

THE NEW STATESMAN

The Report

**Healthy and sustainable homes
Building for the future**

**Developing the homes and skills
needed for the years ahead**

**Tackling the UK's housing crisis
with healthier, affordable homes**

**Putting people and planet at the
heart of a housing revolution**

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Comment



Councillor Michael Mordey
Leader of Sunderland
City Council

“In Sunderland, we are building homes and skills with a vision for the future”

There are moments in a city's story when the horizon suddenly seems changed. Not just physically, but figuratively too. When regeneration really begins to touch people's lives in ways that will change them – and their future – for the better. That moment has arrived in Sunderland.

Cities are renewed when investment in place is matched by investment in people – their skills, their health, and their future. That principle sits at the heart of what we are now delivering at Riverside Sunderland, and it is particularly evident when you look at the new VELUX Skills Academy.

Marrying ambition with opportunity, the VELUX Skills Academy will be located within the state-of-the-art Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy (HICSA) – a multimillion-pound facility based at Riverside

Sunderland and one of only ten Construction Technical Excellence Colleges in the country. The academy will deliver hands-on, industry-led training in roofing, window installation and modern construction technologies, equipping Sunderland's young people and aspiring tradespeople with the skills the 21st-century construction industry needs. The students will play a part in building a community of 40 high-quality homes, part of the Vaux housing development, with the properties showcasing how modern, sustainable design can be implemented at scale.

VELUX is one of a number of industry-backed partnerships that is ensuring that young people and adults – including those not in education, employment or training (Neet) – in Sunderland are developing the skills that the most innovative employers need – trailblazer skills that will be required in the future. And by embedding training directly into the fabric of Riverside Sunderland's redevelopment. We're creating career pathways that lead straight from classrooms and workshops into meaningful work; work that contributes locally and responds to national needs in sustainable construction and low-carbon techniques. This is the kind of employment ecosystem that creates new communities and builds resilience from the ground up – where residents don't just watch regeneration happen, they create it and contribute to it. They drive it.

Riverside Sunderland's broader vision, shaped in partnership with developers like igloo Regeneration and inspired by global exemplars such as the Living Places model from Copenhagen, demonstrates what is possible when sustainability, health and community are centre stage in urban design. Homes are being planned and built to optimise daylight, ventilation and low-carbon impact, showcasing how design can contribute to wellbeing as effectively as it delivers shelter.

Our goal is simple: a neighbourhood where people want to live, work and grow; a place that not only attracts investment but keeps it here with us; an urban heart that beats with innovation, creativity and opportunity. By linking skills development with visionary housing and infrastructure, Riverside Sunderland is becoming an exemplar for other cities grappling with regeneration challenges in the 21st century.

This is the Sunderland we're building; rooted in community, powered by people, and designed with purpose. ●

Comment



Alex O'dell
Managing Director at VELUX

“The Living Places concept can transform the UK”

The UK is facing the dual challenges of a housing crisis and climate change. VELUX has responded by developing a concept called Living Places, which promotes: low-carbon, sustainable, high-density urban living, and by working with partners to deliver an exemplar project in Sunderland. The city leadership has an ambition to be the first net zero city in the UK, and we wanted to support that. When we

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began discussions, we quickly saw that there was strong alignment in our principles. We have since come together as a team with Sunderland City Council, Igloo Regeneration (the developer), MawsonKerr Architects and other partners and are now finalising the details of a development of around 40 to 50 mixed tenure homes in the centre of the city. The site is a reclaimed brownfield plot, opposite the City Hall, and forms part of a larger development of 1,000 homes.

We were then introduced to HICSA (Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy), part of Sunderland College, which is based in the city and aims to train 800 school-leavers, apprentices and adults per year who want to upskill, return to, or join the construction sector. HICSA is working with partners to deliver parts of the curriculum, and there is strong synergy between our aim to develop an exemplary sustainable neighbourhood and the goal of training the future builders and construction workers who will build and possibly live in those homes in their community. We have installed a VELUX Training Academy within HICSA, and will both deliver courses to their students and also train their staff to run courses themselves.

VELUX is keen to scale this model to other colleges. There are nine additional construction skills academies across the country, and we are developing a curriculum that can plug into the national framework, meaning we could support delivery at scale. It is estimated that an additional 48,000 skilled workers will be required in the construction sector to deliver the homes we need in the future. We also need a skilled workforce for the retrofit market, with the expertise to upgrade the large stock of older homes we have, whether that involves replacing boilers, installing insulation or upgrading windows.

