

Housing

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Town and Country Planning Association attaches great importance to social matters as generators of planning policy. It is especially concerned that the people should be well housed; that deliberate under-provision of housing, whether in terms of its quantity or quality, should not be tolerated for any reason; and that present low annual rates of building should be increased to meet existing need, especially for social housing and for new needs arising from the projected growth in households and from rising space requirements in and around the home. Properly planned and optimally located provision can ameliorate the environmental impact of new housing, but should not be used as an instrument for constraining the overall supply – either by allocating insufficient land or by suggesting housing in places where there is clearly no demand for it.
- 1.2 The TCPA believes that the housing debate has become unnecessarily polarised between environmental and building interests. Planned provision on sustainable development principles offers a third way forward which meets environmental conditions without leaving the population seriously under-housed. The Association has a long record of urging the importance of urban regeneration, in which housing development and renewal must play a significant part, but it also insists that greenfield development has an inevitable part in the portfolio of housing developments which will be needed. The full range of options includes urban conversions, brownfield building, suburban extensions, village and town expansions, and new settlement creation.

2 Popular Housing Aspirations

- 2.1 The TCPA is deeply concerned that housing policy should take proper account of people's expressed desires in terms of the internal space, external surroundings, location (particularly in relation to place of work), and density of the housing they would like to occupy. Generalised terms like a decent home and reference to adequate choice are insufficient.
- 2.2 Popular aspirations in the housing field are well documented by numerous public surveys and research and should only be overridden for proven and compelling reasons. In crucial policy areas such a convincing rationale is lacking. The current debate about planning and housing is dominated by dogma which places an infinite value on saving greenfields regardless of the social consequences and simply assumes that higher development densities will reduce car dependency and congestion.
- 2.3 The Association also fully supports the principle that enjoyment of a home of one's own brings with it certain environmental responsibilities. At their broadest these encompass the sustainable location of the home (in so far as an occupant can influence this), its environmentally sound operation, and environmentally friendly activity in and around it (including travel mode choice).
- 2.4 The TCPA is concerned by the reduction in internal space standards in the average house over the past century. At a time when the accumulation of consumer goods and pressure to work from home is increasing, new family housing is offering less space per person than it used to. Evidence clearly rejects the assumption that households consisting only of single people and couples are likely to require only one bedroom and have little desire to own a private garden, however small.

3 Relationship of Housing to Jobs

- 3.1 Associated with a substantial movement of population from metropolitan areas and older industrial towns to smaller towns and rural areas in recent decades has been a comparable shift in employment. (Jobs have gone predominantly to new towns, smaller towns and

villages, rather than to open countryside.) This urban-rural shift of jobs followed, and was partly caused by, population movement, but has also had its own drivers. These include growing business dissatisfaction with the older urban areas as places in which to operate, the changing nature of industry, particularly the rapid growth of the private service sector (which is relatively footloose), the perceived living advantages offered by rural areas, and easier road access.

- 3.2** The TCPA's report *The People: Where Will They Work?*, published in December 1999, concluded that these employment trends were deeply entrenched and likely to continue even though jobs and homes were now located less closely together because of increased personal mobility and other factors. Positive, highly desirable policies to make the cities more attractive, to promote sustainable development and so on, are unlikely to reverse these trends in the foreseeable future. Attempting to revive cities by negative measures to restrain investment outside them is to risk choking off economic development of great national economic significance.
- 3.3** The TCPA argues that rural development is important and should not always be inhibited in the cause of furthering urban regeneration. One fifth of the population lives in rural areas and can face severe disadvantage through lack of housing, economic development, and jobs. The use of land currently designated for employment to build housing may be realistic in certain urban areas where there is clearly an excess of such land, but could be counterproductive in rural locations where there is a shortage of potential employment land. In some cases it could run counter to the goal of mixed development and the need for homes and workplaces to be closer to each other.

