

Streamlining planning to build more homes





The Housing Forum

The Housing Forum is the cross-sector membership network for housing and construction committed to a 'Quality Home for All'.

The Housing Forum has 150 member organisations from across the housing sector and supply chain. Between them our members have over £24bn turnover and share a determination to drive quality in design, construction and maintenance of UK homes and a commitment to partnership working.

Local authorities represent a third of membership and are constituted as the 'Councils Network' within The Housing Forum. The Councils Network enhances the voice of our local authority members and raises awareness of issues they face.

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Executive Summary



1 How to harness the benefits of planning?

Planning can sometimes get forced in the 'technocratic' rather than the wider spatial role it should have, which does not serve anyone's best interests.

Reforms are needed to help elevate the status of planners in local councils and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated and spent on planning.

- Planners need to be empowered, trained and resourced to **promote the benefits of new housing**.
- Planners should **work in partnership with the development industry**.
- It is critical to elevate and **integrate the role of planning within a local authority**, so that planning and its objectives are understood and shared. **The Chief Planner should be a statutory role**.
- **Cross-departmental working within local authorities** can help, including embedding planners in other departmental teams, or physically co-locating them.

2 How can we reduce the burdens and improve efficiency?

The breadth of planning policy has grown significantly over time which has resulted in the need for a significant amount of evidence to be submitted as part of major residential planning applications.

We identified several ways in which the workload within planning could be reduced:

- **Local authorities should use permitted development orders** wherever feasible. **The Government should grant permitted development rights by default** with the option for local authorities to remove those rights where necessary.
- Local authorities should ensure that it is possible for those submitting major planning applications for larger sites to have **a free conversation with a local planner prior to the pre-application stage**, to iron out queries and ambiguities and ensure the application can be validated quickly and easily.
- **Quality pre-application advice should be available to developers** to start building a process of constructive engagement.
- **Local planning authorities should ensure that standards already addressed by existing regulations are not added on as local planning requirements** without a strong rationale for doing so and awareness of the trade-offs.
- **The Government should remove nutrient neutrality from the planning system**. This is because there are other agencies which are tasked with dealing with it.
- **Statutory consultees should prioritise and focus their involvement in major planning applications**.



3. How can local planning authorities retain and recruit staff better?

Many local planning authorities are short staffed with the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) [latest survey](#) finding 82% of authorities reporting difficulties in recruiting staff.

There are ways we can improve this:

Retention

- **Planners' salaries and reward package need to better match those in the private sector.**
- **Planning officers need empowering to make decisions. Allocating a dedicated case officer to each application helps with job satisfaction.**
- A career in planning needs to offer **progression opportunities.**
- The government should **avoid imposing too many changes on local authorities** as disruption and restructuring are key factors that cause staff to leave.
- A government scheme to **encourage former (retired) senior planners to support local planning authorities dealing with householder applications** could help – leaving 'career planners' to focus on more complex applications. Older planners might also be able to mentor and support newer planners.

Recruitment

- The government should continue work with the RTPI to **develop routes into planning for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds**, including apprenticeships.
- **Internships or a 'year in industry' option** within degrees can help attract the best graduates to a career that is right for them.
- **New planners should be exposed to a range of disciplines** to ensure they are aware of the work of other parts of the local authority. **Secondments between the private and public sectors and the Planning Inspectorate** for staff at all levels would also help.



Introduction

The Housing Forum's ambition is for a Quality Home For All. The planning system is vital in ensuring that we bring forward both the quantity and quality of housing needed to do this, including affordable housing for those who need it.

We know from our membership that there are many talented and passionate planners working in local authorities and in the wider housing sector who share our ambition and want to see the benefits of new housing for their local areas.

The planning system, however, is not currently working as well as it should be and we hope that the ideas set out here offer some possible ways forward.

The Housing Forum Councils Network Advisory Group identified the planning system as a key area of concern to local authorities.

Concerns about the time it can take to secure the necessary planning consents to be able to deliver new homes are echoed by our wider members. We therefore set up a working group on planning to discuss the challenges facing local planning authorities including resources and the growing 'asks' being placed on both them and the wider housing sector.

The aim of this report is to propose solutions focussed on the role of planning in building more homes and through the larger-scale applications which most homes are provided.

