

Why increase housing density?

High-density housing is back on the agenda. London's population is increasing. Over the next 15 years it is predicted to grow by 700,000 people – the population of Leeds. The capital faces enormous pressure as the housing crisis mounts. There are already 52,000 households in temporary housing; another 65,000 destitute asylum seekers are housed in London. Over 200,000 households are on local authority lists awaiting permanent homes and London stands to lose 60,000 key workers over the next 10 years because of the lack of affordable accommodation

The Mayor's Housing Commission estimated that 43,000 homes, of which 28,000 should be affordable, are needed every year for the next 10 years. But land is in short supply. So, to help address this, the Government and London's Mayor are calling for higher residential densities.

But high housing density need not mean high-rise. The densest parts of London include wealthy areas such as Belgravia and the ever-popular Victorian and Georgian terraces.

London's housing associations, as the key providers of affordable housing in the capital, recognise that housing density needs to increase to meet the twin challenges of rising housing demand and falling land supply. But they are concerned that the mistakes of the past are not repeated in the housing they develop and manage.

The London Housing Federation (the London Region of the National Housing Federation), representing London's 450 housing associations, commissioned this research as it wishes to contribute constructively to the debate. *Capital Gains* is not a design guide, instead it takes an holistic view of high-density housing considering all aspects of development and management including occupancy, child densities, lettings policies and residents' preferences - residents' views are vital to this report.

What are the practical issues?

Capital Gains examines eight successful and typical London housing schemes which are built to very high densities, (81-455 dwellings per hectare). Of the eight schemes, seven are managed by housing associations and one by a local authority. It also looks at a major partnership at Imperial Wharf, Fulham, led by the developer St. George PLC.

The research looks for answers to questions including:

- What is the most effective measure of density?
- Who can live in high-density housing?
- What is the impact of location and amenity on high-density housing?
- What are the design implications?
- What are the implications for lettings?
- What is the impact of different approaches to management?
- What are the implications for the grant regime for housing associations of the rents, service charges and capital costs of high-density housing schemes?

The findings

How important is density to a scheme's success?

How we currently measure density is neither particularly appropriate nor practical. It is occupancy and not the number of habitable rooms per hectare that matters.

Occupancy includes:

- Who lives in the scheme.
- The space residents enjoy.
- The time residents spend in their home each day.

Dwellings per hectare and people or bedspaces per hectare are better measures of housing density - bedspaces can act as a proxy for the number of people living on a site.

What makes the difference between success and failure?

There was a striking similarity in the factors that help to make these social housing schemes work. Reputation and image were important and the older schemes were characterised by communities with long-standing residents.

There was a sense of community and feeling of neighbourliness. There was very little antisocial behaviour and resident turnover was low, by choice rather than force of circumstance. All these factors contributed to a 'sense of place' that was reinforced by the visual impact of the scheme and its location.

There were four critical factors impacting upon success:

1 Accessible locations with good transport links

The residents valued:

- A location they regarded as generally sought after.
- Access to employment.
- Good transport links.
- Proximity to shops, schools and other amenities.

2 Comparatively low occupancy levels and child densities

Successful schemes have a higher proportion of older residents without children.

Child density, at 18% of total residents, was low.

Occupancy was low in individual homes at 75%, i.e. a spare bedspace or bedroom was common. These rates of occupancy are a consequence of scheme maturity and have evolved over time.

Generally, residents spent more time in their homes each day than in the private sector.

In London there is tremendous pressure to house homeless families. *Capital Gains* recognises this priority, but has also found that child numbers need to be managed if the housing of these families is to be successful in the longer term.

A range of housing needs can be met and provided for successfully in high density housing schemes, provided that current housing lettings policies are reformed.

3 Effective management

Residential caretakers were common; a local presence gives residents easy access to the management staff and vice versa.

Estate agreements, a strong community network and community development plans agreed with residents all contributed to the management approach.

Well-maintained common parts were a highly valued feature.

Although the residents valued on-site staff, they recognised that the real issue was achieving a speedy and personal response to issues and complaints.

