

A new nationwide minimum space guideline for new-build homes has been brought in by the Government, which might mitigate some of the worst abuses. Ten architects, housebuilders and developers give their views on the new move...

space standards for homes

The UK's continuing housing crisis, spiralling rents and too few homes has meant smaller and smaller parcels of space coming on to the market, from studio flats that require the occupant to sleep on a shelf to shoe-box bedrooms under stairs. According to the RIBA, more than half of new homes being built today are not big enough to meet the purchaser's needs. RIBA research found that the average three-bedroom home in London is now 25 sq m bigger than in Yorkshire, meaning that some Yorkshire families are missing out on the equivalent of a double bedroom and a family living room.

Last October the Government brought in a long-awaited, Nationally Described Space Standard, guiding housebuilders and architects on the minimum internal area for new homes, bringing the rest of the country in line with London, which since 2011 has had its own standard. Previously there had only been the Parker Morris, brought in for new social-housing projects after the 1961 report *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*, and dropped in the Eighties.

Based on the number of bedrooms and occupants, the new rules apply to every new home, from affordable mass housing to one-off projects. Under the standard, a one-bedroom flat should be a minimum of 39 sq m, while a three-bed, five-person home has to be 93 sq m. In two-bedroom homes one must be a double, with a minimum floor area of 11.5 sq m, plus a single a minimum of 7.5 sq m.

Yet the new space standard is optional and any knock-on effects might not be seen immediately. To adopt minimum standards, local authorities must first carry out an impact assessment to demonstrate local need and viability. They also need to carry out a full local plan review, including public consultation. In its recent *HomeWise* campaign, the RIBA suggests that the best solution would be to embed the new standard within Building Regulations, calling for every new home across the country to be covered.

But what has been the response from the architecture community to the new standard? Has the Government gone far enough, and will it really have any impact? We asked architects, housebuilders and developers for their thoughts and opinions...



Hari Phillips

Transforming quality of life by delivering

outstanding homes is at the heart of Bell Phillips' ethos, and so we welcome measures that seek to raise the quality of housing. But size isn't everything, however, and space standards reduce the concept of quality to a very limited metric.

My concern is that this focus dominates discussions on housing quality at the expense of other important factors: views, light, volume, usability, flexibility, lifestyle, innovation, creativity. Increasingly, meetings with planning officers resemble a meeting with one's accountant — people pour over detailed spreadsheets to assess 'compliance'. This draconian, design-by-numbers' approach means that in certain situations architects are forced to make poor design decisions or are restricted in their aspirations in order to make the numbers work.

In my view, the quality of housing should be considered in a holistic way that considers size among other issues, and this assessment should be embedded within the planning process. In an ideal world planning officers would have the education, intelligence and experience to make proper value judgments about what constitutes good-quality housing. Perhaps it is this lack of faith in the system that pushes us towards the blunt instrument of minimum space standards.

Hari Phillips
director, Bell Phillips Architects



Russell Curtis

The Government's attempts to streamline housing standards are welcome and long overdue. The principle of making compliance with technical standards the responsibility of building control is sensible, but its conflation with planning policy is a bewildering move. A clearer separation of duties would have been more sensible, particularly with regards to requirements for wheelchair-user housing under the new Part M that, confusingly, is implemented at the request of local planning policy. Only time will tell how this gets enforced on more complex schemes, and it will be interesting to see how the industry works to find an efficient way through the statutory approvals process.

Concerns remain regarding some of the more prescriptive requirements that limit a creative approach to challenging sites, but more fundamentally it's difficult to see why minimum space standards shouldn't be mandatory within the Building Regulations rather than an 'optional extra' determined at the local planning level. People don't vary in size according to their whereabouts in the country, so there's no reason why space standards should either. I just don't buy the suggestion that a small increase in area suddenly tips previously viable schemes into financial oblivion. Efficiencies in design, procurement and delivery can more than offset the cost of a few additional square metres, so arguments against mandatory minimum areas therefore appear spurious and miserly.