We asked:

- How can we build support for new housing and harness the benefits of a good planning system across the whole of a local authority, so that planning for new housing supports wider ambitions?
- How can we reduce the burdens of the planning system and make it more efficient? Streamlining processes can free planners up for the creative process of placemaking.
- How can we address staff shortages within planning and improve skills of planners?

The proposed solutions have come from engaging with both local authority planners and housebuilders. Both share the ambition of getting more homes built – including affordable housing – and improving housing quality.

Methods

A range of meetings, discussions and two larger workshops were organised to gather the evidence for this report. These were attended by a range of Housing Forum members from housebuilders, housing associations, architects and contractors, as well as local authority officers.

The working group also commissioned a review of the validation checklist and the evidence being asked for in support of planning applications, and will be publishing the findings from this later this autumn.



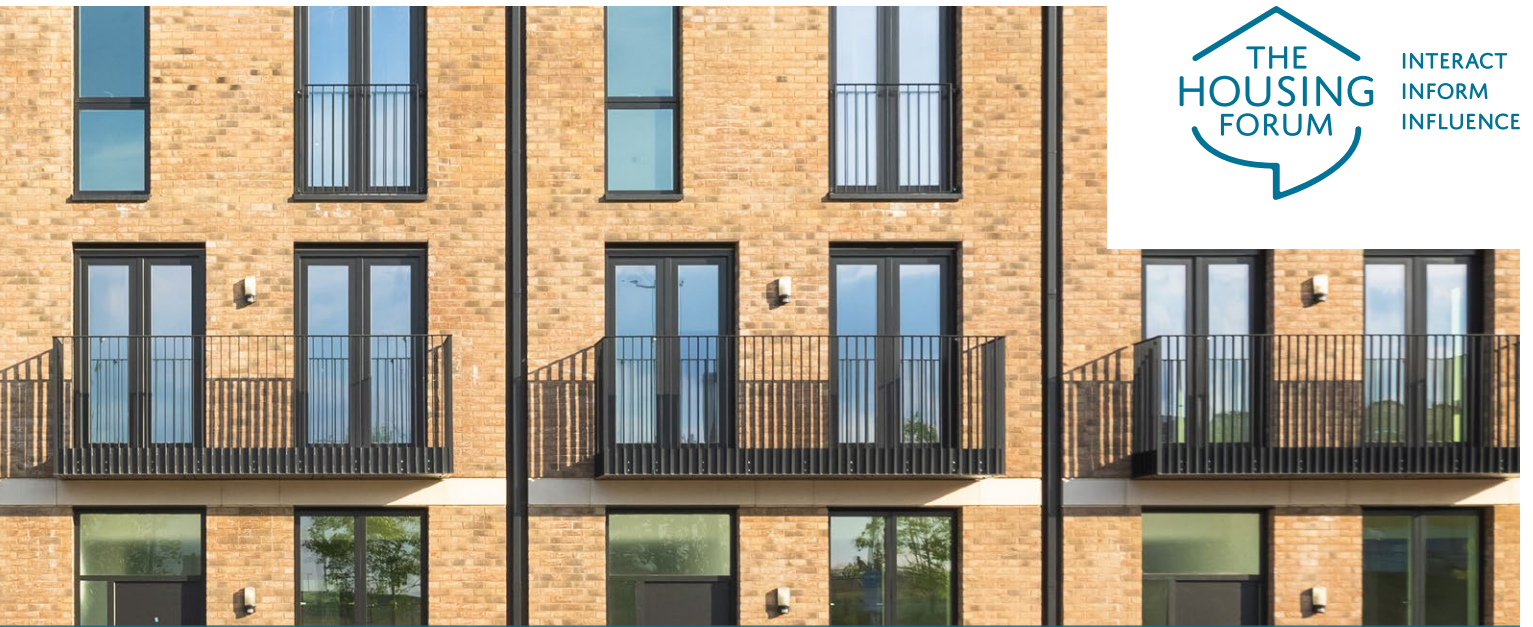
1. Building support for new housing and harnessing the benefits of planning

The workshops identified a number of ways to support the planning system to bring forward quality housing at scale:

- Having a corporate attitude to growth embedded across a local authority including local councillors and officers, with planning at the heart of this.
- Making the most of S106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy.
- Working in partnership between local authority housing delivery teams, planning teams other public sector bodies such as the highways team and Environment Agency, and of external organisations including housing associations and housebuilders.

