

# *A VISION FOR SUSTAINABLE HOUSING*

*TO TACKLE THE CLIMATE AND NATURE CRISES AND  
HELP EVERYONE LIVE HEALTHIER, HAPPIER LIVES*



Produced for the Labour Party by



The  
**Wildlife**  
Trusts

# INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that there is a housing crisis in this country, with 1 in 5 households in serious housing stress<sup>1</sup>. The political parties have announced their intentions to tackle this crisis through programmes to build significantly more housing than has been achieved in recent decades.

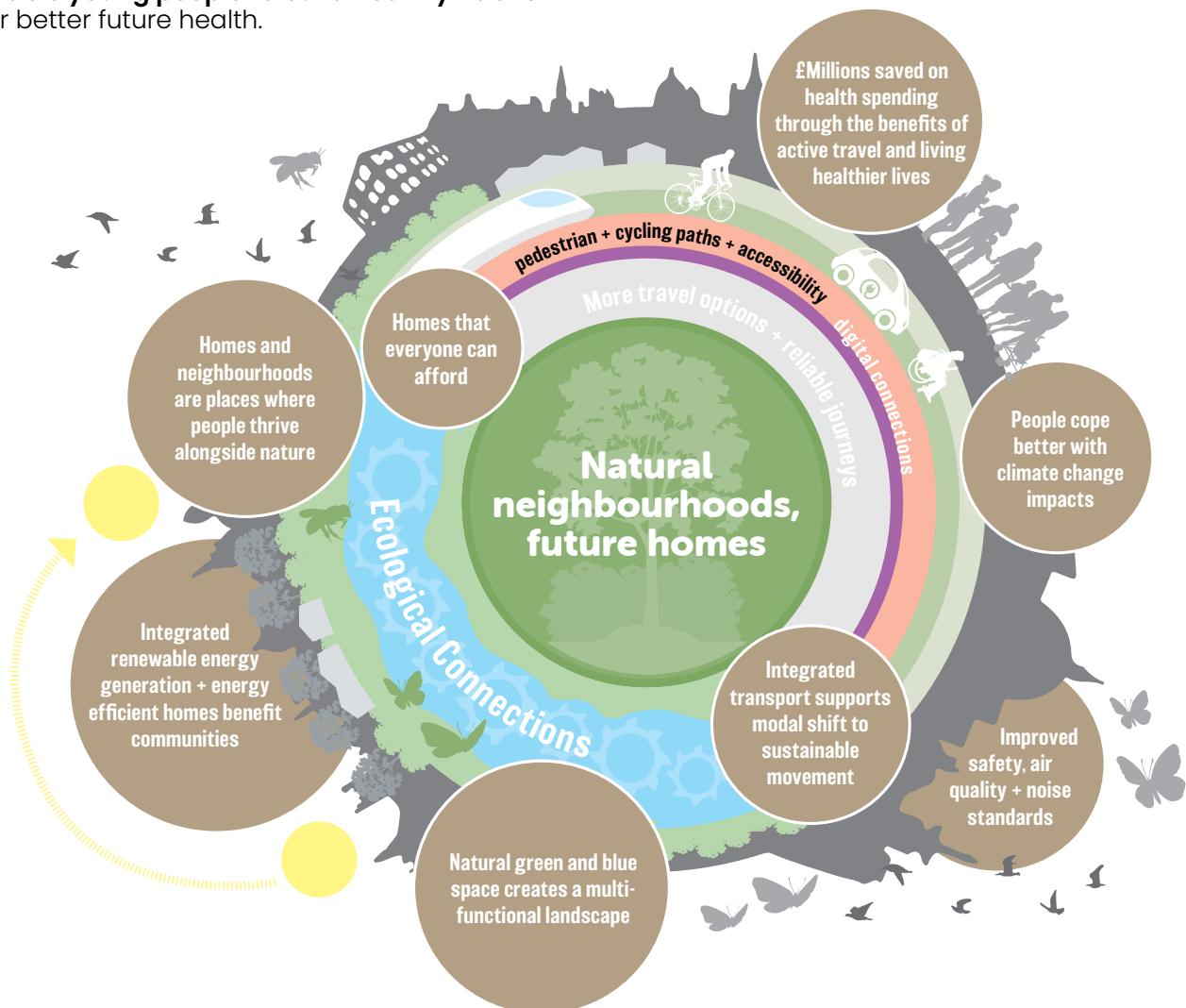
This presents an opportunity to ensure that new housing is planned and built in such a way that it contributes to resolving some of society's most pressing problems. In solving the housing crisis any future government could also:

