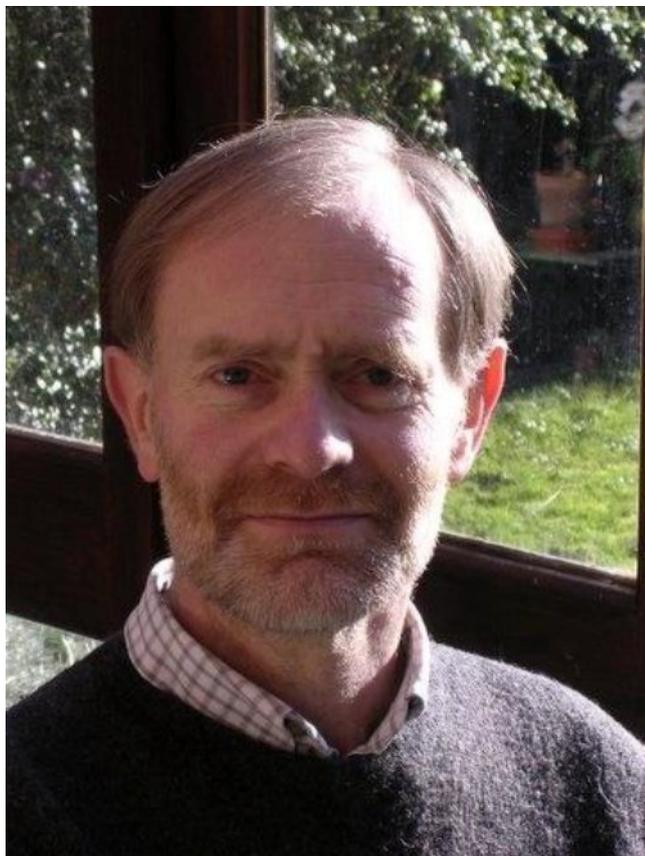


ZERO and a plan for housing

CARBON BRITAIN

By Daniel Sharf



There appears to be a consensus that the housing shortage in Britain can only be met through building over 200,000 dwellings per year. The environmental consequences of this rate of building are rarely discussed. However, all such developments would need to receive planning permission in accordance with local development plans and the National Planning Policy Framework, supposedly in accordance with the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'. In fact, since March 2012 when the NPPF came into effect vast numbers of houses have been permitted and built, the sustainability credentials of which are questionable.

In an appeal decision in August 2012 (Planning Inspectorate Ref. 169598) the inspector provided some insights into how the planning system had adjusted to the "presumption in favour of sustainable development". He says, "*Although the sustainability accreditation of the proposed element was often mentioned...there is little detail or objective evidence. This is perhaps surprising and suggests that sustainability, in the wider context, is*

misunderstood." He found the location to be potentially sustainable but, "...on the other hand, if we seek a Bruntland scenario [the definition referred to in the NPPF], whereby today's development would not impose environmental costs on future generations, we are a considerable way from achieving that. There was certainly no expectation that the development would consume its own smoke'." This conclusion was reached despite the fact that the development was proposing Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4 - a standard higher than would have been required by the Building Regulations. He referred to an inadequate travel plan, and the absence of proposals to generate energy on the site or for sustainable drainage.

Not all inspectors have treated the concept of sustainable development in this considered way. What is needed is for everybody interested in the sustainability of development to work with their local councils to ensure that policies are included in development plans that limit development to that which would "consume its own smoke". This paper has been produced to assist both professionals and the public engaged in this endeavour. Policies along the lines described below (with their justification to assist in negotiations with the 'planners') would reduce emissions attributable to new housing so that attention can be given to the upgrading of the existing 26 million dwellings.

Policies

Housing development should be regarded as a driver of change and a joint enterprise between developers, planning authorities and the public. It is necessary to understand the different potential funding streams. Planning permissions should be granted subject to obligations under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 specifying the services and facilities **necessary** to make the development acceptable and the location more sustainable. These community benefits should be listed in a development plan policy. This list could include the upgrading of bus services, maintaining the capacity of the local schools, ensuring adequate recreational and play facilities, maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, a travel plan demonstrating a reduction in car dependency (eg the formation of a car club, car sharing database and cycling facilities). Desirable but not necessary improvements can be funded through the New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy to which less stringent rules apply.