4 Housing and Sustainable Development

- 4.1** The TCPA believes that housebuilding policy should have as its main objective that everyone should be housed to a level which at least reflects their reasonable aspirations. The Association believes that we can have both a rigorous application of soundly based sustainable development principles and a standard of planned housing provision that significantly improves the living environment of everyone. There are social and economic, as well as environmental, aspects to sustainable development: the TCPA believes that meeting housing requirements is one of the most important of these.
- 4.2** The TCPA has a long history of support for mixed-use development and socially and economically balanced communities. The Association supports development of more sustainable patterns of settlement which deliver accessibility by public transport. It is mindful of evidence that compact-city plans can achieve significant reductions in car use but is concerned that this may be associated with inefficiency in the use of other resources and in conflict with the desirable objective of greening the city. The Association is aware that in terms of renewable energy, water recycling, self-sufficiency in food production, and general biodiversity, less compact settlements tend to have the better record.
- 4.3** The TCPA holds that regional, county, and unitary authority forecast housing requirements, once agreed, should be rigorously adhered to in forward planning. Household formation projections must play a significant role in the planning of future housing development. The new system of plan, monitor, and manage will only be useful if clear and detailed plans for adequate housing are put in place as the first part of the process. These must relate to reasonable forecasts of employment provision and a workable transport system.
- 4.4** The TCPA believes the threat to the countryside from the large proportion of households wanting houses with gardens is greatly exaggerated, even if most of the new housing needed over the next quarter century were to be built at moderate densities. It is also clear that the optimum balance between increased urban density and savings in land and energy use occurs at the sort of medium densities – approximately 40 dwellings per hectare (net) – that the TCPA has advocated for virtually the entire century of its existence. Densities higher than this, if unpopular, are unlikely to stem out-migration from the urban areas.
- 4.5** The TCPA argues, on the basis of its own research findings, that housing land recycling targets should relate to the amount of recyclable brownfield land available to individual local authorities rather than to any single national target such as the 60 per cent brownfield target presently adopted by the Government, which will prove inappropriate to local

circumstances. The Association has drawn attention to the importance of integrating decisions on planning and transport and exploiting opportunities to promote growth well served by public transport, whether inside urban areas or on new sites.

- 4.6** The TCPA supports the case for adjusting green belt boundaries where their alteration would allow more sustainable development, but without impinging on areas of high landscape or other intrinsic value or, if possible, on the best agricultural land.

5 The Portfolio Approach

- 5.1** The TCPA advocates a portfolio approach to housing land allocation, under which an appropriate variety of housing land, both in and out of urban areas is used, regulated by phasing tailored to local circumstances.
- 5.2** Appropriate locations for new housing may include urban and city sites, urban edge sites, infilling, and modest extensions to rural towns and selected villages, as well as carefully located and planned new settlements or new towns. An overriding and exclusive priority to develop previously used urban land is not practicable or desirable, as shown, for example, by the substantial amount of household growth that is expected to arise in rural counties. The Association fears a build-up of housing need in such areas, followed by a rush of ill-considered land releases (planning by appeal) in order to catch up on the backlog of demand, as has happened in the past.
- 5.3** The TCPA welcomes government recognition – in PPG3: *Housing* (March 2000) – that the sequential approach may not be applicable in all cases and that previously developed land has to meet suitability criteria before being developed for housing. The Association takes the view that a sequential approach to housing land is a matter for the planning authority to apply in allocating land and in phasing land releases, but in deciding the majority of individual planning applications it will not prove practicable.

6 Housing Development Outside Existing Urban Areas

- 6.1** The TCPA supports the goal of making good use of existing urban areas for housing purposes. Urban regeneration is a high priority where there is dereliction. A proportion of the new homes required must be built in urban areas to help the process. But that proportion will vary – applying a rule-of-thumb percentage everywhere is unrealistic and could lead to overcrowding, which would be highly damaging to the quality of life. The Association notes that most people's housing requirements are met in suburbs. While there is much room for improvement in the design of suburban housing and in the planning and re-planning of suburban communities, housing styles which allow for space, flexibility of use, and adaptation to changing household circumstances remain an ideal not to be casually abandoned. The Association is greatly encouraged by research which shows that moderately higher net densities, with a mixture of housing types, can be achieved without destroying the dominant house and garden character of many established and popular residential areas.
- 6.2** Good-quality houses with gardens, which can be achieved at medium densities, reflect the desires of a high proportion of the population – desires that should only be frustrated for very good reasons. The latent hostility harboured by many of the more affluent towards what they dismiss as suburban environments and lifestyles does not constitute such a good reason – a high proportion of those who live in suburbs do so by preference. Nor do unsubstantiated assertions about the need for high densities in order to meet the demands of sustainability or to save green fields. Except in cases of landscapes worth protecting for their beauty, or for their ecological or amenity value, the supposed loss of countryside involved in developing previously undeveloped land has to be balanced against the social benefit of housing people properly near their places of work, shopping, entertainment, etc.
- 6.3** The TCPA argues that not all housing development can or should take place within urban areas and that there are significant advantages in building elsewhere. Developments on previously undeveloped land, whether in town extensions, village expansions, or new settlements and new towns (all of them part of the portfolio approach) are necessary for urban restructuring at both the individual town and city level and at the sub-regional and

