



## Planning a HAPPI family

A planner's eye view of how the planning system could contribute to the meeting of genuine housing needs in an efficient and timely way. Within the confusion described as a planning "system" there are synergies and linkages between apparently disparate interests. It is the job of those within and working with the system to understand how these different interests can best be provided for by the triggering of virtuous circles. This viewpoint seeks to show how the provision of small dwellings could be the trigger for satisfying the economic, social and environmental aspects of housing supply and demand.

Written by **Daniel Scharf MA MRTPI** of Pause for Thought, for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network

**April 2017**

The Housing White Paper (HWP)<sup>1</sup> published for consultation in February 2017 acknowledged that tinkering with the housing and planning systems is itself a cause of frustration and inefficiency. Some reasons why the HWP is unlikely to be the last or even a lasting word on housing supply can be found at [www.dantheplan.blogspot.com](http://www.dantheplan.blogspot.com)<sup>2</sup> but the purpose of this paper is to argue that a systemic approach to planning for housing could identify ways in which real progress could be made in providing housing of sufficient quality, of the right type, in the right places and at the right prices. Progress is unlikely to be achieved by a Government attempting to apply individual solutions to individual problems. The fact that 29 different proposals have been identified in the HWP is indicative of a Government reaching for straws instead of looking for the virtuous circles that could achieve and lock-in substantial improvements to the housing supply.

There are two preliminary points that have to be made. The first indication that the HWP will not do the job is in the title “Fixing our broken housing market”. No lasting progress will be made until Government understands that fixing of the broken land market (and capturing the uplift in land values for public benefit) is a necessary precursor to effective improvements to housing supply. Secondly, there has to be a greater understanding of the extent of the under-occupancy of the existing housing stock and the reasons for this unsustainable waste of this resource.<sup>3</sup> To a significant extent the housing crisis<sup>4</sup> is one of an inequitable and undesirable distribution of this scarce resource and finding ways to balance the size of houses with the size of households must be moved centre stage in formulating future housing policy.

In arguing that the shortage of housing is caused primarily by unfairness in its distribution, it should be noted that Britain ranks as the 4<sup>th</sup> most unequal country (after Singapore, the USA and Portugal),<sup>5</sup> essentially on economic grounds. And inequality impacts most noticeably on the provision of housing,<sup>6</sup> an area where land use planning has been playing an important role.

Moving on to some of the obvious needs that will have to be met, the HWP does propose an amendment to the National Planning Policy Framework requiring all local plans to include clear policies that address the provision of suitable housing for the elderly, and the ways in which this should be done will be described in the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG). However, this should already have been the case given that Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs) were designed to identify particular housing needs as part of the evidence base for plan-making. The fact that SHMAs have singularly failed to understand and quantify the housing needs of older people means that a corrective through the NPPG would be welcome, particularly if it included the recommendations in this paper.

In the provision of adequate housing, the planning process has been hampered by its preoccupation with providing and protecting individual privacy. It has also been complicit in the obsession with investments in private property.<sup>7</sup> A report by Oxford Economics<sup>8</sup> for the Redfern Review into the decline of home ownership describes the two distinct housing markets; that for a home to live in and the other as private investment. The OE analysis describes the confusion

---

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/housing-white-paper>

2 <http://dantheplan.blogspot.co.uk/2017/02/the-housing-white-paper.html>

3 Dorling D 2014 *All that is Solid: How the Great Housing Disaster Defines Our Times, and What We Can Do About It* Penguin London

4 As with most shortages the crisis is one of distribution as much if not more than sufficiency of supply

5 Wilkinson R and Pickett K 2010 *The Spirit Level; Why equality is better for everyone* Penguin London

6 The impact on younger generations described by Howker E and Malik J 2010 *Jilted Generations: how Britain has bankrupted its youth* Icon Books London applies to other disadvantaged groups

7 *Planning and Privacy* 1975 undergraduate dissertation Oxford Polytechnic Daniel Scharf

8 [www.redfernreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/20161114-Redfern-Review-modelling-paper.pdf](http://www.redfernreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/20161114-Redfern-Review-modelling-paper.pdf)

between these markets and also explains why house prices are not affected (i.e. lowered significantly) by increasing the supply. It is unlikely that the market for housing will be fixed until the focus of Government is on the provision of homes fit for the sole purpose of living in.

