



Housing LIN

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Viewpoint 110

Some thoughts on building 1.5m new dwellings by July 2029

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My Background

Before I go on, let me explain my background; I was a Town Planner from 1961 to 1973, during which time I qualified and worked in Newport, South Wales and Leeds. I am a 'bucket & spade' planner, having taken both the intermediate and final examinations of the Royal Town Planning Institute, meaning that I learned and practiced surveying, building construction, design and a modicum of engineering and architecture, as well as Town Planning Law, Theory and Practice among social science subjects. All this came in useful when, due to Local Government Reorganisation in 1974, having been deeply involved in Housing via General Improvement Areas, Housing Action Areas and policy generally, I transferred to the Housing Service. I was Assistant Director of Housing (Development) in Leeds from mid-1973 until I left to go to Hull as Director in 1979. By then, the post-war housing programme was losing momentum and Housing Associations were favoured by government. After leaving local government I worked for seven years in a specialist Housing Association developing accommodation for people living with a mental health condition or issue, and Recovering Alcoholics Groups. Then, having obtained an MBA I went to teach Strategy at Sheffield Business School.

A little house building history

Apart from the period of intensive housebuilding during the 1950's, when the Conservative government under Churchill, with McMillan as Housing Minister, aimed for over 300,000 houses a year in 1951, and in 1953 did it, building 318,000 dwellings, then 350,000 in 1955 when they built 14 New Towns. Those involved said that it was "Managed like a War Effort". Since then, we have seldom built more than 150,000 dwellings per year.

To the purely practical

We used, in my days - 1960/70's - to build 2000 varying units per annum in Leeds alone. The other West Yorkshire authorities also contributed large numbers, as did LAs generally.

Specifically, as an example, I was one cog in a team of 30 to 50 Planners, Architects, Quantity Surveyors, Valuers, Lawyers, Accountants and Housing Staff that it took to get those dwellings built. We had a land bank, experience, designs, a direct labour force to maintain the stock, and it provided useful feedback on what we had built. All these professionals worked together, one of the main groups being a Housing Working Party that considered all the problems that we already had as well as preparing plans for future developments. In this model, a very important ingredient was the way that we incorporated the experience of the staff already managing almost 100,000 dwellings in the existing LA stock. We frequently invited members of the Housing department to attend meetings to gain knowledge of both the geographical and social nature of an area. We also invited staff from the Police, Social Services, Cleansing and other departments when we thought we needed expertise.

Innovation

For some time, Leeds had been a member of the Yorkshire Development Group (YDG). I don't know the full history, but it had been formed some years previously by four large LAs to share the cost of designing and developing specifications for a range of property types. The original members were Leeds, Nottingham, Sheffield and Hull. One of the first designs was for an updated "Streets in the sky" development. All four member LAs built schemes. They proved highly problematic, not least because the explosion at Ronan Point¹ made the use of preformed concrete panels in load bearing walls unacceptable. TV News showed a section of the flats collapsing like a pack of cards. Gas was therefore deemed inappropriate so the Streets in the sky dwelling designs were hastily modified and units equipped with electric storage heaters. Experience in Leeds and Hull showed that tenants were not able to adapt to a heating system that necessitated advance planning and accurate weather forecasting. All four cities had difficulties in dealing with the problems caused by expensive electric heating and inadequate insulation, and there were also structural problems involving drainage of the high level walkways, flat roofs and so on, causing tenants great inconvenience. Anti-social behaviour did not help; one day, waiting for a lift I was warned to stand well back! Apparently, tenants or visitors using motorcycles used the high level walkways and also the lifts, keeping engines running for a rapid exit from the latter! This also enabled parking more securely right by one's front door. Note that both Leeds and Hull abandoned YDG designs in 1979/80 due to unpopularity among councillors, housing departments and tenants.

I quote this experience to show what introducing novel ideas into mass construction programmes can lead to. Bluntly, seemingly brilliant innovation can lead to large scale expensive problems with similarly large scale solutions. Leeds demolished its stock, Hull glazed walkways and built pitched roofs to replace flat ones. Whatever is built in large numbers needs to be soundly designed AND constructed. I know of whole developments designed in then novel ways that have needed major reconstruction works, one example being 5M housing. The use of consultants was widespread in some newly created areas where small authorities built public housing. As a Committee Member of the newly created - by merging small authorities' stock - Coast & Country Housing in the early 2000's, we did a bus tour of our new stock and I was amazed at the variety of schemes, all relatively small and designed by consultants. Most had problems unique to their designs, resulting in there being no overall policies for design or construction. The main difference between Cleveland, Yorkshire and large LAs is that in the big LA it is quite possible to identify LA housing due to its uniform designs, materials used etc.