*Russell Curtis
director, RCKa*



Alex Ely

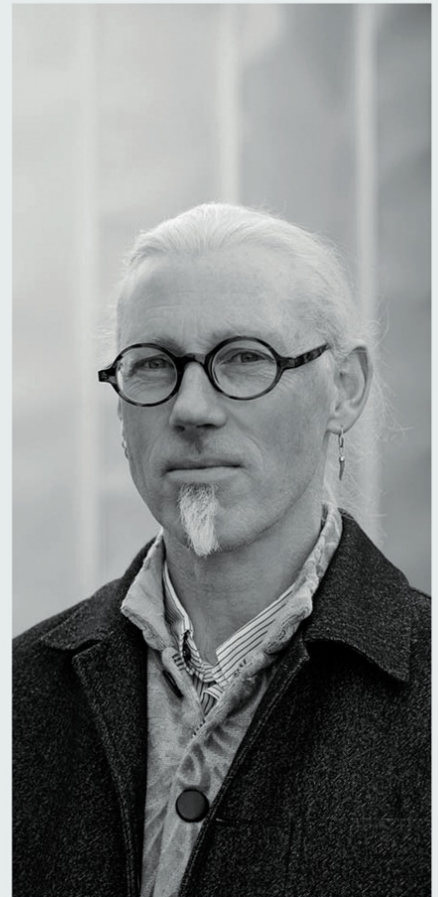
Good architecture must be generated by ideas beyond the practical and the technical, but at Mæ we nonetheless recognise that there is a role for legislation when speculation and the liberty of the market work against the interests of the common good.

Writing the Mayor of London's Housing Design Guide was an absorbing commission for Mæ and became the subject of much debate. It introduced mandatory requirements for all housing developments in Greater London and became the benchmark for the Nationally Described Space Standard.

There is much resistance to legislating space standards on the basis that it will impact on viability. But viability is what we chose it to be and regulation is collectively made in the interests of creating a civilised society. Well-planned, generously lit and spacious homes are as important in delivering sustainability as urban design and building performance.

In a dysfunctional market space standards help protect against the worst, they are simple and unequivocal unlike so much legislation, and they give certainty to the home buyer, the authority as well as the developer and their architects. It is only a pity that the Government has left the decision to adopt the Nationally Described Space Standard to individual local authorities.

*Alex Ely
principal, Mæ*



Meredith Bowles

It's about time there was a requirement for new houses to be built to given space standards. We all know that the size of properties has fallen over the years, which is one reason that older properties remain valued. Despite progress, new houses are often smaller, pokier, with smaller windows. So what's the problem with the Nationally Described Space Standard?

Well, it's not mandatory for one. It has loopholes that allow certain developments off the hook. And while Nationally Described, the guidelines are locally implemented. I get why there is agitation from the industry at the RIBA's sabre-rattling, with soundbites that pit industry against the profession when we would do better to work together. And I get why it's hard to insist on a one-size-fits-all approach, but this could be overcome with some thought.

We have taken the needs of people with disabilities seriously. Space to accommodate wheelchairs has, bit by bit, found its way into legislation, and has transformed the lives of many people — not just those with disabilities but those with children or shopping bags too. Isn't it time to think about the rest of the population?

*Meredith Bowles
director, Mole Architects*



Andrew Matthews

While housing quality is in part related to adequate space standards, the application of a one-size-fits-all policy, applied through the Building Regulations, fails to recognise the very difficult challenges that face housing providers in different parts of the UK.

It's understandable for policy makers to wish to protect future residents from unscrupulous developers that might see relaxed standards as an opportunity to build sub-standard accommodation and maximise profit, but it's quite another if the same policy makes it unviable for housing associations to deliver much-needed, affordable housing in the poorer parts of the country. It seems to me that such a policy can in some cases be counterproductive.

We are currently helping housing associations deliver family housing in the North to space standards that are below the national space standards' target. But through creative design and innovative site layouts we believe we can help unlock much-needed, affordable housing in a socially responsible way on otherwise unviable sites. Good residential design is not just about space standards.

Andrew Matthews
founding director, Proctor and Matthews



Luke Tozer

The current space standards provide a good baseline for all new dwellings, are clear and easily understood. Space above these minimum standards should be provided for everyone to live in and enjoy. It is akin to a basic human right. It should be provided above these minimums universally by a well-functioning housing market. Currently it clearly is not.

Although the standards themselves are OK, it is the implementation on a voluntary basis and the decision of each local authority that is the Achilles' heel. The market responds best to legislation and regulation where it is imposed nationally, rather than where it is voluntary and localised. They will only have impact if they are adopted by local authorities. But sadly in an era when they are all facing severe budget cuts, it seems unlikely that all or many local authorities will have the resources or skills to implement the change.

Space standards are easily quantifiable, obligatory and nationwide. If you couldn't get a Building Regulations Completion certificate — hence mortgage — unless you had met them then everyone would suddenly be building to them. This also solves the resources and skills' gap in local authorities, as Building Regulations can be administered by the private sector through Approved Inspectors.

