

## *Concreting the countryside*

### **Challenge Overview Sheet**

Talk of a housing crisis in the UK has been going on for a number of years. To many the crisis is one of an imbalance between house prices and affordability, but the reality is different. The UK has a projected housing shortfall of 3 million homes over the next 11 years (by 2020) and the real crisis is one of supply meeting demand and where to put these new homes.

At the heart of the issue is a political conundrum (according to **Simon Jenkins**). This involves a battle between two countervailing forces: *'traditional views based on our love of the countryside and the surrounding environment being directly in contention with our desire for advancing economic growth, progress and prosperity'*.

A deeper issue relates to our attitudes towards housing – are they buildings for homes or are they investments for profits? This is then played out against the backdrop of a fear that the great British countryside is about to be buried beneath ever increasing layers of concrete. Attitudes towards housing extend to the very types of buildings that are constructed as well as their location. Should more apartments be built on city central brownfield sites or should the inherent desire to provide everyone with a detached or semi-detached property in the countryside be fulfilled? Furthermore; can our homes become models of sustainable living as the consequences of climate change become increasingly urgent? This issue challenges the very way we live and how communities function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The words of one Government Minister probably introduce the challenges as well as anyone:

*It's a debate about how we can support a growing economy and changing society. It's a debate about what our communities will look like in ten, twenty, fifty years. It's a debate about the kind of places we want our children to be living in, and the kind of places we want to grow old in.* The **Rt Hon Caroline Flint** MP Minister of State Minister for Housing, attending Cabinet (January - October 2008)

The videos included on the website focus on recent patterns of housing development and question whether their continuation is desirable, sustainable or even meeting the needs of the present, let alone those of the future.

### **Where has all of the concrete gone? (Sir Peter Hall)**

In this presentation Sir Peter Hall seeks to allay fears that the countryside is disappearing beneath a layer of concrete, but concedes that the debate about where to build new homes has been rumbling for decades. Citing the 1946/47 New Towns and Town and Country Planning Acts he explains that opposition to 'greenfield' construction sites is not new. He also suggests that the New Towns represented a successful balance between 'preserving the countryside and providing a lot of homes for a lot people who needed them'.

Today we are facing a shortfall between the supply of new houses and growing demand. Seeing the current housing market situation(2008-9+) as a short term 'blip' in house prices, Sir Peter believes that it will not resolve the problem. A recent and extraordinary crisis in the imbalance

in the relationship between house prices and earnings has focused attention on the dangers of housing shortages and the next 25-30 years require careful planning.

Government strategies include three bold attempts at dealing with the pending housing crisis:

- The Sustainable Communities Initiative
- Three Growth Corridors
- EcoTowns project

All of these plan to preserve green areas and move planning into an era of increased 'sustainability' connecting provision to people's needs. However, they do not provide anywhere enough new homes for the next 25-30 years.

The key arguments seem to encompass two viewpoints:

- That all farmland should be preserved
- That new builds should provide good public transport, schools and shops

The former view rests on the belief that all rural land is needed and should not be sacrificed and the latter encourages the freedom of individuals to choose where to live. Choosing between public transport and private car use is made easier if the new developments are centred on areas that already possess excellent public transport links. Increased housing densities are inevitable when these two views are taken together, but densities may not have to increase too much.

### **So should all farmland be preserved?**

The facts might be surprising – very little of UK is actually developed! No more than 14% (10% in 1988) of the land area is developed (19% of England) and that amounts to only 1 in 5 hectares. What is more, significant amounts of farmland are not currently productive, suggesting that land is idle – 5% of England's farmland; 8.5% in the South East and up to 11% elsewhere. The point is made that *'instead of growing weeds we might consider planting houses and that much of the controversy exists in areas where most farmland is being wasted'*.

### **So what about the Brownfields?**

The Urban Taskforce 1998 set out to push up the proportion of previously used urban land from 56% to 60% and by 2005 the quotient had reached 77%. In this period housing densities had increased from below 25 per hectare, through the recommended minimum of 30 to a norm of 40 per hectare.