The moral is obvious: beware of untested innovation on a large or grand scale! Equally, I am not encouraging planning to build only in old tried and tested ways; that is clearly impractical given the target and ambition, not to mention the skilled labour problem. Since few of the architects, engineers and others that will design the new programmes have experience of designing and building mass housing, great care will need to be exercised. This applies throughout the process, all the way to the Planners and Housing Officers writing the brief for each development.

(1) http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/16/newsid_2514000/2514277.stm

Development – experience, or the lack of it?

In 2003 I did some teaching for what is now called 'Leeds Colleges'. One group were students studying for the Institute of Housing examinations. My brief was to teach 'Development'. I studied the syllabus and found it wanting. I therefore taught what I thought the students needed to know, using the site of High Royds Hospital, Menston, Leeds, then slated for closure, as the basis. Few of the group were actually involved in the development process. We used the site to examine the type of options open to potential developers. The group found it a valuable exercise and, they said, learned a great deal, most of which they had not had a clue about. This was twenty years ago and, while they were relatively young, they will have moved through their Housing Associations and their successors will have dealt with relatively little development, certainly nothing like the scale the 1.5m will involve. Their successors in the voluntary movement and local authorities will have very limited, if any, experience of briefing architects. Unless some serious training is done it could be a case of the blind leading the blind. This raises a question; who will be the trainers and how will they be found?

No doubt there will be many who feel that they can initiate the new development process, but, in addition to those listed below, we also, depending on the location, used to consult the local police and councillors who, if we are honest, frequently know more in detail about the many different communities that new development involves than the professionals designing them. Arrangements such as this will be required. Which makes me think about the changes taking place in many County Council areas, where it seems that much local knowledge may be lost. Our own North Yorkshire now includes towns like Harrogate, subsumed into a largely rural area. This raises the prospect of the new LAs with little or no experience of developing large public sector housing schemes suddenly finding themselves being required to take part in the design and development of major schemes when they have had no experience of them or the process, apart from any schemes by the big builders who simply build what they know they can sell.

We need to build for the future – obvious but are we ready?

I have sounded a warning in the above paragraphs, but I do not want to suggest that we must build as we always have. There are many designs in the past that have worked well; multi-storey flats, maisonettes, terraced and semi-detached houses, specialist housing etc., many in the YDG range. We really need to give serious consideration to multi-storey development once again, not only to achieve numbers but to create suitable densities of population to support services such as schools, local shops, medical centres and public transport. It is my view, and probably not a popular one, that we should not be designing new residential areas that make car ownership or access a necessity. The more suburban low density they are, the less they will support the uses mentioned. Multi-car families make a nonsense of many car parking standards that have been applied over recent decades. Do we want new developments with streets lined with cars as many pre WW2 developments have become? Therefore, I suggest work be commissioned or carried out by DEFRA to give some idea to LAs of what density they should be aiming for. Indeed, I think that it

would be extremely useful if some non-governmental agencies, for example the TCPA, which some time ago published ideas for the construction of 'Healthy Homes'. For me, the RTPI has remained remarkably quiet in the debate to date, but it seems to reject taking part in public discussion, whereas I believe it should take a leading role. I think that the RTPI, the RIBA and RICS should form a specialist group to consider the design implications of new forms of housing development. How about starting with a review of the success of le Corbusier's unité d'habitation?



The images above show two highly imaginative developments; the Markthal, a hybrid market hall and housing complex with underground parking, and a 1980's development over a metro and tramway station, both in central Rotterdam. Images supplied by the author.

A five year programme?

An initial programme of 1.5m dwellings, will need to be continued. I say this because, given the state of the nation's homes, many that are currently occupied will not stand the impact of climate change or will require major modifications if not actual replacement. Another question: until the halt to the public sector building programmes of the 1960's and 70's, there were major programmes to clear and demolish dwellings that were deemed unfit for habitation. What should the nation do about that problem, are we really planning for the continuation of thousands and thousands of 'Back to Back' houses into the 2030's and 40's? To quote Leeds again, at the time they were building 2000 per annum they were also clearing or planning to clear 2000 per annum. That programme met major resistance and was almost halted in the 1970's, but almost fifty years have passed. Back to Backs for the 2040's anyone?

A conundrum – electric vehicles ... and others ...

A decision will have to be made regarding planning for electric cars and other electric vehicles. Are we going to build all 1.5m dwellings with parking spaces and facilities for charging them? What is the likely mix between those built for sale and those built for rent, and when it comes to design, what standards will be adopted? It is worth *pointing out that in Scotland all charging points use the same plug/socket design, a wise decision by the government.* We do not have the same policy

here. I have a friend that travelled to Leeds to visit. She said that finding a charging point was a nightmare and she will never bring her car to England again. There are many more detailed issues that will need to be resolved before we start building. There are also many other infrastructure implications for the relatively near future including:

- a. Water resources.
- b. Sewage disposal capacity. Recent publicity has drawn attention to this.
- c. Generating capacity for electricity. A recent BBC programme included a quote by the head of what I still think of as the Central Electricity Generating Board. She said that the UK would need to increase capacity by five times the existing to enable all the electric vehicles imagined to be charged.
- d. Drainage capacity. Increased flooding is now recognised as an issue. We have been building on known flood plains for some time.

