the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), in January 2023, which invests in volunteering opportunities in disadvantaged areas, after evidence showed the positive impact that volunteering can have to reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

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19   Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, A Connected Society, October 2018, p. 2.
20   Campaign to End Loneliness, The State of Loneliness 2023, June 2023, p. 3.
21   Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Government's work on tackling loneliness, June 2023.
22   Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, Combatting loneliness one conversation at a time, December 2017.

However, given that loneliness continues to increase, there is a limit to how much the current strategy can tackle the root causes of the loneliness problem. The strategy helps illuminate the problem of loneliness in society but can do very little in its current format to reduce it. For example, in February 2024, the government launched a new campaign to address the stigma around loneliness in young people, bringing together celebrities from Made in Chelsea and Love Island to talk about their experiences of loneliness and encourage others to do the same. The good intentions of those involved in this initiative are undeniable, and in all likelihood, it will help some people who watch the videos. Although at the time of writing, several videos published on the DCMS YouTube had as few as 153 views.[26] The broader problem within the government's work on tackling loneliness is that addressing stigma does not help to tackle the root causes of loneliness. Reducing stigma should not be the end goal of the government's loneliness strategy, it must instead be a means to an end, with a concerted campaign of solutions that aim to build connection and community across the UK to reduce the prevalence of loneliness.

Over 2024, the CSJ will be publishing four reports outlining what the government can do to foster connection and community across the UK. This report marks the third in this series. To reverse the concerning trends in loneliness and social isolation, the government must act on its root causes. One of these causes is the nature of the built environment. This report outlines the overwhelming evidence which shows the relationship between loneliness and the built environment.

This means that the government's mission to build 1.5 million homes is not just limited to securing economic growth and tackling the housing crisis, but has implications for the very nature of our communities and how they can contribute to human flourishing. The government must not miss the opportunity to ensure that new development facilitates and does not hinder social connection. Building more homes has the potential to not just tackle Britain's economic malaise, but to build more cohesive, happier and less lonely communities.

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23 Campaign to End Loneliness, Facts and statistics about loneliness, n.d. Accessed: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics/.
24 Ibid.
25 Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Tackling loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year, March 2023.
26 www.youtube.com/shorts/6RsTz7Qmnoc as of 27 September 2024.

Throughout 2024, the CSJ has highlighted the need for the government to address the root causes of loneliness by updating the 2018 loneliness strategy. There is broad agreement across the third sector that a renewed strategy is necessary. In 2023, over one hundred organisations including Age UK, Campaign to End Loneliness, British Red Cross, The Cares Family and The Jo Cox Foundation joined together to call for a new strategy and a dedicated Minister for Loneliness.[27] In January 2024, Lilian Greenwood MP, the then Shadow Minister responsible for loneliness, asked in the House of Commons what the government had done to prepare for a refreshed national strategy, paving the way for a wider review under the new government.[28] However, neither the previous Conservative government, nor the current Labour government, has made any official announcement regarding a refreshed strategy at the time of writing.

The relationship between loneliness, community infrastructure and housing was recognised in the 2018 loneliness strategy, meaning the government already has a basis to include commitments on tackling loneliness through planning reform.[29] In chapter three of the strategy, the government committed to "unlocking the potential of underutilised community space", as well as "placing community at the heart of design of housing developments and planning."[30] Refreshing these aims to tackle loneliness are the core concerns of this report. In its strategy, the government stated that on loneliness, home and neighbourhood matter.[31] The government recognised that renters are more likely to feel lonely and that the length of time and sense of belonging to a neighbourhood were important determiners of loneliness.[32] They also stated that 'thoughtful urban design' had an important part to play in planning policies.[33] In the last yearly update on loneliness, published in March 2023, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said they would work to set standards for local design and planning to consider loneliness.[34]

DCMS should make it a priority to update the government's work on loneliness to include reference to the mission to build 1.5 million homes and collate the significant evidence base on loneliness and the built environment for use in planning reform. A refreshed loneliness strategy that commits the government to tackling loneliness through the built environment, especially within its plans for significantly increasing the development of new homes across the country, will serve as a bulwark against badly designed places and help to ensure that new development creates communities which tackle loneliness.

27   British Red Cross, A new call to action: Tackling loneliness and building community, 2023.
28   Lilian Greenwood, Lilian challenges Government on Loneliness Strategy, January 2024. Accessed: www.liliangreenwood.co.uk/news/2024/01/18/lilian-challenges-government-on-loneliness-strategy/.
29   Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, A Connected Society, October 2018, pp. 42-44.
30   Ibid, p. 36.
31   Ibid, p. 42.
32   Ibid, p. 42.
33   Ibid, p.42.
34   Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year, March 2023.

Recommendation

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should launch a refreshed loneliness strategy that builds upon *A Connected Society* and include commitments to tackle loneliness through the built environment.

A refreshed strategy should include a commitment by the MHCLG to tackle loneliness through the built environment, particularly in the design of new housing developments, new towns and urban extensions. The refreshed strategy should commit to support community led housing in England as well as doubling the number of neighbourhood plans in place across England by 2034 as a tool to build well-connected, designed and beautiful places.

This report outlines the government's proposals for planning reform, the relationship between loneliness and the built environment, and how the government can improve the built environment to tackle loneliness.

Methodology

To understand the scale of loneliness across the UK and people's perceptions of the built environment, we have analysed two data sets. These are as follows:

1. A poll conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults online between 15-16th April 2024, surveying the state of loneliness in the UK. Data were weighted to be representative of all UK adults. Whitestone Insight is a member of the British Polling Council.

2. The UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society).

   Understanding Society is the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, which is based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. Understanding Society is a household panel study, interviewing everyone in a household to see how different generations experience life in the UK. In this report we use Wave 13, which was carried out between 2021-2023. Wave 13 contains more than 16,000 households. The data are weighted.

This report is informed by visits and interviews with 17 CSJ Alliance grassroots charities and social enterprise leaders from across the UK, and five lived experience focus groups held in February 2024.

The Government's Proposals for Planning Reform

Planning Reform is Necessary

During the 2024 General Election campaign, housing became a headline topic. YouGov's weekly tracker of the most important issues facing the country found that by the end of June 2024, one in four adults ranked housing as one of their top three issues.[35]

In *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK,* the CSJ found that a lack of affordable or good quality housing was ranked as the second biggest factor holding people back from living the life they wanted to. Only low wages were ranked as a higher issue, as seen below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: What do you feel is the biggest factor holding you back from living the life you want to live, all adults.
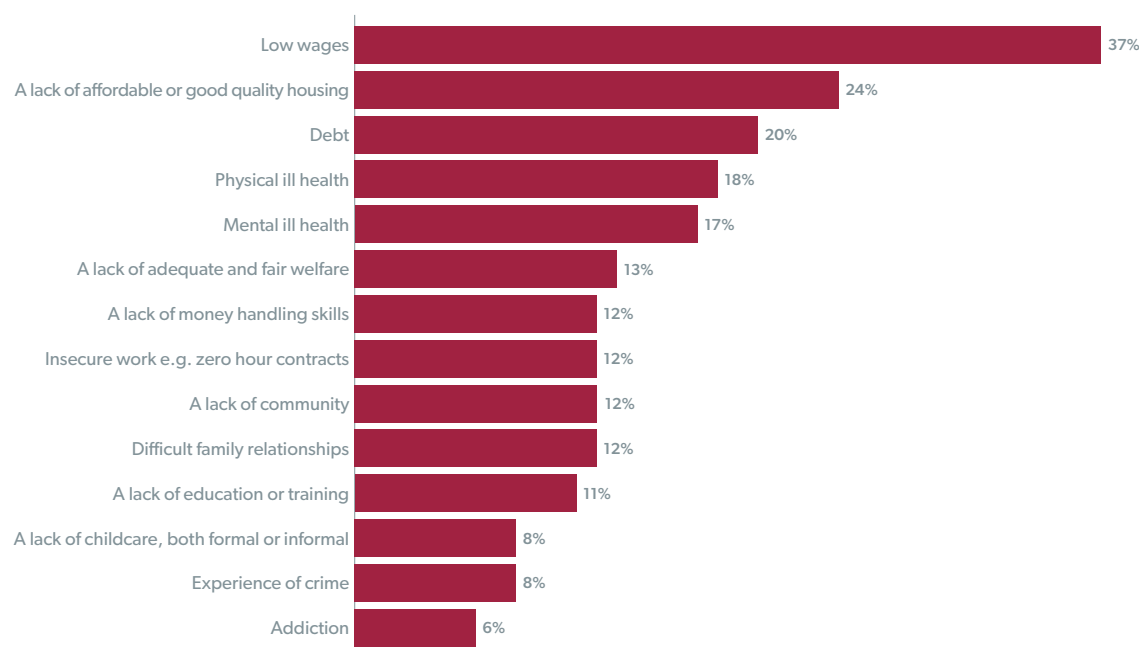
Factor	%
Low wages	37%
A lack of affordable or good quality housing	24%
Debt	20%
Physical ill health	18%
Mental ill health	17%
A lack of adequate and fair welfare	13%
A lack of money handling skills	12%
Insecure work e.g. zero hour contracts	12%
A lack of community	12%
Difficult family relationships	12%
A lack of education or training	11%
A lack of childcare, both formal or informal	8%
Experience of crime	8%
Addiction	6%

Source: Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 78, Figure 24.

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35 YouGov, The most important issues facing the country, n. d. Accessed: yougov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country.

The most deprived in Britain also ranked housing among the top factors holding them back in life. Housing was ranked as the joint fourth most significant factor, below mental and physical health, low wages and on par with debt. The full ranking of factors for the most deprived cohort can be seen below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: What do you feel is the biggest factor holding you back from living the life you want to live, adults in the most deprived sample.
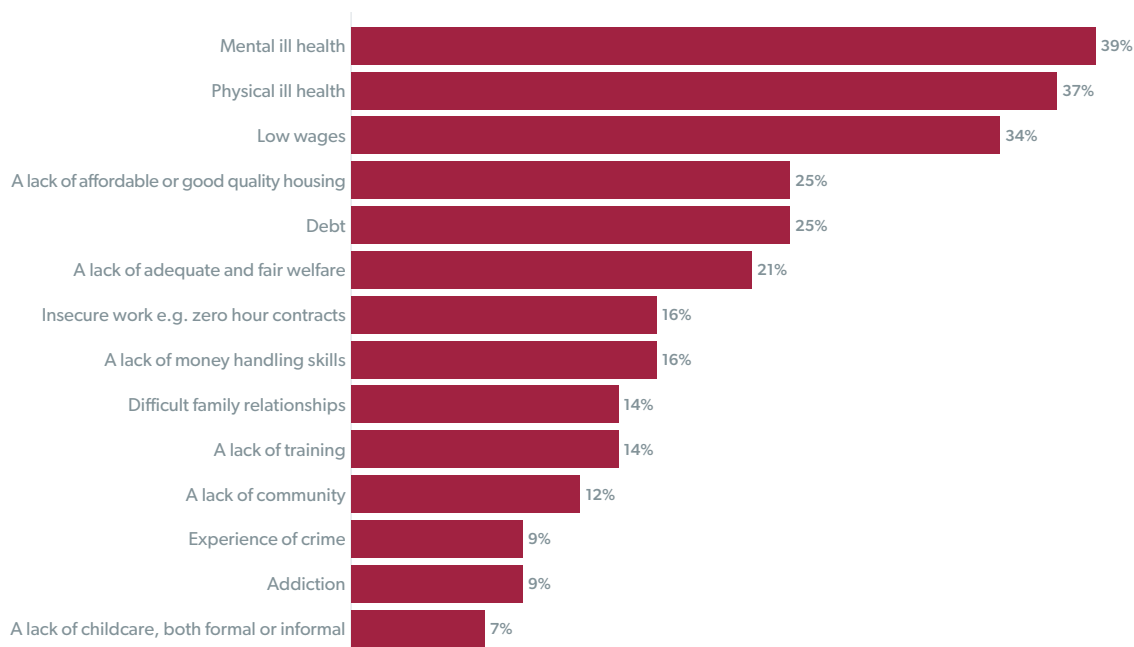
Factor	Percentage
Mental ill health	39%
Physical ill health	37%
Low wages	34%
A lack of affordable or good quality housing	25%
Debt	25%
A lack of adequate and fair welfare	21%
Insecure work e.g. zero hour contracts	16%
A lack of money handling skills	16%
Difficult family relationships	14%
A lack of training	14%
A lack of community	12%
Experience of crime	9%
Addiction	9%
A lack of childcare, both formal or informal	7%

Source: Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 77, Figure 23.[36]

Housing has become a prevailing issue because of long-standing failures to build enough homes. Millions of people across Britain struggle with housing affordability, have a lack of tenure security and face issues with the quality of their home. Housing has become a poverty trap. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that the poorest 25 per cent spent 3.5 times more on housing as a fraction of their income than the richest 25 per cent.[37] CSJ research shows that over half of adults, and nearly three in four of the most deprived, worry about the cost, security and quality of their housing.[38]

One of the root causes of the UK's failing housing market is a lack of supply of homes across all tenure types. For decades, the UK has failed to build enough homes to keep up with demand. The property market has become overheated in certain parts of the country, predominately in London and the South East of England. In addition to the supply issue, high levels of immigration in recent years have also placed pressure on the housing market.[39] The average house price in London was £508,037 in December 2023, compared with £377,162 in the South East, £244,574 in the East Midlands and £159,451 in the North East.[40] The housing affordability ratio measures how much a full-time employee in England could expect to spend on buying a home. In London, a full-time employee could

36   Cohort demographics for the most deprived sample can be found on page 24 of *Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK.*
37   Ibid.
38   Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 142.
39   Centre for Policy Studies, Taking Back Control: Why Britain needs a better approach to immigration, May 2024, pp. 6-7.
40   Office for National Statistics, UK House Price Index: December 2023, February 2024. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpricein-dices/bulletins/housepriceindex/december2023.

expect to spend 11.9 times their earnings on buying a home, compared to the national average of 8.3 times.[41] By this metric, the most affordable area in London was still less affordable than the least affordable area in the North East of England.[42]

One reason why the UK is failing to build enough homes is because the planning system fails to release enough land for development to satisfy market demand. Planning is a devolved matter and henceforth any reference to the planning system refers to England. England's planning system is both local and national. It is constituted by a complex body of primary and secondary legislation, the foundation of which is the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 which had the effect of nationalising most development rights.

A significant change occurred in 2012, with the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The NPPF was issued to standardise planning policy which by then was dispersed across multiple different sources. The NPPF sets out the government's planning policies and a framework within which locally prepared plans can provide for sufficient housing and other development.[43] However, in January 2024, Savills found that just 21 per cent of local authorities had an up-to-date local plan.[44] The government launched a consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF in August 2024.[45]

The NPPF also requires Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to ensure that visual tools such as design codes are used to inform development proposals.[46] The National Model Design Code states that design codes and guides "should provide a framework for creating high-quality places, with a consistent and high-quality standard of design to inform development proposals."[47] This is particularly important for designing communities that support social connection. In 2021, government announced the creation of the Office for Place which was set up to help LPAs create beautiful, successful and enduring places that foster community. The Office has recently been helping local authorities implement design codes.[48]

Using the NPPF, LPAs prepare local plans which set out the vison and framework for development and land use. A plan should identify what development is needed, where it should go, and what land is protected.[49] In addition to local plans there are also neighbourhood plans which are prepared by parish or town councils or local community groups. These were introduced by the Localism Act 2011 which aimed to devolve powers to communities.

