

# HOUSING

## THE END OF PLANNING?

In the first week of August, the Government published a far-reaching White Paper entitled *Planning for the Future*. This reduced the notional 12-week consultation period by almost a third in practice.

LHG will be responding in the coming weeks, aiming to mobilise a full critique of the proposals, starting with an article in this issue by Duncan Bowie entitled "*The end of housing planning as we know it*" which may prove prophetic.

Supporters need to know that official responses must be in before 29<sup>th</sup> October, details at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>

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## CONFERENCE SEASON 2020 PREVIEW

LHG stalwarts will know that sleepy August usually turns into manic September as political parties crank up for their conferences and Parliament, haltingly, resumes. Of course, 2020 will be a year like no other, thanks to Covid19 and its many side-effects.

We now know that the Labour Party's Conference will take place – in the cloud! – from 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> September, not the following week as rumoured.

It takes the form of "**Connected - Bringing our Movement Together**", details at [www.labevents.org/connected](http://www.labevents.org/connected)

LHG will play its part with a "fringe meeting" which will almost certainly be shared with other socialist societies. Its subject(s) will be topical and the online event is planned for a weekday evening.

**This will be followed, probably on Saturday 3rd October**, with a half-day's Housing Conference with Shadow Cabinet speakers and topical workshops.

LHG is working with several other sister groups such as Labour Campaign for Human Rights and SERA to plan this Conference. Taking advantage of online conferencing, much of the content will be recorded and available soon afterwards to those who cannot tune-in at the time.

All of this is, of course, subject to change but you will get updates from us just as soon as we can confirm the details.



## Developing a PRS fit for purpose

Previous Policy Days have been held locally where members can attend in person, but, thanks to Covid19, this year 's had to be an online session.

We were delighted that over 50 people took part in a discussion on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2020 entitled *Developing a Private Rented Sector that is fit for purpose*.

Our guest speakers were **Thangam Debbonaire MP**, Shadow Secretary of State for Housing, **Tom Renhard**, ACORN Chair, **Dan Wilson Crow**, Deputy Director of Generation Rent, **Jacky Peacock**, Advice4Renters and **Karen Buck MP**.

A full write-up is available on the LHG website but the the key points were :-

- Ensuring the Government sticks to their commitment to get rid of Section 21 evictions and the use of Ground 8
- Campaigning for the moratorium on evictions to continue
- Campaigning for the benefit system to change – scrapping the Bedroom Tax, and removing the Housing Benefit cap
- Strengthen enforcement to prevent illegal evictions
- Developing tenancies for life
- Linking rents with property condition
- A national register of landlords, with training and accreditation as mandatory
- The Labour Party encouraging Labour authorities to use their full powers, and highlighting the good practice of many Labour councils
- Campaigning for public housing to be built – the right houses to meet the right needs

## Expect a ~~Planning for the Future~~ "blitzkrieg"

*"Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." (Winston Churchill)*

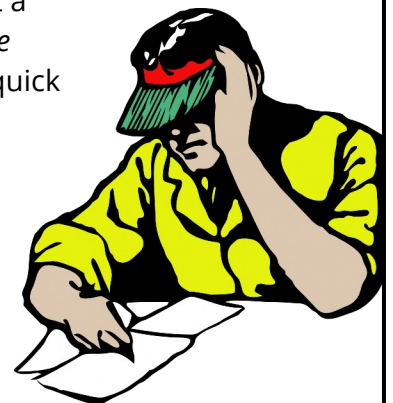
The Coalition Government's first and most far-reaching Bill became the Education Act 2010 in record time.

**It was the first public outing of the Michael Gove/Dominic Cummings double-act and remains one of the best examples of legislative Blitzkrieg.**

- It was accompanied by an intense charm offensive aimed not at the specialist press but at national journalists and TV talk shows.
- "Experts" were dismissed as vested interests and out-of-date.
- Full advantage was taken of any splits between opponents and high-profile "deserters" were encouraged. Critics were often silenced by the insistence they were "only taking Labour policies to their logical conclusions".
- There was a shameless mobilisation of beneficiaries and reassurance of potential objectors from among the English middle-classes. *Other voices were largely ignored.*
- Citizens with a grievance against local authorities, (e.g. parents of children with special needs) were further empowered to take LAs to court but the resources needed to meet that need were withheld.
- The Bill gave broad outlines of direction but important detail was often buried in regulations published later.