- Help prevent ill health and **reduce costs to the NHS**.
- **Contribute to net zero** and reduce climate impacts whilst tackling cost of living issues.
- **Contribute to nature's recovery**, helping to meet our biodiversity commitments on the world stage.
- Reduce health inequalities and **help everyone live healthier lives**.
- **Enable young people to build healthy habits** for better future health.

It is vital that people have adequate housing, but development is not just about building homes. It is about creating amazing places; building a safe and welcoming environment where people want to live and work, and where they can make choices for healthy lifestyles. Building places is as important as building homes and contributes to a sense of place and community<sup>2</sup>.

To achieve this, five principles should underpin any new housing strategy:

- Provide the right homes,
- In the right place,
- In the right way,
- Using nature and people centred design,
- With secure environmental resources.



<sup>1</sup> Affordable Housing Commission (2020) Making Housing Affordable Again: Rebalancing the Nation's Housing System. The final report of the Affordable Housing Commission

<sup>2</sup> RIBA (2018) Ten Characteristics of Places where People want to Live.

Where people live can make a stark difference to their health and wellbeing, and even their life expectancy. As we face a cost-of-living crisis, adding stress to already difficult lives, the need to give people proper access to nature becomes even more important. Enabling contact with nature close to where people live could reduce visits to GPs and other health professionals. Evidence shows that access to natural green space is linked to big improvements in both physical and mental health and reduces health inequality<sup>3</sup>. Providing access to greenspace within 15 minutes' walk of home, particularly in economically deprived areas, would save the NHS £2.1 billion<sup>4</sup>, and help combat pressures by reducing calls on NHS time. It would enable children who live in deprived areas, who are currently nine times less likely to have access to green spaces<sup>5</sup>, to build healthy habits for better health in the future. A successful housing strategy would ensure that everyone could experience these benefits.

Well-designed homes can help society face future challenges. Homes built to best net zero standards, with minimal embodied carbon and high energy efficiency will help tackle the climate crisis and contribute to energy security. They will help address the cost-of-living crisis too, by making homes warmer and cheaper to heat. Joined-up policy on energy generation and transmission is needed alongside this to ensure renewable energy provides cheaper, cleaner power to all homes.