England's planning system is discretionary, meaning that there is no automatic right to be able to develop land. Development is practically prohibited until planning permission is granted. Permitted development affords some building rights without the need for planning permission, but normally all new housing and infrastructure projects need to be approved by LPAs. England's planning system is usually contrasted to a zonal system, where planning permission is automatically granted to

41   Office for National Statistics, Housing affordability in England and Wales: 2023, March 2024. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulation-andcommunity/housing/bulletins/housingaffordabilityinenglandandwales/2023#alternative-house-price-earnings-and-affordability-estimates.

42   Ibid.

43   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework, December 2023, p. 4.

44   Savills, Planning Data Update 2024, January 2024. Accessed: research.euro.savills.co.uk/united-kingdom/to-publish/planning-data-up-date-2024.aspx.

45   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system, August 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system.

46   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework, December 2023, p. 40.

47   Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, National Model Design Code, January 2021, p. 1.

48   Office for Place, Getting Started with Design Codes, July 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/guidance/getting-started-with-design-codes.

49   House of Commons Library, Overview of the planning system (England), August 2023. Accessed: commonslibrary.parliament.uk/plan-ning-in-england/.

developments within a set area that meet relevant rules and regulations set out in the zonal planning code. In England, local authority planning officers make decisions on most planning applications. The planning system gives officials a large amount of power to decide on the outcome of applications. The House of Commons Library states that only ten per cent of applications are decided by elected councillors on a committee.[50]

The planning system is failing to deliver the homes the country needs. The discretionary nature of the planning system causes delays, adds to costs and makes the process of obtaining permission uncertain. Furthermore, the lack of land available for development has contributed to land value speculation and meant that the uplift in land value after planning permission is granted presents major difficulties for developers of affordable or social housing. High land prices have also led to a crisis in quality as developers and builders pay extremely high prices for land, which has resulted in poor quality homes that are very expensive to buy.[51] The 1961 Land Compensation Act which gave landowners the right to receive hope value has caused prices to remain high and has made it much more difficult for local authorities to compulsory purchase land for development, new towns and social housing. Unnecessary green belt designation has also prevented much needed development in areas of high demand.

The Politics of Planning Reform

Planning has become a deeply politicised issue. The Labour government was elected on a manifesto that contained a strong critique of the planning system. At the Labour Party Conference in 2023, Sir Keir Starmer spoke of "our restrictive planning system" and the need to "bulldoze through it." The Labour manifesto included several commitments on housing, despite not promising wholesale reform of the planning system. These commitments included:[52]

- Immediately updating the National Planning Policy Framework.

- Restoring mandatory housing targets.

- Ensuring local authorities have up to date local plans.

- Strengthening the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

- Funding additional planning officers.

- Fast-tracking approval of brownfield sites.

- Releasing more green belt land for development with 'grey belt' land being prioritised.

- Building a generation of new towns.

- Requiring all combined and mayoral authorities to strategically plan for housing growth.

- Reforming compulsory purchase compensation rules, ensuring that for specific types of development schemes, landowners are awarded fair compensation rather than inflated prices.

- Strengthening planning obligations to ensure new developments provide more affordable homes.

- Reviewing increased right to buy discounts.

- Giving first-time buyers the first chance to buy homes and ending the practice of entire developments being sold to international investors.

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50 Ibid.
51 Liam Halligan, Home Truths: The UK's Chronic Housing Shortage (Great Britain: Biteback Publishing Ltd), p. 240.
52 The Labour Party, Change, June 2024, pp. 36-39.

The consultation on proposed reforms to the NPPF include proposals on expanding the right to build upward developments, a definition of 'grey belt' land,[53] removal of provisions which reduced housing density in areas where it conflicts with local character, refocusing design codes, a definition of the government's 'golden rules' for development which include necessary improvements to the local infrastructure as well as provision or improvement of green spaces, a promotion of mixed tenure development, strengthening community led housing and removing references to beauty that were included in 2023 revisions of the NPPF.[54] The CSJ submitted its response to the consultation in September 2024 reflecting the findings of this report.

As well as reforming the NPPF, the government has also promised to introduce a Planning and Infrastructure Bill that will reform further elements of the planning system, and importantly, compulsory purchase compensation rules which are currently a key obstacle in developing affordable housing. In September 2024, the government published a working paper on Brownfield Passports which could help to fast-track development on particular sites.[55] Alongside this MHCLG have announced a New Homes Accelerator programme, a New Towns Taskforce and a Brownfield Land Release Fund.[56]

At the end of July 2024, local authorities were given notice of new mandatory housing targets, alongside a new method for estimating the number of homes required.[57] Writing to local authority leaders, the Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, wrote of the "moral obligation to see more homes built."[58] Alongside this, the government also released a policy paper on new towns which outlined the ambition to build new large-scale communities on greenfield land, but also larger urban extensions and regeneration schemes.[59]

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53 In proposed reforms to the NPPF, 'grey belt' land is defined as "land in the green belt comprising Previously Developed Land and any other parcels and/or areas of green belt land that makes a limited contribution to the five green belt purposes (as defined in para 140 of this frame-work), but excluding those areas or assets of particular importance listed in footnote 7 of this framework (other than land designated as green belt)."

54 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system, August 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system#chapter-1--introduction.

55 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Planning Reform Working Paper: Brownfield Passport, September 2024.

56 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Thousands of new homes to be built as government unlocks brownfield sites, October 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-new-homes-to-be-built-as-government-unlocks-brownfield-sites.

57 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Housing targets increased to get Britain building again, July 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/news/housing-targets-increased-to-get-britain-building-again.

58 Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP, Playing your part in building the homes we need, July 2024.

59 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Policy statement on new towns, July 2024.

The Aim of Planning Reform

Economic Growth

The government's proposals for planning reform are centred on economic growth. The Deputy Prime Minister finished her statement to the House of Commons in July 2024 with the promise to achieve the biggest boost to affordable housing for a generation and get Britain building to spur economic growth.[60]

The government is right to recognise that England's outdated planning system has hampered economic growth. High house prices have made labour mobility more difficult, funnelled lending into unproductive mortgages, limited the expansion of secondary cities,[61] and added to the cost of building national infrastructure. Achieving long-term economic growth is dependent on reforming the planning system and building more housing and national infrastructure. However, it would be a mistake to just assume that building more housing is primarily concerned with growing the economy. The nature of the built environment is fundamentally linked to the social fabric.

Community, Belonging and Social Connection

Economic growth should not be the only aim of planning reform. The government must consider its duty to create places that foster community, belonging and social connection. Housing is not only an economic asset. The built environment creates the wider communities where people live, either fostering a sense of community and belonging or contributing to loneliness and social isolation.

By prioritising good development and the creation of communities, the government will be supporting the public health of the population. Research has shown that the built environment has direct and indirect effects on mental health.[62] A historic article from 2003 identified that high-rise housing was harmful to the psychological wellbeing of women with children. [63] The article also found that the mental health of psychiatric patients was linked to design elements in the built environment. More recently, a study of people in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that house type, home workspace, and neighbourhood environment contributed to the mental health status of participants.[64]

60   Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Deputy Prime Minister on changes to national planning policy, July 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/deputy-prime-minister-on-changes-to-national-planning-policy.

61   Policy Exchange, Homes for Growth: How Housebuilding Can Revitalise the UK Economy, February 2023, pp. 7-8.

62   Reichert, M., Et al., "Studying the impact of built environments on human mental health in everyday life: methodological developments, state-of-the-art and technological frontiers", Current Opinion in Psychology, 32 (April 2020), pp. 158-164.

63   Evans, G.W., "The built environment and mental health", Journal of Urban Health, 80 (December 2003), pp. 536-555.

64   Xiao, J., Et al., "The impact of built environment on mental health: A COVID-19 lockdown perspective", Health & Place, 77 (September 2022), 102889.

Loneliness and the Built Environment

The State of Loneliness in Britain

CSJ polling can reveal that nearly six in ten (58 per cent) adults feel lonely at least some of the time. This equates to 32 million people.[65] Over three in five adults (61 per cent) say they feel left out at least some of the time. 59 per cent of adults say they feel isolated from others at least some of the time and 56 per cent say they feel a lack of companionship at least some of the time.

Table 1: Loneliness in the UK.

	How often do you feel lonely? (%)	How often do you feel left out? (%)	How often do you feel isolated from others? (%)	How often do you feel a lack of companionship? (%)
Most of the time	9	8	10	10
Often	11	12	12	11
Some of the time	38	41	37	35
Total	58	61	59	56

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.[66]

The percentage of adults who say they are chronically lonely (those who said they felt lonely most of the time) is similar to results in other UK surveys. CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13 found that ten per cent of respondents felt lonely often.[67] From 7th August 2024 to 1st September 2024, eight per cent of adults said they felt lonely often or always according to the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey.[68]

CSJ polling finds that loneliness is more prevalent among the younger generation and least prevalent among those aged 65 plus. Our findings can reveal that 34 per cent of 18–24-year-olds feel lonely most of the time or often. This makes young people today nearly three times more likely to say they are lonely most of the time or often than those aged 65 plus.
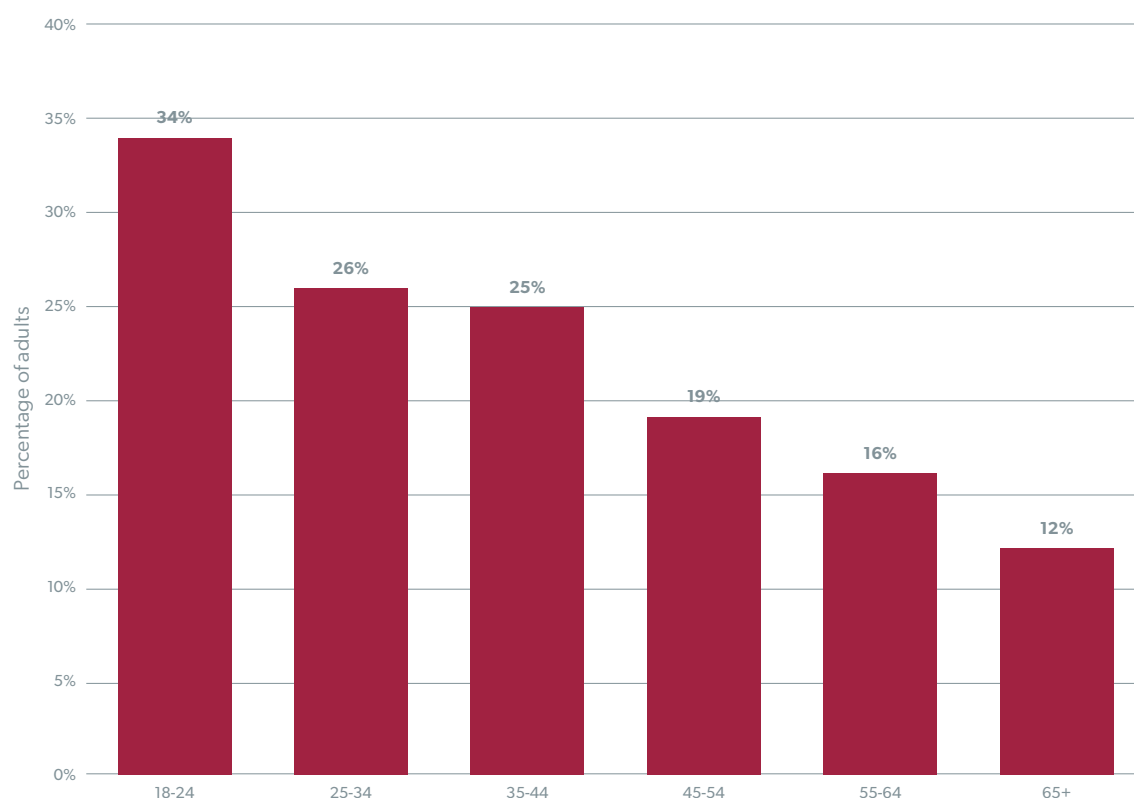
65   Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024 and National Population projections by single year of age, projected year 2024, via Nomis, October 2024.
66   Notes: Other options respondents could select were: 'Never or hardly ever', 'Don't know', 'Prefer not to say'.
67   CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13, conducted February 2024.
68   Office for National Statistics, Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness, September 2024. Accessed: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritainpersonalwellbeingandloneliness.

Figure 3: Age of adults who said they feel lonely most of the time or often.

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

CSJ polling also asked adults what their experiences of loneliness felt like to obtain a snapshot of the experience and intensity of loneliness across the UK. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: How loneliness presents across the population and age groups.

Experience of loneliness	Total (%)	18-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	45-54 (%)	55-64 (%)	65+ (%)
I would like more meaningful relationships in my life	30	44	35	32	34	30	16
I feel I don't have enough high-quality social connections	26	33	31	29	30	23	14
I feel a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world	22	29	27	20	24	22	13
I have a general feeling of loneliness that often comes and goes	35	47	38	40	36	33	24
I feel particularly lonely at certain times or occasions like birthdays or Christmas	18	21	16	21	20	21	13
None of these/other	31	16	22	25	26	36	51

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Table 2 shows that the most common experience of loneliness was a transient feeling that comes and goes, with 35 per cent of the population saying they experience this. Second was a desire for more meaningful relationships. Over one in five adults (22 per cent) selected the option that matched a description of existential loneliness – feeling a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world. This rises to 29 per cent of 18–24-year-olds. Older people over the age of 65 were the least likely to say they felt or experienced any of the feelings outlined above. 51 per cent of those aged 65 plus said they felt none of the feelings of loneliness listed. This compares to just 16 per cent of those aged 18-24 who said they felt no feelings of loneliness.

The Importance of the Built Environment

There is a rich body of evidence that highlights the relationship between loneliness and the built environment. The Campaign to End Loneliness has highlighted the quality and interconnectedness of the built environment, places for meaningful interactions, and the importance of design as key elements that reduce the likelihood of loneliness.[69] Other organisations such as The Loneliness Lab have brought together hundreds of stakeholders working in development, design and loneliness policy "to tackle loneliness through urban design, placemaking and the built environment…"[70] In their research, the Loneliness Lab found that groups vulnerable to loneliness (including those living in poverty) are badly served by the built environment.[71] They highlight that contemporary design and placemaking have deprioritised the need for places to connect people, arguing that "design features that have historically brought people together like communal and civic spaces and pedestrianised streets have been overlooked in favour of cars, private ownership, and profits."[72] They argue that design should be place-based, participative, iterative, people-centred, flexible and diverse.[73]

In the *Tackling Loneliness Evidence Review,* published by DCMS in 2023, authors concluded that the existing body of evidence suggested the vital importance of place-based factors such as the built environment, green spaces, urban design and street network.[74] They conclude that loneliness needs to be considered within a wider environmental context.[75] However, the authors also highlighted a lack of evidence for how homes, buildings, zoning, streets and pavements related to loneliness.[76]

Other organisations have shown the negative effects on wellbeing of a badly designed built environment. A study by Leeds Beckett University on men's mental health found that having access to good quality, affordable housing which enables social connection is an important determinant of health. The researchers identified that nearly two thirds of residents in council owned high-rise flats are male, and that living in high-rise flats was linked to higher levels of depression and social isolation.[77]

The Steeple in Dundee told the CSJ a similar story about the living situations and loneliness of men living alone in high rise flats. The Steeple said that in their case, many men had been housed in high rise buildings after struggling with multiple difficulties and experiencing homelessness. Instead of helping them to recover, the built environment served to foster a culture of isolation and loneliness.