We should expect the timetabling of any legislation to support a *Planning for the Future* blitzkrieg to be very quick and ruthless.

And Robert Jenrick is now an expendable asset in their campaign.



Paul Martin (Editor)

# “THE END OF TOWN PLANNING AS WE KNOW IT”

The stated objective of the White Paper, *Planning for the Future*, published by Robert Jenrick (of Westferry development fame) is to introduce the most fundamental reform of the planning system since the Second World War, in effect to replace the 1947 Act based regime, which is not just considered by the current government to be unfit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but to be responsible for the undersupply of housing and for constraining economic and business growth.

No evidence is provided for these assertions. The timescale for determining Local Plans by local councils (of all political persuasions) is given as demonstrating the case for ‘system failure’, with no recognition of economic and governance factors, such as lack of planning staff, continually, changing government guidance, inaccurate government household and population projections and economic volatility – such as the 2008 Global Financial crisis, BREXIT and now COVID19.

So far as the Government has a clear idea as to what it wants out of planning, the White Paper seeks to deliver two distinct objectives – to increase housing output and economic growth through deregulatory measures and to achieve more ‘beautiful’ developments.

Leaving aside the issue of whether measurable design quality is equivalent to ‘beauty’, there is no recognition that there may be some incompatibility between the two objectives. It is significant that the proposals have emerged from a series of think tank reports, notably the work of Jack Airey at Policy Exchange, who is now the PM’s specialist adviser on planning.

The government has been assisted by an advisory group, none of whom is either a qualified planner or represents a planning authority. The group comprises two developers (one of whom, Miles Gibson was previously a civil servant working on planning policy), a planning lawyer who mainly represents large developers, an economist, an economic historian who has supported the Liberal Democrats and the Director of Create Streets, Nicholas Boys Smith, who was co-chair of the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission and has links to the Conservative Party.

It is understood that Dominic Cummings had some role in working up the policy proposals, and no doubt in drafting the Prime Minister’s preface to the document.

The proposals in the paper have not emerged from discussion with planners, planning authorities or professional bodies representative of planners, such as the *Royal Town Planning Institute* (RTPI) and the *Town and Country Planning Association* (TCPA) - key planning professionals I have contacted were not approached.



*The author is Duncan Bowie, long-term member of LHG, who has been a strategic planner for the London Mayor, a university planning lecturer and published a number of books on housing and planning policy. He is currently co-convenor of the London and Wider South East Strategic Planning Network.*

*([wseplanningnetwork.org](http://wseplanningnetwork.org)) and chair of the Highbury Group on Housing Delivery (<https://e-voice.org.uk/highburygroup/>)*

The last shadow planning minister, Roberta Blackman Woods convened a Labour Planning Commission, to which Duncan Bowie contributed, but the commission’s recommendations, which were hardly radical, were never adopted by the Labour Party, and Roberta had to publish the commission report privately after she had stood down as MP for Durham.

<https://labourplanningcommission.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/planning-commission-report-2020.pdf>.

A substantive critique of government policy has just been published by the TCPA: *The Wrong Answers to the Wrong Question*: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/the-wrong-answers-to-the-wrong-questions>.

# THE END OF TOWN PLANNING AS WE KNOW IT (continued)

While some academic reports are referred to in the document, some of the conclusions apparently drawn from these reports are questionable, and it is clear from some of the content of the document that the authors have given little thought to potential implications of the proposals or to transitional arrangements – there is a general tendency to focus on deconstructing the existing regime rather than the details of the proposed replacement, and how it would be introduced through statutory legislation and guidance.

The White Paper proposes to repeal existing planning legislation and to replace the current planning framework with a simplified local plan system and a severe curtailment of the process for determining applications for individual developments by a planning authority.

There are no proposals for strategic planning at an inter-authority level and the current requirements in relation to the duty to cooperate with neighbouring authorities will be abolished.