Of more concern has been the shift in the patterns of housing over that period. In 1998, 85% of new builds were houses and only 15% were flats/apartments. By 2008 a dramatic shift had taken place: 47% were apartments and of these 35% were two-bedroom (8% 1998). More worryingly, very many of these 2 bedroom apartments are standing empty as they have not been bought as homes. Swathes of central Leeds, Birmingham Hull and London areas contain empty flats- 40% in Manchester alone. The *'Buy-to-Let Syndrome'*, where builders, developers and the financial institutions have encouraged speculative purchasers who *'buy and leave'* is a major problem. It appears that flats are not what people wanted and so the notorious 2-bedded unit stands empty when 50% of people prefer a detached home.

### **What about High Density Urban Living?**

Surveys consistently show that people do not like living in high density city areas. (CABE and MORI). All backgrounds seem to have the same 'dream homes' and children regularly aspire to acquire detached homes.

Developers see their financial gains diminish when building densities exceed 40/50 units per hectare because they then have to provide fixed infrastructural assets in the shape of schools and shops. Below 30ph a *bonus culture* exists and the cost of providing for people's needs is less. There is '*nothing to be gained from overcrowding*' and this sentiment stems back to Raymond Unwin's *Garden Cities* plan of 1912. It is estimated that to have a decent public bus service, a density of 30 units is required and for a tram service 60 units.

Successful examples are mentioned where new builds are part of an urban extension – The Hamptons (Peterborough old brick fields) Upton (Northampton) and Ingress Park (Thames Gateway) all display well developed transit systems. An extension to Ingress Park, in a disused chalk quarry will eventually link to Ebbsfleet and St Pancras.

### **Where is most demand?**

An area extending for 100 miles out from central London is called the **MegaCity Region**. This is where most demand exists for new housing and it is an area of well connected towns and cities. Many settlements beyond 45 miles of central London are self-contained and can be seen as urban areas '*set against a background of open country*'. Around 75% of the population of this area live and work within the region and would benefit from enhanced transit systems enabling them to live out the visions of the Garden Cities movement – '*social cities, compact, surrounded by the countryside and connected by high quality public transport.*' Central Lancashire New Town and Milton Keynes/S Midland Regional strategy serve as models. In the M11 a 20mile bus transit corridor is being developed now.

### **Can the Future be different?**

When planning for new houses the key decisions revolve around the size of each new development, the distances between them, whether they should be urban extensions and how high their densities should be. Who should develop them becomes a muted point, but there is a need to build faster and better to meet needs. There is an opportunity to cash in on land value uplift when it returns and this could be claimed by the public purse to afford the necessary school, hospitals and transport systems to support the homes of tomorrow.

### **Where should all the concrete go? (Martin Crookston)**

There is no escape from the need to build – the concrete has to go somewhere and the last 10 years have seen it going almost anywhere and everywhere. Ten years ago a great deal more houses were being built and in places that would now be deemed inappropriate. 'Urban Capacity' has become the 'buzzphrase' and concentrates on densities and use of brownfield land. Major progress in terms of use of 'previously developed land' (PDL) has forced a review of quantity and quality issues.

Essentially, planners have been expected by government to build more intensively and across Great Britain councils have eagerly awaited foreign investment to help them out. Land has not been used efficiently and highly valued spaces have been dedicated to surface

car parks in most town and city centres. This is a British phenomenon and not seen in Europe.

### **Can urban areas be used more efficiently?**

Martin Crookston suggests that there is scope for **Urban Intensification** and an **Urban Renaissance**

New urban housing can occur on three relatively unused sites in city centres:

- Redevelop old housing sites
- Develop small open spaces
- Develop vacant plots (White land) that have not been allocated for any specific purpose in the past

In addition there are waves of office conversions to homes and sub-divisions of larger houses and refurbishment of empty stock. All three of these sources add to availability in brownfield areas. A policy shift has encouraged these movements and led to the *renaissance of urban areas*. The promotion of inner town retail developments and a tightening of out of town permissions has helped to bring developments back to city centres.