Luke Tozer
director, Pitman Tozer Architects



Ben Adams

A set of space standards for all is a great idea, and making them simple to understand and implement is essential. The London Plan enshrines such standards for that city, sets planning policy at the city-wide level, and is understood by consultants, clients and other stakeholders. Voluntary space standards will easily be overridden by market forces and so the standards need to be mandatory, but who will police them? Can we expect planning officers or Approved Inspectors to get the tape measure out when large apartment buildings are finished, or will we see scandal after scandal as the press exposes yet another building with rooms that are too small? I suspect the planning system could be a better guardian than Building Control as the overall scale of a building is unlikely to change much once consented, and therefore the rooms inside should add up to the right amount of space in total.

Then there is the potential downside to mandatory space standards: we face a national housing crisis because homes generally are too expensive, and larger ones will be more so. There are two ways we might combat this: by persuading a UK government to invest in new affordable housing, or by decoupling house prices from land values by leasing land rather than owning it. We explored the second idea in proposals to New London Architecture for the Disco Housing Trust, in which homes are rented or leased from a trust that builds genuinely affordable homes on borrowed land. Space standards are critically important, but form one part of a larger and escalating housing crisis with conflicting pressures.

Ben Adams
founding director, Ben Adams Architects



Martyn Evans

What is important to understand is why we are talking about space standards at all. Our simple ambition as housebuilders should be to create beautiful, inspiring, useful and practical places for people to live in. In that regard, to borrow a phrase, size isn't everything.

In the myriad responses to the housing crisis there are some very creative ideas out in the market right now. Companies like The Collective, working on an innovative co-living brand that takes the student accommodation model and up-scales it for young professionals, is offering a solution that might deliver well-designed affordability in a complete rethink of how we live. More and more developers will be testing out the idea of micro flats. Pocket Living is developing apartments at the very lower end of the guidelines, at around 38 sq m, but I have seen proposals for individual living spaces, augmented by very beautiful communal living, at sub-30 sq m.

The idea here is that the distinction between affordable and... what...? Non-affordable (?) becomes academic. It's ALL affordable. To move the debate along we have to ask questions of the role that planning regulations play in the delivery of affordable, inspiring homes. When does regulation simply get in the way of designers and developers driving innovation?

Martyn Evans
creative director, U+I



Daisy Froud

I welcome the standards, but as a remedial measure it's like an emergency dressing applied to a gaping wound. A pressing problem has been addressed, but the same painful underlying logic will continue to drive procurement — that of housing as an investment commodity. Setting aside whether standards will be implemented where they are most needed, due to the possibility of opting out if they affect 'viability', and to the failure to incorporate them into Building Regulations, it's unclear how much they can actually achieve in terms of quality. Even the London Housing Design Guide, which is more in the spirit of Parker Morris, with its qualitative focus on 'social encounters' and real 'usability', tends to get applied unthinkingly as a target rather than a minimum standard.

There's a nice bit of research done by UCL for CABE in 2010 on the history of space standards. It discusses Italy, where development culture prizes long-term usability and adaptability. When legal minimums were introduced in 1975 these were confidently set lower than the average home size, merely introduced to eradicate bad practice in a market that was otherwise functioning well. Introducing properly enforced UK space standards may prove a step in the right direction, but it would be great to see some other 'Italian' features actively promoted here by any government that really wants to provide better housing for its citizens, such as support for smaller local housebuilders and continuing reduction of the appeal of 'buy-to-let.'

Daisy Froud
independent community engagement strategist



Sarah Wigglesworth

It's depressing that we have to have a debate over space standards at all. Generous space provision should be a fundamental requirement — not an opt-in — of all new housing regardless of tenure. It's utterly depressing to observe the Government propose the rebuilding of so-called 'sink estates' on the one hand, while encouraging the construction of thousands of poor-quality new homes as part of a dubious long-term plan, and doing absolutely nothing to break that cycle of failure.

At the root of it all is the monetisation of housing in pursuit of an ideological dream of mass ownership. Add to this the appeasement of volume builders, whose price for delivering the Government's Starter Homes has been minimal regulation and huge subsidies.

It doesn't have to be this way. We are working with PegasusLife on a new retirement development, where generous space standards are just the start of an inspired brief from an informed client that prioritises wellbeing, health and social lives for its residents. I am also working with colleagues at the University of Sheffield, together with Sheffield City Council and local housing providers to research how the design of houses and neighbourhoods can facilitate mobility and wellbeing. Holistic thinkers are out there — it's time we forced the rest to step up to the mark. ■

Sarah Wigglesworth
director, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects

TIMOTHY SOAR