

Budget's housing measures don't form a coherent programme

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While the government has introduced many welcome policies, there is no evidence of a truly co-ordinated approach to increasing housing supply, writes *Shahriar Nasser*

The [budget announcements](#) along with other recent government statements relating to the built environment are individually not of very great scale, but together do they amount to a prospect of real movement, especially in relation to housing?

Many of them are welcome, but they need further qualification as well as joining up to make a difference. Some are particularly directed at small-scale projects, which is right as large projects with many hundreds of units are relatively well provided for because of scale. But getting results on thousands of small high-street retail sites or difficult infill or brownfield city sites is more challenging.

[Changing permitted development rules](#) is useful. However, as MP Helen Hayes – the one planner in Parliament – has pointed out, this runs real risks with the quality and appearance of housing at a time when there is already heightened concern about the design and planning of public space. It may also further reduce the availability of city-centre locations for non-retail businesses, already aggravated by earlier office-to-resi conversion. So this will not achieve its aim without a holistic approach to planning and Building Regulations, which should be one of the targets of the plans, at least in London, to provide more funding to strengthen local authority planning departments with qualified architects

Whether funding is used to access the best architectural input depends on sensible development of procurement arrangements

The provision of guarantees to SME builders is a very welcome step, which will increase the likelihood that smaller sites, unattractive to large contractors, are developed. However, these sites often remain undeveloped for a reason, usually an accumulation of difficult planning, design and technical challenges. It is said that only 10 per cent of housing projects use architects, so a change in approach, and perhaps culture, will be needed if the skills of the SME architects with established expertise are to be matched with those of the builders.

The provision of extra funding to local authorities, whether through grants, additional borrowing powers or strategic partnerships with housing associations, is welcome but, as RCKa's Russell Curtis has pointed out in relation to grants in London, whether the funding is used effectively and can access the best architectural input depends on sensible development of their procurement arrangements, which are currently heading in the wrong direction. They still tend to be focused on large contractors, and the increasing emphasis on social contribution solely for the benefit of each borough is bound to limit opportunities for the small businesses the government is trying to encourage.

Changes to stamp duty for shared ownership or limited extension to right-to-buy are also useful small steps to help individuals. However, we still lack evidence of truly co-ordinated measures of scale to increase supply. Effectively implementing those measures that have been announced will require much continued effort to ensure that good intentions for housing are converted into practical reality. This matters both for those who are to live in these homes and for those who live and work in the neighbourhoods where they will be created.

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