69   Campaign to End Loneliness, Tackling loneliness through the built environment, October 2022, p. 14.
70   The Loneliness Lab, About the Loneliness Lab, n. d. Accessed: www.lonelinesslab.org/about-us.
71   The Loneliness Lab, Using design to connect us, 2020, p. 6.
72   Ibid, p. 9.
73   Ibid, p. 15.
74   Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Tackling loneliness evidence review: main report, March 2023.
75   Ibid.
76   Ibid.
77   Leeds Beckett University, The State of Men's Health in Leeds: A Summary, 2015, p. 20.

> *"There are a huge number of registered homeless who live in single rooms in hostels or bedsits or single bedroom flats in multi-storey blocks in the city. There is no sense of community or trust in these places. I have seen that isolated life in a multi-storey can contribute to loss of mental wellbeing."*
>
> Charity Leader, The Steeple, Dundee.

There is evidence to suggest that high rise buildings are associated with atomisation, having fewer social connections and poorer relations.[78] One author concludes on high-rises: "with such damaged social bonds, with fewer friendships, it should be no surprise that violent crime can be higher in multi-storey blocks particularly in complex non-conventional estates."[79]

There are also elements of the built environment that can protect against loneliness. One of the most significant contributions to the evidence base came in the form of a government commissioned study conducted by the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2021. LSE researchers found that features of community led housing, which emphasise social connection with neighbours and shared spaces, are essential to feeling attached to a place and wellbeing, which may prevent loneliness.[80]

Definitions

Community led housing has no legal definition. Community Led Homes, a partnership organisation between a number of community led housing membership groups, state that the definition agreed within the community led housing sector is:[81]

- A requirement that meaningful community engagement and consent occurs throughout the process. The community does not necessarily have to initiate and manage the development process, or build the homes themselves, though some may do.

- The local community group or organisation owns, manages or stewards the homes and in a manner of their choosing.

- A requirement that the benefits to the local area and/or specified community must be clearly defined and legally protected in perpetuity e.g. through an asset lock.

Some of the features of community led housing identified by the LSE that countered loneliness included:

- The design features of buildings (e.g common rooms and shared living spaces). [82]

- The organisational structure of community led housing (e.g regular meetings). [83]

- Formal ways of negotiating conflict.[84]

- Knowing that others are around and available.[85]

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78 Nicholas Boys Smith, Heart in the Right Street: Beauty, happiness and health in designing the modern city (Great Britain: Amazon), p. 36.
79 Ibid, p. 38.
80 The London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Those little connections': Community-led housing and loneliness, November 2021, p. II.
81 Community Led Homes, The legal framework for community led housing, April 2018. Accessed: www.communityledhomes.org.uk/legal/31
82 The London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Those little connections': Community-led housing and loneliness, November 2021, p. 50.
83 Ibid, p. 50.
84 Ibid, p. 54.
85 Ibid, p. 54.

- Shared purpose and values.[86]
- Community led housing helped to promote intergenerational contact and eased difficult life transitions.[87]

On the whole, LSE researchers found that involvement with community led housing schemes were associated with reduced loneliness as well as greater trust and belonging. They recommended that the benefits of the schemes should be seen as the basis for learning about what loneliness prevention strategies could be used by the wider housing sector.[88]

Other organisations such as Create Streets have contributed significantly to the wider evidence on the built environment and wellbeing. Founder and Chairman Nicholas Boys Smith writes that design has a largely predictable impact on a wide variety of factors, including neighbourliness and purpose in everyday life.[89] Boys Smith writes that design features can impact how people behave and feel in an area. For example, people feel safer and more able to spend time talking to neighbours in areas where traffic is reduced and when modest front gardens are included within housing units.[90] He concludes, importantly, that design is not subjective. He states that there are predictable links between place with health, happiness, prosperity and sustainability.[91]

In a summary of existing research on the places where people want to live and be, Create Streets outline ten steps that developers, architects, landowners and planning authorities should follow to design places that are popular with people. Some of these steps include promoting gentle density to maximise land use, using greenery in development, emphasising the role of beauty and place, and increasing walkability and 'bike-ability'.[92]

As an example of the impact of one of these steps, Create Streets have found that greenery in urban areas is associated with lower rates of mental health problems, improves the psychophysical status of city dwellers by lowering stress, as well as finding a link between regularly looking out at a green environment and mood, stress, recovery from mental fatigue and wellbeing.[93] Significantly for loneliness, a survey of people's experience of lockdown found that access to greenery was strongly associated with greater neighbourliness.[94]

CSJ analysis of Understanding Society found that out of all adults who had access to green space, fewer than half (41 per cent) said they felt lonely at least some of the time. Over half (59 per cent) said they had no feelings of loneliness. This relationship reverses for adults who had no access to green space. Over half (56 per cent) said they felt lonely at least some of the time, compared to fewer than half (44 per) cent who said they had no feelings of loneliness. The results can be seen below in Table 3.

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86   Ibid, p. p. 55.
87   Ibid, p. 57.
88   Ibid, p. VI.
89   Boys Smith, N., "Turning Everywhere into Somewhere: How Can We Plan for a Happier and Healthier Future?", Journal of Planning & Environ-mental Law, 13 (2021).
90   Ibid.
91   Ibid.
92   Create Streets & Cadogan London, Of Streets and Squares, March 2019.
93   Create Streets, Greening Up: From fights to rights, September 2023, p. 34.
94   Ibid, p. 35.

Table 3: Access to green space and loneliness.

	No access to green space (%)	Access to green space (%)
Not lonely	44	59
Lonely at least some of the time	56	41

Source: CSJ analysis of Understanding Society Wave 13.

To further understand the relationship between loneliness and green space, the CSJ conducted a regression analysis to test the association between the two variables. Our analysis identified a statistically significant relationship between loneliness and access to green space. People who had any access to green space (inclusive of private or shared gardens, balconies, rooftop gardens or terraces, and other outdoor space) were statistically significantly less likely to be lonely than those who did not have access to green space.[95]

There is now a strong evidence base that shows the importance of the built environment to tackling loneliness, as well as the elements of the built environment that need to be prioritised by those developing homes and communities.

The Place of Beauty

Emphasising beauty in design and planning has been criticised for being subjective and as a potential blocker of development.[96] Understandably, the state should not be dictating every aspect of style. However, the design of places, particularly large areas such as new towns, should reflect the priorities of local people and the character of a place.

This is not to say that innovation in design and architecture is a bad thing. Innovation often comes with great benefits, and the sector must look forward as well as back.[97] However, this must be balanced with preserving the character and identity of existing places. Nicholas Boys Smith writes, "innovation of aesthetic (while necessary) needs to be balanced with the familiar."[98] In part, this is because on average, most people prefer similar styles. In its interim report, the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (BBBBC) found that the types of homes, places and settlement patterns that most people want are fairly consistent and compelling.[99] The BBBBC also identified a consistent, and most likely growing, desire for better connected places where we know more of our neighbours, where we speak to them more often and which are also safe.[100] The places where people are more likely to know their neighbours are on streets with less traffic and with modest front gardens. On the whole, people also want to retain a sense of place, with new development matching the aesthetics of existing buildings. As the BBBBC stated in their final report, design is not subjective.[101] This means that the government can have confidence that it is possible to discover a strong local consensus about how people would like their streets and squares to look and feel.

95 (OR: 0.65, Confidence interval [0.57, 0.74]).
96 Montagu Evans, The place of good design, beauty and density in the new NPPF, July 2024. Accessed: www.montagu-evans.co.uk/articles/the-place-of-good-design-beauty-and-density-in-the-new-nppf/.
97 Policy Exchange, Building Beautiful, 2019, p. 52.
98 Ibid, p. 52.
99 Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Creating space for beauty, July 2019, p. 43.
100 Ibid, p. 45.
101 Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Living with Beauty, January 2020, p. 99.

The BBBBC define beauty as: "everything that promotes a healthy and happy life, everything that makes a collection of buildings into a place, everything that turns anywhere into somewhere, and nowhere into home. It is not merely a visual characteristic but is revealed in the deep harmony between a place and those who settle there. So understood, beauty should be an essential condition for planning permission."[102]

> "Most of us prefer places we can walk in, where there is greenery frequently present and where we find the streets and squares beautiful to look at and be in. We prefer places that do not cost the earth but can help us live in harmony with it."
>
> Building Better Building Beautiful Commission.[103]

Critics of beauty in the NPPF argue that well-designed is not synonymous with beauty, and that design quality should be the appropriate benchmark for new buildings. This would be the case if what was considered to be well-deigned by those responsible for creating the built environment matched the preferences of those that lived there. However, as studies have shown, a design disconnect can be observed between architects and the general public.[104] A survey by Create Streets in 2015 asked people to choose between four different types of building (two were more traditional, two were modern and 'innovative'). 87 per cent of respondents preferred the less innovative option, with 2.25 per cent of supporters working in planning, architecture or creative arts. On the other hand, 46 per cent of supporters of the less popular two options worked in planning, architecture or creative arts.[105]

Beauty is also an issue of social justice. Well designed, beautiful places should be the benchmark for all future developments. The earliest pioneers of social housing saw decent, well-maintained properties as essential to human flourishing. Octavia Hill was motivated by a belief that beauty could "ameliorate the lives of the poor", which included, among access to culture and learning, green spaces in cities.[106]

It is the poorest in society who often are pushed to live in built environments with less green spaces, opportunities and poorly built homes. [107] Beauty understood in a broad sense, defined as aspects of the built environment that promote a healthy and happy life, and that contributes to a sense of place, should be considered the minimum benchmark of any new development.

Whilst the government is right to keep beauty as a fundamental aim of the planning system in the NPPF, they should consider keeping the six references to beauty that they have proposed removing. Whilst not removing all references, the government wishes to remove the six additional references to beauty and beautiful that were added in December 2023, further to five references to beautiful places that were included in September 2023.[108]

Within the NPPF (pre-2024 consultation), beauty and placemaking is listed as a desired outcome of development and as a measurement of development quality. For example, in paragraph 94 of the NPPF, the text states that: "Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive

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102 Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Living with Beauty, January 2020, p. 1.

103 Ibid, p. 99.

104 Chávez, F.C. and Milner, D., "Architecture for architects? Is there a 'design disconnect' between most architects and the rest of the non-specialist population?", New Design Ideas, 3:1 (2019), pp. 32-43.

105 Ibid.

106 Demos, The enduring relevance of Octavia Hill, 2012, p. 60.

107 Royal Town Planning Institute, Poverty place and inequality, May 2016, p. 2.

108 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system, August 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system#chapter-1--introduction.

and safe places and beautiful buildings."[109] This is one example of where government is proposing to remove a reference to beauty as an aim of development. The CSJ recommends that the government do not remove references to beauty from the NPPF and instead utilise it as a means of guaranteeing well-designed characterful places that the public support. This will help to build public support and trust in development.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is right to keep beauty as a fundamental aim of the planning system alongside sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework and should consider keeping more references particularly to neighbourly and beautiful placemaking.

The place of beauty in development has often been considered a conservative concern. However, there is a rich socialist heritage that places a premium on beauty. Former Labour MP, Jon Cruddas, wrote this year that the government should "re-establish the older, foundational socialist tradition that viewed beauty as integral to bestowing human dignity on the poor and improving the lives and living conditions of the most vulnerable in society – on whose behalf the Labour Party was originally established to advocate."[110] This would be a noble ambition for the new government and by embracing the place of beauty in the built environment, it could leave a lasting legacy for communities across Britain.

The Design Disconnect

The CSJ has previously written about the decline in community manifesting in the experiences of loneliness, insecurity, and feeling left behind.[111] When the public realm, homes and communities become unfamiliar, ugly and designed in a way which lead to worse economic, social and health outcomes, a sense of community and place declines. Sadly, some new developments have failed to contribute to the beauty of the built environment and wellbeing. Research from University College London and the Place Alliance found that new housing design is overwhelmingly mediocre or poor, with many schemes getting planning permission that should have been refused.[112] The low quality of some new build housing was reflected in conversation with CSJ Alliance charities. One man who had moved to a newbuild estate told the CSJ how the design features made connecting with neighbours more difficult compared to the village he used to live in.

> *"What I've noticed is I used to live in Chinley, a village, and you talk to everybody, your neighbours, there's no high walls or anything like that. I live on a new estate now, and you know what the fences are that [signals with hand] tall. No one wants to interact anymore. So, people have got their own privacy, but at the same time the community is well gone."*
>
> Service User, Zink, Buxton.

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109 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework (consultation), August 2024, p. 30.
110 Policy Exchange, Beauty and Socialism: How the Left can put Beauty back into Britain, 2024, p. 6.
111 Centre for Social Justice, Pillars of Community: Why communities matter and what matters to them, June 2021, p. 6.
112 Place Alliance, A Housing Design Audit for England, 2020, p. 7.

The lack of quality in newbuild homes and estates is also true for the public realm. Very few public buildings that have been built over the last century have garnered pride and respect in the same way that historic sites do.[113] Create Streets blame the 'design disconnect' and divergence of taste between the public and professional designers for the civic and public buildings that have sprung up, but that contribute little to the character of communities.[114]

However, it is also the case that there is often less emphasis placed on the social and communal aspects of design by developers of housing, rather than the fault lying with those responsible for designing it. Research has shown that often good design of any style, be that modern or traditional, can be sidelined by developers in order to maximise space in the quickest amount of time at the lowest price.[115] Alongside architects, the planners, developers, builders and others involved in the planning system have a responsibility to ensure beauty and good design is prioritised in development.

A charity leader from East Marsh United told the CSJ about the impact that a degraded and poorly maintained built environment has on a sense of community. If the quality of the built environment declines, a community loses a sense of pride and people take less responsibility for treating their area well.

> *"If you live in rubbish houses, if you can't get repairs done, if the alleyways are full of rubbish, if you don't feel safe going to the park, this all has an effect on community."*
>
> *"Definitely loneliness is linked with the built environment. One of the reasons people don't go to the park is that it's not safe, but also because of what they're going to see on the way to the park, so they tend to stay in. Then they're not engaging with other people. Especially not face to face."*
>
> Charity Leader, East Marsh United, Grimsby.

CSJ polling can reveal a disconnect between the public and the built environment. This disconnect is higher among adults who say they feel lonely often. Our polling asked adults if the buildings in the community were generally beautiful and nice to look at; if they were ugly; if their own home was a nice building; if architects and planners were out of touch with what people wanted; and if the buildings were designed in a way that encourages a sense of community. The results for all adults can be seen below in Figure 4.

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113 Create Streets, The Create Streets manifesto for homes, hope and health, June 2024, p. 9.
114 Ibid, p. 9.
115 Policy Exchange, Building More Building Beautiful, 2018, p. 8.

