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SELF-BUILD NORFOLK

A White Paper by Lucas Hickman Smith



Lucas Hickman Smith

We are a Wymondham-based RIBA Chartered Practice with an established reputation for high quality design in the residential and community/cultural sectors. We have a long track record in sustainable design and working with listed buildings. Our residential work includes projects for house-builders and housing associations, but owner-occupiers are an important part of our business and we have completed a number of one-off new-build houses for self-build/self-commission clients.

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Cover: The Garden House, Wymondham. Self-build project, designed by Lucas Hickman Smith

SUMMARY

On April 19th 2012 the Department for Communities and Local Government and the National Self-Build Association launched a major new initiative which they hope will make it much easier for people in the UK to build their own homes. The government believes that the self-build sector could massively increase its output if the barriers it faces can be addressed and overcome. 14,000 homes were self-built or self-commissioned in the UK last year – that's 10% of all new homes produced, but by European standards this is a very low percentage; 40-70% is more typical.

The initiative includes a new website – The Self-Build Portal – and a package of measures to increase the availability of self-build finance. But the most significant move is the inclusion of a 'self-build clause' in the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This places local authorities under a new duty to assess the demand for self-build land in their area, and then cater for that demand. East Staffordshire Borough Council has already carried out a demand-study under these new powers, and we are running our own version at www.selfbuildnorfolk.co.uk. We will share our findings in due course.

We believe that to deliver a step-change in the provision of self-build land, the focus should be on the provision of serviced plots. These could either be on newly allocated land or as quotas applied to larger housing developments, in the same way that affordable housing is currently delivered. We should expect house-builders to be hostile to quotas, because each self-build plot represents a lost profit margin on the construction of an 'off the peg' house. We therefore believe that pricing controls will be necessary to prevent developers fighting quotas through the unrealistic pricing of plots. There are, however, good reasons to embrace self-build:

Environment: Self-build homes tend to be designed to higher standards of energy and water efficiency than spec-built homes.

Design: Self-built homes display greater variety in their design, and seeing more of them might encourage house-builders to be more imaginative.

Housing Supply: New self-build allocations would increase the supply of housing land, and including self-build plots within larger sites already allocated might give local communities a new incentive to embrace development in their area.

Economy: Imposing quotas for self-build plots on national house-builders would create more work for smaller, regionally based contractors, suppliers, surveyors and architects, benefitting the local economy.

The government has created the policy lead, and in collaboration with the National Self-Build Association is planning to publish some more guidance on implementation later this year. However, in line with its 'Localism' agenda it expects local authorities and communities to take the initiative. This paper concludes with a call to action for Norfolk's local authorities, construction professionals, architects, contractors – and, above all, potential self-builders (See page 8). How can we bring about a self-build revolution in Norfolk?

SELF-BUILD UK

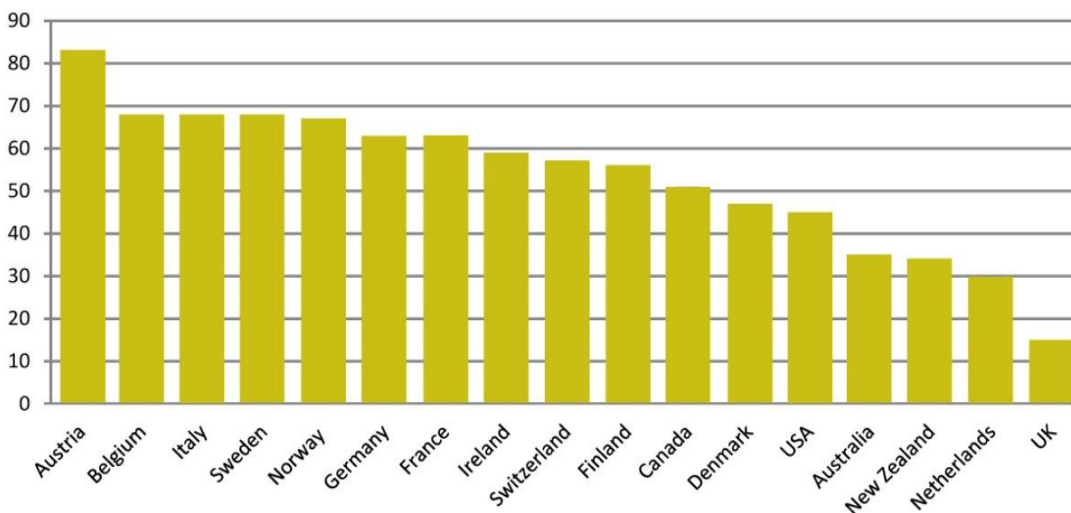
Housing choices in the UK are limited. An attractive older house in a village or town is the dream-home for many, but beyond the financial means of most. And if you would prefer (or can only afford) a new house, with lower heating and maintenance bills, then your choice is probably limited to what is offered by the national house-builders. Many people would like to build their own house, but with suitable land in such short supply this seems an impossible dream for most people.