The challenges to achieving these were identified as:

- Planning can sometimes get forced in the 'technocratic' rather than the wider spatial role it should have, which does not serve anyone's best interests.
- The wider benefits of housing delivery are not fully understood across all parts of local councils – for instance supporting health, wellbeing and economic growth. The benefits of delivering new homes are often hard for planners, local councillors and developers to articulate. For instance, the costs of households in temporary accommodation can be huge, but the role of good planning in alleviating these is not fully appreciated.
- A lack of certainty around housing delivery and its value to the local community puts delivery at risk due to lack of information and clarity around what benefits housing will bring and why it is needed. The specific benefits of housing delivery as a lever for investment for local communities are often very opaque.
- Objections to new housing slow down delivery, especially if they are taken up by local councillors who can refuse permissions.
- Planners are often isolated within local authorities – left to do the 'heavy lifting' on the big issues with a lack of wider consensus. Some authorities divide planning between different functions in an attempt to overcome this, but this can sometimes increase the sense of isolation.



How to harness the benefits of planning?

Planners need to be empowered, trained and resourced to **promote the benefits of new housing**. Building new homes helps to meet the local area's housing and affordable housing provision, but there are many further benefits:

- Housebuilding and new housing boosts the local and national economy.
- Housebuilding creates employment opportunities during both construction and operation stages. New jobs are created via construction, the supply chain and via employment in mixed-use sites.
- New housing supports local businesses via increased expenditure in local areas, as well as ensuring that local schools and services remain viable.
- Building affordable housing helps address homelessness and reduces expenditure on temporary accommodation for homeless households.
- The New Homes Bonus¹ means that additional funding comes to local authorities who build new housing.
- New housing means increased council tax revenues, helping the council to deliver services to the whole of the local community.
- New housing can provide contributions to local infrastructure via the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Planners should **work in partnership with the development industry** and wider housing sector to agree and clarify the key outcomes that are being delivered. This will ensure that all of those involved are working together to deliver not just homes but a place and a community. Partnership working is needed across local authorities and combined authorities to clarify an approach to wider placemaking benefits. The Housing Forum's [Route Map for New Homes Delivery](#) sets out good practice on this.

It is critical to elevate and **integrate the role of planning within a local authority**, so that planning and its objectives are understood and shared. Local authorities need to clarify the wider spatial planning role as curator of activities across places rather than as a purely technocratic process – this needs to be reflected nationally in the National Planning Policy Framework.

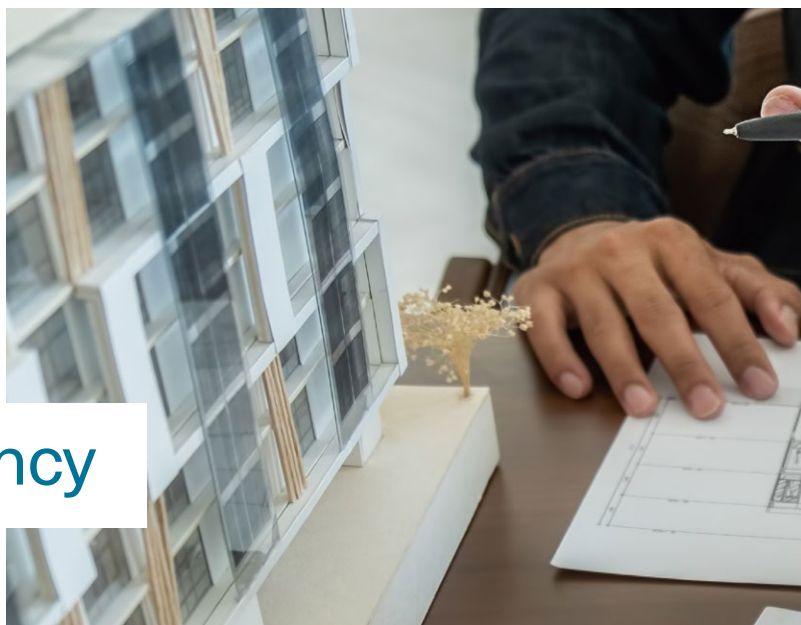
The Chief Planner should be a statutory role, and member of the local authority's management team with responsibility for managing the service and outcomes including design quality and promoting equality. The RTP1 is currently running a campaign for a legal requirement to have a chief planning officer, which The Housing Forum supports. A key performance indicator could be used to require councils to demonstrate the position of the Chief Planner within the council.

Cross working within local authorities can help, including embedding planners in other departmental teams, or physical co-location. For instance, the housing growth approach taken in Leeds recently has been successful at this.