city-regional scales. This will make all our urban areas liveable once more and create those functioning networks and hierarchies of settlements the Association calls sociable cities.

- 6.4** Making smaller towns and villages prosperous, attractive, successful, and well related to existing larger urban areas can help rather than hinder urban regeneration. Approaching settlement problems with the intention of cramming as much development as possible into existing urban areas and only then considering where else to allow it is the wrong approach: it ignores powerful social and economic forces, particularly the decentralisation of population and employment. The TCPA accepts the challenge to make our 19th century conurbation cities liveable again: this must be achieved – but it will not stop the out-movement or do much to stem it.
- 6.5** The TCPA recognises that urban extensions will be useful where they can use existing physical and social infrastructure. But it warns against the possible effects on existing settlements to which this solution is applied. The add-on estate is notorious for cutting off the people who are already living in a town from their nearby countryside. It is also important that all substantial extensions should strive for a degree of self-containment and mixture of uses. New dormitory suburbs should be out of the question, and adequate shops, employment, and services must be provided. As long as such developments are linked to the centres and sub-centres of their parent settlement by public transport, and car use for the purpose is severely restrained, there are advantages in their being fully detached, if only by a mile. Overgrowth of an original settlement by successive accretions would thus be avoided.

7 New Settlements and New Towns

- 7.1** The advantages of concentrating some development into major new settlements or new towns (including expansions of small country towns and villages) are well established. Large numbers of people can be settled in congenial surroundings on sites of relatively low landscape or agricultural use value. The countryside and existing rural settlements are protected from the effects of scattering the development far and wide. Housing can be planned in relation to places of work and entertainment, a full range of retail and community facilities can be provided, a sense of community can be generated, and public transport services can be devised from scratch, with the real prospect of sufficient passengers making use of them. Commerce and industry can take advantage of optimum conditions in terms of workforce availability, transport access, and potential expansion. Plans can take account of sustainability issues (especially, since virtually all buildings will be new, through energy conservation measures in building design), and should always accommodate a full cross-section of the population.
- 7.2** The TCPA welcomes government recognition, in PPG3: *Housing* (March 2000), that in the right location and with the right concept, new settlements can make a contribution to meeting the need for housing. However, it does not agree that their high initial costs are a valid reason for creating them only infrequently. Their land and development costs need to be weighed against the financial return they eventually show and their economic, social and environmental benefits. Moreover, there are costs to the public purse from development wherever it takes place, although they may arise indirectly. If there were any question of public subsidy, high initial costs might be a relevant consideration. But the only prospects at present are either for the private sector to take the matter up (as it has in many recent cases) or for the public sector to become involved. It would do this by appropriating development value under the New Towns Act, which is still available on the statute book, or by making use of some similarly effective machinery. So it can be assumed that any fully worked-out proposal for a new settlement will be commercially viable.
- 7.3** All major forms of development should be subject to the same tests. The TCPA supports the idea that new settlements should be big enough to provide desirable town services and exploit a public transport network. But any stipulation that they must always make use of previously developed land is unworkable. Of course some redundant airfields, brickfields, and quarries may be appropriately located, in which case their use would make sense. But the Association believes that a new settlement may often be a very good way of accommodating some necessary greenfield developments which would otherwise be scattered around many different places. And the proposal that a new settlement should be allowed only if there is no more sustainable alternative would be a restrictive condition not

applied to any other form of development. Making new settlement proposals meet a special set of planning conditions would be entirely irrational.

