Has deregulation killed the incentive to strive for better residential design quality?

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The Government’s new housing standards and a context of deregulation will undoubtedly create uncertainty for housing associations and their partners as they adjust in the short-term. Arguably, in the long-term rationalising housing standards offers those who are most innovative in our sector the freedom to define new approaches to achieving design quality that better aligns to their social mission and resident needs.

The National Housing Federation has been working closely with housing design experts and innovative developers to prepare members for the ongoing implementation of new housing standards and to support them to deliver better design quality during a period of uncertainty and shifting policy. In summary, changes resulting from the ‘Housing Standards Review’ (March 2015) include:

- withdrawing the Homes and Communities Agency’s Design and Quality Standards (April 2007) familiar to funded providers through the Housing Quality Indicators (HQIs),
- winding down the use of Code for Sustainable Homes
- consolidating of technical standards to the Building Regulations, and,
- creating optional cross-tenure nationally described spaces standards to be consider by local planning authorities.

How and when local planning authorities will be able to assess and integrate requirements for accessibility, water and the nationally described space standards into Local Plans following needs and viability testing is a source of uncertainty. As is the extent to which local planning authorities will adopt otherwise voluntary quality measures into planning policy such as Building for Life and Secured by Design. Sufficient to say the issues are complex for those familiar with the intricacies of past systems, and the National Housing Federation’s upcoming Housing Standards Conference 2015 in Birmingham on 8 October 2015 has been devised to help decision-makers apply the range of national and local mandatory and optional standards. Special sessions have been planned on how to meet the new accessibility standards, the implications of the new space standards housing design, and the related issue of achieving real energy efficiency.

Setting aside present doubt relating to transitional arrangements, there are two key questions worth considering:

1. What does the advent of new ‘minimum standard’ mean for housing associations interested in delivering, distinctive, high quality schemes for their residents?
2. Does deregulation mean the incentive to strive for better design quality is over, or does the new regime create the space for housing associations to undertake voluntary innovation to better manage the value of the schemes they commission?

How housing associations respond to these questions may depend on how they choose to address the ‘wicked’ problem of achieving design quality in light of apparently ever-diminishing resources and the need to tackle an unprecedented housing crisis. It depends on whether a focus on securing minimum standards caps aspiration or becomes an efficient benchmark from which to seek out additional value. Whether associations bring in designers to add flare for that special project, or manage design as a core part of the business of development at the project, programme or organisational level to drive value and shape organisational. Whether we begin to see design quality as a fixed description of a compliant product, or whether our sector harnesses the design process to make better development and regeneration decision-making with communities…

Well that’s the heady, idealistic stuff you’d expect of an architect. It wouldn’t fit neatly into a compliance matrix, it takes us beyond current regulatory changes, and will form part of our discussion on what constitutes design-led innovation at the conference’s close.

Dhruv will be discussing the past, present and future of design innovation and what opportunities it could create for you. He will be speaking at the Housing Standards Conference 2015 in Birmingham on 8 October 2015.