Development land in towns and villages is desperately hard to obtain, and planning law in the UK means it is almost impossible to build new homes in the countryside. The market in land for home-building is largely controlled by local planning authorities and the national house-builders, who have the resources to buy large tracts of land and promote them through the UK's complicated planning system.

Even so, each year many people do manage to find a precious piece of land for self-build. Some literally build their own house, saving considerably on the cost of a new home bought from a developer, and others use an architect and contractor to 'self-commission' a new home to their own specific requirements. The houses produced in this way range from large and expensive 'grand designs' down to more modest family homes. Less common in the UK are groups of self-builders, collaborating so they can look at larger pieces of land, too big for an individual self-builder but too small to interest a large house-builder.

A whole support-industry has evolved around these self-build pioneers, with a clutch of monthly magazines, TV shows like Grand Designs, and a number of specialist websites providing advice on budgets, building techniques and finding land. So against the odds the UK's self-builders produced almost 14,000 new properties in 2011 – more than any one of the national house-builders, and accounting for over 10% of the national output of new homes.

However, by European standards this is a very low percentage. In most European countries, between 50 and 70% of people self-build or self-commission. Even in the Netherlands, where population density is much higher than in the UK, over 30% of homes are self-built.



A NEW START FOR SELF-BUILD

With this assumed pent-up demand in mind, the government is convinced that the UK could sustain a step-change in the provision of self-built/self-commissioned homes. Since the coalition came to power it has been working with the National Self Build Association (NaSBA) on a package of measures it hopes will overcome the barriers that prevent self-build reaching its full potential in the UK. The case for self-build was outlined in the government's Housing Strategy for England in the autumn of 2011, and given a star-studded press launch at Downing Street on 19 April this year – with Grand Design's Kevin McCloud announced as NaSBA's 'Self-Build Champion'.

The package of measures include a new NaSBA website – the 'Self-Build Portal' – intended to give self-builders a starting-point as they begin to map out their project, and an initiative aimed at increasing the availability of self-build mortgages.

Perhaps the most significant move, however, is the inclusion in the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of a 'self-build clause', placing local authorities under a duty to assess and then cater for the demand for self-build land in their area. Under a section on 'Plan Making', Paragraph 159 states (highlights added):

Local planning authorities should have a clear understanding of housing needs in their area. They should:

1) Prepare a Strategic Housing Market Assessment to assess their full housing needs, working with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment should identify the scale and mix of housing and the range of tenures that the local population is likely to need over the plan period which:

- *meets household and population projections, taking account of migration and demographic change;*
- *addresses the need for all types of housing, including affordable housing and the needs of different groups in the community (such as, but not limited to, families with children, older people, people with disabilities, service families **and people wishing to build their own homes**); and*
- *caters for housing demand and the scale of housing supply necessary to meet this demand;*

*2) Prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment to establish realistic assumptions about the **availability, suitability and the likely economic viability** of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period.*

This appears to be a major change in the status of self-build/self-commissioned homes at the highest level of UK planning policy. It may take some time for the full implications of this to sink in. How could this new regime play out in our county?



The Western House, Wymondham. Self-build project, designed by Lucas Hickman Smith

SELF-BUILD NORFOLK

The Government's new Self-Build Portal confirms that finding good building plots in East Anglia is difficult, but the region is set for large-scale housing growth. The number of new homes to be provided in and around Norwich over the next fifteen years is set out in the Joint Core Strategy prepared by Norwich City Council, Broadland Council and South Norfolk Council. It sets a target of building 37,000 new homes up to 2026. To support this plan the three Councils are in the process of 'allocating' or approving land for development. This process has already taken place in Breckland and North Norfolk. These local plans are geared towards larger-scale housing development, focussed on strategically well-connected sites. This is good news for the house-builders, but currently offers little encouragement for the self-build sector.

