



The Brief

Affinity Sutton and the challenges facing providers of affordable homes

Affinity Sutton is a business for social purpose which is committed to producing well designed affordable homes and places within sustainable communities. The increasing challenge is to resolve the competing demands of design quality, affordability, practicality and environmental impact, while continuing to ensure customer satisfaction. Affinity Sutton takes its impact on the environment seriously, particularly the issues surrounding carbon reduction, fuel poverty, energy efficiency and waste management.

With a portfolio of 54,000 existing dwellings, Affinity Sutton is one of the largest providers of affordable homes in the country. We recognise that, through the on-going maintenance of these properties and our new homes development pipeline of more than a thousand homes per year, we may be directly or indirectly involved in processes which will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the environment. The environmental impact of this should not be underestimated. Each year in the UK, domestic energy use accounts for approaching 30% of total energy consumption. The construction industry is the UK's largest user of natural resources and producer of waste (generating more than a third of the UK's annual waste, most of which is destined for disposal in landfill sites). Materials used in the construction of new homes in the UK accounts for 10% of mineral extraction, and 1% of the negative contribution towards climate change comes from this activity.

Affinity Sutton values the innovation of high quality design and the construction of homes designed with in-built flexibility and efficiency to enable residents to live in them according to their own aspirations. This encompasses all aspects of modern living, whether by virtue of a 'Lifetime Home', a growing family, or as a product of flexible working practices. In other words, internal spatial design is at least as important as the external fabric. We believe that the quality of the architecture, the landscape and environment need not necessarily be sacrificed in the pursuit of economic, buildable solutions which seek to make efficient use of internal and external spaces.

The Bethnal Green Estate

One hundred years ago, before anyone realised that our way of life was contributing inexorably to the decline in natural resources and an increase in our planet's instability, a housing estate was developed at Bethnal Green in London's East End. The first scheme to be developed through Sutton Dwellings (founding member of today's Affinity Sutton Group), Bethnal Green was also one of Europe's first charitable social housing schemes.

Make Bethnal Green

Bethnal Green has survived the rigours of time, as well as two World Wars, and remains a fundamental part of Affinity Sutton's affordable housing portfolio. It is interesting though to contemplate: *What would we build on the same site today and how would that design make a positive contribution to the environment?* This Open Ideas Competition seeks to answer that question and RIBA Part 2 Students are invited to submit concept schemes to *Make Bethnal Green*.

The site

The design proposals should be based within the geographic constraints of the 0.54 hectare site occupied by Affinity Sutton's existing homes at Bethnal Green. The proposals should draw upon the heritage of the site, taking into account its urban setting, context and sense of place. The primary features of the site are:

- **Location.** The scheme is located on Sceptre Road in Bethnal Green (London, E2).
- **Density.** The current scheme provides 313 dwellings per hectare and 787 habitable rooms per hectare. The 169 current dwellings are provided through three original five-storey buildings of 1909 construction and two, 4-storey buildings constructed in the mid-20th Century. The accommodation includes 23 no. bed-sit apartments, 68 no. one-bedroom apartments, 49 no. two-bedroom apartments, 26 no. three-bedroom apartments and 3 no. four-bedroom apartments.
- **Additional buildings.** There are also 28 no. sheds, 9 no. garages and 21 no. parking bays for residents on the site.
- **Other.** There is an active residents' association on the Estate and it is suggested that provision could be included within the concept proposals for a meeting room that could be utilised by the wider community.

Guiding Design Principles and Considerations

Aspirational concept proposals are sought which will combine high quality, affordable housing design with an ethos for minimising impact on the environment in terms of construction processes, services and materials, supply chain management and building usage.

External treatments, space and landscaping

The proposals should have the potential to engage and delight those who might live there, promoting a general sense of well-being and healthy living environment. The scheme should provide a clear and coherent sense of place and competitors should consider all aspects of external treatments, including private amenity space and the wider public realm. Competitors are also encouraged to identify any measures aimed at increasing resident involvement, biodiversity on the site etc.