- 7.4** Regional plans should be the mechanism for bringing forward new settlement proposals – it is not necessary to require that all the local authorities concerned should support such a proposal. While it is to be hoped that the recipient district council will be persuaded of the advantages of the proposal, this can hardly be assumed. It would be entirely unacceptable if coherent and publicly beneficial regional housing and planning strategies were to founder on the veto of just one lower-tier council. Any major new settlement or new town proposal affecting more than one county or unitary authority needs to appear in regional planning guidance. But smaller proposals affecting only a single county or district might be adopted through a county structure plan, a unitary development plan, or a district plan.

8 Density

- 8.1** Research shows that savings of land or gains in sustainability are only marginal above a medium density of approximately 37 dwellings to the hectare (net) – about 15 to the acre. This finding is outlined in the TCPA Tomorrow Series discussion paper *Sustainable Cities or Town Cramming?*. Higher densities are rarely justified unless in limited areas around transport nodes, and usually anything over 50 per hectare (net) would be excessive because such densities tend to squeeze out the opportunity for a sufficient number of private gardens and adequate internal space - vital parts of most good residential environments. High densities involving flats are usually unsuitable for households with children and are not the preferred choice of most other households. However, in the majority of cases very low densities (below 25 dwellings per hectare) will not be appropriate, for sustainability reasons – nor indeed desirable for the creation of liveable communities in which many trips are walkable or cyclable.
- 8.2** It is possible to build at medium densities without becoming an entirely car-dependent society. The Garden City experience proves the point. Many variables other than density are involved, not least the better mixing of land uses, adequate investment in public transport, internet shopping, home delivery services, road pricing aimed at commuter traffic, and a range of other disincentives to excessive car use. Some of the earliest modern (i.e. 20th century) suburbs grew in response to extensions of urban rail networks and omnibus services and are still organised around them.
- 8.3** Excessive off-street parking provision may add unnecessarily to the cost and land requirements of new housing. But while reducing car use is a realistic goal, especially in the main towns and cities, car ownership remains a dominant aspiration of most of the population. Homes lacking off-road parking or garaging in established urban areas are less attractive to potential occupants than those with this feature. So the real target of planning policies should be car use rather than car ownership – although there is a complex relationship between the two. In the context of policies to make the inner city as attractive a place in which to live as out-of-city, it would be a mistake to discriminate against car ownership in the cities while leaving it as easy as ever elsewhere. Too many of the affluent, who are needed to make mixed and thriving city communities, would simply regard the impossibility or difficulty of keeping their car as a major disincentive to urban living. Restrictions on non-residential parking, on the other hand, would be a far more useful measure for traffic reduction.
- 8.4** Higher residential densities threaten the aspirations of many households for additional domestic space, for living or for storage. The internal space standards of modern houses are inadequate to cope with the pressures of the current consumer society, and are further stretched by the rise in homeworking. This is evident from the widespread conversion of garages for living or storage purposes. The TCPA urges that minimum space standards along the lines of the Parker-Morris standards of the 1960s be re-introduced for all new development.
- 8.5** The TCPA fully endorses the need for urban regeneration, but does not believe that very high residential densities are necessarily always appropriate. The life and prosperity of the whole extent of our cities will not be revived by redevelopment at the densities, and with the range of activities, to be found in city centres. In order that regenerated urban areas achieve well balanced communities, it is necessary that a substantial proportion of new

homes are suitable for families with children. There is a danger in tailoring new stock too tightly to the household structures of the moment. If very high densities are adopted, those in a position to do so will continue to move away in search of the greater space and security, cheaper or free forms of recreation, healthier surroundings, and better services associated with lower-density living environments. Lower urban densities do not lead to loss of population; rather, the outward movement of people (a less loaded term than loss) gives the opportunity for lower-density redevelopment, but is not usually caused by it.

- 8.6** It is important to recognise the problems associated with town cramming and the need to avoid it. There is an urgent need to define and set standards for urban capacity studies and to decide the criteria by which capacity is to be judged. The TCPA is wary of the effect that the anticipation of windfall site numbers can have in reducing the need to plan ahead and in raising development densities to levels which may make more areas unattractive to families and other households. Any kind of target for windfall sites increases the likelihood of inappropriate and over-dense developments being permitted. It is important to make full use of the existing housing stock, but excessive sub-division of urban housing by conversion into large numbers of inflexible, very small flats and bedsits should be avoided.
- 8.7** Open space is vitally important in the urban environment, and gardens, both in public parks and those attached to individual private houses in urban and suburban areas, make an important contribution to a sustainable urban environment, as do allotments and many vacant sites. They do this through their value as social amenities and through their contribution to biodiversity, which is often greater than that offered by today's agricultural land.