The context for the search for solutions also includes the fact that carbon emissions from the building and use of housing has to reduce to zero over the next 35 years and the sooner the better. New housing will have to compete with other potential land uses (including food growing and recreation) and that skilled and semi-skilled labour and materials are in short supply.

In adopting a systems approach to housing supply, synergies can be found between the housing needs of different groups; the young looking for their first home, the more elderly looking for their last, and growing families looking for houses with 3 or more bedrooms. Conveniently, research has been carried out into these markets and there are clear mutual interests in targeting resources into this area.

In 2014, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Housing and Care for Older People received evidence that around 8 million households were at least thinking about downsizing. And, in June 2016, the APPG published the report, *Housing our Ageing Population: Positive Ideas (HAPPI 3) - Making retirement living a positive choice*.<sup>9</sup> One of the suggestions is that the Government should turn its attention to the potential of providing housing suitable for the elderly instead of concentrating on the first time buyers (and renters). This should result in sufficient family size houses being made available by those older households moving to smaller properties.

Research published in March 2016<sup>10</sup> by the Intergenerational Foundation estimated that there are about 4.4 million dwellings which could be readily subdivided providing opportunities for 'downsizing in situ'. The needs of younger generations will not be met exclusively in the subdivision of existing homes but the potential in incentivising this process is very significant. These extra homes would amount to about 10 years supply of 2 bedroom dwellings without laying another brick. Sub-dividing existing dwellings is only part of that potential, but the building works would provide opportunities for substantially upgrading energy efficiency.<sup>11</sup> Policies should be designed to make better use of the 30 million empty bedrooms and million empty homes (leaving second homes out of the equation) alongside the policies designed to increase supply of new homes. Even in London the level of under-occupation is significant; there are 2 spare bedrooms in 40% of houses in outer London and in 20% of inner London. The equivalent figures for 1 spare bedroom are 42% and 26% respectively, amounting to a total of about 2.5million unused bedrooms in the capital city alone where the annual need has been assessed at about 50,000.

In bald terms, there are about 23.4 million dwellings<sup>12</sup> in England. If there were only one spare bedroom per dwelling this would equate to about 10 million 2 bedroomed houses, the equivalent of 40 years of residential development at 250,000 per year. Nobody would suggest that the whole population could or should move out of any house with a spare bedroom,<sup>13</sup> but it is equally foolish to believe that this level of underuse of a vital national resource can be sustained.<sup>14</sup>

---

9 [www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Housing-our-Ageing-Population-Positive-Ideas-HAPPI-3-Making-retirement-living-a-positive-choice/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Housing-our-Ageing-Population-Positive-Ideas-HAPPI-3-Making-retirement-living-a-positive-choice/)

10 [www.if.org.uk/archives/7779/unlocking-englands-hidden-homes](http://www.if.org.uk/archives/7779/unlocking-englands-hidden-homes) (accessed 2017.03.04.)

11 80% of existing dwellings are the equivalent of EPC D and below

12 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/423249/Dwelling\\_Stock\\_Estimates\\_2014\\_England.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/423249/Dwelling_Stock_Estimates_2014_England.pdf)

13 <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/construct/summary.asp?reset=yes&mode=construct&dataset=544&version=0&anal=1&initself=>

14 It may be helpful to see the housing stock as a 'commons' when considering its management and distribution

While the Government is clearly reluctant to address this issue, there is a clear message coming from the HWP that housing and homelessness are becoming increasingly sensitive issues. While the Government identify with a 'consensus' that the quantitative need is for at least 250,000 new homes per year it will fail to see the ways in which the real needs<sup>15</sup> can be met with fewer resources.

