



Senior momentum: What have the planners ever done for us?

This viewpoint for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) has been prepared to identify some of the ways in which themes being discussed and implemented through the planning system could hinder or help in the supply of suitable and sufficient housing for the elderly. Housing suitable for the elderly is wrapped up in the housing system seen as a whole. There are reasons to believe that by meeting the needs of the elderly, the shortages of housing affecting other groups might also be relieved. It is important that housing is regarded as a public good and that the planning system is used to control supply and adaptation in the wider public interest – addressing the problems being caused by short term political interests.

Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by
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Introduction

The influential Housing our Ageing Population Panel for Innovation (HAPPI)¹ makes recommendations for what it sees as the main agencies involved in providing housing for the elderly, including the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and Royal Institute of British Architects. There is mention of ‘other professionals’, and recommendations for actions to be taken by planning authorities, but it is a cause for reflection that the planning profession itself and the Royal Town Planning Institute do not merit specific mention.²

In 2012, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People inquiry³ gave higher emphasis to planning, making a series of recommendations and clearly stating:

Local Planning Authorities to ensure their Local Plans give prominence explicitly to meeting the needs of their ageing population and, through the sensitive use of CIL and Section 106 Agreements, encourage private and social providers to bring forward HAPPI-style projects.

(Housing our Ageing Population: Plan for Implementation)

Further to the recent Government consultations on planning and housing design standards⁴⁵, this viewpoint for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is an attempt to focus on the role of professional planners working for the private, public and NGO sectors and explains why there is a role for ‘planners’ and why there should be a much greater level of cooperation in order to re-balance the nation’s housing stock; encouraging a better fit between the size of dwellings and households and also concentrating on the concept of Lifetime Neighbourhoods⁶ rather than Lifetime Homes that has worked its way into planning policy.

Senior momentum

The country is currently faced with a serious institutional problem caused by having given planning authorities statutory controls over the developments that will be needed to meet identified housing needs, but then subjecting the professional planners to a very mixed bag of political advice and instructions. Government ministers, think tanks, academics and media personalities are just some of those with ‘answers’ to serious problems, but the law has given the powers to planning authorities (subject to the right of appeal to the Secretary of State and the Planning Inspectorate and supervision of the courts).

Whilst it is true that many important social and environmental problems are not dependent on planning controls over the use of land and erection of buildings, there are some important matters to which planners should give their attention. In this case, I would argue that it is better that those currently in this privileged position of planners should get their act together and adopt constructive policies on housing for older people rather than wait for some wholesale and systemic reforms.

¹ www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/happi_final_report_-_031209.pdf

² For the purposes of this paper ‘planners’ are those professionally trained and qualified to prepare and comment on development plans and deciding applications. The recommendations are also intended to apply to their political masters, private developers and other housing agencies.

³ www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design_building/HAPPI2/?parent=8649&child=8650

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/giving-communities-more-power-in-planning-local-development>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/housing-standards-review-consultation>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifetime-neighbourhoods--2>

Quantity or quality?

There is a national debate in the media, together with a succession of pronouncements from the Government and Opposition, which gives the appearance of a consensus that the response to the shortage of housing should be a substantial increase of supply. The proposals to build over 200,000 new units per year to include a number of new garden cities, or just delivering large scale housing⁷ (the 2013 contribution of the RTPI to this debate), might have superficial appeal to those in housing stress, but there is rarely if ever any reference to the type of housing that might meet real needs in the most sustainable way, including housing for older people.

With regard to the latter, the Housing LIN and Elderly Accommodation Counsel's Strategic Housing for Older People Analysis Tool (SHOP@) predicts a shortfall of 240,000 units of specialist housing for older people by 2030.⁸ More generally, the sheer scale of the perceived shortage of all accommodation is serving to drown out the nuanced argument about the types of housing that are required. It might also be a delusion that building hundreds of thousands of new houses every year for the next decade in large chunks is very likely to happen, and avoids the issue of the carbon footprint of new housing in the context of the statutory target to reduce carbon emissions from the housing sector as whole to zero by 2050 (2011 *Carbon Plan*).

When a house is not just a house

Until the 1987 Use Classes Order a dwelling house was recognised as such by the planning system, in the sense that a material change to or from another use would require planning permission, but there was no statutory definition. And, until the 1990s there was no separate definition of an affordable home, the change coming from a High Court judge deciding that in land use terms, the affordability of housing was a material planning consideration in deciding planning applications in the public interest. In 2013, the Secretary of State decided an appeal imposing a condition that at least half of the 400 dwellings being permitted should be constructed with occupation limited to people over the age of 55. Hence the importance of both affordability and nature of the occupation have become fully acknowledged.

In addition, there has been a succession of neighbourhood development plans where amateur 'planners' are pushing the boundaries to enable the planning system to meet local needs. This demonstrates the way in which planning can evolve, through regulation, the courts and through decisions. There can also be statements from government ministers recorded in Hansard. This is the fluid context in which the following proposals are being made and, although some would not be considered yet to be standard practice, this should not prevent or deter planners from seeking to effect the necessary changes to enable development to be controlled in these ways.

Development plan policies; local plans and neighbourhood plans.

