

## **SUBMISSION TO NPF4 CONSULTATION.**

The current planning system is primarily geared towards encouraging mass production style home building.

Whilst desirable it has a number of disadvantages:-

1. It leads to development of sprawling estates all displaying sameness. These will never be anything more than commodity housing as the design of them is aimed at low cost speedy delivery with little regard to long term longevity. Are the houses we build today going to become desirable listed buildings for future generations? Likely not.

Where city centre office buildings can have a shelf life as short as 25 years because of the element of private individual ownership, the shelf life on these estate homes is longer but balanced by the reduction over similar timeframes with regards to diminishing desirability. As the desirability descends so does the price but that is often masked by inflation in the economy. The question is, are we building the 22nd century's slums? In essence, houses are in danger of sharing the characteristics of modern disposable consumer items.

2. Major developers work with squads of subcontractors whom they move about the country. Despite claims to the contrary, this does little if anything for local unemployment and skill set generation or retention. Craft skills are downgraded by being more and more narrowly focussed in the desire for speed to reduce labour costs. This can best be demonstrated by examining the skills of woodworkers: the skilled carpenters from the mid 1900s have gradually been replaced by shuttering, framing, roughing and finishing joiners, each with very limited skillsets.

3. The design of these estates is akin to painting by numbers where developers will build 20 type 37A, 15 type 39b, 21 type 43f etc. This is housebuilding's equivalent of word processing for mailshots. The developer has a stock portfolio of house types and the only architectural design input is in laying out the streets of these estates and placing the house types.

As a consequence, certainly in Scotland, it is difficult to find praiseworthy architecture in these housing estates. It has long been recognised that great architecture and good design enhance the living environment, however, that is rarely what is being delivered in the haste to process housebuilding. Taking Glasgow and its suburbs as a case study, there are numerous examples of uninspiring modern housing estates that are dull, boring, repetitive, lacking in facilities and from which the majority of people have to commute to their place of employment. Contrast that with the magnificent sandstone houses built in Pollokshields around the Maxwell Park area, each one a bespoke architectural gem with proper gardens. Contrast this with the similarly affluent Newton Mearns / High Whitecraigs suburb in East Renfrewshire and the contrast is a shockingly clear. Not so long ago, Newton Mearns was predominantly made up of small to medium-sized farms. Today it is claimed by some to be the largest residential urbanisation in Western Europe with a population of around 30,000 and climbing. Most of the original Newton Mearns homes have been demolished to facilitate larger developments. Sometimes these buildings have been of historic importance.

4. The majority of the today's architects tend to be self-employed or working in small practices where they seldom have the opportunity to utilise their design skills to the full and instead become stuck in a rut of extensions and loft conversions. Where are the future legacies inspired by Charles Rennie Macintosh et al? Stimulating and supporting the commissioning of one-off homes could enable architecture to become creative once again. Recent architectural landmarks - for example Holyrood, Glasgow's new Museum of Transport and The Hydro at the SEC - had no connection to any Scottish-based architects. The commissioning of one-off homes would encourage small local builders who would then employ and train apprentices, thereby increasing the pool of local skilled multi-task craftsman. Too many school leavers fail as the focus is to push them all through university, whereas many would do far better in a vocational apprenticeship.

5. Much is made by politicians on the delivery of affordable housing, which is created and financed by the imposition of what amounts to hidden taxation to subsidise the required delivery of 25% affordable housing for every development of four or more homes. Meeting this requirement merely pushes up the cost of the remaining 75% homes, thereby in turn making the majority of housing less affordable. Similarly, it is common for planning consent to come loaded with substantial financial demands by Local Authorities for planning gain. Again, this is rolled into the retail price of the homes being sold and greatly increases their cost. My own local authority can levy up to £20,000 per home by way of planning gain purportedly intended to improve infrastructure, public transport and school provision but often simply squandered with no lasting discernible results.

### **The Proposal - and its benefits.**

Any application from an intended owner occupier / self-builder for a single house on a single plot of ground should be exempt from requiring planning permission. This would immediately reduce the cost for self-builders who are often working with limited capital resources. All too often the planning authority refuses applications on questionable whims, which the single house applicant cannot afford to challenge on grounds of cost as well as time. Buyers of second owner's homes used to suffer similarly with multiple surveys being commissioned on the same property. Each unsuccessful buyer could spend much of their capital fruitlessly, hence legislation brought in the system for Home Reports. Failed planning applications carry similar capital depleting consequences and with the added problem of loss of time. Removing the need for planning permission would immediately speed up the cost-effective delivery of self-build bespoke homes. Whilst being exempt from requiring planning permission they would remain subject to building control - but we suggest for a fixed-price per unit, rather than percentage-based on the value building control perceives the construction cost will be in order to enhance the fee they can levy. This would go some way to addressing the issue of whether building control is a profit centre for local authorities or an at-cost public service.

Private self-builders building a single home would be assisted in delivering a genuinely affordable home for their own occupation, without any levying of charges on others, either through the requirements to contribute to so-called affordable homes or a local authority's imposition of planning gain, plus they would also save on the developer's profit margin and marketing costs. **These are real cost benefits often added back into the spend to deliver a higher quality home.** Through this scheme, radical though it may sound, Scotland could deliver a genuinely affordable house to an owner for their occupation, perhaps with the stipulation that the scheme can only be used once every five years by the applicant. It would also assist in the removal of often ugly small gap sites which are too small in scale for the mainstream builders.

Scotland's existing legacy of highly desirable individual houses - many of which have been granted listed status - were built before the planning system came into force. They are dotted around the countryside and stand proud in magnificent isolation rather than contributing to urban sprawl. We managed very well before we had a planning system and most houses were commissioned and delivered by local small builders with multiple skills - an asset that greatly supported the local economy. It may well be SMEs such as small local builders who help get the economy back on track after we conquer the current pandemic.

Removing the need for planning consent on one-off homes commissioned by the owner occupier will save on planning costs, avoid the peril of refused applications, reduce the time taken to get planning consent before going before building control, and save on developer's profit margins and marketing costs - all whilst encouraging the market for local architects and builders, thereby delivering real local jobs, generating funds for the local economy and delivering a broader and more diverse range of house styles. This is a true win, win, win for those prepared to build their own individual and genuinely affordable self-build homes.