There is little point in having the ambition to build more homes and to do so more sustainably if you do not have partners who can help deliver it. We recognise that colleges need support from both business and the private sector. We would welcome the opportunity to work with organisations delivering this training, and explore what we could achieve together, understanding their ambitions and how we can support them

The vision of Living Places Sunderland is to demonstrate that developers, councils and housing associations can build more sustainable, healthier homes at scale, homes that people genuinely want to live in and enjoy. These homes are healthier, better for occupants, and affordable to build. ●

From Copenhagen to Sunderland

Why the next housing revolution is about daylight, health and more sustainable building practices



Britain's housing debate is often framed as a trade-off: build more homes quickly or build better homes sustainably. Believing this dilemma to be real is one reason we keep repeating the same mistakes – homes that meet short-term targets but lock in long-term costs, from expensive energy bills to poor indoor air quality. The question we should be asking is simpler: how can we make “better” the default, at scale, and within real-world budgets?

One answer is emerging from experiments that began in Copenhagen and are now being used in the north-east of England. The Living Places concept – developed by the VELUX Group with Effekt architects and Artelia engineers – sets out to prove that



Skilled and trained workers are needed to build the next generation of sustainable homes

homes can be “people-positive” and low-emission without waiting for breakthrough technologies. It combines ultra-low embodied carbon thinking with a focus on indoor climate – daylight, fresh air, thermal comfort – because housing that ignores health isn’t sustainable.

The Living Places principles

Living Places is built around five core principles that a home should be: healthy, affordable, simple, shared over time and scalable. This is a framework designed to be practical for the mainstream housing sector, not just showcase projects.

The premise is that every design decision should be tested against both human outcomes

(comfort and wellbeing) and planetary outcomes (carbon and resource use), which the Living Places work describes as a “people and planet” approach.

That “both/and” mindset matters in the UK, where policy and practice still too often treat operational energy, embodied carbon and health as separate boxes. Living Places argues you can’t decouple them: a home that is airtight but poorly ventilated can harm health; a home that is comfortable but carbon-intensive worsens climate risk; a home that is exemplary but unaffordable is irrelevant if it can’t be scaled.

Copenhagen proved the concept

Living Places Copenhagen – the first full prototype – was designed

to demonstrate that a significantly lower carbon footprint can go hand in hand with healthy indoor climate in buildings constructed using readily available materials and methods. VELUX also ran live-in studies with dozens of guests to measure comfort and wellbeing in real use, not just in models.

The project’s influence has been recognised internationally and in the design industry. This matters because awards can help new approaches about how homes are built move from the margins and towards procurement frameworks, investor confidence and municipal adoption.

But the more important shift is that Living Places is no longer only a Danish experiment. It is now being translated into UK ▶

◀ place-making – starting with Sunderland.

Sunderland: a real UK test bed

In May 2025, VELUX and Igloo Regeneration announced a partnership to build around 50 new homes in Sunderland, which was based on Living Places principles, as part of the broader Riverside Sunderland regeneration.

The homes are planned on a brownfield site near City Hall, with a mixed tenure including townhouses, maisonettes and apartments, intended for around 120 residents. The project is expected to commence in 2026 with completion projected for 2027.

That detail matters because it signals the move from prototype to delivery: brownfield constraints, mixed typologies, local authority ambitions, and the everyday realities of UK planning and construction.

It is also part of a wider civic transformation: Riverside Sunderland includes plans for 1,000 new homes, significant employment space, new public amenities and infrastructure – an attempt to make city-centre living attractive and viable again.

In the press release announcing the partnership, VELUX leadership emphasised not only carbon and energy standards but also “good ventilation and plenty of daylight” to support health and wellbeing. Meanwhile, Igloo framed the collaboration as “more than just building houses” – the ambition is to raise the bar for quality and wellbeing while “reimagining the way we live”.

For a UK audience, the Sunderland initiative should be read as a challenge to the idea that healthy, low-carbon homes are inevitably niche or expensive. It is an attempt to put a new definition of “value” into the mainstream: long-term resilience, lower emissions, and lived comfort – delivered through

design choices that can be repeated.

Living attic: the greenest home is often the one you already have

If Sunderland shows how Living Places can shape new build, the latest proof of concept – Living Attic – makes the case for renovation as a people-and-planet strategy.

Officially presented in February this year, Living Attic documents a holistic renovation and attic conversion of a family home near Paris, turning an underused space into a brighter, healthier living area while radically improving energy performance.