These reforms would help elevate the status of planners in local councils and ensure that sufficient resources are allocated and spent on planning.

¹ The New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils which depends on the number of new homes they build or bring back into use.

2. Reducing burdens and improving efficiency



The breadth of planning policy has grown significantly over time, often because of central government policies requiring local authorities to consider an ever-growing range of issues, though locally-led priorities have also added to the requirements in many areas. This has resulted in the need for a significant amount of evidence to be submitted as part of major residential planning applications – those with 10 or more homes.

Our research looked at ways in which the work required by local authorities to process planning applications could be reduced. One aspect that could help is ensuring that things are asked for at the right stage. We have commissioned some research into planning validation requirements and this will be published separately later this autumn.

Climate change and biodiversity are big overarching priorities for many councils. The planning system is one element where councils can push up national requirements and try to achieve these ambitions. However, there are examples of elements within a climate change policy that are unsuitable to go into a planning policy.

How can we reduce the burdens and improve efficiency?

- **Local planning authorities should use permitted development orders wherever feasible.** Councils should make greater use of permitted development orders for lower value work, so that resources can be channelled into major applications.
- **The Government should grant permitted development rights by default** with the option for local authorities to remove those rights where necessary would be the most effective means of making planning simpler in as many areas as possible, whilst allowing local authorities to intervene when necessary.
- **Local planning authorities should ensure that good quality and insightful pre-application advice** is available to applicants for all major applications for larger sites. This initial conversation allows the developer to share outline details of their proposals and a timelines. This service should be prioritised within councils and advice should be given in a timely manner. The initial meeting would allow both the council and developers to understand and agree the scope of the formal pre-application engagement and both developers and planning officers need to approach this as the start of constructive ongoing engagement. This will help ensure that when applications are received, they have all the necessary information to be validated quickly. Applicants find it very frustrating if they are made to wait for months for pre-planning advice and then given information that can be found online. Our research revealed examples of local authorities, even in high-pressured London boroughs, where local planning authorities were successfully responding to applicants within a few days, allocating a case officer and meeting within two weeks to discuss a prospective application.



- **Developers and local councils should consider producing a Planning Protocol.** This is a jointly produced advisory document and is legally binding on any party, but which aims to set out agreed principles to encourage collaborative working between all those involved in delivering new housing and wider local growth.²
 - **Local planning authorities should ensure that standards already addressed by existing regulations** are not added on as local planning requirements without a strong rationale for doing so and awareness of the trade-offs. For instance, replacing double glazing with triple glazing generates only very slight improvements to carbon emissions and may not be a good use of resources. Money put to one use is not then available to meet another either environmental or housing objective. Whilst design elements are important for local flavour, aspects such as the required energy efficiency levels of heat pumps are better dealt with via regulations. The Future Homes Hub is doing some work in this area to create off the shelf policies on aspects of sustainability, which local authorities can amend if needed. Starting from a point of standardisation would reduce the input required by local authorities to write policies, and also make it easier for planning applicants to ensure they comply.
 - **The Government should remove nutrient neutrality from the planning system.** This is because there are other agencies which are tasked with dealing with it. The Secretary of State has indicated that they intended to take this forward via new legislation though the timing is uncertain. In the meantime, local authorities should exercise as much flexibility as possible and work closely with developers to find mitigation solutions. Similar leadership over the water neutrality rules is needed to ensure that new housing can be built in areas where it is badly needed and which would otherwise be very suitable, such as Cambridgeshire.
 - **Statutory consultees should prioritise and focus their involvement in planning applications.** They need to comment within the statutory timescales, and to develop ways of streamlining their responses to facilitate this. Planning departments should help to skill up their colleagues across other statutory consultee areas, and work closely with them to identify and tackle the areas where objections most often lie. Better resourcing of local authorities across the whole of the services they provide is needed, or – failing that – a reduction in the scope of their responsibilities in recognition that they cannot do the same amount of work with far less resource.
- There is an innate tendency for the list of planning requirements to get ever longer. A change in ethos whereby existing requirements are reviewed after a period and a cost-benefit approach used would be beneficial, rather than including all ‘nice-to-have’ elements as if they were cost-free. There is always a cost to the local authority of overseeing planning requirements, and the cost to the planning applicants may well feed through into a reduce amount of affordable housing being viable on sites, a lack of applications coming forward, or poorer quality development.
- The recommendation of increasing planning fees has been broadly welcomed across the housing sector, and the move to increase fees annually in line with inflation gives predictability to both applicants and local planning authorities. However, there remains concern that with local authority budgets under so much pressure and cuts to other parts of their budgets, the money may be soaked up into other areas (for instance, cutting the amount of a local authority’s own funding it puts into its planning service) and fail to deliver an improvement in service to applicants. The alternative to trying to ringfence funding is to monitor performance – this was also discussed in the [recent fees consultation](#) and we look forward to the ideas here being taken forward.

