

ROOM@RTPI Housing Seminar: "Living By Numbers": The Unintended Consequences of Housing Delivery

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Somerset County Cricket Ground, Taunton

Seminar Report by Charles Goode

Planning for housing always has two key components: policy and delivery. Although this Seminar focused more on delivery, the very important aspect of policy was regularly and helpfully brought in whilst the common thread or question running through the day was- how far is planning a 'blunt' or 'sharp' tool in achieving the overall object of increased housing delivery? This was very usefully posed in the introduction by Seminar's Chair **Paul Barnard** (Service Director of Strategic Planning and Infrastructure at Plymouth City Council) who also outlined the constant changes in planning policy, especially the increasing focus on housing numbers. Indeed, as always, it was a very interactive Room@RTPI Seminar which encouraged debate, discussion and deliberation on the effectiveness of Government policy, exploration of its unintended consequences and consideration of how it could be improved. Notwithstanding the terrible weather and closure of Taunton Railway Station due to engineering works (!), I found the Seminar very thought-provoking, learnt a huge amount about what is going on in practice and plenty of questions about how policy could be changed and improved. Additionally, friends who live in Taunton constantly praise their local cricket ground, so the venue was great although there was not much cricket taking place yesterday!

Discussion Session 1: Delivering Housing Need through the Planning System

After one of the RTPI's now legendary breakfasts, the first session helpfully focused on specific housing- custom build and older people's housing- which is clearly distinctive from the typical new home built for sale by large housebuilders. **Lex Cumber** (Business Development Director at Castleoak) passionately made the case for planners to consider the needs of older people's housing beyond care homes and sheltered housing. He introduced an incredible range of statistics on the ageing population, its geographical density in the South West and the amount of money being leveraged in the retirement communities sector. However, Lex argued made the point, whilst money was forthcoming, planning was more challenging and that there needs to be a separate use class available for retirement communities. Lex constantly argued that the housing crisis is more about the *distribution* of existing stock rather than building new housing supply and therefore planners should focus on 'freeing up' more family homes by allowing more retirement communities to allow older people to downsize (the more general argument about the housing crisis is a complicated and controversial one- I personally think that new supply and existing stock are *both* vitally important). **Mario Wolf** (NaCABA Task Force Director) then gave a very comprehensive presentation on custom self-build housing the bottom line of which custom and self-build is a great way to diversify housing supply. Additionally, he argued that, whilst the number of local authorities with specific policies on custom build housing in local plans has significantly increased (in line with policy requirements), there are a number of authorities which do not have specific policies and this could be challenged at Examination. However, Mario acknowledged that many authorities in the South West were leading the way in terms of integrating policies into local plans, which he argued was the best approach, and that areas without Self-Build and Custom Build Registers were mainly in the North of England where there was low housing demand.

The discussion then centred around the main barriers to self-build and custom build and housing for older people. The amount of demand for self-build and custom build was highlighted as an issue alongside the sustainability of locations where retirement communities were proposed. This was echoed in the more general discussion which focused on the expense of housing for the elderly, as well as societal attitudes towards (preserving) homeownership, which meant that retirement communities are perceived as expensive and more 'high-end' rather than being 'mass-market'. The reliance upon the private sector as the main way of delivering housing were also raised.

Discussion Session 2: Green Belts and Housing Delivery

Charles Goode (ESRC Doctoral Researcher in Urban and Regional Planning, University of Birmingham) then focused on the history of strategic planning in England and the current lack of (statutory) regional planning within the context of the Green Belt (his research topic). Charles outlined that, although regional planning has always been challenging, especially around governance and in relation to Green Belt, these governance challenges surrounding housing delivery and Green Belt have intensified since the abolition of regional planning in 2010 and been one of the factors in leading to mistrust between planners and campaigners. However, building on the widespread recognition that there needs to be strategic, larger-than-local planning Charles then turned to how strategic planning could be rebuilt in England through considering various options such as all Combined Authorities gaining planning powers, Joint Local Plans and Structure Plans, a Green Belt Council (along the National Parks model) and even returning to Regional Spatial Strategies were outlined as possibilities!

Considering how effectively strategic planning is working in one's local area and the effectiveness of the SHLAA call for sites were then the key discussion points. The challenges of strategic planning and the power of localism, even in non-Green Belt areas, was raised in our group alongside the importance of considering a wide range of sites on sustainability grounds. In the wider discussion, the distinction between the planning process (especially of getting various bodies together) and the resulting planning outcomes was raised alongside the issue of land value capture and whether a New Towns approach was best.

Discussion Session 3: Securing Housing Standards and Design Quality through the Planning System

After a hearty lunch and more helpful discussion, delegates settled down to the final session which focused on the very topical issue of design quality. **Dan Stern** (RIBA Senior Policy Advisor) helpfully focused upon the general context of the issues that had been created since the winding down of CABE and the increasing awareness of quality as an issue (such as with Permitted Development Rights). He argued that this had resulted in the last two Secretary of State's for Housing (James Brokenshire and Robert Jenrick) giving much more emphasis to design which has culminated in the *Building Better, Building Beautiful* Commission and the new National Design Guide and proposed National Model Design Code. Dan then outlined the RIBA's research project into quality in the build environment, especially considering a wider range of factors than the Letwin Review (like viability) and also focusing on design quality in new local authority built housing. Lastly, **Julie Tanner** (Creating Excellence) made a strong case for design review of at the beginning of the planning application process and helpfully outlined that, contrary to perceptions, design reviews focus a lot on viability. Julie again highlighted design quality in local authority built housing (mentioning Goldsmith Street, Norwich being the Stirling Prize winner) and the training and roundtables that the Design Network has been running for councillors and planners. She also helpfully mentioned the National Model Design Code and argued that it should be easier for councils to refuse poorly designed development but also highlighted the power of impartial design reviews, Design Guides, SPDs, Development Briefs and Masterplans.

The discussion question focused on whether the focus on housing numbers could be reconciled with place making principles. The discussion on our table focused on wider factors such as transport patterns and consumer attitudes towards the sustainability of new housing. The wider discussion highlighted questions on the enforceability of the Design Guides and the potential detrimental effect that the Government's drive on housing numbers, such as 5 Year Housing Land Supply and the Housing Delivery Test, on design quality.

To conclude, this Seminar helpfully brought together a range of perspectives on housing. I think that the key message for me was that, whilst the Government continues to focus on housing numbers, as planners we need to consider a wide range of factors when planning and delivering housing including design quality and place making, strategic planning and how best to bring various bodies together and other types of housing beyond the standard type built by large housebuilders, including retirement communities and self- and custom build.

Author:

Charles Goode is a Doctoral Researcher in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Birmingham where he is supervised by Dr Michael Beazley and Dr Austin Barber. He is researching the Green Belt and the housing crisis and is keen to get as broad a spectrum of views as possible on the issue so has interviewed a range of planning stakeholders. He is therefore very interested in the views of RTPI South West members on the Green Belt/ housing crisis- feel free to contact him via email about the project: C.Goode@pgr.bham.ac.uk.

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