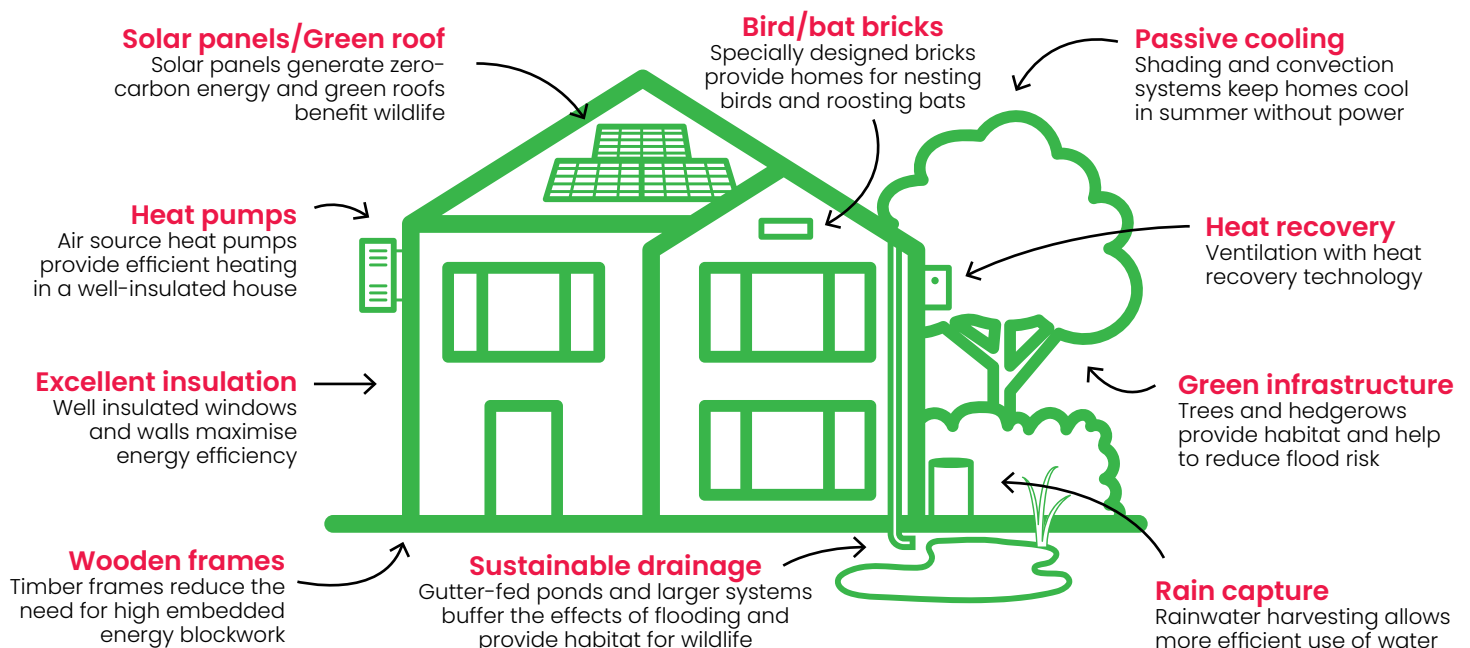
It is important that existing communities experience these benefits too. Priority should be given to improving, modernising and repurposing existing homes, buildings and estates. Constructing new

builds can produce ten times more CO<sub>2</sub> than refurbishment<sup>6</sup> and consumes more land which might otherwise be used to support nature's recovery. Any new housing strategy must ensure the quality of existing homes, whether owned or rented, as well as providing new homes.

Thirteen million people are private renters in the UK – that's 1 in 5 of us, including 1 in 4 families<sup>7</sup>. Renters deserve a nature-friendly and climate-proofed home too, but are usually unable to make the necessary changes to their homes themselves. There is no incentive for private landlords to provide their tenants with nature, and current energy efficiency regulations only require them to meet basic standards. This is despite the average renting couple in England spending 41% of their income on rent<sup>7</sup>.

## Healthy habitats and ecosystems

- Slow and store water, reducing the risk of flooding downstream, and supporting river flows during drought.
- Offer protection from coastal erosion and storm surges.
- Clean air and water resulting in fewer pollutants such as nitrates, phosphates and particulates.
- Help regulate local air temperature.
- Connect people to nearby nature, improve health, well-being and enjoyment of life.
- Provide the pollinators, soils, nutrients, food and water that sustain us.