Figure 4: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the buildings in your local area, such as the houses on your street, local shops, schools, pubs, or other buildings? All adults.
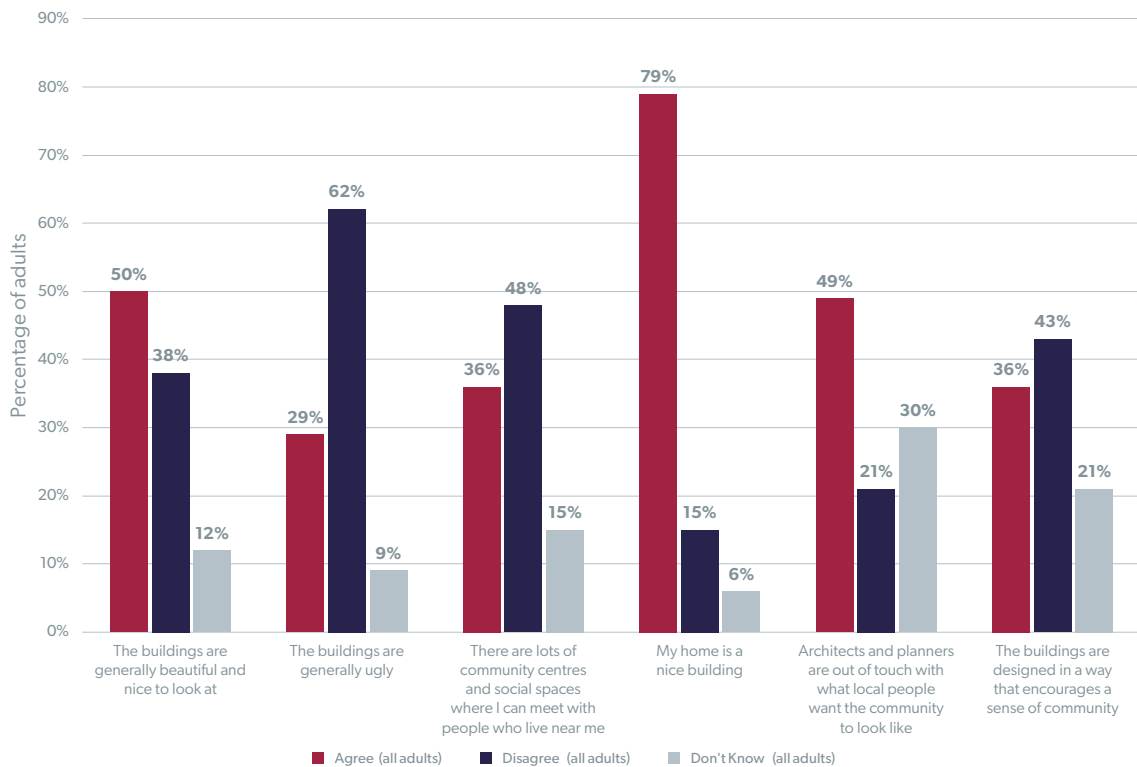
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Across all adults, over one in four (29 per cent) thought that buildings were ugly in their community, nearly half (49 per cent) believed that architects and planners are out of touch and just 36 per cent said that buildings were designed in a way that encourages a sense of community. Nearly half of all adults (48 per cent) disagreed that there are lots of community centres and spaces where I can meet with people who live near me. CSJ polling also shows that across all the questions, people who said they were lonely often had more negative associations with the built environment. The results for adults who said they were lonely often can been seen below in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the buildings in your local area, such as the houses on your street, local shops, schools, pubs, or other buildings? Adults often lonely.
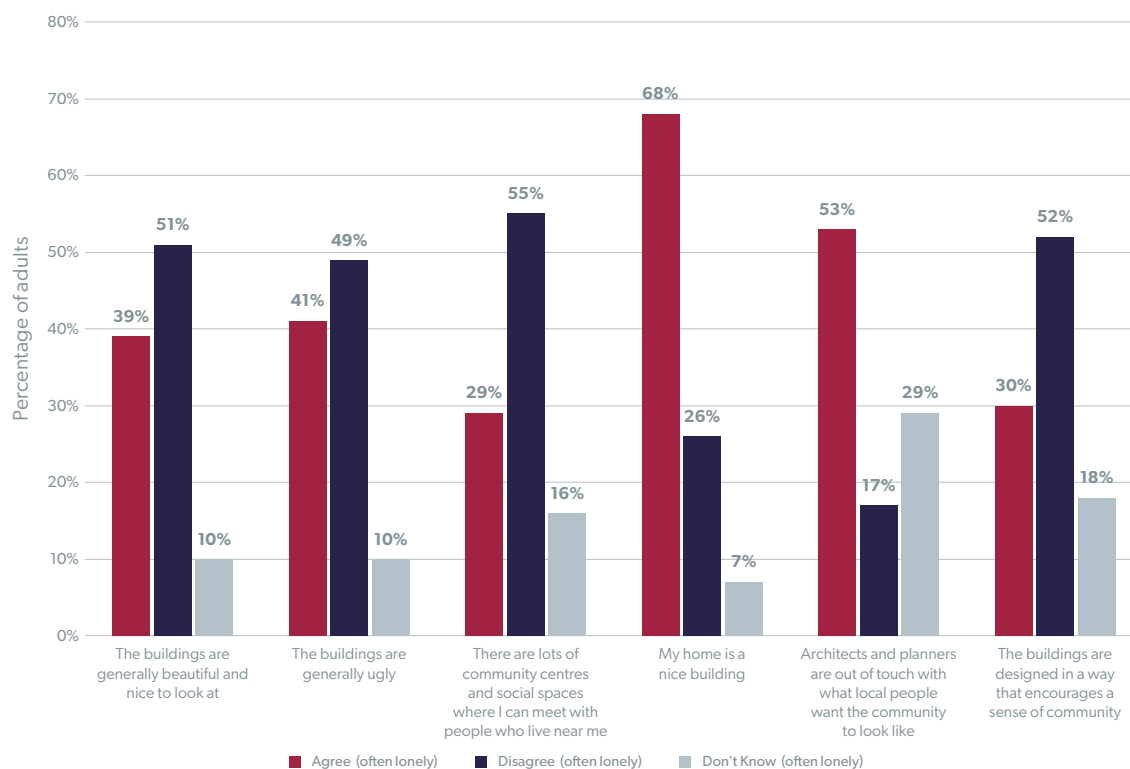
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Across all the questions above, people who were lonely had more negative associations with the built environment. Lonely people were less likely to say that the buildings are generally beautiful and nice to look at (39 per cent), more likely to say the buildings are generally ugly (41 per cent), less likely to say their home is nice building (68 per cent), more likely to think that architects and planners are out of touch (53 per cent), more likely to disagree that there are community centres and social spaces to meet with people (55 per cent), and less likely to think that the buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community (30 per cent).

The Built Environment Is Not Neutral

The disconnect between the public and built environment demonstrates the need for new homes and communities which embody the aspirations and values of people that live in them. The built environment is not neutral. It is shaped by the values and worldview of those who build it. Popular post-war architecture emphasised low-cost, quick building methods, high-rise blocks and a clean break from the past. In *Heart in the Right Street*, Nicholas Boys Smith shows how the designers of such buildings celebrated the break with past and tradition. He quotes Erno Goldfinger's biographer, Nigel Warburton, who said: "Viewed from outside, they are incredibly muscular, masculine, abstract structures with no concessions to an architecture of domesticity."[116] Another author wrote in praise of Balfron and Trellick Tower: "The sheer concrete walls…impart a delicate sense of terror."[117] Boys

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116 Nicholas Boys Smith, Heart in the Right Street: Beauty, happiness and health in designing the modern city (Great Britain: Amazon), p. 37.
117 Ibid, p. 37.

Smith rightly concludes that the idea that architects should try to terrorise their residents is perverse.[118] As the former Labour MP, Jon Cruddas recently wrote, it was deprived, working-class, post-industrial areas that bore the brunt of the utilitarian low-cost building methods that left "the most economically vulnerable in society marginalised, isolated, disenfranchised and often terrorised by the very council estates conceived for their accommodation and protection."[119]

Traditional building styles have always been more popular with the public. From the mid-20th century to today, the evidence shows that people generally want to live in streets, houses and low to medium rise buildings.[120] In a report published by Create Streets and Policy Exchange, authors outline several polls from across the last century which show that people prefer more traditional forms of building. For example, the authors found that in 1967, 75 per cent of applicants to the Greater London Council preferred a house with a garden.[121] 80 per cent of residents living in an iconic multi-storey housing development wanted it demolished in 2007.[122] Research published in 2012 found that people prefer private gardens to shared gardens.[123]

To avoid the mistakes of the 20th century, it is right that new build development reflects the wishes of the people that will live there. New homes should be designed in a way that fosters the communities that people enjoy living in, that are beautiful, and which encourage social connection. The design of housing and communities should reflect the values which people hold and the aspirations they have for their lives.

Research has shown that people do not want soulless copy and paste developments that could be found anywhere in the world, but homes that fit with the character and history of a community, that foster a sense of belonging, happiness and pride.[124] To understand this, there is much that government could learn from the idea of the common good in Catholic Social Teaching. Using common good thinking, housing is not primarily a financial asset, but a place where we live our lives in relationship with others. A report by Caritas and the Centre for Theology and Community wrote that: "Choices for housing are not morally neutral but take us to root beliefs and practice about the kind of society we intend to make for ourselves, through the boundaries between private and public spaces, inclusion and exclusion, and the impact of building choices on the whole of creation." Whilst couched in religious language, this is a helpful insight into understanding the relational aspects of housing and development which are not often considered in government policy. It illustrates that housing is not a neutral entity, but a key domain for family life and human flourishing.[125]

Loneliness, Culture and the Built Environment

Loneliness is one product of the unravelling social fabric and decline in family and community life that has taken place since the mid-20th century. Loneliness cannot be understood as an individual phenomenon. Its root cause is found in the atrophied and individualistic makeup of modern society. In his book *Morality*, the late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks quoted the sociologist Robert Bellah who wrote as early as the 1980s: "'We have lived through an extended period during which the 'I' has grown stronger at the expense of the 'We'. The result, as American sociologist Robert Bellah put it,

118 Ibid, p. 37.
119 Policy Exchange, Beauty and Socialism: How the Left can put Beauty back into Britain, 2024, p. 5.
120 Create Streets, Create Streets: Not just multi-storey estates, 2013, pp. 21-28.
121 Ibid, p. 21.
122 Ibid, p. 21.
123 Ibid, p. 21.
124 Policy Exchange, Building More Building Beautiful, 2018, p. 8.
125 Together for the Common Good, Housing and Land: A Common Good Approach, December 2018. Accessed: togetherforthecommongood. co.uk/stories/housing-and-land-a-common-good-approach.

is that our 'social ecology' has been damaged by 'the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them 'frightened and alone'."[126]

The built environment and housing have not been unaffected by the cultural changes that have taken place over successive decades. People with lived experience of loneliness told the CSJ about the way the built environment can fosters disconnection and loneliness.

> "A lot of places in society, like where I live in my flat, there is no social system there, there is no interaction. Everyone lives in their own boxes and keeps themselves to themselves. You could have someone pass away in their flat and no one would know. Nobody checks anymore. Nobody cares anymore. This is the perception we get."
>
> **Service User, Loughborough Wellbeing Centre.**

The decline in community, or 'social system' in the words of this service user was reflected nationally in the CSJ's polling. Adults expressed negative views about how socially connected their communities are. Whilst more adults said they would prefer to live in a society where individual choice and expression is valued over communal belonging and shared identity, 60 per cent agreed that society is too individualistic. The full results can be seen below in Figure 5.

Figure 6: Thinking about life nowadays, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
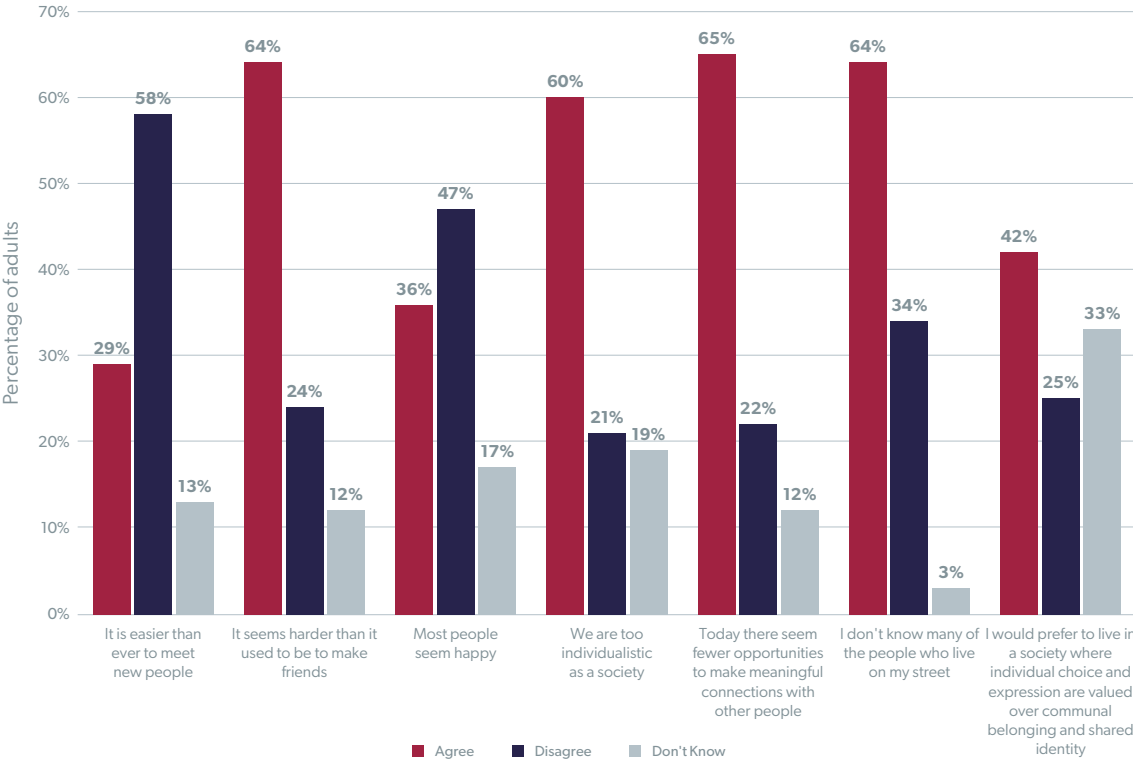
Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

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126 Robert Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, (United States: Haper Collins, 1985), in Jonathan Sacks, Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 2020), p. 284.

- Nearly three in five (58 per cent) adults disagreed with the statement it is easier than ever to meet new friends.

- Just under two in three (64 per cent) adults agreed it seems harder than it used to be to make friends.

- Nearly half (47 per cent) of adults disagreed with the statement that most people seemed happy.

- Three in five (60 per cent) adults think that society is too individualistic.

- Over three in five (65 per cent) adults agreed that there seem to be fewer opportunities to make meaningful connections with other people.

- Over three in five (64 per cent) adults said they don't know many of the people who live on their street.

- Just over two in five (42 per cent) adults said they would prefer to live in a society where individual choice and expression is valued over communal belonging and shared identity.

