

# Self-build builds potential for more and better homes

Source: Public Sector Executive April/May 2019

The director of The Right to Build Task Force – which advises stakeholders on bringing on more custom and self-build homes – Mario Wolf, who is currently on secondment from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, discusses challenges the public sector needs to engage with to deliver housing supply growth.

In his recent review findings, Sir Oliver Letwin pointed to the need for diversification in housing supply on large sites in areas of high housing demand to speed up delivery. Custom and self-build will make a vital contribution to this diversification, but to do so it needs the public sector to embrace it, and recognise that it can deliver more and better homes.

As a core element in providing additional homes, custom and self-build supports local economies and small-to-medium businesses, and builds a sense of community. Evidence shows that communities view it as a more palatable form of development, and the homes it delivers are, on average, built to a higher standard and include more sustainable tech than typical new builds.

What's more, their owners occupy them for longer, and they provide a valuable source of variety in the market, in both a rural and urban context. This can be in the form of smaller, high-end homes that suit downsizers, homes that suit people's work-life patterns, or ones that meet the needs of accessible, multi-generation or younger families.

But with over 13,000 homes delivered via this route annually and a steady growth rate year-on-year, why aren't we seeing more custom and self-build opportunities when the results are so tangible?

The need for local authorities in England to actively plan for custom and self-build housing is now firmly embedded in legislation and national planning policy. The Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 (as amended), known as 'the Right to Build,' came into effect in April 2016. This places a duty on English local authorities to keep a register of demand for anyone interested in securing a plot for an owner-commissioned home, i.e. a custom or self-build home, and to have regard to this register when they exercise their statutory functions. The Housing and Planning Act 2016 requires councils to grant sufficient development permissions to reflect this demand within three years on a rolling basis. The legislation was one approach to alleviating the issues of finding land and obtaining planning permission.

However, the interpretation by local authorities of the duty placed on them varies considerably, with some driving a range of initiatives, while others see it as a demand on resources. Their activity or lack thereof) has a direct correlation with the numbers on the registers, and impacts on the number of plots coming forward in an area.

In November 2018, the National Custom and Self Build Association (NaCSBA) found that there were more than 40,000 people signed up to the registers; and 30 October 2019 marks the completion of the first full three-year 'base period' since the commencement of the registers. This is a watershed moment for the public sector that the NaCSBA is referring to as 'Right to Build Day,' as it will starkly illustrate which councils are meeting this duty and which are falling short.

Since the introduction of the legislation, government has further strengthened its planning rule book (the National Planning Policy Framework) to ask councils to assess and plan to meet the demand for custom and self-build housing, which is leading to new local plans which include supportive policies and land allocations.

A European model

Custom and self-build is still a nascent industry in the UK, but it is a vital and complementary addition to it. The potential is huge, as evidenced by European examples, where in some cases it contributes to between half and a third of all new housing. In the Netherlands, a task force was set up to support the sector, which helped double self-build output. Following its model, the NaCSBA initiated the creation of a UK version: the Right to Build Task Force.

The task force advises a range of organisations and community-led groups, especially local authorities, to help them deliver more custom and self-build homes to suit local circumstances, including affordable housing. It is government-endorsed and regularly reports its progress to government ministers.

The task force comprises a panel of experts with a regional

spread from a range of professional arenas, such as affordable housing and planning, housing development, and public policy. Anyone seeking support fills in an expression of interest form on its website, the Right to Build Toolkit.

**A wide variety of tailored support is available. For example:**

- Advice on the evolution and promotion of 'Right to Build' Registers to create a powerful evidence base for demand
- Targeted visioning and strategy workshops
- Facilitated political engagement with elected members, and training for officers and professionals
- Engagement with landowners and developers, especially in the context of larger sites and settlements
- Policy development for Local Plans and guidance to ensure they are robust enough to withstand scrutiny
- Neighbourhood planning and advice on how communities can bring forward their own custom and self-build housing projects to meet local objectives

The task force estimates that its work is helping bring forward several thousand more custom and self-build opportunities and that the market is on the verge of an explosion of activity. The sector benefits from cross-party support, with new initiatives coming forward in Wales and Scotland. It is also an ideal route to delivery for community-led housing projects to support people in housing need. What's more, the traditional barriers of finance, land and planning have all been rebalanced, making it far easier for people to access an owner-commissioned home.

NaCSBA and the Right to Build Task Force want to see local

authorities embrace the opportunities of custom and self-build housing and put in place initiatives to enable more people to build their own homes to meet their needs and access affordable home ownership.

We want to see more councils involved in positive activity, such as Teignbridge District Council, which has a dedicated self-build officer; Cherwell District Council, which has facilitated the creation of Graven Hill, the UK's largest custom and self-build housing site; or Plymouth City Council, which is enabling self-build opportunities for armed forces veterans and selling public land to groups of people.

We also need more councils to promote their Right to Build registers – and act on the demand these evidence. Some eight out of 10 people are unaware that these registers exist – imagine if many more people signed up?