9 Affordable Housing

- 9.1** There is a substantial unmet need for affordable housing in many urban and rural areas. The movement of population from older urban to more rural areas has pushed up house prices in those areas and made access to housing for people on lower and even average earnings difficult. Restrictions on greenfield development are likely to exacerbate the problem and in those urban areas where an urban renaissance is occurring, similar disadvantages to lower-income households are to be seen.
- 9.2** Provision of affordable housing is therefore important and the TCPA welcomes the evidence in PPG3: *Housing* (March 2000) that the Government thinks so too. But the need should be properly defined. The key ratios between local income levels and house prices or rents have to be identified regionally or sub-regionally. Account should also be taken of differences between urban and rural circumstances. An additional constraint arises from the need for affordable housing to be accessible to shops, schools, and work by non-car modes of transport.
- 9.3** The need for affordable housing has to be addressed by provision of adequate land for new housing in all areas where the need arises, rural as well as urban, as well as by an increase in the supply of social housing. The latter depends essentially on increased public resources, either centrally through taxation or locally through planning gain negotiations. It is disappointing that the release of local authority capital receipts since 1997 has not resulted in more social housing units being created.
- 9.4** The shortfall between the supply and the need for affordable housing is characteristic of the housing situation in many areas of the country, especially in southern England. It has been apparent for many years that neither housing associations nor the private sector have been able to meet the need. Local public intervention is required to achieve appropriate mixes of housing types, assemble large development or redevelopment sites, and phase the release of land for development. But local planning authorities are not equipped to direct the housing market in detail, although comprehensively planned major development schemes on land acquired at or close to existing use value – for example under the New Towns Act or a similar mechanism – is capable of yielding very substantial proportions of affordable housing.
- 9.5** Since under-supply in the private sector raises demand in the public sector, it is time for an increase in public resources to flow into affordable housing provision. Otherwise there could be wide differences in how neighbouring authorities treat the matter, with serious

consequences both for housing demand and supply in some areas but not in others and for migration rates between local authority areas.

10 Design

10.1 The TCPA urges that good quality and good design be given a higher priority in considering housing proposals, and that the Government should be prepared to support, through the appeal system, local authorities which insist on design improvements. Design is not just about appearance, materials and setting, important though these are: it is also about fitness for purpose, personal space, ease of access between activities, enhancement of the public realm, and environmental impacts, including energy and water conservation and bio-diversity. It also involves safety, security, noise insulation, health, privacy, and daylighting.

11 Conclusion

11.1 The TCPA believes that public policy-makers in national and local government should treat the proper housing of the people as an all-important national priority and a necessary element in any sustainable development strategy. Well planned, spacious, greenfield development is a positive and desirable part of the national approach to housebuilding. Obsessive protection of all countryside from use for new housing serves neither social nor environmental purposes, and is likely to further damage, rather than improve, the cities whose regeneration is so important. The long-term view must embrace revival of sustainable cities on social and economic as well as environmental and aesthetic criteria or they will not be truly sustainable places. Applying a city centre vision of the urban future to inner city and suburban environments will only rarely be appropriate.

11.2 It remains true that there is nothing to be gained by overcrowding and a great deal that may be lost, but equally that there are circumstances in which excessively low densities can work against the viability of public transport. Moderately raised densities need not mean abandonment of the predominantly house-and-garden environment which is the aspiration of the great majority of the population. Much better design and variety in housing is required, along with policies to ensure that in areas of housing pressure effective affordable housing policies are in place.

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) has been at the forefront of the debate concerning the type and location of new housing that will be needed to meet the projected increase in households over the next 25 years. In 1996 we published a region-by-region examination of the implications of the household projections. In 1998 we published a further series of reports which sought to investigate the constraints and opportunities for brownfield development in cities. We gave evidence to the Environment Select Committees two recent inquiries into housing and have recently completed a major new project (supported by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and a wide range of private sector concerns), entitled *The People: Where Will They Work?* This research examines the effect of changing patterns of employment on housing provision. We are also investigating, during the year 2000 and with help from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the potential contribution to the achievement of planning objectives of economic instruments such as taxes on land value increases resulting from development.