Several reports have investigated how quality and quantity issues could be resolved and where the new homes should go. The CPRE talk of 'Untapped Potential' and 'Sustainable Residential Quality' in urban areas. Examples of Leeds directing 90% of development to brownfield, Swale looking at car park stock, Waveney on small site developments, all show how local policies and actions make a difference. All show greater intensity and improved relationships between people and their living space.

### **Are High Densities a Problem?**

Not if you can afford them! When flats have been developed as investments and values exceed local affordability then a problem exists, but not because of the density. Investment distorts the picture and turn houses into units rather than homes.

Urban infill by 'grabbing the gardens' is producing densities of 30-40 units per hectare, but is not as common as perceived. By comparison, there is ample new brown land coming onto the market and in the future as industries – like Ford in Dagenham or Nissan in Sunderland retreat to other countries, as global shifts continue and technology changes old industrial sites will become available. The problem is that it is not always in the right place – it has to relate to the land around it and must become a real place.

### **Is there a clear choice?**

It is necessary to lose the emotional sentiments; avoid 'cartoon choices' because it is not about Greenfield or Brownfield choices. Brown sites could easily provide 50% of new developments but some green sites are fine too. The real issue is about what we build – avoid the creation of '**nowheresville**' and try to provide character; places where people want to live. There is a fear that government decisions are almost knee-jerk responses.

Crookston refers to the notion of the **3Ps** where **Panic** about housing numbers leads to **Political** decisions that in turn yield **Planning** responses that are not really well thought out. This approach has given birth to the EcoTown concept without due care and attention to the needs of the future. Such small developments are little more than a sop to the growing Green movement, but their small scale counts against their sustainability. He also fears that

decisions are not universally applicable because where the conflicts over green sites exist in the south; the north is desperate for development of any type to revive its towns. Southern perspectives are different and yet dominant!

### **Alternative Futures (Wayne Hemigway. Member of the government Eco Towns Advisory Panel)**

#### **The role of EcoTowns**

EcoTowns – should not be part of the government’s housing provision targets, but are experimental projects that raise the bar above European examples (Frieburg/ Hammarby Sjöstad). He explains that they should be slowly developed to become be real eco projects. They do involve shifting people to public transport, recycling and the adoption green economies. The concept aims for social, economic and environmental sustainability all in one place.

Hemingway pessimistically predicts that much recent house building has laid the foundations for the ***Slums of the Future*** - 80% of Great Britain housing built since 2003 is mediocre or poor and 25% should never have been built. In his opinion the ‘mistakes of the 60s/70s have been repeated recently by big developers that have collectively ***Wimpeyified/Barratised*** our housing environments. He believes that EcoTowns can avoid these mistakes if done properly. He goes on to show an example in Gateshead of eco-living at Staiths South Bank.

This example tied to create a sense of place where *‘Liveability and sustainability go together’* – people need to feel comfortable and able to put down roots. Aimed to build a community and used school as heart of plan. The project was in a difficult area- old industrial decay and deprivation and next to heavy industry. High risk strategy and involved Wimpey acquiring land cheaply. The community has been designed as car free, is well connected to central urban areas and offers cycle renting schemes. Homes have been built with individual identities, open spaces, greenery and maturity from the outset. Residents have also been involved in the planning of sustainable lifestyles, building materials and local initiatives.

#### **Additional points were then raised by the audience:**

- **Is farmland really idle? What gives land value? Can un-used farmland be regarded/ revalued and the worst built on?**
- **Is it a case of damaging the countryside versus inadequate housing?**
- **What impact has the lack of council house building had on availability and affordability?**
- **Are urban extensions the answer?**
- **Can brownfield really be a sustainable solution when there are by definition areas without employment opportunities?**
- **Can places be built for people to relate to if we simply ‘predict and provide’ without thinking of communities.**