Residents' associations, covering all tenures, have an important role to play, but residents are more interested in being able to steward (protect and oversee) their homes than to control them.

When housing density increases, management costs, rents and service charges go up too.

How a scheme is managed and maintained is more important to scheme success than the density of it.

Working with the private sector

Section 106 planning agreements offer immense value in attracting more resources for affordable housing.

Service charges are a key issue for resolution.

High-density, mixed-use schemes are not just about bricks and mortar but involve a number of key partners working closely together.

Uniform conditions for freeholders, leaseholders and tenants, and estate management approaches with a single, estate based manager serving all tenures work best.

Social landlords must act quickly to tackle any antisocial behaviour.

It is vital to ensure that mixed-tenure schemes are rendered more sustainable through nominations and lettings policies.

The future must be about sustainable, integrated and inclusive communities.

4 Housing design

With some exceptions, these factors were ranked by residents in the following order of importance:

- Security.
- Sound insulation.
- Dwelling size.
- Good quality open space.
- Privacy.

The case studies all exhibit the following features:

- They fit well into the existing urban scale and street pattern.
- High quality building materials have been used which appear to be standing the test of time.
- Some personal outdoor space is provided.
- Car parking provision is low but there is excellent access to public transport.
- Security standards are high.
- Space standards are generous.

Good design costs however. And good design of high-density housing costs more owing to the need for higher specifications. Any initial savings on land costs or through economies of scale may therefore be lost.

While good design alone cannot ensure success, bad design is a major cause of scheme failure.

THE FUTURE: making new high-density housing work

High-density living can be successful for all household types with varied economic circumstances, but only if it is high-quality living, facilitated by quality design and more intensive management. This must be supported by appropriate occupancy levels procured through sensitive lettings policies.

Lettings and occupancy

Lettings plans, which replicate the profile of more mature schemes, should be agreed for all high-density schemes.

Lettings plans should take into account the:

- Balance of household type.
- Occupancy levels.
- Intensity of use.
- Child densities.
- Tenancy histories.

Lettings policies and nomination agreements should be reviewed in conjunction with local authorities and the Housing Corporation to ensure that lettings plans can be implemented effectively.

The Housing Corporation should make lettings plans for high-density schemes a condition of funding.

Child densities

Maxima should be placed upon the proportion of children to be housed on the scheme at design stage. 25% is probably the appropriate level for high-density housing schemes.

Adequate amenities for play must be provided for children of all ages.

Housing management

Management policies should be agreed when a scheme is being planned and protocols drawn up by housing managers.

For mixed-use and mixed-tenure schemes, the lease conditions should be the same for all residents and consideration be given to using a single management provider.

Residents should be involved and consulted particularly on plans to develop the community on their estate.

Consistent and accurate information needs to be collected on management costs, child densities and economic circumstances of current residents to inform policy decisions.

Design and location

Schemes should be:

- Located in accessible locations with appropriate facilities.
- Assessed in terms of bedspaces (people) per hectare in addition to dwellings per hectare.

Design should take into account child densities, occupation levels and use.

Homes exclusively for families should not be developed in parts of a scheme where density exceeds 250 dwellings per hectare.

Schemes should meet “Secure By Design” standards.

Robust and high specifications for homes and amenities should be chosen with a view to reducing long-term maintenance costs.

As housing density increases, so amenity should also increase through more space, balconies and storage and higher standards of sound insulation.

Costs

The annual review of Housing Corporation’s Total Cost Indicators, which determine grant levels for housing association developments, should take account of the additional costs of developing high-density schemes.

Rent guidelines for housing associations should take into account the impact of service charges to residents in high-density schemes to maximise affordability and protect the viability of housing associations

The full report

The full report, written by Helen Cope with Avebury International, is available from the London Housing Federation. It costs £20.00 (plus £2.50 postage for the first copy and £1.50 postage per additional copy).

Written orders should be sent to Violeta Reen at LHF, 175 Gray’s Inn Road, London WC1X 8UP. Cheques should accompany your order and be made payable to the London Housing Federation.



Capital Gains:



making
**high
density
housing**
work in
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