Poverty and the Built Environment

Emphasising the place of community, beauty and design in the built environment is not a middle-class concern but one of social justice. Nearly one hundred years ago in 1933, George Orwell reflected on the slum clearances and emergence of 'corporation houses', built by local authorities for the working class. Whilst the housing was indefinitely better than what people were living in, little concern was given to the customs and values held by people asked to move. He wrote in *Road to Wigan Pier* that among the corporation estates: "there is an uncomfortable, almost prison-like atmosphere, and the people who live there are perfectly well aware of it."[127]

Orwell goes on to write about the restrictions on the new estates: "You are not allowed to keep your house and garden as you want them…You are not allowed to keep poultry or pigeons… The restrictions about shops are more serious…Many a small shopkeeper is utterly ruined by some rehousing scheme which takes no notice of his existence…As for pubs, they are banished from the housing estates almost completely…it is a serious blow at communal life. It is a great achievement to get slum-dwellers into decent houses, but it is unfortunate that, owing to the peculiar temper of our time, it is also considered necessary to rob them of the last vestiges of their liberty."[128]

Orwell shows that in the ambition, good and necessary as it was, to clear the slums and rehouse people in dignified and safe conditions, other aspects of community life like personal freedom and relationships were ignored. Orwell shows that whilst material wellbeing is important, the customs, values, traditions and relationships that people hold are also immeasurably important to human flourishing.

Social reformers such as Octavia Hill also recognised the relationship between poverty and the built environment. An early pioneer of social housing in the 19th century, she rented houses to the poor whilst providing them with training, jobs and cultural opportunities. Hill was a proponent of the importance of access to beauty and greenery for poor city dwellers.

In modern times, the importance of the built environment for tackling poverty has been recognised by organisations such as the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). In a 2016 report they wrote that: "The poorest are often pushed to live in degraded environments with fewer services and amenities,

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127 George Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, 1933. Accessed: www.telelib.com/words/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/prose/RoadToWiganPier/index.html.
128 Ibid.

poor access to public transport, educational opportunities and jobs, a lack of green spaces, lower air quality and higher rates of crime and anti-social behaviour. This is in turn reinforces poverty and inequality."[129]

There have been historic mistakes in the way the state has housed the most disadvantaged in society. In their final report, the BBBBC highlighted the failures of modernism and mid-century slum clearances and the impact this had on the poorest in society:

> "However, what happened next was cheap system-building, often corrupt procurement, the 'vertical slums' that were poorly constructed and often equally poorly managed, leading to isolation and crime, that and were a far cry from the neighbourliness and family life they promised."[130]

Similarly, Patrick Dunleavy, a Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the London School of Economics, wrote in 2017, reflecting on the Grenfell Tower tragedy, of the minimal maintenance, poor weatherproofing, ill-fitting doors, and high heating costs of mid-century high-rise tower blocks.[131] Polling from 2019 shows that social housing tenants are much more likely to think poor quality-built environments are the norm (58 per cent) compared to all people (49 per cent).[132]

The CSJ has spoken to charity leaders from across the country who have experienced the ways in which a badly designed or poorly maintained built environment contributes to negative behaviours in communities.

For example, in *Two Nations: The state of poverty in the UK*, CSJ alliance charity, The Link Community Hub, based in Sheffield, told the CSJ about the reinforcing effect of bad quality housing on poverty.[133] They told us that bad quality housing was one of the most important causes of people mistreating the local area. They saw that as housing quality deteriorated, littering, fly tipping and other forms of anti-social behaviour increased. They said that as the quality of housing declined, people's sense of community, belonging, and pride followed.

> "The area is dirty, it's unloved, it doesn't look nice, you don't have a community like you did."
>
> Charity Leader, Link Community Hub, Sheffield.

The charity leader who spoke to the CSJ understood the link between the built environment and how people acted, as well as the association between behaviour in the community and how it appeared – "it doesn't look nice". It was understood that the built environment could either foster harmful or positive behaviour in a community.

Beauty as defined by the BBBBC includes everything that promotes a healthy and happy life.[134] A beautiful and well-designed built environment is therefore a fundamental issue of social justice. If the most disadvantaged are pushed towards built environments that lack the features that are predictive of better social outcomes, then the nature of the built environment is an issue of fairness and inequality that should be addressed by government.

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129 Royal Town Planning Institute, Poverty, place and inequality, May 2016, p. 2.
130 Ibid, p. 30.
131 Architects' Journal, High rise, low quality: how we ended up with deathtraps like Grenfell, June 2017. Accessed: www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/high-rise-low-quality-how-we-ended-up-with-deathtraps-like-grenfell.
132 Policy Exchange, Building Beautiful, 2019, p. 19.
133 Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 162.
134 Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, Living with Beauty, January 2020, p. 1.

For example, a European study from 2023 found that residents living in high-rise buildings expressed a heightened fear of crime.[135] An older literature review from 2007 found that "high rises are not optimal for children, that social relations are more impersonal and helping behaviour is less than in other housing forms, that crime and fear of crime are greater, and that they may independently account for some suicides."[136] In 2013 a think-tank summarised existing research on high-rises as consistently finding "higher levels of neurosis, emotional strain, stress, depression, mental illness and marital discord among those living on higher floors. Children suffer from more stress, hyperactivity, hostility, juvenile delinquency and temper tantrums. They are less likely to learn to dress themselves or use the lavatory age-appropriately."[137]

The CSJ has previously highlighted the impact of unaffordable, poor quality and insecure housing on the lives of the most disadvantaged. Unaffordable housing reduces disposable income after housing costs, making worth not worth it, as well as impacting people's ability to succeed and do well at work and in their personal relationships.[138] Bad quality housing negatively impacts a child's education. A Shelter report from 2018 found that 91 per cent of teachers said they have seen the impact of bad housing on children's ability to arrive to school on time.[139] National statistics for adult substance misuse from 2021/22 found that 11 per cent starting treatment said they had a housing problem.[140] Poor housing and unsuitable community design can be a catalyst for crime.[141] Furthermore, the availability and security of housing can affect the likelihood of ex-prisoner reoffending.[142] Poor housing can increase the risk of modern slavery taking place, and the likelihood of problem debt issues.[143] Financial resilience is undermined by unaffordable housing, increasing the chances of relying on loans and family members for support. [144]

135 Sypion, N., "The Influence of High-Rise Buildings on Crime in Urban Environments", European Research Studies Journal, XXVI: 3 (2023), pp. 885-891.
136 Gifford, R., "The Consequences of Living in High-Rise Buildings", Architectural Science Review, 50:1 (June 2011), pp. 2-17.
137 Policy Exchange, High-rise living means crime, stress, delinquency – and social breakdown. Instead, we must Create Streets, January 2013. Accessed: policyexchange.org.uk/blogs/high-rise-living-means-crime-stress-delinquency-and-social-breakdown-instead-we-must-create-streets
138 Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 173.
139 Shelter, The Impact of Homelessness and Bad Housing on Children's Education: A View from The Classroom, 2018, p. 8.
140 Office for Health Improvements and Disparities, Adult Substance Misue Treatment Statistics 2021 to 2022: report, October 2023.
141 Centre for Social Justice, Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK, December 2023, p. 175.
142 Ibid, p. 174.
143 Ibid, pp. 175, 177.
144 Ibid, p. 177.

Improving the Built Environment to Tackle Loneliness

The government has promised to build 1.5 million homes over the current parliament to ease the housing crisis and grow the economy. Given the considerable expense, upheaval and investment required to meet this 1.5 million target, it is important that policies to increase the supply of housing also consider other important metrics on wellbeing, loneliness and social isolation. In addition to increasing the number of homes, new development should have the aim of improving the health, happiness, social connectedness and wellbeing of the people who will live in them. CSJ polling shows that nearly six in ten adults say they feel lonely at least some of the time. [145] This report has shown the relationship between loneliness, wellbeing and the built environment. There is therefore a significant opportunity for government to tackle two problems at the same time: the housing crisis and lonely communities. In this chapter the CSJ outline a suite of recommendations that would increase housebuilding as well as tackle loneliness.

This report has shown the importance of the built environment for tackling loneliness and wellbeing. It has identified significant public discontent about the nature of the built environment and shown how it is often those living in poverty that face the consequences of poorly designed places. It has also shown the importance of beauty, as determined locally by communities, thoughtful design, and that the public generally share a consistent view of what they prefer their communities to look like.

This chapter is structured around two themes that frame the majority of recommendations in this report; Build Places That Tackle Loneliness and Give Communities Control. The first shows how government can build better places that tackle loneliness. The second shows how a radical package of devolution is necessary to rebuild community agency and belonging.

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145 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Build Places That Tackle Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness identified the importance of creating attractive, friendly, green, safe and navigable built environments to tackle loneliness.[146] The nature of the built environment effects wellbeing, mental health and loneliness. Studies have shown that city dwellers are more prone to mental health problems and stress,[147] and that building facades can affect people in positive ways if they are is interesting but negatively if monotonous.[148] The writer and urban expert Charles Montgomery has warned of an "emerging disaster in street psychology" as shops are replaced by blank, cold spaces.[149] The BBBBC identified the growing body of research into the relationship between contemporary ways of building on physical and psychological health, and the correlation between ugliness in design and mental health problems.[150] The Campaign to End Loneliness has also recommended that local people, including lonely people, were included in decision making on the built environment.[151]

This is where design codes should be utilised. As stated previously, the NPPF requires LPAs to ensure that design codes are used to inform development proposals.[152] The National Model Design Code, which was created to help shape local codes and provide national guidance was published in 2021 and supported by changes to the NPPF as well as the creation of the Office for Place.

Design codes help to ensure that development is characterful, high quality and complimentary to the existing built environment. Design codes inform the planning system with clear asks from the community and should be used to maximise beautiful development, giving more certainty to developers of housing. Integrating the term beauty in the NPPF with the expectation that it should be determined and defined by communities through the use of design codes will also remove subjectivity and uncertainty from the planning process.

More broadly, the Office for Place state that design codes are important not just for the quality of private homes, but for shaping better, healthier and sustainable places.[153] They provide a mechanism for communities to have a say in what they want their built environment to be like. This could include references in design codes to green spaces, streets, squares, frontage, scale and skyline. In being able to emphasise good design features that contribute to wellbeing, design codes should be recognised as a key tool in being able to create less lonely and more beautiful places.

Reviewing the current state of design code implementation in August 2024, Vicky Payne, who helped produce the National Model Design Code, wrote that: "in some well-resourced planning departments, with consistent area characteristics, coding has worked."[154] Payne references Hounslow's use of a design code as a particular example of success.[155] Whilst full-coverage design codes work better in zonal planning systems (the UK has a discretionary planning system), what appears to have worked in the UK has been codes suited for specific areas and contexts.[156] This analysis broadly reflects the

146 Campaign to End Loneliness, Tackling loneliness through the built environment, October 2022, p. 6.

147 Abbott, A., "City living marks the brain", Nature, 474 (2011).

148 BMW Guggenheim Lab, Testing Testing: A psychological study on city spaces and how they affect our bodies and minds, 2013.

149 BBC, The hidden ways that architecture affects how you feel, June 2017. Accessed: bbc.com/future/article/20170605-the-psychology-behind-your-citys-design.

150 Building Better Building Beautiful Commission, Living with Beauty, January 2020, p. 33.

151 Campaign to End Loneliness, Tackling loneliness through the built environment, October 2022, p. 6.

152 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework, December 2023, p. 40.

153 Office for Place, What are the benefits of Design Codes?, July 2024.

154 The Planner, A brief history of design codes – and their possible future, September 2024. Accessed: www.theplanner.co.uk/2024/06/10/brief-history-design-codes-and-their-possible-future.

155 Urban Design Group, Hounslow Design Codes: Allies & Morrison, n. d. Accessed: www.udg.org.uk/directory/awards-finalists/hounslow-design-codes-allies-morrison

156 Ibid.

changes the government wishes to make to the NPPF which would re-focus design codes in specific areas rather than taking a district wide approach.[157]

As well as Hounslow, a design code has been used to support development in Chesham, an area which made headlines in 2021 after the Conservative government lost the Chesham and Amersham by-election, widely blamed on their planning reform proposals, which were then subsequently abandoned. Chesham Town Council commissioned a town wide Neighbourhood Development Order and Neighbourhood Design Code with the aim of de-risking development on brownfield sites. Both of these mechanisms have the potential to deliver up to 900 new homes.[158]

Wherever the government chooses to focus design codes through the NPPF, they should remain committed to their use as a way of increasing certainty in the planning system. The government should build on the progress made in launching the National Model Design Code and the Office for Place by committing to seeing all local authorities developing and using design codes, in consultation with the local community, which embed locally determined definitions of beauty and place.

In order for design codes to be a success they should be produced democratically, in consultation with local people. This is where local people should be prioritised in the planning process, in being able to determine what type of development they would like to see. Secondly, public consultation can help to create built environments that tackle loneliness. Design codes are a mechanism by which those involved in the planning process can hear from lonely people about how they want their community to foster belonging and social connectedness.

Design codes should also be used to speed up development and create more certainty in the planning system. The government has recognised this in the Planning Reform Working Paper on Brownfield Passporting, published in September 2024. This paper outlines the government's ambitions to speed up the delivery of development on brownfield sites and make the default answer to suitable proposals 'yes'.[159]

The government wrote that they "are interested in understanding more about the potential to use design guides and codes that draw on existing character of places, to identify these opportunities and provide clarity on the types of development that are regarded as acceptable in particular locations".[160] This is a positive move by the MHCLG and they should require that LPAs consider planning applications on brownfield sites to be acceptable by default if clearly shown to have been prepared using local design codes. If adopted, this could allow for the development of significant numbers of beautiful and well-designed homes.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should set a specific expectation that would require Local Planning Authorities to accept by default planning applications on brownfield sites if they have been prepared using a local design code unless specific exclusions apply, with an ambition of moving towards a more automatic approval of applications that are compliant.

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157 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system, August 2024. Accessed: gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system.
158 Create Streets, Neighbourhood Design Code Chesham, n. d. Accessed: www.createstreets.com/projects/chesham-neighbourhood-design-code/.
159 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Brownfield Passport: Making the Most of Urban Land, September 2024.
160 Ibid.

Putting Communities at the Heart of Planning Reform

As stated previously, one of the key recommendations made by the Campaign to End Loneliness on the built environment was to involve local people, including lonely people, in informing development and change in the built environment. This is important because lonely people have more negative associations with the built environment compared to the adult population as a whole. For example, Figure 6 shows the views of all adults when asked about the built environment and social connection.

