Field of dreams: ‘If you build it they will come’

Paul Newman explores a new vision for housebuilding in the UK and the opportunities for timber offered by the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Bill

Not only is ‘Field of Dreams’ the title of one of my favourite films but it’s also rather apt given that I have just emerged from a briefing meeting with MP Richard Bacon to discuss his Private Members’ Bill – The Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Bill. Like Kevin Costner’s character in the film, Ray Kinsella, Mr Bacon is undoubtedly a man with a vision; he wants to transform how we procure and construct housing in the UK. Interestingly, he sees the quality and predictability that off-site modern methods bring to construction as a key element in de-risking the transformation, and critical if the sector is to secure support from funders. Rightly, Bacon maintains that there is no shortage of land for housing in the UK only a shortage of ‘accessible land and financeable propositions’.

The Bill is necessarily simple, as Private Members’ Bills rarely succeed if they are not. The aim of Bill is to make it easier for people or groups of people to build their own homes and it will do this in two simple ways:

- It creates a legal obligation for Local Authorities to keep a register of groups and individuals who want to build their own home.
- It obliges the authorities to ‘have regard’ to the register when considering planning, housing provision, land disposal and regeneration.

If successful, the Bill will begin to enshrine in law the words and policies of Nick Boles who, as planning minister, announced a ‘Right to Build’ initiative in May 2014. Although it may seem like Bacon’s Bill is taking only baby steps it is important because it places a legal obligation on authorities to act and means they can be pursued in court if they don’t.

Government strategy

Until recently, the process of building your own home was almost universally referred to as ‘self build’ and this term had become well recognised by both consumers and the development sector. In 2011, the Government’s Housing Strategy for England introduced the term ‘custom build housing’ to define a new way of procuring a home.

A custom home is a one-of-a-kind home or other dwelling that is designed for a specific client or group of clients and for a particular location. The custom home builder may use plans created by an architect or another designer. Custom homes afford consumers the opportunity to influence the design and specification of their new home. There are many different flavours of custom build; some offer the customer complete flexibility over the design and appearance of their new home, whilst others, rather disappointingly, give choice over only the specification of fixtures and fittings. In my view the latter is merely conventional house-building rebranded.

To increase the number of homes built within the UK, custom build has now been referenced within the National Planning Policy Framework and local authorities are obliged to make provision for custom build within their local plans. In Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England (HM Government, 2011) the Government announced the introduction of a ‘Custom Build Programme’ which involves a series of key actions to kick-start its ambitious growth for the sector. Government recognised that the size of the UK self-build sector compares poorly internationally and it is looking to double its size over the next decade to help address our housing need.
In July 2012, Housing Minister Grant Shapps announced details of seven government-owned sites which have been set aside for groups of people looking to work together to build their own homes. One of these is Trevenson Park in Cornwall where developer Igloo will make land available for over 50 custom-build homes. More recently (Sept 2014), the Government has announced the appointment of 11 vanguard councils, each of whom has been awarded a share of £550k to help them bring forward plots and sites for custom build. How successful this initiative is will depend upon how effectively they use the rather small sums of money each has been given. For example, Cherwell District Council has been awarded £90k to help it progress its plans to develop over 1,000 custom-build homes at Graven Hill – a development so large and wonderfully ambitious that surely it will require all variants of custom build.

Most aspiring self builders face two major problems: finding an affordable plot of land to build upon and securing planning permission for the type of home they want. Obtaining finance, which for the past six years has been difficult, is gradually getting easier thanks in part to the efforts of specialists like Buildstore but also because the funders see an opportunity in the self-build/custom-build sector and the market is generally more optimistic. For most people, the construction process itself, whilst daunting, is relatively straightforward and there is plenty of support available from experts like the Self Build Academy.

An opportunity for timber

All of the effort being put into reshaping the housing market creates an opportunity for timber-based methods of construction and those embarking on self- and custom-build projects choose structural timber systems for a number of reasons:

Service

- Most timber system manufacturers deliver a range of support services which can include the provision of: architectural design and detailing, planning and Building Regulations submissions, SAP calculations and energy performance certificates.

- Many self-build businesses provide a range of additional products including: windows and doors, stairs and joinery, insulation packs etc.

- Some businesses are able to support the construction process itself with project management, construction to different build stages including the provision of turnkey building services.

- A few businesses have permanent show house facilities, run networking days for customers, provide information to help customers project manage themselves and run training courses to transfer knowledge and build confidence.

An international comparison of the percentage of homes delivered by self-builders. The UK ranks at the bottom. Source: NaCSBA
Flexibility and performance

- Self builders have access to an unrivalled range of timber product solutions with unbeatable versatility and flexibility including: timber frame panels, structural insulated panels, cross-laminated panels, trussed rafters, engineered joists and beams.

- Timber-based products are easy to work with, in the factory and on site, and provide almost limitless opportunities for hybrid structures and design customisation to suit almost every style and form of building.

- Self builders using timber receive completed buildings that are typically more energy efficient than those constructed using other methods. They are highly insulated, airtight and benefit from minimal cold bridging – it’s not that these things can’t be achieved with other methods of construction but that they are more easily and reliably delivered with timber-based systems.

- Off-site construction methods reduce accidents on site by removing work into a controlled, safe, factory environment – this already is and will increasingly become a particularly important point for self-build sites without full-time site managers.

- Robust acoustic solutions that minimise noise transfer between and within dwellings – so you don’t hear your neighbours’ or your children’s music.

Sustainability

- Timber-based products are natural materials that remove carbon dioxide from the environment as the raw material grows and it is stored for the lifetime of the building.

- Timber-based products have lower embodied energy than all other mainstream construction materials. They can be re-used, re-cycled and then recovered to produce energy at the end of their life.

- They are renewable materials, harvested from sustainable forests with independent chain of custody certification to prove this.

Affordability

- Timber-based construction methods provide a cost-effective, value-for-money route to energy-efficient buildings that reduce the need for renewable technologies. Fabric-first energy efficiency reduces running costs for the life of the building and doesn’t need to be replaced or maintained.

- Faster build times reduces site preliminary and labour costs – a key factor when borrowing money to fund the construction of your new home.

- Timber frame is tried, tested and widely used. Poor weather is less likely to cause delays meaning a more predictable build programme which secures price certainty.

All in all, it’s an exciting time for the self-build sector and those with the diverse range of skills necessary to supply products and services to it. There is real potential for growth that should deliver not only profit but houses that people really want to live in.