In what is described as a 'plan led system' it is planning policy that should be leading the way. The 'golden thread' in the National Planning Policy Framework⁹ is that which leads to the holy grail of sustainable development. It is the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' that should be guiding the formulation of housing policy and, therefore, planning decisions.

⁷ <http://rtpi.org.uk/media/630969/RTPI%20large%20scale%20housing%20report.pdf>

⁸ www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/HousingExtraCare/ExtraCareStrategy/SHOP/SHOPAT/

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2

Smaller dwellings

Typically, suburban and rural areas have high levels of under-occupation. One district council calculated that its housing needs would justify 97% of new dwellings to be one or two bedrooms. In the same area, the rates of under-occupancy are represented by over 40% of dwellings having two spare bedrooms and over 30% with one. There is an ageing population with large numbers looking to downsize but where such options are severely limited by an institutional failure to provide a sufficient supply of smaller dwellings, and many smaller dwellings having been and continue to be extended. There is a small supply of sheltered housing for those unconcerned by the institutional feel or the limited storage and outside areas.

Permitted development (PD)

These are the rights to develop without the need to apply for permission and are important due to the extent to which small (and relatively affordable) houses can be extended to be larger, less energy efficient and more expensive. Were planning policy to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, it would support the imposition of conditions on planning permissions for new housing that would require applications for planning permission for extensions so that the impact on housing mix, affordability and energy efficiency could be considered. Policies could also support the imposition of conditions on extensions, of a scale or location where permission is required¹⁰, to again take into account the mix and affordability of housing in the area and possibly require 'consequential improvements' to maintain or even improve the energy efficiency of the extended dwelling.

Adaptable housing

Lifetime homes might have some merit but it could also be argued that the downside is making it easier for older people to under-occupy housing. Such homes will remain a good idea until more suitable and attractive alternative housing is provided in the vicinity i.e. Lifetime Neighbourhoods. Planners could reduce the prevalence of this problem by requiring all new housing (and in the instance of extensions requiring permission) to be designed so that dwellings could be easily sub-divided when family circumstances change. Simple and cheap sub-divisions could facilitate the accommodation of elderly relatives, boomerang children, or lodgers, while maintaining privacy, harmony and high levels of occupation. Rather than being suspicious of sub-divisions (how will the garden be used? where will the cars be parked?) planners should adopt enabling policies and even find grants to assist.

Co-housing

In any discussion of sustainable development, there should now also be serious consideration of co-housing that has the potential for contributing to social, economic and environmental objectives.¹¹ The smaller private space and shared spaces and facilities enable the overall use of resources in construction and use to be reduced. The guest accommodation should allow for higher levels of occupation as downsizers retain the ability to accommodate grandchildren and visitors. The storage of stuff accumulated over a lifetime can be turned into an asset for a community including growing families and shared living spaces and gardens. At a time when the heating of private spaces is becoming a serious issue – the stark choice between heating and eating, co-housing will always have spaces where both the heating and eating would be shared.

¹⁰ not falling within the parameters set out in the Town and Country Planning General Permitted Development Order 2002

¹¹ [www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/?](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/Cohousing/)

Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA)

This is how the local planning authority will decide how many new houses to allow for in their development plans. The idea is that the SHMA will identify particular markets, including the need for housing suitable for the elderly. If such provision is to do that job, it should be designed as being suitable for the younger old who have a greater freedom to exercise their choice, but not as housing for the elderly that could have an institutional feel and not be welcoming for households at different stages of their lives.

A SHMA that does not quantify the level of under-occupation (readily seen from the ONS data from the 2011 Census) which could be addressed by a particular form of housing provision or supply, and the particular housing needs from older age groups (including forms of co-housing), should not be accepted as reliable evidence to assist planning authorities in the preparation of development plan policy.

Summary

It is difficult to argue that planners have been doing their job or showing signs of shouldering the responsibility for ensuring that the quantitative shortage of housing is met in ways that facilitate a better match between the size of housing and households. However, if the shortage is to be met within the constraints of planetary environmental boundaries (and local land shortages) then planners should be persuaded to concentrate on the means within their control in which better use can be made of existing and new housing stock. The suggestions for policy in this paper may well be seen as draconian, but it is difficult to see how the necessary transition to a zero carbon housing stock by 2050¹² will be achieved with the existing forms of planning policy.

The planners' job of working in the wider public interest may seem harsh to those believing their home to be a personal castle. However, the changes being proposed in this paper might be welcomed by those currently with no home, a crowded home, or one past its sell-by-date. It would be unfortunate if the politicians were successful in raising building rates to over 200,000 units per year primarily on large sites or in new settlements without taking into account the ways in which carefully targeted new housing could remedy the current imbalance and specific shortages within existing suburbs, towns and villages.

¹² *Zero Carbon Plan 2011 HMG and Fourth Carbon Budget Committee on Climate Change*

Note

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

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About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions, including dementia.

For further information on planning, designing and developing housing for an ageing population, visit our 'Design Hub' at: www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design_building/. At the time of writing, we are further developing this content to improve access to relevant planning publications and useful resources.

To participate in our learning and service improvement activities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings across housing, health and social care in your region, login to:

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