Figure 7: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the buildings in your local area, such as the houses on your street, local shops, schools, pubs, or other buildings? All adults.
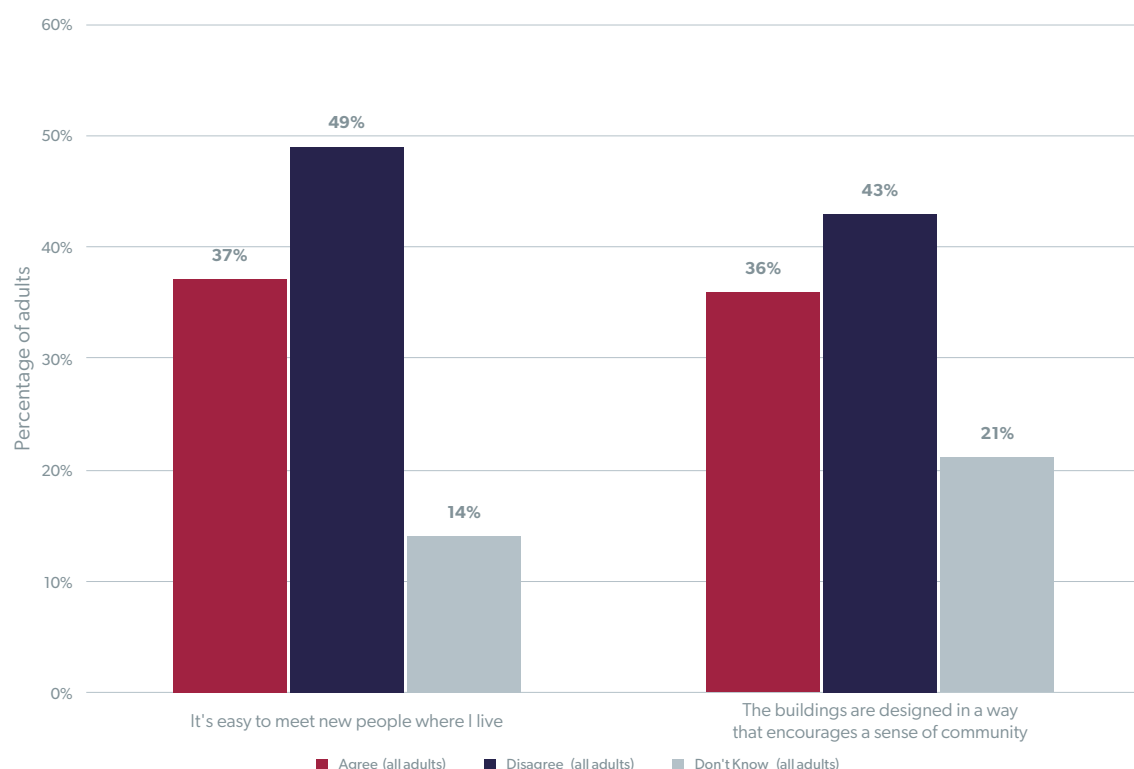
Nearly half of adults (49 per cent) disagreed with the statement 'It's easy to meet new people where I live' and over two in five (43 per cent) disagreed that 'The buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community. Whilst adults as a whole are more negative about how the built environment enables social connection, lonely people are much more likely to make these associations. Figure 7 shows the responses of adults who said they felt lonely often.

Figure 8: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the buildings in your local area, such as the houses on your street, local shops, schools, pubs, or other buildings? Often lonely adults.
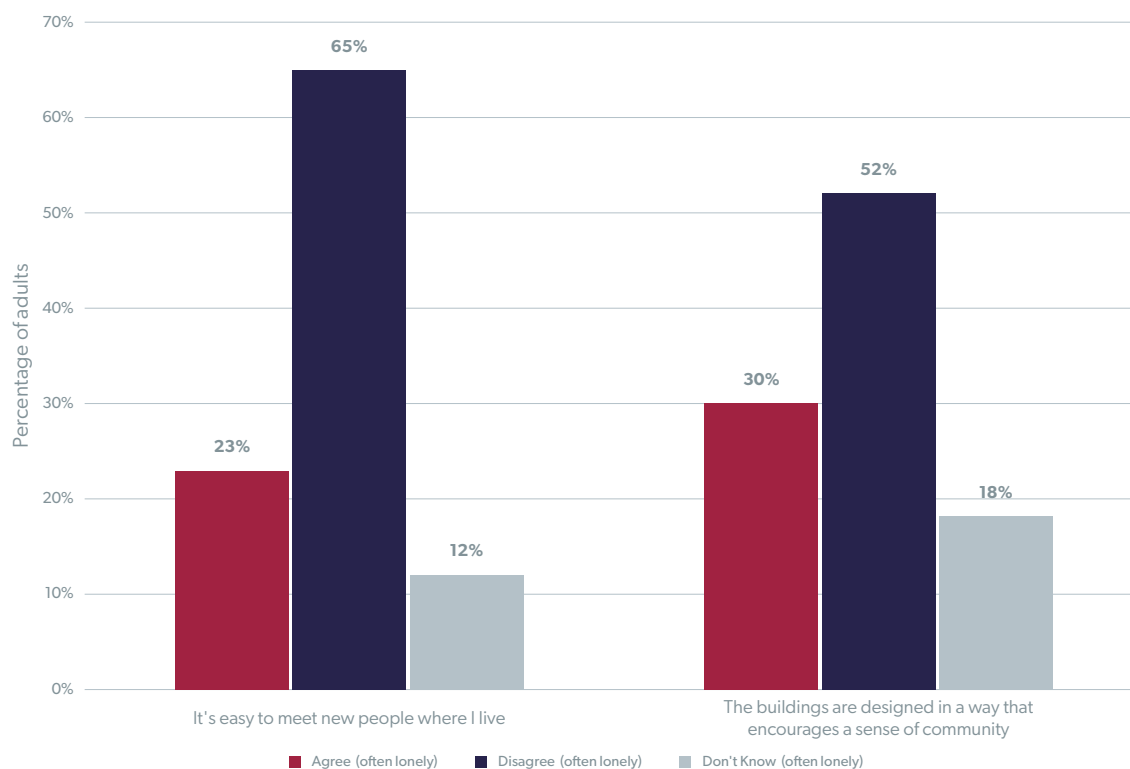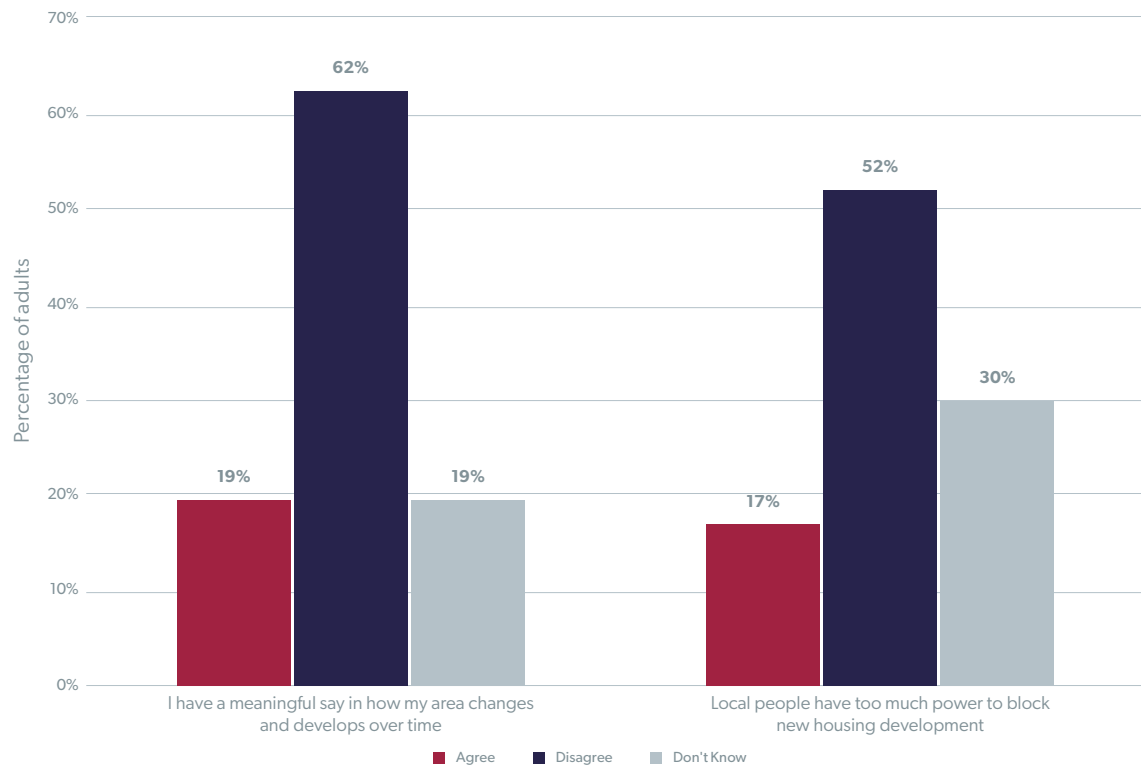

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Over half of adults (52 per cent) who say they are lonely often disagree that buildings are designed in a way that encourages a sense of community, falling to 43 per cent of all adults. Over six in ten adults (65 per cent) who say they are lonely often disagree that it is easy to meet new people where they live, falling to just under half of all adults (49 per cent).

Furthermore, CSJ polling found that most adults feel cut out of the development process and that they have little to no say in how their communities change over time. Our polling found that 62 per cent of adults say they have no meaningful say in how their area changes and develops over time. 52 per cent say that local people do not have enough power to block new housing development. In order to make a success out of its mission to build 1.5 million homes over the current parliament, the government must engage with why people feel ignored in the planning process and take steps to remedy it. Development without consultation will only serve to alienate people and make it harder to increase public support for housing.

Figure 9: Thinking about your local area, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
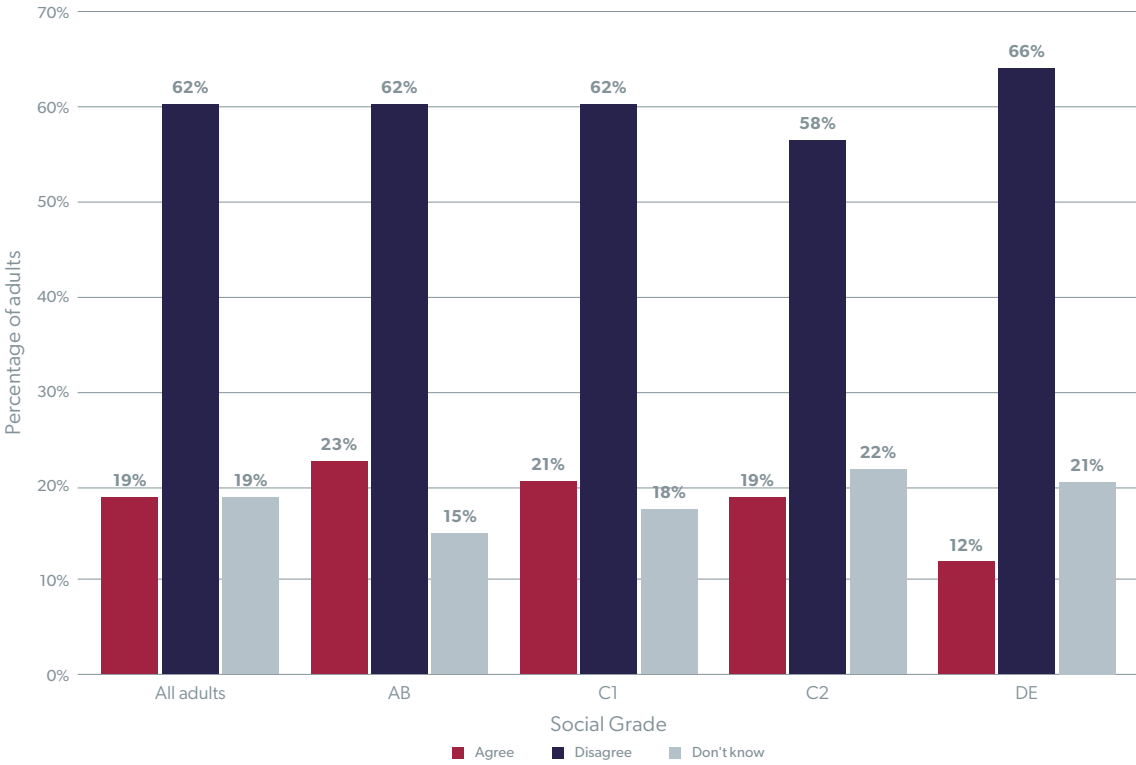

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15ᵗʰ to 16ᵗʰ April 2024.

Our polling shows that adults across the UK feel a lack of control over how their communities change over time. Furthermore, on the whole adults are not sympathetic to the idea that local people have too much power to block new housing development.

CSJ polling also identified how adults in different social grades felt. Social grade is a socio-economic classification that groups people based on their financial and social situation. [161] The categories range from professional to unskilled manual occupations.

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161 Social Grade is a socio-economic classification. This is a way of grouping people by type, which is mainly based on their social and financial situation. The grades include higher and intermediate managerial, administrative and professional occupations (AB), supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional occupations (C1), skilled manual occupations (C2), and semi-skilled and unskilled manual and lowest grade occupations (DE).

Figure 10: Thinking about your local area, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I have a meaningful say in how my area changes and develops over time.

Source: Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2,066 UK adults Nat Rep between 15th to 16th April 2024.

Adults in the AB social grade are the most likely to say they have a meaningful say in how their area changes and develops. 23 per cent agree with this statement, above the national average of 19 per cent. Adults in the lower social grades (DE) are more likely to disagree that they have a meaningful say in how their area changes and develops over time than those in the AB grade. 66 per cent disagree compared to 62 per cent, respectively. Indeed, adults in the DE social grade are nearly half as likely to agree that they have a meaningful say in how their area changes and develops than adults in the AB social grade. Adults across all social grades are much more likely to disagree with the statement than agree.

It would be tempting for government to consider these concerns parochial, and to simply reduce the means available to local residents to object to development. However, whilst the view that local government should have less power to block development outright is understandable, this should not come at the cost of all community engagement. Indeed, there should be much more community input in the early stages of the planning process to shape the type and style of development. This report has already outlined the potential of design codes in achieving this, but the government should also aim to see a significant increase in neighbourhood planning. This is a powerful tool that is available to local communities, town and parish councils. A concerted effort to increase the use of neighbourhood planning, alongside design codes, will increase community involvement in development that is in line with local priorities, as well as giving local people the opportunity to decide how they want their built environment to foster connection and tackle loneliness.

Analysis from Locality, a membership body for community organisations, shows that there are over 1,000 neighbourhood plans in use and thousands more in development across the country.[165] Importantly for the government's mission to build 1.5 million homes, analysis by the University of Reading has shown that neighbourhood plans are providing sites for an average additional 39 units per neighbourhood plan as an addition to local plan allocation.[166] The authors found that scaling up the production of neighbourhood plans could make a "significant contribution to housing supply – particularly if cooperation between neighbourhoods and local planning authorities are strengthened further."[167]

Therefore, the government should introduce a requirement for LPAs to consider planning applications in line with neighbourhood plans acceptable by default. For applications that are made to the LPA, and not via the rights given to communities to give planning permission directly through the Neighbourhood Development Order and Community Right to Build, LPAs should grant approval by default for planning applications which meet the requirements of neighbourhood plans. This would help to provide certainty to developers by guaranteeing that their application will be successful if they comply with all the conditions outlined by the community in the neighbourhood plan.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should set a specific expectation that would require Local Planning Authorities to accept by default planning applications if they meet the conditions outlined in neighbourhood plans unless specific exclusions apply, with an ambition of moving towards a more automatic approval of applications that are compliant.

162 Locality, Frequently asked questions by neighbourhood planners, 2021, p. 20.
163 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Neighbourhood planning, September 2020.
164 Ibid.
165 Locality, Building Thriving Neighbourhoods: The Locality Manifesto, June 2024, p. 35.
166 University of Reading, Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England, May 2020, p.3.
167 Ibid, p. 3.

