

Briefing

How street votes could help to protect the environment

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Compact urban areas help to fight climate change

Despite its relatively large population for its land area, the UK has an inefficient pattern of housebuilding. Urban areas are sprawling and built at low densities, making poor use of land and leaving residents reliant on their cars.¹ New development is cheaper and less risky where there is less local opposition, which leads to building on greenfield sites on the outskirts of urban areas in isolated settlements that lack public transport links, shops and services.²

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), compact, walkable urban environments are a strong contributor to the mitigation of climate change.³ Co-location of housing, jobs and public services means people travel shorter distances to access their daily needs and can make use of multiple modes of transport, leading to a lower dependency on private cars. Flats also have lower heating requirements because they are insulated by neighbouring flats and tend to be smaller than houses. In sharing more infrastructure and services, urban dwellers make better use of resources.

Spatial planning and densification is often overlooked as a tool to fight climate change and protect nature. This is despite the considerable associated benefits, helping to deliver other government goals such as economic growth, healthier lifestyles and more homes for people in the places they want to live.

New homes should be built in the best places to meet environmental goals

England suffers from a chronic shortage of housing, resulting in overcrowding and high housing costs. Commitments to increase housebuilding were made in every main political party's manifesto in 2019.

Where these homes are built is very important to avoid locking in carbon intensive lifestyles. If current building patterns continue, new developments will be concentrated where technical and political challenges are fewer, ie away from existing homeowners and on greenfield land.

Homeowners are inclined to object to housebuilding because they perceive only downsides, such as a loss of amenity, congestion and disruption from construction. Those who would benefit, ie the would be residents of new developments, do not have a say in the consent process. Unlocking community support is, therefore, a crucial step in changing patterns of development.

Street votes

Clause 96 of the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill is a placeholder clause for street votes. This is a system that the government hopes will allow intensification of existing residential streets with the consent of the people living there.

Street votes would allow residents of a street to collectively agree to redevelop their houses by adding extra storeys or using more of their plots to create homes for others. Dwellings with planning permission to expand would increase in value and the value uplift would accrue to the residents. It would be higher where there is the greatest demand for living space, helping to provide housing where it is most needed. The value uplift would also be subject to taxation, generating revenue for local infrastructure.

Residents would be able to submit a street plan proposal to their local authority, including a design code for the form development must take. If the proposal is voted through by a qualified majority, all homeowners would receive planning permission to redevelop within the new design code.

This should be subject to restrictions to ensure developments do not infringe excessively on neighbouring streets and should exclude buildings with heritage value. There should also be protections for tenants, as outlined in *Strong suburbs* by Policy Exchange.⁴

Street votes would help to protect the climate and nature

Street votes would provide a mechanism for suburban intensification that is missing from the current planning system.

Fragmented land ownership in existing urban areas prevents larger parcels of land from becoming available for redevelopment. Instead, small plots may be developed one at a time, if they can overcome opposition from other residents on the street. Agreeing plans at a street level allows larger plots to be freed up and enables a more coherent, efficient use of space. It also involves all residents which ensures designs that are popular.

Increasing the number and floorspace of dwellings in suburban areas will reduce pressures on the natural environment by sparing greenfield land that would otherwise be built on.

It will also enable public transport improvements in two ways. Higher density is a necessary condition for efficient and frequent public transport systems because it allows more people to live within walking distance of a transport link. Second, taxation of the value created by new dwellings, and of new residents through council tax, would help to fund local public transport services.

Recommendation

Green Alliance supports a trial of street votes as a first step towards enabling suburban intensification. A green housing policy of this nature should include the following conditions:

- Dwellings built or extended are entitled to only one resident parking permit (where applicable) and should not increase the number of parking spaces on their lot. If additional dwellings are created, no further parking permits can be awarded.
- Maximum use is made of recycled construction materials. Reusing materials and elements from demolished dwellings should be prioritised.
- New dwellings are built to the Future Homes Standard and are not connected to gas.

For more information, contact:

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Endnotes

¹ Centre for Cities, 2021, *Measuring up: comparing public transport in the UK and Europe's biggest cities*

² Institute for Government, 2014, *Housing that works for all. The political economy of housing in England*

³ IPCC, 2022, *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of climate change. Working group III Contribution to the IPCC sixth assessment report. Chapter 8: Urban systems and other settlements*

⁴ Policy Exchange, 2021, *Strong suburbs*