

## **Build, baby, build !**

*We know that we need more homes – but where, and for whom ?*

The government has set a target of 1.5 million new homes by the end of the decade. Leaving aside the feasibility of this target (in particular the doubts about the capacity of the building industry and the planning system to cope with this level of increase) where should they go ? Brown fields within urban areas ? New Towns and extensions to urban areas which would require high levels of coordinated national and local planning <sup>1</sup>Green fields on the edge of towns, which would be cheapest and easiest for volume developers ? Smaller housing estates on the edge of villages ? Or all of these ?

The answers to these questions are not at all clear from government pronouncements so far, especially for rural areas. The message is focused on growth and volume rather than location or liveability: never mind the quality, feel the width. Planning is viewed as a blockage to be overcome rather than a set of tools to deliver new homes. Bats and spiders have been shamelessly scapegoated as examples of barriers to growth. Democratic engagement has been undermined by cuts to funding for Neighbourhood Development Plans<sup>2</sup> and pressure to delegate more decisions to local authority planning officers rather than elected councillors.

Nor is it clear who the new homes will be for. There is talk of reducing the Section 106 requirements to produce a quota of social affordable homes in response to profit `viability` claims by the housebuilding industry. `Exception` sites on the edge of villages which are not earmarked for housing but which might be available for affordable homes will be under increased pressure from developers as landowners perceive potential `hope` value.<sup>3</sup> Community-led housing such as Community Land Trusts and co-housing schemes which build homes for local people at rents they can afford attract much local interest but face daunting and time-consuming obstacles, especially funding.

The pressure will be on to build on easy green field sites – even the Green Belt where it is perceived to be `grey`. <sup>4</sup> Precious views and open spaces within villages are likely to be under threat. Crucially, will such developments help provide or serve essential local services and facilities such as schools, shops, and public transport ?

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<sup>1</sup> Which of course we have been perfectly capable of delivering in the past...

<sup>2</sup> A petition seeking continuing support funding for community-led Neighbourhood Plans has been launched by Dr James Derounian - [Continuing support funding for community-led Neighbourhood Plans | 38 Degrees](#)

<sup>3</sup> This may be a positive solution in certain cases where a mixed development may be required, but it will need careful planning.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that green belts were designed to prevent sprawl, not protect the open countryside.

Local Plans face a huge task dealing with these pressures to build. Sadly their track record is not impressive – they seem to always be in preparation or under examination ! This is partly due to endless tinkering by central governments purporting to `streamline` the system -or even reform it as the current government claims; partly due to local political resistance to development, and partly due to a lack of conviction about the shape and direction and powers of development by local authorities themselves. This means that inevitably many key planning decisions will continue to be made by appeal, itself a costly and time-consuming process.

What is to be done ?

I think it is essential that local planning authorities work very closely with their rural communities. By that I mean that they fully engage rural parishes and their members in the local plan process, preferably via Neighbourhood Development Plans. This means sourcing the expertise and funding required to produce NDPs, preferably on a shorter timescale and in a simpler form that focusses on the key planning issues within each community. In this way a genuinely `bottom up` approach, helped by experts `on tap` rather than on top`, can be effected to deliver new homes in the right places and for the people living and working in those communities.

Central and local government should also do much more to help community-led housing initiatives such as Community Land Trusts and Co-housing schemes. There is an appetite and a will to take these forward – but they need much more financial and administrative support.

I believe the top-down approach taken by this government to `build, baby, build` is fundamentally flawed, both practically (it is not feasible) and `politically`, in the sense that it will provoke endless battles across the green fields of England. We need a much more creative approach which recognises that planning is about engaging communities to help deliver new homes that are truly sustainable in terms of affordability, location and environment.

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