What labour force?

In a recent article in The Guardian, Polly Toynbee², quoting the House Builders Federation, states that we will need another 30,000 building workers for every 10,000 houses that are planned. Assuming completion of 200,000 homes in 2024, to build an additional 100,000 dwellings a year we need a total of 300,000 extra builders, to which I would add numbers to provide infrastructure. Any thoughts as to where we find them lead to reflections on our nation's apparent continued dislike (being polite!) of immigration. Talking of training those needed is a fiction. I am not an expert, obviously, but it takes time to recruit, train and develop people with the necessary skills to construct a building, sewers, roads etc. The old Youth Training Scheme system was simply a way of getting people off the streets; very few emerged with a solid base of skills. Times change, but in "the old days" it used to take up to seven years for an apprentice to emerge fully qualified. Allowing for changes, not least the fact that our old Colleges with programmes for training tradespeople don't seem to exist any longer, what impact can we expect to make on the problem if we don't allow in people from the EU, who used to form a lot of the building force.

Can we expect the use of factories to produce new designs of dwellings to be assembled on site? I hear friends talking about prefabricated housing such as seen on TV's Grand Designs. Those that I have seen were called "Huff House" designs and were indeed brilliantly designed and assembled, by a team from Germany in each case that I have seen. This brings us back to "System building", already referred to. To list some more: 5M, BISF, Airey, No Fines and many that I don't know about I am quite sure. Ideas are forthcoming, for sure, but the scale of the programme suggests to me that prefabricated housing is not the answer. Many are based on timber, not perhaps ideal in our climate, and not suitable for multi-storey developments, although I have seen pictures of an IKEA terrace of three storey houses. I think we should be very careful before embarking on multi-thousand programmes of housing based on these ideas.

(2) Britain needs houses and Labour's bold plan... 18th April 2025. RTPI also quoted here on number of Planners required.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/18/britain-houses-labour-plan-more-migrants-skills-gap>

I must make the point here that not everything that was built in the 50's, 60's and 70's was bad, but it is acknowledged by many that there were some serious cases of poor construction. Supervision on site is an important aspect. I remember hearing that a Clerk of Works in one authority had the supervision of three simultaneously constructed fifteen storey blocks as his sole responsibility. There was some laughter and a lot of concern when this was revealed. I personally had responsibility for programmes of major repairs on many blocks of dwellings. Ronan Point did happen, and luck prevented any fatalities that time, but the lesson is clear.

The pre-commencement programme

When will LAs be able to actually start to assemble the land, using Compulsory Purchase Orders? The labour force in terms of valuers, lawyers, planners, architects and Housing professionals with the necessary expertise in Housing development is almost certainly not presently available in-house. It is going to be difficult to make an early start because suitably trained or experienced teams will be needed from the word go. While finance could be available quickly, commencing the programme will need assembly of teams of suitably qualified, trained and experienced professionals of all kinds. I cannot see this being achieved rapidly, so when can we expect LAs to be in a position to commence major programmes of development? I am repeating myself, but local authorities need to be given the scope to prepare properly by recruiting, briefing and training staff before major designs and building programmes are commenced. It is my view that to avoid repeating mistakes of the past, introduction of planned programmes for training and learning is essential, for example case studies could be prepared for education of new staff via tutorial groups, preferably on an inter-authority basis. As a process for learning, this would be a valuable experience.

Summing up

To sum up, unless the nation is to repeat the mistakes of the past in terms of design, construction, location etc., expertise is needed NOW, not in a year or two when some land has been acquired, etc. Planning is the key. It should really have already started by identifying sites for acquisition, etc. The notion of creating New Towns or perhaps Town Expansion Schemes as they were called has been floated. Until these kind of decisions are made, little can actually be done. By this I mean the thinking, organising, agreeing on processes and of course, town planning should be under way already.

To conclude – a more sensible plan?

So, to be somewhat controversial, unless I am way off beam, once some of the essential decisions discussed above are made, I think it would be sensible and practical to turn the 'plan' into 2.5 million dwellings over the next ten years.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

Cover image shows the Markthal, a hybrid market hall and housing complex in central Rotterdam, supplied by the author.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 20,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently
- provide access to intelligence on the latest funding, research, policy and practice developments
- raise the profile of specialist and supported housing with developers, commissioners and operators, and
- attract business to help and support clients plan, design and operate aspirational housing and services for people of all ages.

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