The local plans also set targets for the proportion of these new homes that should be affordable, and give detailed definitions of 'affordability' and how it should be calculated. It seems to us that the new NPPF 'self-build clause' is intended to have self-build/self-commissioned housing treated in the same way:

- Assess the demand
- Define the product
- Plan for its provision

The first step will be for Norfolk's local authorities to assess the demand for self-build land in their area, either individually as district councils or perhaps more efficiently at county level. East Staffordshire Borough Council has recently run a pioneering on-line demand-survey, the results of which are currently being collated. We are running our own version at

www.selfbuildnorfolk.co.uk. We will share our findings in due course. Assuming significant demand is identified in Norfolk, how could local authorities cater for it?

We believe that to deliver a step-change in the output of self-build homes, the focus should be on the provision of low-risk ‘serviced plots’ – appropriately sized sites with outline planning permission and primary services (gas, water, drainage and electricity) already available. This might be achieved in one of two ways:

Route A: Local authorities could allocate smaller sites specifically as self-build plots. These might be pieces of land that would otherwise not be allocated, in or adjacent to well-serviced villages – a ‘rural exception policy’ for self-build, to mirror the one that already exists for affordable homes.

Route B: Alternatively, larger developments could be required to have a certain proportion of serviced self-build plots. Again, we do a similar thing with affordable homes. This approach would bring forward more sites, more quickly, and could be done within existing strategic policies.

We shouldn’t expect the house-builders and other developers to accept this new regime with open arms. Selling land as serviced plots means the developer will lose the profit they can make on building and selling a house on each site, so this new initiative will cost them money. It may be necessary to devise some sort of pricing-control to apply to these self-build ‘quota’ sites; otherwise developers will simply market the land at unrealistically high prices, and then claim that the promised demand has failed to materialize. Again, the detailed definitions of ‘affordable’ homes in existing planning policy serve as a precedent.



The Wood House, Wymondham. Self-build project, designed by Lucas Hickman Smith

WHY SELF-BUILD NORFOLK?

We believe that a step-change in the output of self-build homes in the region would be a good thing, delivering some real benefits for local communities and businesses.

Benefit 1: The Environment

Self-built homes tend to be designed to higher standards of energy and water efficiency than spec-built homes. This is because self-build owner-occupiers have more interest in the future running costs of their home; commercial house-builders tend to focus on minimising the capital cost for the greatest profit on the initial sale.

Benefit 2: Design

A criticism often aimed at the volume house-builders is that their 'product' can be repetitive and rather dull. Self-built homes display much greater stylistic variety. Groups of self-built homes would create moments of interest within large housing developments, and by demonstrating the public's appetite for a broader range of architectural styles there could be a wider impact, encouraging house-builders not to play so safe.

Benefit 3: Housing Supply

If local authorities do decide to release smaller parcels of land specifically for self-build homes – in a new sort of 'rural exception' policy (Route A above) – there will be an increase in the supply of land, albeit rather a modest one. It is also possible that including self-build plots within larger allocations (Route B above) might give local communities a new incentive to embrace development in their area.

Benefit 4: The Local Economy

The house-building industry in the UK is dominated by a handful of large PLC businesses and with the general thrust of planning policy remaining in favour of large scale developments this looks set to continue. Imposing a quota of self-build plots on large developments by the national house-builders would create more work for smaller, regionally based contractors, surveyors and architects. The profits made by these smaller businesses stays in their local communities, whereas the proceeds from large housing developments 'leak away' to the house-builders' head-offices and shareholders.

TOWARDS SELF-BUILD NORFOLK

This paper is a call to action for those who might participate in Norfolk's self-build revolution. The Government has confirmed that it will provide some further guidance later this year on how its enthusiasm for self-build should play out, but it has also indicated that this guidance will be limited; under its Localism agenda it wants local authorities, businesses and communities to take the initiative in their own areas. So, what can we do to support Self-Build Norfolk?

National Government: Having set the ball in motion, we would welcome further guidance from central government on how it believes local authorities should respond to paragraph 159 of the NPPF. It should also work with the National Self Build Association on the issue of plot pricing and viability.

Local Authorities: The NPPF places local authorities under a new duty to assess the demand for self-build in their area and then make provision for it. This can't mean business as usual. Local authority housing teams will have to review and update their Strategic Housing Market Assessment with self-build in mind, and their colleagues in planning policy will have to devise spatial strategies for meeting the identified level of demand. We call on them to put this in hand immediately as Supplementary Planning Guidance, rather than wait for the next iteration of their local plans. We also urge them to be proactive in seeking further guidance and support from the Self-Build Team at the DCLG and the National Self-Build Association, particularly on issues of plot-pricing and viability.