To unlock the full potential of neighbourhood planning, the MHCLG should also set a target to double the number of neighbourhood plans in place across England by 2034 and require all local planning authorities to actively identify communities where neighbourhood plans could be developed in their jurisdiction. Local planning authorities should strongly encourage communities with most potential to form neighbourhood plans (especially economically deprived areas) and provide comprehensive support to enable them to do so. This would require a greater role for LPAs to identify and support communities to create neighbourhood plans. Of particular importance is increasing the number of neighbourhood plans in use among economically deprived areas as most so far have been taken up in affluent parts of the country.[168]

Furthermore, to compliment neighbourhood planning and increase the number of community led developments taking place across England, the government should re-launch the Community Housing Fund with a £78 million funding pot for four years. £78 million reflects the £65 million that the Community Led Homes network recommended government invest in a new Community Housing Fund in 2021, adjusted for inflation.[169] A new fund would help to deliver thousands more community led homes across England. In 2020, an independent review of community led housing projects found that the potential pipeline of homes was significant, numbering 23,000 across unspecified and specified development stages. Over 10,000 units were planned at that time.[170] Community led housing should be considered an important element of the government's plan to build more homes. The fund should be targeted at the 150 most deprived local authorities in England and be open to all community led housing organisations who can demonstrate a social benefit, not just registered providers of affordable housing.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should launch a targeted Community Housing Fund with £78 million committed over four years.
The fund should be targeted at the 150 most deprived local authorities in England and not be limited to registered providers of social or affordable housing. Community led housing organisations that are not registered providers but offer affordable rented accommodation and can demonstrate a social impact should be eligible for funding. To be eligible for funding, all groups should have to demonstrate that there is an affordable housing need in their area. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should consult with community led housing providers on the best way of structuring a refreshed fund. The fund should also be available for acquisitions projects.

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168 Locality, Building Thriving Neighbourhoods: The Locality Manifesto, June 2024, p. 36.

169 Community Led Homes, Proposal for the Community Housing Fund, September 2021, p. 2.

170 National Community Land Trust Network, Et al., Estimating the pipeline of Community-Led Housing projects and its grant requirements, February 2020, p. 2.

As stated in the previous chapter, government commissioned research shows that features of community led housing are associated with less loneliness, as well as greater trust and belonging.[171] Through consultation with community led housing providers, the CSJ was told of the positive impact they have.

> "Yeah, people do trust us in a way that they won't always trust other organisations."
>
> Charity Leader, Giroscope, Hull.

> "We are trying to rebuild community relationships in the place of family relationships that have just been lost."
>
> Charity Leader, Back on the Map, Sunderland.

> "We want to hear the local people's voices, the plan (for the neighbourhood) will be their plan, the plan is what they want to see. A lot of common issues are coming up, lots to do with housing, the state of repairs, a feeling of security. People don't invest in their house because they don't know how long they'll be there. But when East Marsh United rents to them, they know it's a home."
>
> Charity Leader, East Marsh United, Grimsby.

To better support the work of community led housing in the UK's most disadvantaged places, the CSJ recommends two significant changes to the Community Housing Fund which existed between 2016 and 2020.

1. The Community Housing Fund should not be limited to registered providers. If a community led housing group is providing affordable housing and can demonstrate a social benefit, they should be eligible for grant funding even if they are not a registered provider. The flexibility and ingenuity of community led housing groups should be celebrated and supported.

The previous Community Housing Fund existed between 2016 and 2020.[172] The majority of funding was routed through Homes England which meant that community led housing for low-cost rent would necessitate the grant recipient being a registered provider of affordable housing.[173] This presented a major barrier to some community led housing groups who were not registered providers of social housing but who were providing affordable housing and having a positive impact on the community. A new fund should be designed in a way that is open to all community led housing organisations providing affordable housing, even if they are not registered providers.

The virtue of community led housing is not that they are registered providers, but because they are from the community they exist to serve and often provide benefits to a wider group of people than housing associations or other registered providers are able to. Their flexibility is a strength, and in the case of the three trailblazing organisations that the CSJ spoke to over the course of this research, acquiring empty, abandoned and/or dilapidated properties that are of no interest to larger registered providers.

The CSJ visited and spoke to three community led housing providers working in disadvantaged parts of England: Giroscope in Hull, East Marsh United in Grimsby and Back on the Map in Sunderland. Whilst not registered providers of social or affordable housing, these organisations operate as not for

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171 The London School of Economics and Political Science, 'Those little connections': Community-led housing and loneliness, November 2021, p. II.
172 Community Led Homes, The Government's Community Housing Fund, March 2020. Accessed: www.communityledhomes.org.uk/housing/13.
173 Ibid.

profit and reinvest back into the communities they serve. They have a clear social purpose and provide affordable housing to local people who otherwise would be living in privately rented accommodation and/or be on the waiting list for social housing.

A charity leader at East Marsh United explained that whilst they were not registered providers of social housing, they operated as ethical charitable landlords. Operating independently means they have much more flexibility to respond to community needs and provide a variety of other services to the community who may not be tenants.

For example, Giroscope provide support for unemployed young people, a gardening course and have also acquired a former church for the community benefit. East Marsh United are involved with a variety of community initiatives and adult education. Back on the Map run a community space with a variety of different events as well as give support to local entrepreneurs.

It would be misguided to assume that these organisations should become registered providers to become eligible for funding under the Community Housing Fund. Firstly, as others have pointed out, these models of community self-help were how many of the largest social housing providers first emerged.[174] Secondly, having a variety of different tenures working alongside registered providers offer more avenues to boost housing supply and variety for communities. A charity leader at Back on the Map told the CSJ that providers of social housing were limited in the support they could give to non-tenants.

> *"Our properties generate a higher-than-average yield, but we invest in the community. This is what registered providers did in the day when they invested in the wider community. Now they are only allowed to do things that directly benefit their own tenants."*
>
> Charity Leader, Back on the Map, Sunderland.

Furthermore, the variety of different services that some community led housing providers offer means that registering as a provider of social housing is complicated and, in some cases, would be impossible.

> *"We probably couldn't become one [a registered provider]. Because, you know, we've got a computer project, we've got a bike project, we've got some non-residential stuff. Does Mrs. Jenkinson's rent subsidise the work we're doing on the church? There's the money we receive from selling recycled bicycles, does that subsidise the maintenance on Mrs. Jenkinson's house? If you ask me to separate all that out, that's going to be impossible. So, to register the whole of Giroscope now, because we have become a bit of a provider of lots of stuff, it would be impossible."*
>
> Charity Leader, Giroscope, Hull.

Giroscope, East Marsh United and Back on the Map are also engaged in purchasing empty and dilapidated homes on the market and converting them into good quality, affordable, rented accommodation. The CSJ heard that this is not a business model that interests many large registered providers who are focused on developing larger sites. A new Community Housing Fund should be available to groups who are also primarily engaged in acquisitions, rather than newbuild development. Furthermore, community led housing groups have the benefit of being owned and managed by people from the community. There is no obligation on registered providers to do the same. This

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174 New Economics Foundation, The community right to buy: how housing acquisitions can regenerate left behind communities, improve standards, and decarbonise homes, September 2023, p. 5.

model helps to strengthen community agency and belonging – a key pillar of strong and thriving communities.

> "For local people by local people, being resident led is the golden thread that runs through everything. All our volunteers live and work in the area. Our board includes a majority of people living in the community."
>
> Charity Leader, Back on the Map, Sunderland.

Furthermore, tenants having access to Right to Buy was highlighted as a risk for one community led housing provider and a reason why they had not become a registered provider.

In the NPPF consultation launched in August 2024, the government asked for views on whether the definition of 'affordable housing for rent' should be amended. To better reflect the heterogeneous nature of affordable housing providers across the country, the CSJ echoes the Community Land Trust Network in calling on the government to reverse the change to the NPPF in 2018 that implied that only registered providers could provide affordable housing.[175] To make a new Community Housing Fund available to non-profit community led housing organisations, the government may need to introduce new regulation, either via the Regulator of Social Housing or through a separate body, to ensure proper oversight.

2. The Community Housing Fund should be directed towards the 150 most deprived local authorities in England.

As well as being open to non-registered providers of affordable housing, a new Community Housing Fund should be directed to the 150 most deprived local authorities in England and within that, groups that have the twin aims of providing affordable housing and providing a social benefit which could be defined as alleviating poverty. This would help to support the development and regeneration of the most deprived places in England and help with pre-development costs which can be more difficult in less affluent areas. The 2020 review of community led housing highlighted the large pipeline of early-stage projects, for which the likelihood of development was uncertain.[176] When it existed between 2016 and 2020, the Community Housing Fund provided groups with revenue grants to cover 90 per cent of pre-development costs.[177] The CSJ has previously heard from sector stakeholders that a key challenge for new, undercapitalised providers, is the great difficulty in raising finance. The Community Housing Fund provided organisations with risk capital to do this early work.[178] For economically deprived communities, the funding and advice provided at this early stage is crucial for projects succeeding in future. Furthermore, to be eligible for funding, the CSJ recommends that any group applying to the Fund should have to demonstrate that there is an affordable housing need in their area.

At a time when there is significant housing demand, community led housing projects should be able to run profitably over the long-term in more affluent areas where the property market is overheated. To assist community led housing projects in more affluent areas of the country, local authorities should consider making capital loans available to community led housing projects, as well as expanding access to finance through Section 106 funds and Right to Buy receipts. In the long-term, community led housing projects could provide a return on investment for local authorities willing to invest.

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175 Community Land Trust Network, NPPF Consultation Response, September 2024.

176 National Community Land Trust Network, Et al., Estimating the pipeline of Community-Led Housing projects and its grant requirements, February 2020, p. 2.

177 Community Led Homes, The Government's Community Housing Fund, March 2020. Accessed: www.communityledhomes.org.uk/housing/13.

178 Centre for Social Justice, Levying Up: Ensuring planning reform delivers affordable homes, December 2022, p. 54.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should require local authorities to assess their ability to make capital loans available to community led housing schemes as well as capital grants through Section 106 funds and Right to Buy receipts.

To further support the community led housing sector, government should allow community groups to bid for the purchase of housing assets through the Community Ownership Fund. This would require no additional government funding but unlock an immediate source of income for community led housing groups across England. Groups are currently unable to access the Community Ownership Fund to purchase or develop housing or land to develop housing.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should allow community groups to bid for the purchase of housing assets within the Community Ownership Fund.

Give Communities Control

To garner public support for new development and build a nation where people feel a sense of belonging and pride in the places they live, it should be a government priority to give communities more control and agency. Agency is the pathway to belonging. Without a sense of belonging, entire communities feel cut adrift and passive observers of decline.

The CSJ visited charities and social enterprises across the country who are engaged in rebuilding local relationships and a sense of community. These organisations often struggle in the face of economic decline, failing public services and unhelpful short-term contracting agreements with local authorities. To renew the social fabric, communities need to be trusted with the control and resources they need to shape their future.

The Labour government can draw on its own socialist heritage in contriving new ways of strengthening community control and agency. For example, the cooperative movement was founded on the principles of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy and local agency. It was characterised by small groups of local people working together to build better lives and provide for one another. Labour peer, Lord Glasman, writes that "Labour was founded as a politics of working-class agency, through which workers could achieve recognition and participate in the polity as a power."[179] The government could also draw on the tradition of ethical socialism which contests statism and is concerned with, in the words of former Labour MP Jon Cruddas, "fraternity, democracy, solidarity, the building of civic virtue and upholding community life."[180] Loneliness is one product of a ruptured social fabric and community decline. Only by strengthening community life can the government hope to tackle the long-term causes of loneliness in Britain.

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179 Maurice Glasman, Blue Labour: The Politics of the Common Good (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 41.
180 Jon Cruddas, A Century of Labour (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 25.

One such group working to rebuild the social fabric is Coalville C.A.N (Communities and Neighbours), working in the post-industrial town of Coalville. The C.A.N was set up as a Community Benefit Society and operates as a cooperative. Running a membership model, the C.A.N directly involves the community in governing the organisation. Profits are reinvested into the area and organisation. A core value of the C.A.N is land. The group want to own land in the town so that their community can grow and thrive. Currently, they are raising money to purchase the freehold of their main building.

> *"We create spaces where anyone in the community can bump into each other, even the most unlikely people meet. We can have an upholstery class, the tool library up and running, a few people in the shop. Conversations that would happen only at a place of worship or where people need to pay now. The thing they have in common is that they come to our place."*
>
> *"But you need assets and resources…If the council decides it's going to shut a building down, by the time you petition for it its already decided."*
>
> Charity Leader, Coalville Can.

In Sunderland, community led housing organisation Back on the Map compared the employment work they do in the community with the number of overseas landlords who extract wealth whilst making little or no contribution to the area.

> *"There are lots of absentee landlords in our area. How much public money is going in the purse of overseas individuals. If they were our properties how many local people would be employed and how much tax would be paid."*
>
> Charity Leader, Back on the Map, Sunderland.

Another example of grassroots regeneration is in the village of Chopwell, just outside of Newcastle. Chopwell Regeneration Group was set up as a membership organisation in 2017 for local people to regenerate their community from the grassroots up. They purchased a local building for use as a welfare and enterprise centre, which is now at the heart of the community as a café. But for a long time, the group had hoped to purchase an abandoned and neglected hotel at the centre of the village which is shuttered up. Despite attempts to purchase the site, the group have not been able to negotiate a sale. Years later the hotel remains boarded up and without use.

> *"The hotel is privately owned. It's been bought and sold twice in the past eight years, with a view to redevelop as housing. It's now up for sale again. Remote landlord, cheap property. In a terrible state of disrepair and slowly crumbling."*
>
> Charity Leader, Chopwell Regeneration Group.

The CSJ was also told that there was no proactive engagement from local authorities to help community groups like Chopwell take ownership of buildings, despite the benefit it has on local areas and people.

> *"There is no proactive engagement and support for places to take ownership of buildings and deliver a social purpose through them. It is a scary, complex and abstract thing to grapple with."*
>
> Charity Leader, Chopwell Regeneration Group.

The government has recognised that community groups lack the mechanisms to take ownership of land and buildings in their communities. Many places across the country are blighted by abandoned and neglected buildings, sat empty at the heart of communities, when they could be used for a social purpose. The government has understood this problem and has promised to introduce a 'strong' new right to buy 'beloved' community assets and end the blight of empty premises. This will be included within plans for an English Devolution Bill which was promised in the 2024 King's Speech.[181] After consultation with community groups, community led housing organisations, stakeholders in Scotland and the Scottish Government, the CSJ recommends that the government replace the Community Right to Bid with two new Community Right to Buy powers modelled on those that exist in Scotland.

Recommendation

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should replace the Community Right to Bid with two new Community Right to Buy powers modelled on the provisions that exist in Scotland. These are the:

a. Community Right to Buy (Pre-Emptive): The Community Right to Buy (Pre-Emptive) should replace the Community Right to Bid and be modelled on the version that exists in Scotland, giving community groups the right of first refusal on land with a registered community interest. The moratorium period preventing a sale should be set at 12 months giving the community group the opportunity to prepare a bid.

b. Community Right to Buy (Compulsory): The Community Right to Buy (Compulsory) should give community groups the right to compulsory purchase land that is wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected and if the purchase is deemed to be in the public interest.

A Community Right to Buy in England would deliver a meaningful mechanism for community groups to buy land and assets that are not currently being used in the public interest. Subject to safeguards, this could be a powerful tool to regenerate left-behind places, restore ownership and agency, balancing the right to enjoyment of private property with obligations to steward that asset for the common good. The CSJ recommends that just one of the compulsory powers be implemented in England (if land is proved to be abandoned, neglected or detrimental) as this would provide an opportunity to trial the new powers. In Scotland, the compulsory right to buy in the case of sustainable development was introduced two years after the former.

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181 His Majesty King Charles III, The King's Speech 2024, July 2024. Accessed: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-kings-speech-2024.