The supply of allotments should be improved and it can also be argued that residual land owned by the applicants in the vicinity should be made available for market gardening to compensate for greenfield land and growing capacity lost to development. As well as securing the land,

the policy should also require the occupation of one or more of the new dwellings to be limited to somebody engaged in agriculture (see *ZCB and local food*).

Government is understandably concerned that development plan policies do not prevent new housing from being delivered and, therefore, a policy addressing the question of viability should be included, including a requirement for 'open book accounting'.

It has become normal for 40% of new houses to be affordable (available at a social rent or shared equity). A proportion of new housing sites can also be required to accommodate housing to meet needs identified in a local Housing Needs Survey.

About 80% of us live in the suburbs (including villages) where about 75% of dwellings are under-occupied. This is a scandalous and unsustainable waste of resources and the relative shortage of smaller dwellings has also been seen as a factor contributing to the lack of affordable housing in rural areas.¹ A policy is needed to require that new housing should be predominantly 2 bedroomed and, where larger dwellings are allowed, that these should be designed so that subdivision at a later date would be a simple and inexpensive operation. Alternatively, a policy could specify that the design of larger dwellings should include a self-contained element even though this, in the short term, could be occupied as one household. Adaptable homes and Lifetime Neighbourhoods should be seen as priorities rather than lifetime homes.

The Committee on Climate Change has, "... highlighted the need for a step change in the pace of emissions reductions ...[and] the crucial role for local authorities in meeting national carbon budgets, showing that emissions reductions without local action will be insufficient... Under the planning system, local authorities can prepare Local Development Plans which identify sites for specific land uses (e.g. new housing) and set out the criteria for approving planning applications. For example, a local authority can set energy efficiency standards for new homes that exceed current building regulations'²

The Code for Sustainable Homes is being wound down but the Government's commitment to the building of only zero carbon housing by 2016 is unchanged. A policy should require the use of materials with low levels of embedded carbon, and construction methods consistent with achieving both the target of zero carbon houses by 2016

1 "...the mix of available housing plays such relevance...emphasis should be given to increasing the supply of smaller, starter homes in villages (as well as 'entry level' affordable homes in villages). Doing so should narrow the rural-urban price differential." *The value of rural amenities RICS Research October 2012*

2 *How local authorities can reduce emissions and manage climate risk* (May 2012). Committee on Climate Change

and the overall 80% carbon reduction by 2050, by which time there should be close to zero emissions from the housing sector. Post-occupation evaluation should be required to close the performance gap between specifications and completion.

A policy is required to support planning conditions to remove the rights to alter dwellings without permission under 'permitted development' so that the thermal efficiency of the dwelling and the appropriate mix of house types can be controlled.

A policy can seek to deliver the choice of housing required by the NPPF; requiring the inclusion of both self-build and cohousing in new housing developments. "Research has shown that self-built, self-commissioned and community controlled, owned and managed housing has provided wider benefits for individuals and the community..."³ and there is other evidence for this.⁴ The planning authority should be asked to maintain lists of potential self-builders (with skills and local qualification), co-housers and smallholders to facilitate the application of these development plan policies. Policies should explain why self – building or finishing can count towards any affordable housing requirement. Co-housing (with a common house) can demonstrate high levels of occupancy. Agricultural dwellings are integral to a local food supply. Without supporting these forms of housing development plans would not, as legally required to do so, contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

For an example of how the above translates into policy go to <http://www.draxton-near-abingdon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Draxton-Parish-Council-Housing-Policy-Guidance-Dec-20122.pdf>

About the author:

Over the last 35 years Daniel Scharf MA MRTPI (www.DanthePlan.blogspot.com) has been employed as a Chartered town and country planner in the public, private and voluntary sectors. He teaches planning and has worked with the New Villages Association and Rural Resettlement Group and has been chairman of a parish council engaged in preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan. Daniel is also a member of the Campaign Against Climate Change steering group.

3 The Land and Society Commission Report RICS 2011

4 *Bringing Democracy Home* 2009 Cole A and Birmingham University