Architects, Building Contractors and Suppliers: A step-change in the up-take of self-build could create a mini building-boom for local contractors, suppliers and architects. Lobby your District Councillors and local authority planning policy teams, urging them to respond positively to the government's initiative. Ask them to explore how it can be made to work through existing policy frameworks, for the earliest possible implementation. And think about how your business could be ready to help self-builders through the most exciting but challenging project of their lives.

Potential Self-Builders: The most powerful force in this self-build revolution will be the hundreds, perhaps thousands of normal people who are dissatisfied with the new housing currently on offer, and would prefer to have a house custom-built to meet their own needs and aspirations. Central government has put the over-arching policy in place, but they will not take the lead. It is your local district council that has the power to make the self-build revolution happen in your area. Don't wait for them to take the initiative; write now to your local councillor (see page 10), asking them how their housing and planning departments are responding to the government's call to action.

You can also visit our website at www.selfbuildnorfolk.co.uk

CONCLUSION

Lucas Hickman Smith fully supports the government's self-build initiative. It is clear that national planning policy now allows – indeed demands – that local authorities assess and cater for the demand for self-build land in their area, just as they already do for affordable housing.

We believe a step-change in the out-put of the self-build/self-commission sector will have real social and economic benefits for local communities and businesses. We urge you to all to play your part in bringing about a self-build revolution in the county; it's time for us to Self-Build Norfolk...

LINKS TO FURTHER READING

Download a PDF of this paper with working hyperlinks from www.selfbuildnorfolk.co.uk

The new [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) came into effect on 27th March. The 'self-build clause' is at Paragraph 159.

The [Self-Build Portal](#), is a good starting point for those interested in building or commissioning their own home.

The [National Self-Build Association](#) (NaSBA) is 'The Voice of the Self-Build Sector' in the UK. The April 2012 [Progress Report](#) on their 2011 Self-Build Action Plan outlines their intention to provide further guidance and support to Local Authorities and house-builders.

Grand Designs' Kevin McCloud has been appointed as the NaSBA's 'Self-Build Champion'. He explains the new initiative [here](#), addressing a recent conference for local authority planning officers.

[This paper](#) by Barry Sutcliffe explains how the risks associated with buying land and unrealistic pricing (p7) are significant barriers to the wider uptake of self-build:

East Staffordshire Borough Council has recently run a [demand-survey](#) for self-build land in their area. This type of study is set to become the norm under the new NPPF.

Build Store Ltd is running a national [Custom Build Register](#) for those interested in self-build. They have said they will share the results of this survey with Local Authorities during late summer 2012

We suggest the way forward for self-build is the imposition of quotas of serviced self-build plots on large developments – such as these examples at [Hampton Vale](#) and [Tutbury](#).

Lucas Hickman Smith's Matt Wood has written about the recent self-build initiative on his blog Ruralise, starting [here](#).



The Eco-House, Beccles. Self-build project, designed by Lucas Hickman Smith

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL AUTHORITY

If you are interested in building or commissioning your own home, or just think the idea should be supported fully by your local authority, why not write to your local district councillor. If you don't know who that is, one easy way to find out and send them a message is via www.writetothem.com. You could also write to the Leader of your local council and the Head of Planning. The contacts for Norfolk's seven district councils are:

Breckland District Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr William Nunn
Head of Planning: Paul Jackson
Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham, Norfolk NR19 1EE

Broadland District Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr Andrew Proctor
Head of Planning: Phil Courtier
Thorpe Lodge, Yarmouth Road, Norwich NR7 0DU

Great Yarmouth Borough Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr Trevor Wainwright
Head of Planning: Peter Warner
Town Hall, Great Yarmouth Norfolk NR30 2QF

King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr Nick Daubney
Head of Planning: Geoffrey Hall
King's Court, Chapel Street, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE30 1EX

North Norfolk District Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr Keith Johnson
Head of Planning: Steve Oxenham
Holt Road, Cromer, Norfolk NR27 9EL

Norwich City Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr Brenda Arthur
Head of Planning: Graham Nelson
City Hall, Norwich NR2 1NH

South Norfolk District Council

Leader of the Council: Cllr John Fuller
Head of Planning: Andy Jarvis
South Norfolk House, Swan Lane, Long Stratton, Norwich NR15 2XE