Mix

The scheme should be designed to provide a mix of unit types, including disabled persons units, within a sustainable community. Beyond a minimum requirement for 169 dwellings (as per the existing scheme), no defined number of units, or unit types is prescribed. All proposed dwellings must be affordable in terms of tenure, with the majority for general needs rent, and a minimum 10% of the total number of dwellings should be fully accessible to wheelchair users.

Dwelling specification

All dwellings should be designed to meet the latest Homes & Communities Agency Design and Quality Standards - they should offer flexible internal space while not necessarily needing to meet full Lifetime Homes standards.

Planning Policy

Although based around a specific site location, competitors are not required to adhere to specific local planning policy requirements in place at the current time. However, design proposals should be sympathetic to the immediate surroundings in terms of massing, height and density.

Budget

Since this is an Open Ideas Competition and the total number of units is not prescribed, there is no actual fixed budget. However when designing the scheme, competitors should bear in mind the financial constraints of the affordable housing sector and seek to ensure best value build solutions. Total construction costs for such developments in London are typically between £1,600 and £1,800 per m² GIFA at current prices, plus 15% for circulation and internal communal spaces. Competitors should also be mindful of life-cycle, maintenance and M&E operating costs, justifying high cost solutions where appropriate.

Environmental considerations

As noted previously, the affordable housing sector increasingly has to juggle quality, cost and practicality with environmental impact. The proposals should be capable of

achieving a minimum Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4, but Competitors should determine whether this can and should be more ambitious. Entrants should adopt a holistic approach and consider all aspects of the scheme and its surrounding environment to arrive at their own definition of 'best value'. Competitors are encouraged to explore solutions which, amongst other things, might consider:

- Aesthetics, functionality and 'real world' innovation.
- Passive design features.
- Environmental impact, whole-life costs and maintenance over a minimum projected lifespan of 60yrs.
- Embedded carbon of the supply chain during the manufacture, transport and fabrication of proposed materials.
- Resource consumption, energy efficiency and environmental performance.
- Viable low-carbon technologies, on-site renewables and co-generation.
- Off-site manufacturing / Modern Methods of Construction.
- Efficiency versus economy.
- Recycling and construction waste management.
- Other.

Where technologies are unproven, debated or conceptual, a clear argument should be presented to support the incorporation of such measures - particularly where opinion might contradict current thinking in terms of practical, measurable and robust (long-term) energy efficient solutions.

Transport

The proposals should respond to local transport links on the basis of an urban location. While ostensibly car-free, competitors are asked to consider solutions for alternative means of transport and accessibility.

'Real world' innovation

The proposals should seek to incorporate recent developments in building systems, construction techniques and low-carbon technologies. Whilst the proposals will not be developed out, the concept schemes should be fundamentally 'buildable' in the short to medium term.

Links to sources of potentially useful information

- CABE
(<http://www.cabe.org.uk/initiatives> and <http://www.cabe.org.uk/areas-of-work>).
- Secured by Design (<http://www.securedbydesign.com>)
- Competitors should type in 'Sceptre Road, London, E2' into Multimap (www.multimap.com), Google Maps (<http://maps.google.co.uk>) or similar, to view (relatively recent) aerial photographs and 'birds-eye' images of the Bethnal Green Estate. The existing site is delineated by the blocks of flatted accommodation on the corner of Sceptre Road and Braintree Street.
- Homes & Communities Agency, Design and Quality Standards
http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/design_quality_standards

- Designing out Waste : A design team guide for buildings (Waste & Resources Action Programme):
http://www.wrap.org.uk/downloads/19279-02_Design_Guide_online_pdf_version.0e14a8a7.7167.pdf

Additional material available following on-line payment

- Release of Ordnance Survey Data to 3rd Parties form.
- Declaration of Authorship form.
- Red line site plan (PDF format) with index to gallery of present day images.
- Ordnance Survey Extract (DWG format) with red line site boundary.
- Memorandum in response to questions raised (to be issued to registered applicants after 25 November 2009).