

Getting Britain on the move

Key actions for planning, housing, climate and social impact. By **Human Nature**

Foreword

Housing costs are prohibitive, housing supply is restricted and young people, having missed out on the boom years of property (when housing became an investment not just a place to live), are spending far too much of their income on sub-standard homes.[1] Poverty is on the increase, economic productivity has stalled, and private landlords, landowners and volume housebuilders have extracted excessive value from the housing economy.[2] [3]

Ours is an industry in crisis and in need of a new vision and a plan. While there is no silver bullet, and the transformational change needed will take time, there are many sensible actions that can set the UK on a clear, exciting and rapid path to better homes for all, while bolstering the creative and circular sustainable economy and generating common wealth rather than maximising private wealth.

But there are risks. Liberalising planning policy and processes to enable housebuilding could wholly undermine any serious commitment to a safe climate, enhanced nature, quality of life, health and community.[4] [5] If planning reform makes it easier for volume housebuilders to build in their care-free way, carbon emissions caused by construction and private cars will soar, precious habitats will be lost, roads will be congested[6] and the edges of our villages, towns and cities will become ever more banal.

As we move quickly with a fresh and energetic government and a country hungry for change, let's set in train policy and practice that will build (and rebuild) our homes, places, communities and economy sustainably for the long-term. We warmly welcome this new government and wish it well – we hope you can seize this moment and its many opportunities.

Jonathan Smales
Founder & CEO, Human Nature

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1. Resolution Foundation, Housing Outlook 2024 (here)
2. UK Centre for Housing Evidence, Why have the volume housebuilders become so profitable? (here)
3. New Economics Foundation, The financialisation of UK homes (here)
4. Ecological Economics – A home for all within planetary boundaries: Pathways for meeting England's housing needs without transgressing national climate and biodiversity goals (here)
5. Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health - Bursting the car bubble: urban mobility for mental, social and physical health (here)
6. RTPI, The role of car-dependency in new housing developments (here)

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Actions

We offer 10 actions that would help create a durable, inclusive and sustainable development model. These are a convoy of ideas and propositions designed to be introduced together and at pace. The inherent interdependencies in the built environment demand this type of joined-up thinking and action, creating good outcomes while minimising the myriad harmful consequences of destructive development.

1 Invest in planning (but beware of writing an open cheque for volume housebuilders)

We need smart, well-trained practitioners in these key societal and economic roles. Every local authority should have a lead architect, sustainability guru, civil engineer and movement team. All plans should have a whole-place and whole-life carbon footprint report and targets; an active travel and public transport strategy at the apex of all movement plans; and a national design and specification code for each scale and type of place. Yes to housing targets, yes to greyfield and selected greenfield development. But beware of writing an open cheque for the extractive volume housebuilders, who will take (y)our money, destroy climate and nature and build lousy places.

2 Radically restructure Highway departments and enable a shift towards active travel

Emissions from traffic generated by new development should be accounted for in whole-place carbon targets[7] – encouraging a modal shift away from private vehicle ownership. This move towards active travel benefits air quality, health[8], wellbeing and creates economic uplift[9], but cannot be achieved without progressive movement specialists who understand and are deeply committed to streets, low-traffic neighbourhoods, walking, wheeling, cycling, integrated co-mobility services and EV shuttle buses. Highway departments should be split, with sustainable movement experts working with architectural teams, while highway engineers focus on roads.

7. RTPI, Net Zero Transport: the role of spatial planning & place-based solutions (here)
8. Journal of Transport & Health, Impacts of active travel interventions on travel behaviour and health (here)
9. Living Streets, The Pedestrian Pound (here)

3 Build new towns, a new city – and reinvigorate existing places

We welcome the idea of new towns – and are planning to submit our own. But we must recapture their original pioneering spirit, rapidly speed up delivery – including, where necessary, the use of development corporations. We also think there should be a new city the size of Copenhagen (and would do well to share many of that city's qualities) between Oxford and Cambridge. Let's not forget the renewal of existing new towns through intensification and new infrastructures – these can create better connected places, rejuvenate high streets and stimulate more productive local economies.

4 Develop flying squads to push forward major projects

Place projects above a certain scale and otherwise of special significance should be supported and shaped by a Planning Inspectorate and Design Council hybrid, working with the Royal Institute of British Architects, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Institution of Civil Engineers. Flying squads of top-class public sector CEOs, planners, architects, urban designers, sustainability specialists and economists should enable the fast-tracking of these schemes – with an emphasis on affordable housing – while ensuring accedence to the highest standards of sustainability in development and place. It is these flying squads who will make recommendations to local, democratically elected planning committees. We need to get the UK on the move. This is how.