One of the social and economic issues being confronted, comparable to and not unrelated to housing, is the care of the elderly. Research has indicated that the current system of social care will not be sustainable beyond 2017.<sup>16</sup> Where care for the elderly could take place in the "community" if housing was designed or adapted to be more conducive to social care being carried out in a neighbourly way, it is difficult to excuse those involved in the provision of housing from addressing this need.

John Bingham reported on a study carried out by the Office of National Statistics which showed Britain, "... to be the loneliness capital of Europe, with its inhabitants less likely overall to know their neighbours or have strong friendships than people anywhere else in the EU...."<sup>17</sup> In 1968, an American sociologist Philip Slater suggested that, "The longing for privacy is generated by the drastic conditions that a longing for privacy produces." We seem to be in a vicious cycle where our individualism makes it increasingly difficult to provide mutual support and affection. Private housing is being designed to be not only privately owned but unsocial or even anti-social in its occupation and thereby contributing to unfortunate and probably unsustainable levels of isolation and loneliness.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of individualism is one which Howker and Malik<sup>19</sup> identified as being at least partly responsible for the desperate straits in which the younger generations find themselves, particularly in the search for suitable and affordable housing. Both being under twenty years old, the authors claimed that their young age added credibility and weight to their arguments.<sup>20</sup> Disturbingly, it seems that the very unequal distribution of housing is not benefiting those who have too much or those who have too little.

Whatever the extent to which the planning system has been complicit in the unequal distribution of housing in the past, it is now incumbent upon it to act as a catalyst if not a leading agency in creating a fairer and better housed society; how to become part of the solution rather than remain as part of the problem?

So the trigger, if not the proverbial silver bullet, for the "virtuous circle" that would meet genuine housing needs is for virtually all of the new dwellings that can be created through conversion and new building with the limited resources available should be of no more than 2 bedrooms. On the evidence of the HWP, the Government still needs to be persuaded that a large and diverse supply of smaller dwellings (most within the HAPPI family in Lifetime Neighbourhoods<sup>21</sup>) would be an efficient and necessary use of scarce resources and would address the issues of social care, loneliness and affordability. These potential gains should be worth planning for.

---

15 The average size of household is 2.4 persons and would fall further were sufficient smaller and affordable dwellings provided

16 *The generation strain: Collective solutions to care in an ageing society* 2014 McNeil,C, Hunter J IPPR

17 *Britain, the Loneliness capital of Europe* The Telegraph 18 June 2014  
[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10909524/Britain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10909524/Britain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html) (accessed 2015.12.31)

18 Slater P E 1968 *Pursuit of Loneliness*

19 2010 op cit

20 <http://dantheplan.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/credentials.html>

21 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6248/2044122.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6248/2044122.pdf)

## Note

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

## About the Author

Despite having worked as a professional planner for over forty years in the public, private and voluntary sectors, Daniel has maintained a belief that the planning system could provide answers to some of the most critical and wicked problems faced today (e.g. climate change/ air quality, adequate housing and social care) only some of which have been caused or exacerbated by the planning system.

You can also find Daniel's previous Housing LIN viewpoint (No.59), 'Senior momentum: What have the planners ever done for us?' at:

[www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Senior-momentum-What-have-the-planners-ever-done-for-us/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Senior-momentum-What-have-the-planners-ever-done-for-us/)

## About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

And to access further information and resources on planning and housing for older people, visit the Housing LIN's dedicated 'planning portal' at:

[www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Planning/](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Planning/)

## Published by

Housing Learning & Improvement Network  
c/o EAC, 3rd Floor,  
89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7TP

Tel: 020 7820 8077

Email: [info@housinglin.org.uk](mailto:info@housinglin.org.uk)

Web: [www.housinglin.org.uk](http://www.housinglin.org.uk)

Twitter: @HousingLIN & @HousingLINews