3 Michael Marmot, Jessica Allen, Tammy Boyce, Peter Goldblatt, Joana Morrison (2020) Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review ten years on. London: Institute of Health Equity

4 Review by Public Health England: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904439/Improving\\_access\\_to\\_greenspace\\_2020\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenspace_2020_review.pdf)

5 National Children's Bureau. Greater Expectations: raising aspirations for our children. London: National Children's Bureau; 2013. [https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Policy\\_docs/GEXP\\_final%20WEB.pdf](https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Policy_docs/GEXP_final%20WEB.pdf)

6 Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission (2020) Living with Beauty, p. 92

7 [https://www.generationrent.org/about\\_renting#:~:text=13%20million%20people%20in%20the,in%20every%205%20of%20us](https://www.generationrent.org/about_renting#:~:text=13%20million%20people%20in%20the,in%20every%205%20of%20us)

# Principles for providing homes at scale whilst securing benefits for people, nature and climate

## 1. Provide the right homes

- Local authorities should identify the tenures, types and sizes of homes as well as the number of homes that will meet local housing needs. In most places, genuinely affordable (often meaning socially rented) homes are what is most needed.
- New homes should only be built if they provide the housing needed in the area in which they are being sited.
- Priority should be given to improving, modernising and repurposing existing homes, buildings and estates.

## 2. In the right place

- Nature underpins our economy and society<sup>8</sup>, but our natural environment is fast disappearing. Its protection is essential. The location of housing should be strategically and spatially planned, avoiding harm to wildlife and natural spaces from the outset. This means giving Local Nature Recovery Strategies a stronger role in the planning system and putting the local plan front and centre to create a genuinely plan-led system. This will reduce risk, delays and expense for developers as well as avoiding further loss of nature.
- New homes and communities must be built to withstand our changing climate and should not be built in flood risk areas.
- New houses and settlements need to be well-connected to public transport links to avoid increasing reliance on car ownership.

## 3. In the right way

- New and retrofitted homes must reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges we are facing. The Government has a duty to meet net zero targets. Delivering sustainable low carbon homes will contribute to achieving these whilst also helping people cope with the cost-of-living crisis.
- New development must allow people to enjoy the beauty of nature on their doorstep and give nature space to recover and thrive. Good design can build features and space for nature into new and existing housing developments, minimise water use and incorporate nature-based solutions to aid climate resilience. All new towns should be required to deliver at least 30% Biodiversity Net Gain – resulting in a third more quality natural habitat than there was before development.

- Future proofing homes and places so they require as little alteration and retrofitting as possible will be key for all new developments. Considerations should go beyond the build itself to include infrastructure such as locally sourced clean energy, active travel and access to nature and services.

## 4. Using nature and people-centred design

- Integrate high quality and accessible natural green and blue space, managed to increase wildlife, into urban areas through innovative design and placemaking, to create places where people can enjoy healthier lives. All people should have everyday access to nature close to home. Setting mandatory targets for accessible natural green space would help achieve this.
- Contact with nature is beginning to be prescribed as part of the solution to health problems, through ‘social prescribing’<sup>9</sup>. It is essential that there is sufficient natural green space within fifteen minutes’ walk to provide people with this opportunity.
- Connected, green walking and cycling routes linked to decarbonised public transport, local amenities and schools would enable healthy lifestyle choices and provide everyday access to nature, creating strong communities and promoting well-being.

## 5. With secure environmental resources

- All decisions about the planning, design and construction of new housing must be based on a thorough understanding of the natural environment’s capacity to meet the demands placed on it.
- Strategic planning, informed by a strategic environmental assessment, is needed to ensure that the principles we propose can be met and that development proposals stay within environmental limits for nature, carbon and water.
- Strategic planning must consider the cumulative impact of multiple projects. Too often, impacts are deemed insignificant on their own, but over time have amounted to death by a thousand cuts for vulnerable habitats and species. A new Wildbelt designation, identified through the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, could protect land in the process of being managed to bring nature back – and speed up the creation of the Nature Recovery Network in England.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta (2021) The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review

<sup>9</sup> Our evidence shows that for every 1.1 million people reached, Wildlife Trusts green prescribing programmes save £100M See The Wildlife Trusts natural health Services: 23JUN\_Health\_Report\_FINAL (1).pdf (wildlifetrusts.org)