



THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS

Response to Housing Green Paper:

Homes for the Future

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Summary

The attention is drawn to the reliability of the statistical methods used to predict the future need for 3 million new dwellings and to the failure to relate the policy to the type of residents that comprise the predicted rise in households.

The need to recognise the type of households that will be seeking dwellings and the type of dwellings they require is not adequately covered by the Green Paper.

Emphasis is laid on our concern where the new dwellings are to be built and we stress the importance of reaching decisions on employment and infrastructure before decisions on housing are taken. These decisions need to be taken at the lowest viable level where the best informed authorities on the feasibility and desirability of development will be found.

Introduction

The National Organisation of Residents Associations has members from all over England stretching from Newcastle upon Tyne to Carlisle, from Norwich to Shrewsbury and from Canterbury to Camelford. Members vary from single residents associations with a few hundred residents as members to large federations of many residents associations as in, for example, Southampton and Bath. Consequently their opinions on this document express the views on the housing problems in England from a variety of view points and a variety of experiences.

The prime aim of this organisation in representing its members is to protect the environment and the amenities enjoyed by residents. This concern is felt by existing resident members, who also wish to protect future residents who will join them and also those who will succeed them

Hence their support for the proposals in this Green Paper is limited and critical since it will disturb many aspects of the environment they enjoy, though they realise that Homes for the Future are essential for the welfare of the community. Their concern is about the number, the types and the quality of new development needed to meet the actual demand whilst ensuring the developments do not destroy the very environment our successors will inherit.

Analysis of need and current housing

The model used by the Department assesses the current number of households as nearly 21 million (Fig. 5) of which nearly 15 million are owned (Fig. 1). Figure 5 suggests that of the 21 million households 12 million are families, one million are lone parents and 7 million are single person households. Another million are multiple occupancy households, presumably otherwise termed Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO). Along with others we are currently pressing for the definition of HMOs to be clarified and tightened.

Figure 5 goes on to predict a substantial increase to 26 million households by 2026, i.e. in 19 years' time, with the increase of 5 million households almost entirely in single person households. Two fundamental questions need answers. First, what are the sources of the data that lead to this estimate and how reliable is this estimate? Secondly what is the anticipated nature of these extra 5 million single person households?

The Green Paper refers to Live Tables available on the DCLG website to justify its conclusions for the future housing need. The data appears to be based on an analysis of the last census, long since out-of-date, up-dated by regional sample analyses, and a belief that the calculations are correct and will continue into the future. This is then used to predict future household numbers and future housing demands. The complex manipulation of these statistics with no mention of the usual standards of error in the calculations must cast doubt on the validity and reliability of the predictions. No reputable scientific journal would be likely to accept an article using this style of statistics. The results are more like conjecture than evidence-based.

Logic dictates that single person households must comprise the widowed, the single and the divorced, but the document does not provide any details of the proportions who are the elderly, students, the young leaving family homes, the well-to-do, separated couples or immigrants.

If the composition of the predicted 5 million single households is unknown, then the number and type of dwellings they require is impossible to predict, since the requirements of these different groups is entirely different. Many of the elderly widowed will want to remain in their own property. Immigrants and students may seek communal accommodation. The divorced without children will need quite different accommodation from the lone parent. To state that the predicted 5 million extra single households require 3 million extra houses is therefore not logical.

The demand for housing will always remain, since those who provide the dwellings will not invest in unwanted dwellings. That the perceived need is a consequence of the balance between demand and supply is not denied, but the demand itself is not directly related to need. There are numerous factors that determine demand, and most are social and financial, but it is keenly related to available employment. If there are no jobs, the demand is invariably low, but where employment is seen as both plentiful and well-paid, demand will always exceed supply. In NORA's view the provision of adequate employment prospects is the key to solving demand. Unless the balance of employment between the south east of England and the rest of the country is altered, there will always be a higher demand in the south east. Providing more dwellings will only aggravate the situation.

Demand from immigrants will increase unless immigration from EC countries is controlled more effectively than at present. To satisfy the demand for dwellings from newly-arrived immigrants to the detriment of established citizens is bound to provoke resentment especially amongst the lower-paid, who are already at a severe disadvantage in the market-place..

Mortgage problems

The UK has a larger proportion of its population living in owner-occupied dwellings than any other country. It has been at the expense of rented property originally supplied by local authorities. The sale of this type of accommodation has not been followed by an adequate increase in privately managed rented accommodation.