The results are striking: the home moved from energy class F to A, adding 35m² of usable attic space, with reported improvements to thermal comfort and indoor climate. The project describes a “90 per cent reduction in overheating” and a “carbon payback time” of ten years, positioning the work as a scalable model for renovation “in France and beyond”.

What’s important here is not the French policy context, but the transferable insight: decarbonisation is not just a new-build story. In the UK, where much of the 2050 housing stock already exists, retrofitting and smarter use of space – lofts, attics, adaptive reuse – can deliver carbon savings and comfort benefits expanding the footprint of existing buildings. Living Attic argues that meaningful improvements don’t require exotic solutions; they require coherent design thinking – insulation, solar shading, thermal mass, natural and automated ventilation,

and a whole-house view.

In other words, the Living Places principles can be applied to both how we build new homes and how we can live better in ones that already exist. And that is exactly what the UK needs.

What this means for Britain’s next wave of housing

Taken together, Sunderland and Living Attic point to an overdue reframing of what “housing delivery” should mean. If we continue to treat carbon reduction, indoor health, affordability and scalability as competing priorities, we will continue to build tomorrow’s problems into today’s so-called solutions. Living Places offers a pragmatic alternative: a set of principles designed for the messy middle – where cost, supply chains, skills and planning realities still apply.

The UK doesn’t need another shiny one-off. It needs pathways that local authorities, developers and supply chains can replicate. The Sunderland partnership is a credible test of that ambition in a British context. Living Attic reinforces the equally urgent retrofit story: healthier, brighter homes can be created by working with existing fabric and unused space – often faster and with less carbon than building new.

The most radical idea embedded in Living Places may be the least glamorous. It suggests that the future is not waiting for a miracle material or a breakthrough technology, but for the confidence to apply what we already know – at scale, with discipline, and without people’s well-being and lived experiences treated as an afterthought.

If Sunderland can prove that in the UK market – on brownfield land, in mixed tenure, within real constraints – then Living Places will have done something rare. It will have transformed sustainable, healthy housing from aspiration to routine. Hopefully the rest of the building industry will take notice. ●

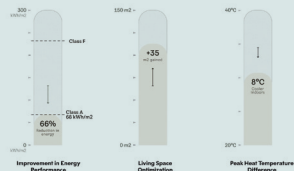
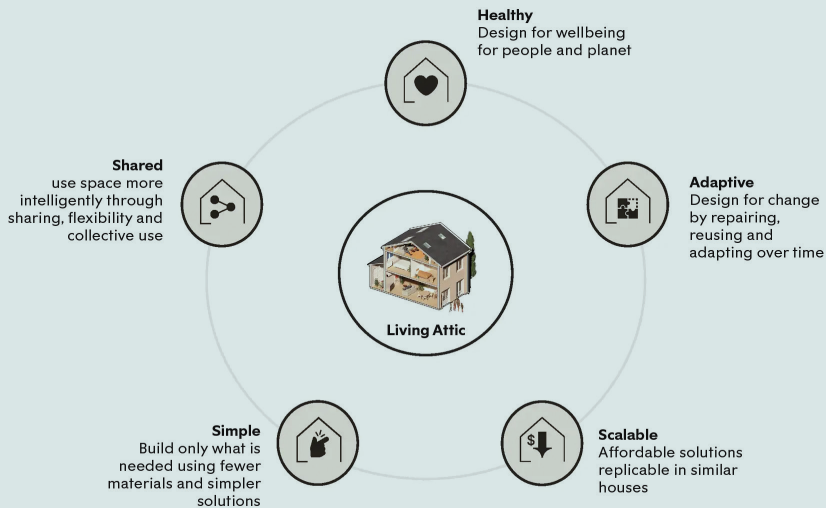
Living Places can be applied to new and old homes

Living Attic: A holistic approach to renovation

The Living Attic project demonstrates how renovation can create healthier indoor environments, reduce emissions and make smarter use of existing space.

It demonstrates that meaningful improvements don't require complex solutions – just thoughtful choices grounded in the wellbeing of both people and the planet.

Through a mix of passive and active solutions – insulation, added thermal mass, automated VELUX roof windows and smart solar shading – the attic stays cooler in summer and retains heat in winter, while maintaining a healthy indoor climate.





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VELUX roof windows have been bringing daylight and fresh air into homes around the world for more than 80 years, creating healthier living environments.

As the UK embarks on ambitious plans, both to renovate homes for climate and energy goals, and to build 1.5 million new homes this parliament, it is vital to include policies that prioritise the health and well-being of occupants alongside lowering energy bills and meeting climate targets.

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