The fundamental basis of the post-1947 system, that local authorities should control land use, appears to be abandoned and replaced with a simplified zoning approach – the Local Plan should comprise three zones – a *growth* zone, a *renewal* zone and a *protected* zone. The White Paper suggests that the first two categories could be merged. Development proposals within *growth* and *renewal* zones would normally receive automatic ‘in principle’ development consent without any assessment by local authority members or planning officer and without public consultation. National government policy together with a national design code would be the main basis for determining which developments could proceed. There would be no ability for a local authority to negotiate with a developer to improve a proposed scheme.

The urban design-based approach set out in the second section of the white paper is a parallel approach to the statutory planning approach set out in the first section. This design approach

derives from the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission co-chaired by the late philosopher, Roger Scruton (who was sacked by Theresa May before being reinstated by Boris Johnson) and it is unclear how the approach can be incorporated within a statutory planning framework.

It is important that quality and sustainability are incorporated in a planning system, but these factors must be based on objective criteria not subjective factors. Moreover, neither ‘quality’ nor ‘sustainability’ are equivalent to ‘beauty’, for which there is no objective and measurable criteria.

The concept of ‘sustainability’ used in this section relates to environmental sustainability, with little or no regard to social or economic sustainability.

Given the vacuity of the concepts used, it is difficult to draft a coherent response to many of the proposals in this section of the White Paper. Some commentators have already swallowed the persuasive rhetoric – who after all defends ugliness?

There is no recognition that some of the design requirements set, so far as they are specific, may have an impact on access to development in terms of affordability. Georgian mansions in Belgravia may be an ideal design, but few can afford to live in them. Aesthetics is replacing the historic notion of planning as a mechanism for achieving social, economic and environmental sustainability and for reducing social and spatial segregation and inequality.

The third section of the White Paper proposes that the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is based on a proportion of development value, though no rate is specified. At present Local Authorities set their own CIL rates, based on number of residential units or square metres of non-residential development – some LAs don’t charge CIL. This would simplify the current position, though flat rate levies do not reflect the varying profitability of individual developments in terms of value to cost ratio.

## The end of town planning as we know it (continued)

There is also an implication that planning obligations for affordable housing contributions could no longer be negotiated by councils. While it is proposed that CIL receipts could be used to fund affordable housing (which is not permitted at present) there is no certainty that CIL revenue would increase to replace lost planning obligations/ s106 contributions.

Over the last decade or so. The Labour Party has failed to grapple with the planning system and recognise both the positive and negative consequences of planning. There has not been a socialist planning society for some decades and the Labour Housing Group has not in the past focused sufficiently on the relationship between planning and housing.

**Planning is an important tool for achieving a socialist society. We should give it much more attention.**



Although **Sustainable Homes** was one of the topics chosen for an LHG briefing at our AGM in 2019, it has yet to find authors. **So this article is my attempt to kick-start a discussion.**

### Problems of definition

A growing interest in "sustainability" parallels our increasing sense of the fragility of our planet and the need to be better guardians of its resources.

Yet the term "sustainable" has itself become so elastic that there is a danger of it meaning something to everyone but nothing specific.

Unfortunately, examples of "sustainable homes" often look like "*detached houses for trendy architects*" rather than credible social housing.

However useful such exercises may be to designers, they should not form the basis of our plans.

### What qualities should we look for in a sustainable housing strategy?

**Homes should be created/updated that are:**

- Located where its residents can easily access key amenities, such as hospitals, schools, food shops and places of work

- Built with readily-available materials that meet the design-aims at an appropriate price
- In line with prevailing planning regulations regarding size, scale and appearance as well as being resistant to fire and flood
- Spacious enough to meet the needs of the intended number and type of residents.
- Efficiently warm or cool according to the season
- Long-lasting and capable of repair at reasonable expense for their design-life
- Genuinely affordable for the intended residents
- Amenable to removal or modification at the end of their design-life without undue expense or hazard.

### None of the above will be sufficient unless:

1. The democratic processes at national, regional and local levels are aligned to facilitate such developments.
2. Funding regimes are predictable, consistent, sufficient and progressive.
3. Every home has a "design lifetime" at the end of which it should be renewed or replaced.
4. The "vision" guiding projects is as broad as that applied to creating the best new towns, i.e. not just a builders' blueprint.