² See for instance, <https://www.kentdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Kent-Wide-Planning-Protocol.pdf>

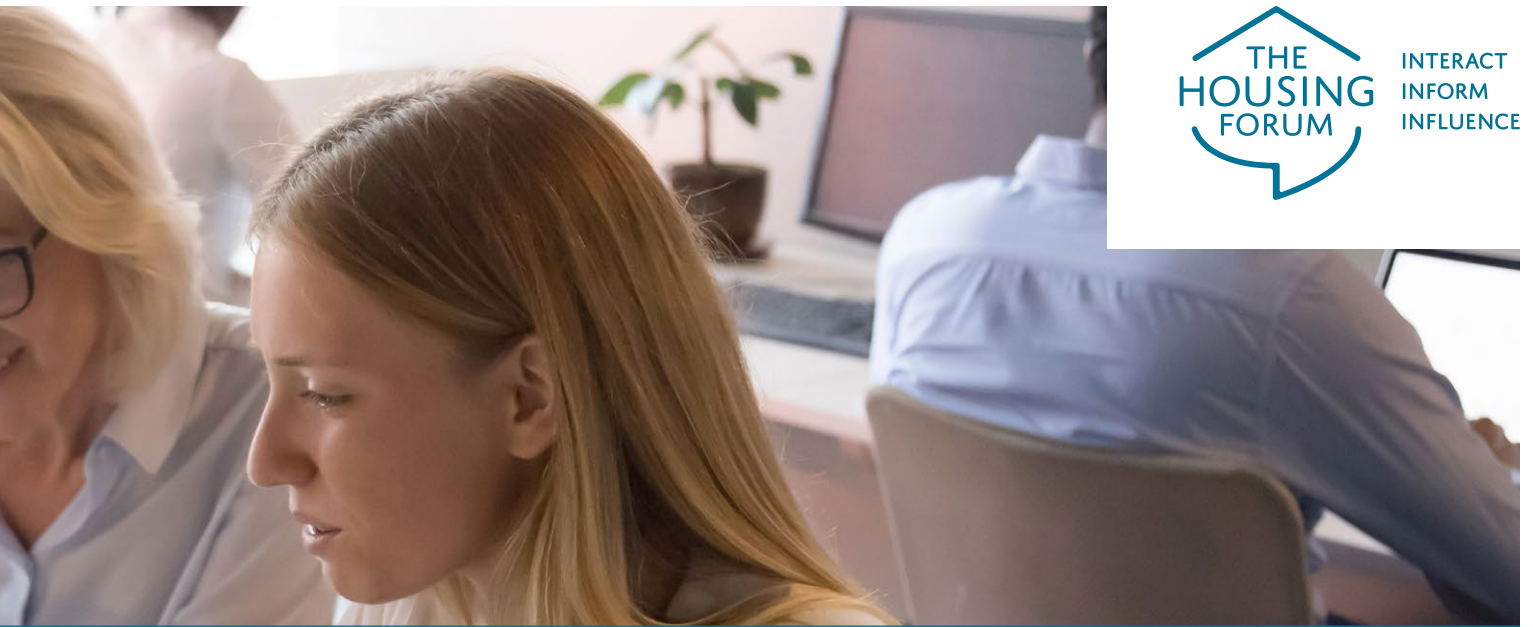
3. Addressing staff shortages and improving skills



Many local planning authorities are short staffed and have difficulty filling roles with the [RTPI's latest survey](#) finding 82% of authorities are having difficulties in recruiting staff.

How can local planning authorities retain staff better?

