

UKGBC - Green Recovery & the built environment

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Introduction:

In his message to the Petersberg Climate Dialogue, delivered on behalf of Number 10, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said: “It will be the duty of every responsible government to see that our economies are revived and rebuilt in a way that will stand the test of time. That means investing in industries and infrastructure that can turn the tide on climate change and it means doing all we can to boost resilience, by building economies that can withstand everything that nature can throw at us.” He went on to say: “This dialogue is not a distraction from the immense challenge tackling this virus represents, but an essential element of our strategy to rebound from it.”

The built environment has an important role to play in the post-COVID economic recovery, with projects that can stimulate clean growth and create jobs in every part of the country - supporting the levelling up agenda and improving people’s health and wellbeing at a time when this has never been more important.

Key policy recommendations:

1: New homes and buildings

Construction will be key to the restructuring of our economy. In these already highly uncertain times, the construction sector needs absolute certainty that there will be no backtracking on Government’s commitment to strengthen Part L of the Building Regulations this year. Alongside this, the proposed Future Homes Standard must be significantly strengthened to ensure that it aligns fully with net zero carbon outcomes. UK businesses are already investing in building lower carbon, and that investment must not go to waste. Low carbon design and product solutions – including innovative new construction methods – offer a golden opportunity to create jobs and improve skills, enabling the UK to gain a competitive advantage and export cutting-edge products and services, just when we need it most.

The strengthening of new building standards is not only critical in meeting our legally binding carbon targets, it is integral to delivering higher quality, healthier homes and buildings. The quality of our homes and places has come into sharp focus during the lockdown period, highlighting the importance to our health and wellbeing of daylight, thermal comfort and sound insulation, alongside access to local amenities and green spaces. We must therefore take every opportunity to boost the design quality of our new homes and places – and in so doing ensure that all our communities are as resilient as they can be to whatever the future might bring.

Targeted capital investment, focused on sustainable outcomes, can also support the transition to zero carbon new homes and buildings by providing a timely boost to the supply chain – not least additional investment in low carbon heat, which is a critical component of a net zero carbon UK. A government-funded training programme could rapidly upskill furloughed workers or those looking to requalify from sectors impacted by COVID. The remit of Homes England should be changed to require a focus on delivering low carbon, sustainable homes.

2: Home energy efficiency retrofit

The International Energy Agency says that energy efficiency has a key role to play in providing early economic stimulus. It can both support existing workforces and create new jobs, delivering economic growth nationwide. Enabling households to save money on their energy bills means they will have more disposable income to spend in the local economy. Energy efficiency is also ‘shovel ready’ – with labour-intensive projects rooted in local supply chains. They can start small and then scale up rapidly as skills and supply chains develop and innovation drives down costs.

Making our homes warmer and more comfortable will also ease pressure on our NHS, while reducing COVID risk factors. Living in a cold home markedly increases the incidence of respiratory disease¹, which in turn is a risk factor

¹ The Health Impacts of Cold Homes and Fuel Poverty, Marmot Review Team for Friends of the Earth:
<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty.pdf>

for more severe incidences of COVID. Moreover, the economic cost to the NHS of cold homes, at a time of great pressure, is around £1.4bn.² Investing in home retrofit will play a vital role in easing this.

There is a clear case that social housing should lead the way – but the Government must provide targeted support to enable social landlords to act. The National Infrastructure Commission has recommended in their National Infrastructure Assessment that £3.8 billion of grant or direct funding be allocated for energy efficiency improvements in social housing between now and 2030.³ This is consistent with the commitment in the Conservative manifesto to a £3.8bn Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund – which should be brought forward immediately. This should go hand in hand with the accelerated deployment and front-loading of the other manifesto commitments - the Home Upgrades Grant and the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme. Additional funding for local training providers would support these stimulus schemes, ensuring that the supply chain is able to step up and deliver.

It is crucial that the stimulus package avoids the pitfalls of previous stop-start funding, with the poor-quality outcomes that this often drove – such as “boom and bust” cycles in the (often SME) construction sector. It must lay firm foundations for a continuing programme of energy efficiency activity across the owner-occupier sector, which is self-sustaining. Government is committed to an energy efficiency strategy for the able-to-pay market, and forthcoming plans must ensure that consumer demand is built up to meet the supply. This should include the early introduction of a revenue-neutral stamp duty incentive, which could play a key role in driving consumer demand and starting to build a value for energy efficient properties in the home-buying market. Finally, we support the Green Finance Taskforce recommendation that Government should provide short-term incentives to prime the green consumer loans and green mortgage markets.

3: Biodiversity and climate resilience

Investing in ‘green infrastructure’, nature and biodiversity offers not only the opportunity to enhance the resilience of the built environment to the impacts of climate change, but also a long-term recognition of the value of green space for public health. The current crisis has acutely illustrated the value of green space to public mental and physical health, whilst also highlighting the inequalities between those with and without access to it.

We believe now would be the ideal time to introduce a new ‘*Green Communities Urban Resilience Fund*’ - a fund applied for by existing community groups, voluntary organisations, local Wildlife Trusts etc. – for investing in local green space, biodiversity, opening up access and improving climate resilience post-crisis. This Fund would build on the success of the Government’s current [Pocket Parks Fund](#), and allow communities to go further in regreening existing neighbourhoods through street trees and shared green spaces, echoing the recommendations of the [Building Better Building Beautiful Commission](#) and emulating the likes of the [Greener Cities Fund](#) in London.

This Fund would help deliver significant economic benefits through reducing health inequalities, enhancing climate resilience and improving both physical and mental wellbeing. It would leave a legacy of green spaces as a permanent reminder of the important role green spaces have played in maintaining public health during this crisis.

There is a strong rationale behind this proposal. Measures to enhance biodiversity and nature-based climate resilience solutions in the built environment have the potential to deliver substantial mental and physical health benefits; with considerable savings and associated advantages for the economy. The evidence on the links between green space and both physical and mental health benefits is extensive and well-established.⁴ Researchers have estimated that the reduced health inequality in areas with more green space can save approximately 1,328 lives per year.⁵ Likewise Defra has estimated that if everyone had access to sufficient green space, the benefits associated with increased physical activity could save the health system at least £2.1bn per year.⁶ In addition, it is estimated that tree cover saved London more than £5 billion in 2014-18 through air cooling, and prevented productivity losses of nearly £11 billion by keeping summer temperatures bearable.⁷

² AgeUK, “The Cost of Cold”, https://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/Campaigns/The_cost_of_cold_2012.pdf?dtrk=true

³ National Infrastructure Commission, “National Infrastructure Assessment”, https://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CCS001_CCS0618917350-001_NIC-NIA_Accessible.pdf

⁴ POSTnote, “Green Space and Health”, <https://post.parliament.uk/research-briefings/post-pn-0538/>

⁵ <https://www.nhs.uk/news/lifestyle-and-exercise/green-space-and-health/>;

⁶ Defra, 2010, Defra’s climate change plan. Department for Environment, Food and Rural affairs, London

⁷ ONS, “Woodland natural capital accounts, UK: 2020”,

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/woodlandnaturalcapitalaccountsuk/2020>

As the impacts of climate change become increasingly apparent, notably through the increase in extreme weather events, enhancing urban resilience through nature-based solutions will be vital for safeguarding vulnerable groups, mitigating possible damage and providing both tolerable working and living conditions.

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