Paul Martin 1st August 2020

*If you can improve on this, please email me at pauljmartin@clara.co.uk*

# SUBSIDISE BRICKS AND MORTAR, NOT LANDLORDS

*By Ken Jones*

It's often worth wondering why things are as they are and how we got to there. In 1975, 82% of central government housing funding was dedicated to capital expenditure to build new homes that were really affordable, with just 18% going to rent and mortgage subsidies.

**By 2015/16 the landscape was transformed, with 95.7% spent on Housing Benefit and a mere 4.3% on supporting new-build homes.**

The nation now spends close to £25bn a year on benefits to subsidise rents which does nothing to add to the supply of new homes. This only swells the bank balances of landlords and gives a further twist to the dysfunctional state of housing in England.

Tory governments have pursued an ideologically driven home-ownership housing policy since the 1980s. As a result, council house building ground to a halt while funding for social housing via housing associations was inadequate to tackle mounting housing needs.

Labour's years in power from 1997 were a missed opportunity in terms of housing policy. The *Right to Buy* policy was allowed to continue and only in its dying days was council house building restored but at barely a trickle of the rate that was needed.

Grant levels to housing associations were raised to subsidise their new build schemes, but much of their programmes were funded through cross subsidy from new developments, as the government sought the creation of communities with a mixed tenure of market sale, shared ownership and social rented homes.

Significant investment from government was devoted to bringing council homes up to a *Decent Homes* standard, but these resources were contingent on councils transferring their housing stock either to independent housing associations or to arms' length management organisations (ALMOs).

One of the first acts of the Tory/Lib Dem Coalition was a disastrous 60% cut in funding for the

affordable housing programme and the raising of affordable rents to 80% of the local market rent level.

The Housing Cabinet Member in my London Borough correctly referred to this as "the unaffordable affordable rents" which they became throughout major cities where the overheated private rented market resulted in mounting rents.

Despite this, some real positives have emerged since 2012. In that year, self-financing of council housing was implemented off the back of John Healey's Green Paper in 2010.

As a result, Councils could now plan their housing service on a long term basis. They could build, own and manage social rented homes where their business plans demonstrated sufficient capacity within existing budgets.

Many councils have taken advantage of the opportunity presented and started building programmes, but even where they use their own land to underpin viability, there is a need for grant from Homes England or the Greater London Authority.

This is demonstrated clearly as the flaws of the cross-subsidy model become more apparent.

**If we believe that there is a need for 300,000 new homes a year of all tenures, then councils must be allowed and equipped to be a major provider.**

This makes sense not only in terms of meeting need, but also in terms of public expenditure and economic regeneration.

But for this to be realised public subsidy needs to be shifted away from Housing Benefit and towards bricks and mortar.

Clearly this would need to be carefully phased to protect those private sector tenants struggling with high rents, but this surely must be part of a long term solution to our dysfunctional housing system.

# KEY WORKER REFORM OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOUSANDS

By Mike Reader

When we clapped at 8pm during the pandemic, we did so without considering who employed the key workers we applauded. Care, health and social workers from public and private sector organisations were celebrated for their commitment, dedication and personal sacrifice in helping to keep our country safe during lockdown. But many of these workers will face uncertainty in their living situation.

Privatisation of our health and social sectors has meant that many of the roles considered 'key' under existing policies of housing associations and local government, are ineligible because their ultimate employer is a private sector body.

Why should someone's employer determine whether they are helped to find a safe, stable home?

Ambiguity exists across the country as to how key workers are supported. Some organisations will maintain a list of employers which make you eligible for support, others use the definitions from the long-extinct *Key Worker Living Policy* that was largely subsumed into other housing assistance programmes.

**Simply put, if you're a care worker working for a private care provider, your chances of securing support and accessing key worker housing is vastly reduced.**

So how should this be addressed?

A clear and unambiguous definition of key workers is the start. This should be based on the benefit to society that those roles deliver, not on the employer. It should take account of current and future employment trends and be used to encourage and reward those choosing roles that support the wider good.

And of course, it should be reviewed annually, in consultation with unions, employers and workers, to ensure that gaps are filled and changing demand is met.