Whilst it may be desirable for everyone to own their own dwelling, until the cost of building dwellings is substantially reduced, the lower-paid section of the community can only dream of ownership. To offer mortgages to the lower-paid by providing a subsidy by the taxpayer will place a large and risky burden both on the community and the resident. Sub-prime mortgages in the USA have recently highlighted this problem and led to turmoil in the banking industry in many countries even those with well-run banking systems.

The concepts of “affordable homes” and “social housing” raise these issues. There is obvious social pressure for everyone to become owner-occupiers, but for the bulk of low wage earners this will never be realistic. The need is for much more rented accommodation at rents that the low paid can afford. To

offer subsidised mortgages is to weigh down the low paid with an unacceptable burden that they will never be able to lift.

Types of residents

The predicted increase in single person households is not explained in the Housing Green Paper. Perhaps it is assumed that the increase in the elderly population will lead to more widowed elderly. Or will there be more divorced males, or thirdly is much of the predicted increase attributed to increases in the number of students and immigrants? We are nowhere told.

The accommodation requirements of these several groups are quite different, and many could theoretically be accommodated in existing dwellings, if people were willing to move.

Ideally students are best accommodated in special student accommodation conveniently placed for access to their place of study. Currently in many university towns they occupy family-type housing in areas that become ghettos of Houses of Multiple Occupation often leading to decline and decay of whole areas. The properties are usually empty for nearly half the year while students are on vacation. Those universities, that provide student accommodation, can manage them to ensure they do not decay, but also they can utilise them for profitable out-of-term conferences.

The widowed elderly, who are able to live independent lives, will understandably wish to stay in their homes, unless for example specially

designed retirement villages can be made a sufficiently attractive alternative. If this option were available, some housing would be released for use by families.

At present immigration is increasing the pressures on UK housing stock, and there has been little attempt by Government to deal with the social problems thus generated. What is needed is a clear policy on immigration to reduce housing demand.

Finally the problem of the wealthy buying second homes, investing money in buy-to-let and even in buy-to-leave properties for their retirement needs to be resolved, since this has led to rises in prices for small dwellings putting them out of the reach of first-time buyers. Furthermore the rents are likely to be “unaffordable”. This is particularly true of inner city dwellings.

Power of decision

Whatever is decided on the number and type of new dwellings, the power of decision needs to be taken at the lowest viable level. Dictat from central administration will only lead to anger and frustration among the electorate. The local authorities at the lowest level are the best judges of how many dwellings their infrastructure and likely employment can support, and they know exactly which are the most appropriate building sites.

Developers prefer to build on open ground, either on greenfield sites or protected Green Belts, whereas common sense suggests that brownfield sites should always be used first even though they may be more expensive to develop. Brownfield sites in many areas are fast disappearing, so that pressure

to build on open ground will rise, unless restraint is observed. Central authorities may demand building in areas that cannot be sustainable in terms of infrastructure, pollution, overcrowding, lack of water, etc., matters that are best understood by local authorities.

The correct solution to relieving this pressure is not to build more dwellings in a vain attempt to try to satisfy an inexorable demand, but to organise attractive employment and social environments elsewhere in the UK other than the south east. If this approach is not adopted, then the south east will become the Great Wen predicted by social iconoclasts.

Planning and Plans

Once the local planning authorities have analysed the appropriate number of dwellings and their types to meet the demand they consider is appropriate for their area, then the planning procedures can start. To set targets, especially unrealistic ones, will lead to unacceptable development, tainted by rush decisions and designs that do not meet the expectations of those who are destined to live in them. The mistakes of the past must not be repeated. Too many high buildings, too dense development, inadequate shopping facilities, insufficient medical services, lack of educational institutions and leisure facilities have all led to problems that were avoidable.

Add poor public transport, expensive road systems that may not meet the needs of the community, problems with water and electricity supplies and no employment, and you have the nightmare scene no-one wants. Building new towns in the countryside will not meet the predicted demands of the extra single

person households. Targetting certain towns for the major increases in dwellings only makes sense if they have brownfield sites, the infrastructure and the employment. How certain is it that the Growth Sites meet these criteria?

Once the local authorities have made adequate proposals and plans, there is no question that the standards of the new dwellings must meet the several well-intentioned principles described in the Green Paper. They must be as near carbon neutral as is practical. They must have a high standard of design. They must be desirable residences that allow both privacy and encourage social mixing. Too much pressure, too much central control, too much interference with the market will only lead to unsatisfactory development and a disenchanted, discontented and disillusioned community.

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