Case Study: Scottish Community Right to Buy

There are three main powers available to community groups in Scotland to buy land when it comes up for sale. This is different to the Community Asset Transfer which exists across the UK and enables community groups to take possession of public land.

Community Right to Buy: The Community Right to Buy was introduced in 2003 and gives communities in Scotland a pre-emptive right to buy land. Community bodies can register an interest in land and have the right of first refusal. This means that when a landowner decides to sell the land, the community body is given the opportunity to purchase the land.

Community Right to Buy (abandoned, neglected or detrimental land): The community right to buy abandoned, neglected or detrimental land came into force in 2018. It gives community bodies a right to compulsory purchase land which is wholly or mainly, abandoned or neglected or the use or management of the land is causing harm to the environmental wellbeing of the community.

Community Right to Buy (to further sustainable development): The community right to buy land to further sustainable development came into being in 2020. It allows community groups the right to buy land to further sustainable development as well as to nominate a third-party purchaser to take title to the group being acquired. This is also a compulsory purchase power that is only available in certain circumstances.

The compulsory purchase powers made available to groups in Scotland can only be used in certain circumstances. The Scottish government state that: "The requirements for the right to buy are complex and a community body is required to demonstrate, within its application, that the transfer of land is in the public interest and is compatible with furthering the achievement of sustainable development in relation to the land. The community body must also demonstrate if its application relates to abandonment or neglect, that sustainable development is unlikely to be furthered by the owner of the land continuing to be its owner; or if an application relates to a harm to the environmental wellbeing of the community, that the right to buy is compatible with removing, or substantially removing, that harm."

For more information on how the Scottish Community Right to Buy works in practice, please see the Scottish Government website[182] and the Development Trusts Association Scotland.[183]

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182 Agriculture and Rural Economic Directorate, Land reform, n. d. Accessed: www.gov.scot/policies/land-reform/.
183 Development Trusts Association Scotland, Community Right to Buy, n. d. Accessed: dtascommunityownership.org.uk/community/other-community-rights/community-right-buy/community-right-buy.

In addition to the above, there are several other differences between how community powers work in Scotland and England. For example, in Scotland there are mechanisms for late applications, an independent valuation of the land takes place, and the final approval of the community must be given via a referendum. Furthermore, government ministers give final approval of Right to Buy requests in Scotland, whilst in England, the Right to Bid is administered by local authorities. The CSJ recommends that the government consult with stakeholders on what mechanisms to carry over directly from Scotland, and which should be kept from the existing Community Right to Bid, under an expansion of community powers in England. For example, under a new Community Right to Buy in England, the added legal complexities may require central government oversight. There is also a case for expanding the number of assets that can be designated as Asset of Community Value in England. Our recommendation uses the Scottish definition of a Registered Interest in land as this currently allows for the designation of more land as having a community interest than is the case in England. In Scotland, the powers are more focused on the broader policy priority of land reform, whereas in England, the Community Right to Bid is centred on assets in communities like a pub or park. Whilst the CSJ recommends that the government move to a policy framework that is similar to what currently exists in Scotland, there should be detailed consultation with stakeholders to ensure new Community Right to Buy powers in England work effectively in what is a different legal and cultural context to Scotland. For example, Scotland has a long history of land reform, and the powers that exist reflect the very different legal and political framework that exist independently of England.[185]

The charity Chopwell Regeneration Group told the CSJ that key areas for improvement within a Community Right to Buy in England should be giving community groups adequate time to raise funding to prepare a bid. They recommended that the moratorium period preventing a sale of the asset should be set at 12 months, as six months is not long enough. They also recommended that an independent valuation of the asset takes place as a flaw within the Community Right to Bid is that owners can demand an above market price. Other priorities included access to affordable finance and support to write a business plan.

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184 House of Commons Library, Assets of community value, March 2022.
185 Power to Change, Getting it right: Introducing and implementing a Community Right to Buy, August 2024, pp. 16-17.

Despite the potential that the compulsory Right to Buy powers (although there are, well used, non-compulsory rights as well) have in Scotland for community ownership, they have yet to be used substantially. When speaking to the Scottish Government in August 2024, the CSJ was told that, to date, there had only been one approved application to use the right to compulsory purchase land, although at the time of writing, that one case is in the Scottish Court of Appeal. The civil servant responsible told the CSJ that despite the legislation not being used in full, it serves to open up negotiations with the landowner and gives the community groups the right to be at the table. We were told that several of the groups that had submitted a compulsory purchase request had, after a period of time, purchased land through successful negotiation instead. This is a better outcome than completing the sale of land via compulsory purchase.

There are valid concerns held by many that introducing wider community compulsory purchase powers in England would contravene property rights. The Scottish Government told the CSJ that their legislation was compatible with Article 1 of the First Protocol: Protection of property in the European Convention of Human Rights. Scottish Ministers are compelled to decline any application under the Right to Buy legislation unless they are satisfied it is in the public interest.[186] Public interest under Right to Buy legislation has been tested in the Scottish courts and found satisfactory.[187] There are also valid reasons as to why property may be left vacant. For example, if there is a planning application in progress this can take a long time to resolve. There may be personal reasons as to why property is left vacant such as the property awaiting repair or renovation. Under an English Community Right to Buy, government must include these caveats and ensure that the process for securing a sale is neutral and equally weighted towards both community group and landowner.[188] The compulsory Community Right to Buy should only be available in certain circumstances. On the other hand, the CSJ also heard from groups in Scotland who believed the existing legislation didn't go far enough in giving communities an absolute right to purchase land.

To compliment a Community Right to Buy, the CSJ also recommends that the government mandate every local authority to produce a community ownership strategy with three core priority areas set by national government. If every local authority implemented the recommendations below, combined with the Community Right to Buy, community ownership would be given the foundations to thrive in the decades ahead.

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186 Scottish Land Commission, Legislative proposals to address the impact of Scotland's concentration of land ownership, February 2021, p. 24.
187 Ibid, p. 24.
188 On their website, the Scottish Government state that: "As a compulsory purchase, the right to buy is not intended to be used as a first resort and, prior to submitting an application for a right to buy, the process requires the community body to send a written offer to purchase the asset to the landowner, as well as conducting a ballot of the defined community. The right to buy process takes at least 12 months from start (the initial offer to the owner) to finish (concluding the sale). An application under consideration by Scottish Ministers does not (whilst the application is being considered) prevent the current owner from exercising any of their rights over the land, including the right to develop or lease their land or buildings, or to obtain planning permission."

> **Recommendation**
>
> **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should require every local authority to produce a community ownership strategy** including the following priority areas:
>
> a. **Strengthening the Community Asset Transfer by requiring every local authority to have a policy in place as well as to review assets available for transfer as part of future asset management plans.** Local authorities should also be expected to agree to Community Asset Transfer requests unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal.
>
> b. **Expand eligibility for empty and/or abandoned property grants to community led housing projects** that are not registered providers of affordable housing but can demonstrate a social benefit.
>
> c. **The CSJ echoes the New Economics Foundation in calling for local authorities to have powers to be able to introduce a Community Right to Buy (Right of first refusal to registered providers and community led housing organisations)** for a limited set period when residential properties are put up for sale in a particular area. This would be aimed at areas where there is little interest from residential home buyers, a large number of empty homes and high numbers of privately rented properties. It would give a competitive advantage to registered providers of affordable housing and community led housing organisations.

The three priority areas above emerged out of consultation with the CSJ alliance network of small charities. Charities and social enterprises outlined these areas as critical for delivering meaningful change in community ownership.

1. Strengthening the Community Asset Transfer

The Community Asset Transfer is one of the most powerful tools available to communities to take control of local assets. It is well established and the main route that community groups use to own local buildings and property. Since 2010, there have been a very large number of publicly owned council buildings sold on the market. In 2018, Locality estimated that 4,000 publicly owned buildings were being sold by councils every year.[189] Sadly, there has not been enough of an emphasis on community organisations being able to take ownership of these buildings. A review of the Community Asset Transfer in 2020 found that less than half (45 per cent) of local authorities had a plan in place to guide their processes, and less than 20 per cent of councils said they review assets available for community asset transfer as part of their asset reviews.[190] The CSJ recommends that government commit to strengthening local government's implementation of the Community Asset Transfer by requiring every local authority to have an up-to-date policy in place and to regularly review assets available for transfer as part of future asset management plans. The government should also issue guidance to local authorities that Community Asset Transfer requests should be agreed to unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal.

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189 Locality, Building Thriving Neighbourhoods: The Locality Manifesto, June 2024, p. 22.
190 The Co-operative Group, In community hands: lessons from the past five years of the Community Asset Transfer, March 2020, p. 6.

2. Expand eligibility for empty and/or abandoned property grants

Local authorities should expand eligibility for empty and/or abandoned property grants to community led housing organisations that are not registered providers but who are still delivering affordable housing. There are many providers of community led housing that provide a clear social benefit and should be eligible for funding from local authorities.

3. Government should give local authorities the power to introduce a Community Right to Buy (Right of first refusal to registered providers and community led housing organisations).

The CSJ recommends that the government give local authorities the opportunity to institute a Community Right to Buy (Right of first refusal to registered providers and community led housing organisations). This recommendation has previously been made by the think-tank, New Economics Foundation (NEF). In 2023, the NEF recommended that this power be made available to local authorities, giving them a competitive advantage over buy to let landlords.[191]

Unlike the Community Right to Buy Power outlined earlier in this report, this power would be a local mechanism, at the discretion of local authorities to implement when there is demand from social landlords and community led housing organisations, to purchase properties in areas with little interest from residential buyers.

This power would enable social landlords and community led housing organisations to have the right to buy (this would function as a right of first refusal on properties being sold not a compulsory purchase right) properties when they are put on the market in a set geographical area. This is because this policy would not work in every locality, especially areas where there is high residential market demand. However, in places across the country where the cost of housing is low, and there is little demand from residential buyers, this power would give a competitive advantage to social landlords and community led housing organisations above buy to let landlords in acquiring stock.

Whilst the Community Right to Buy (Right of first refusal to registered providers and community led housing organisations) would be open to both registered providers and community led housing organisations, in some places, this power would help community led housing organisations obtain first rights on properties when registered providers sell off stock. When visiting Giroscope in Hull, the CSJ was also told that housing associations are regularly engaged in selling older properties on the market to buy to let landlords. Giroscope told the CSJ this meant that in their part of Hull, there was a direct transfer from the affordable housing sector to the PRS.

> *"If you go and check out your local auction house. The chances are half the houses in the auctions are street properties, there will be housing associations flogging them and of course, when they flog them in an auction, the only people buying them are private landlords…*
>
> *…They say 'the repairs are too complicated.' 'Everything's too complicated.' So, we'll bin them off. We'll flog them in auction, and that's what they do. So, housing associations are getting houses that are in the social housing sector and putting them directly into the private rented sector, because that's the only place they're going, you know, unless Giroscope turns up and buys them, that's the only place they're going, they're not going to owner occupiers."*
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> Charity Leader, Giroscope, Hull.

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191 New Economics Foundation, The community right to buy: how housing acquisitions can regenerate left behind communities, improve standards, and decarbonise homes, September 2023, p. 7.

In this case, if the Right to Buy power existed, Giroscope, would have the option to buy housing association properties that otherwise would be sold to buy to let landlords. Giroscope told the CSJ that this power would be interesting to explore.

> *"This idea that you define neighbourhoods which are under a certain amount of stress, you know, high numbers of private rented sector properties and that you give some kind of community right to buy houses? Yeah, I think that's quite an interesting thing to explore."*
>
> Charity Leader, Giroscope, Hull.

This report has shown the positive impact that community led housing projects have on local neighbourhoods and loneliness, but also the difficulty that many organisations have acquiring housing stock. Buy to let landlords who are equity-rich, have a large portfolio of houses and are less reliant on borrowing enjoy a favourable market position compared to community led housing providers.[192] This power would help to support the community led housing sector, as well as registered providers. It would be a market intervention in the interests of strengthening local communities. The CSJ was told by some community led housing organisations that many private landlords in their areas are absentee, some live abroad and other properties are owned by overseas companies. This means that rental income is siphoned away from communities, instead of being reinvested in the local area. An increase in community led housing would address this problem by ensuring more housing assets are owned by local organisations with a stake in the area, ensuring profits can be reinvested in improving the local community.

In many of the communities across the country which would be well positioned to make use of this power, for example, places like Hull, Grimsby and Sunderland, the quality of accommodation in the PRS is poor. In 2023 the CSJ published *Raising the Roof* which outlined substantial failures within the PRS.[193] It outlined how the PRS has the lowest levels of tenure satisfaction, a lack of tenure security, a failure to enforce standards, absentee landlords and a hesitancy to challenge bad standards.[194] Community led housing provider, Back on the Map, told the CSJ that there had been a proliferation of houses of multiple occupancy (HMO) in their part of Sunderland and that this was causing significant issues in very deprived neighbourhoods.

> *"The proliferation of HMOs and unregulated bed sits are causing real issues. This gets concentrated in deprived neighbourhoods. There needs to be regulation of the concentration and management of HMOs."*

Affordable housing is a precious asset in communities. To protect affordable housing stock from being transferred into the PRS, the CSJ also recommends that in addition to the Community Right to Buy power, the Regulator of Social Housing require in all cases, registered providers who are disposing of social housing dwellings to give right of first refusal on properties to other registered providers and community led housing groups for a limited period of time to be decided in consultation with the sector.

Recommendation

The Regulator of Social Housing should require registered providers who are disposing of social housing dwellings to give the right of first refusal on properties to other registered providers and community led housing organisations for a limited period of time.

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192 New Economics Foundation, The community right to buy: how housing acquisitions can regenerate left behind communities, improve standards, and decarbonise homes, September 2023, p. 6.
193 Centre for Social Justice, Raising the Roof: Building a better private rented sector, October 2023.
194 Ibid, p. 6.

Conclusion

This report has shown that the nature of loneliness across Britain is a cause for serious concern. Nearly six in ten adults say they feel lonely at least some of the time. 22 per cent of British adults surveyed feel a form of existential loneliness, a fundamental separateness from other people and the wider world. It has been six years since the launch of the 2018 loneliness strategy, *A Connected Society*. Since then, momentum has been lost. This report has shown how the government can kickstart its work on loneliness with a focus on the built environment.

This report has shown the relationship between the built environment and loneliness. The evidence base has grown in recent years and there is a clear basis for government to prioritise development with design features that contribute to social connection and wellbeing. This is particularly important as the government wants to build 1.5 million homes over the current parliament.

The government has an opportunity to build places that tackle loneliness. This report has shown the importance of beauty in the built environment, defined as all the features of the built environment that contribute to a healthy and happy life. It has shown how government can increase development that reflect local definitions of beauty through the use of design codes.

The government has an opportunity to give communities control. This report has shown how the majority of British adults feel a lack of agency and control over the future of their communities. Our polling found that 62 per cent of adults say they have no meaningful say in how their area changes and develops over time. The government has the opportunity to implement a powerful new Community Right to Buy and rapidly increase the use of neighbourhood planning to return agency to communities.

This government's most significant legacy could be the built environment it leaves behind. Its mission to build 1.5 million new homes is important and necessary. But it must not repeat the mistakes of the past. Thoughtful planning, with a renewed emphasis on placemaking that prioritises tackling loneliness, can revitalise community life in Britain as well as tackle the housing crisis.