5 Reimagine public engagement in a way that proves that local voices matter

Planning can seem technocratic and somewhat abstract. It often is these things. Good intentions too rarely translate into sound, palpable action or even any action. Town planning needs to be refreshed – to ensure the creation of sustainable places, in appropriate locations, that house people well, regenerate climate and nature and create good local jobs. Obligatory use of national guidance on Planning for Real (for better living and sustainability), and other mechanisms for deliberative participation, can generate new engagement and enthusiasm for myriad catalytic conversations about what we value, how to act, and to make wise choices, design and build well – allowing local people to understand the benefit of good development.

6 Rekindle a passion for human-scale apartment blocks

Housing development in the UK tends to be a form of feast or famine. Extractive land speculation, especially in cities inevitably leads to over-tall buildings with harmful concrete frames; a similar process at the edge of towns leads to very low-density single-family housing that cannot support social infrastructure, active travel, or high-quality public realm. The UK needs a renewed passion for a capability in designing, financing and building five to seven-storey[10], long-life apartment blocks with generous courtyards, plentiful shared services and heat and power networks. This 'gentle density'[11] is efficient, houses more people well than any alternative, is environmentally sustainable, creates a wonderful public spectacle, invites local commerce and other land-uses and – when complemented by beautiful streets, parks and public services – greatly improves everyday lives for all.

7 Prioritise building high-quality, secure rented homes

Buying homes is increasingly out of reach for the many. The cumulative cost of interest on mortgages, and the size of deposit needed means that to meet the demand developers are obligated to build cheaply and unsustainably. The short-term fixes this induces are bad for everyone – people and planet.[12] We need a new generation of apartment blocks and other typologies that offer secure, long-term tenancies fixed rigorously to the actual costs incurred by the developer and investor and their cost finance. Evidence is mounting that this will be far cheaper for the occupant, easier to finance at scale (without major public subsidy), create reliable long-term income streams for pension funds, lead to far more, well-made buildings (built for long-life and adaptability), use far less land, and substantially increase access to good homes for all.

8 Focus Homes England investment on essential innovation

The government's housing and regeneration agency has a crucial role to play in this transformation. Its role should primarily – or perhaps exclusively – be to support Local Authorities and SMEs who are leading the transformation process towards faster delivery of high-quality homes and sustainable places; the public purse shouldn't subsidise climate catastrophe. This is through equity in joint ventures, loan guarantees and with compulsory purchase order powers – garnering a profit-share and recycling funding into new places. A New Towns Commission would enable the implementation of the New Towns programme; our Copenhagen would have its own development corporation such as that for Greater Cambridge, and a National Infrastructure body could enable rail, road, grid and water investments. All else can take care of itself.

10. Jan Gehl, Cities for People (here)
11. Sustrans, Why we need to change direction on building homes (here)
12. National Housing Federation, Why we need a long-term plan for housing (here)

9 Stimulate modern green construction and upskill the net-zero generation

We need to invest in and otherwise encourage the bio-based, green construction sector. This can be a product of your new industrial strategy: to generate employment in skilled work, bring talented young people into good work in the construction sector, regenerate habitats[13] and stimulate the rural economy.[14] A new planning system and companion revisions to building regulations – using ongoing and evolving LETI standards[15], in conjunction with a Carbon Tax on building materials – will be the principal tool used to enable the transition. This, together with whole-life and whole-place carbon footprinting measures will put nails in the coffin of a dangerous and moribund housebuilding sector – the Big Oil of development. Enable innovation and watch as hundreds of thousands of new green jobs are created.

10 Eliminate stamp duty

In order to speed up the opportunities for young people to access secure affordable housing we favour removing stamp duty. This will enable people to join the housing market and to support freedom of movement around Britain, which, in conjunction with a generational shift from home ownership to secure, long-term rental (as above), will remove barriers to good homes. Such a model, widespread in Northern Europe can help stimulate the supply of substantial new investment from pension funds and other long-term investors. When the property 'market' generates value uplift over and above the investment in improvements made by the householder, this surplus will be taxed at 25% and the funds used to support Homes England. This should be used in conjunction with far stronger compulsory purchase order powers to ensure a fairer price for development land.

"Enable innovation in construction and watch as hundreds of thousands of new green jobs are created"

13. UKGBC, Embodied Ecological Impacts (here)
14. Institute for Human Rights and Business - Future green construction jobs (here)
15. LETI, Climate Emergency Design Guide (here)

About

Human Nature is new-generation, campaigning, master-developer. We believe in the power of doing, demonstrating in the homes and places we make and the services we provide not just that a far better world is possible but right before us, within reach and will bring new opportunity for all.

Human Nature works at different scales – from rural villages to urban neighbourhoods to new towns. We operate via an increasingly vertically integrated business model and with the benefit of a large and growing network of accomplished and highly motivated professionals and enterprises across all built-environment disciplines.

We believe that a far, far better world – and the far better lives it inspires and supports – is there to be seized and that the shaping of the built environment around us has huge and perhaps even uniquely powerful social, economic and environmental promise. We are bringing forward the flagship Phoenix project in Lewes, described by The Guardian as "an environmentally sound model to rescue Britain's broken private property sector."

See humannature-places.com for more



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