- **Planners' salaries and reward package need to better match those of the private sector.** Without this, local authorities struggle to retain the best planners.
- **Planning officers need empowering to make decisions** to feel a sense of job satisfaction. This could be along the same lines as the model for [Public Practice](#) which supports people from a range of disciplines who are currently working in the private sector to work for 12 months or more for councils.
- **Allocating a dedicated case officer to each application** helps build a constructive relationship with the applicant, improves efficiency and also makes a planner's job more satisfying.
- A career in planning needs to offer **progression opportunities** to retain staff. Local authorities need to identify how this can be provided within the local authority, including fast-track options to promote and retain the very best planners. An increased focus on local plan making can also help.
- The government should **avoid imposing too many changes** on local authorities as disruption and restructuring are key factors that cause staff to leave. The recent history of white papers that are not followed through have been unhelpful, and attempting to bring in the infrastructure levy without cross-party support would likely add to the disruption for no gain.



- A government scheme to **encourage former (retired) senior planners to support local planning authorities dealing with householder applications could help** - leaving 'career planners' to focus on more complex applications. Older planners might also be able to mentor and support newer planners. A similar and successful employment model is already funded by Government and operated by [Public Practice](#) which matches skilled professionals from the private sector with councils and could be adapted. Rules around re-employing retired staff who are drawing pensions can be an issue – **employing via an agency can help get round these.**
- **Secondments between the private and public sectors and the Planning Inspectorate** for staff at all levels would also help to build planners' skills and appreciation of the aim and needs of those they work with.
- Closer working with private sector on **joint training** can help, such as the Design SE model.

How can new planners be attracted to the profession?

- The government should continue work with the RTPi to **develop routes into planning for applicants from non-traditional backgrounds**, including apprenticeships.
- **Internships** for students are commonly used in other countries to give potential planners the opportunity to see if they will enjoy planning as a career and encourage the best suited graduates into planning. A **'year in industry' option** is also offered in many university courses, and local planning authorities could make use of this to help increase their manpower, as well as promoting planning as a career.
- **New planners should be exposed to a range of disciplines** to ensure they are aware of the work of other parts of the local authority. Creating a local authority 'rotation' system for new planners – either as a graduate position or within an apprenticeship for post-18 applicants would give young people the opportunity to identify planning as a career they would enjoy, as well as ensuring that new planners were familiar with the work across the rest of their local authorities, and vice versa.

Streamlining planning to build more homes
A Housing Forum Report



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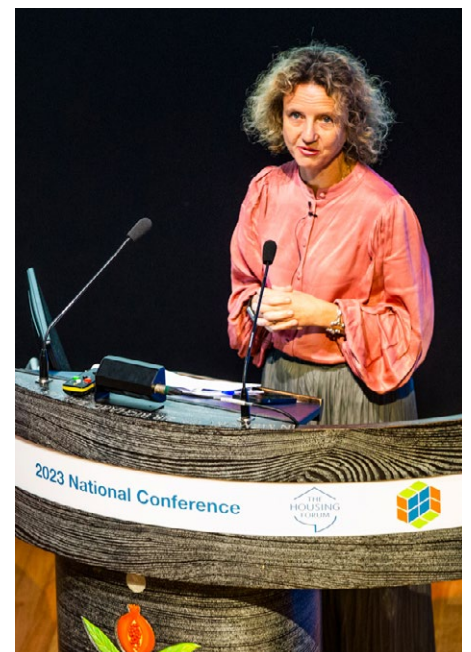
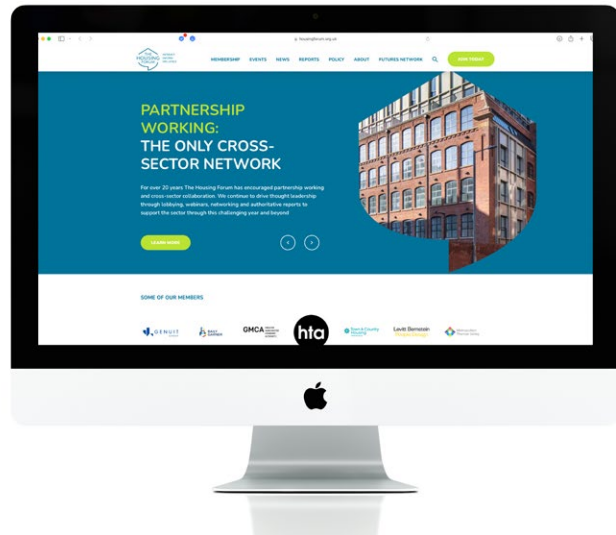


The Housing Forum Membership

The Housing Forum is the cross-sector membership network for housing and construction committed to a 'Quality Home for All'.

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