There are some good examples emerging as organisations become aware of this gap in support. Housing developer Bovis Homes has recently updated its key worker policy to include all those who were deemed key workers under COVID19 guidance. I hope other public and private housing providers will follow suit.

**But it's pressure from Labour and the public that will change the situation for key workers, which is why the Labour Housing Group should carry the fight to level the playing field in housing.**

*Mike Reader is a management consultant with a track record of leading large scale public sector tenders in the property and infrastructure sectors. He is Secretary of Royal Docks Labour in Newham, Secretary of the Newham Fabians and Vice Secretary of the Newham Cooperatives.*

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If you cannot spare time and energy, you can still help us in our work by making a donation by bank transfer to "Labour Housing Group", account number 50478080, sort code 08-90-06, Co-operative Bank, PO Box 1AN, Blandford Street, Newcastle, NE99 1AN.

Of course, you can also send a cheque made payable to "Labour Housing Group" c/o **The Treasurer, Flat 2, 8 Torrington Park, London N12 9SS**

**PLEASE QUOTE "LHG2020 CAMPAIGN"**

# THE LABOUR HOUSING GROUP TEAM

## LHG EXECUTIVE 2020

*LHG's Executive was elected at the AGM 21<sup>st</sup> March for the two years to 2022.*

Executive member	Constituency/role
Andy Bates (co-opted)	<b>Speakers' organiser</b>
Janet Berry	<b>Membership Officer</b> ( <i>Winchester CLP</i> )
John Bevan	<b>Vice-chair</b> ( <i>Tottenham CLP</i> )
Rachel Blake	<b>Branches liaison</b> ( <i>Bethnal Green &amp; Bow CLP</i> )
Nick Bragger (co-opted)	<b>Fundraising</b> ( <i>Guildford CLP</i> )
John Cotton	<b>Chair</b> ( <i>Birmingham Perry Barr CLP</i> )
Ed Derrick	<b>Website link</b> ( <i>Newcastle Central CLP</i> )
Gerard Heffey (co-opted)	( <i>West Derby CLP</i> )
Ross Houston	<b>Treasurer</b> ( <i>Finchley &amp; Golders Green CLP</i> )
Heather Johnson	<b>Vice-chair &amp; Events Organiser</b> ( <i>Hampstead &amp; Kilburn CLP</i> )
Paul Martin	<b>Newsletter Editor and Policy Officer</b> ( <i>Poplar &amp; Limehouse CLP</i> )
Amanda Pinnock	<b>Social media</b> - ( <i>Huddersfield CLP</i> )
Sheila Spencer	<b>Secretary</b> ( <i>North Tyneside CLP</i> )
Christopher Worrall (co-opted)	<b>Blog lead</b> ( <i>Poplar &amp; Limehouse CLP</i> )

## WHAT IS THE LABOUR HOUSING GROUP?

The Labour Housing Group is a lobbying group that is affiliated to the Labour Party and dedicated to the development of a socialist housing policy.

You can contact us at <http://labourhousing.org/contact> and join us at <https://labourhousing.org/membership/>

Individuals must be members of the Labour Party and agree to be bound by Labour Party rules and the LHG constitution

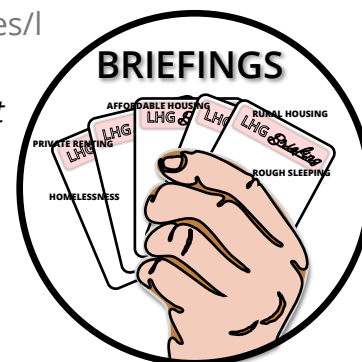
**For readers new to housing policy issues, *Labour Housing Group* publishes a series of short guides aimed at a wide readership.**

Our six published **Briefings** on current topics include *Homelessness, Rough Sleeping, Affordable Housing, Private Renting Sector, Rural Housing* and *Leasehold Reform*. They can be found at:

<https://labourhousing.org/resources/hg-briefings/>

Forthcoming issues will cover, *Right to Buy, Sustainable Homes* and *Council Homes*.

If you would like to contribute, please email our Policy Officer, Paul Martin at [pauljmartin@clara.co.uk](mailto:pauljmartin@clara.co.uk).



*Opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of the Labour Housing Group.*