

Sustainable Neighbourhoods; Sustainable City
A debate on the future of housing in the centre of a world city.

On 16th May 2006 over 70 guests from a range of professional backgrounds joined the Westminster Housing Commission to discuss the future of housing in the centre of London. Hosted by Royal Institute of British Architects, "Sustainable Neighbourhoods; Sustainable City" stimulated a wide ranging debate.

The Westminster Housing Commission was set up to look at new and creative ways of combating the City's shortage of affordable housing it. To inform its work the Commission wanted to use the event to explore how urban neighbourhoods can be developed at higher densities, with sustainability remaining core to their design.

Opening Comments

The event was opened by Kelvin MacDonald, Director of Policy and Practice at the Royal Town Planning Institute and Affiliated Lecturer at the Department of Land Economy, Cambridge, Westminster Housing Commissioner.

Kelvin introduced the work of the Westminster Housing Commission, of which he and a number of people in the audience are members. Kelvin summarised the focus of work of the Commission as follows:

- Ensuring a variety of quality homes are available to Westminster residents with a range of housing needs
- Approaches to intermediate housing and mixed tenure
- Homelessness
- Overcrowding

In capturing the aim of this event Kelvin said

"We are looking at this event to bring forward some innovative thinking, new ideas, new policy approaches, and new ways of thinking about problems to try and reconcile some of the inherent conflicts".

Kelvin presented the complexity of housing issues facing the City Council, with over 5,500 households in priority need, a small supply of affordable housing coming through annually, resulting in high numbers of households spending a minimum of several years living in temporary accommodation.

With property prices being very high these factors mean that "Westminster is very different from most local authorities in the country" he said.

Kelvin queried whether the demand for more and more housing was at odds with other policy initiatives including planning policy. To illustrate the point he

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said that the Housing Commission had received a submission from Church St. which detailed some of the problems arising from high density.

Kelvin urged members of the audience to use the Housing Commission website <http://www.westminsteronline.org/housingcommission/> to access some of the evidence and wealth of background papers, which have been presented to the commission, of which the transcripts from this event will be added.

Kelvin briefly introduced the first speaker, Sir Terry Farrell, Principal of Farrell's and a member of the Westminster Housing Commission.

Design of the public realm for high-density areas. What can be achieved in Westminster?

Sir Terry Farrell, Architect & Urban Designer - Principal, Terry Farrell and Partners and Westminster Housing Commissioner

Terry Farrell began by querying if it was value for money to build in Westminster where land values are so high. The alternative he said was to build in areas with cheaper land values but in which people may not want to live.

Terry outlined the various places he had lived as a child, including a council estate in Newcastle. Although the type of housing and terminology has changed over time, building in high numbers remains constant with John Prescott calling for 200, 000 new homes in the Thames Gateway.

"I don't believe in the numbers games" said Terry, "it's about place making.....housing can't be separated from the high street, schools & hospitals".

For Terry's parents a move off the estate to a house was very important as they made it their own, unlike the estate which Terry said, "*made the individual feel much diminished*".

Terry outlined the changes which have occurred in house building and the rise and fall of co-ownership, which had engendered individualism. When financial institutions finally agreed to fund conversions it transformed London, enabling increased density....."*packing them in without the towers*".

He compared density in London to that of Hong Kong, with the 6-7m people in London being so much more spread out. The geography of Hong Kong has forced such high densities with mountains and water being natural barriers. He suggested that the infrastructure in Hong Kong is what has enabled such densities to work.

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Terry said that the British believe in a “rural idyll”, which results in high density being widely perceived as problematic. *“Density is not in itself a bad thing”* said Terry, encouraging the audience to consider Kensington & Chelsea which has the highest density of any local authority in the country.

Terry outlined some recent work which he had undertaken comparing central London zones and the Thames Gateway. The density of the central London boroughs could easily be accommodated / replicated in the London section of the Thames Gateway and he therefore questioned why such a large area is required.

He pointed to the stratification of London and how if local authorities had been divided east west instead of north south, the poorest borough statistically would be in the middle of London.

He encouraged the audience to think about how the private sector works:

- any “infill” in Maida Vale or Marylebone will be highly prized and developed, yet attempting to do the same on a social housing estate would be problematic.
- densification may not be very glamorous, but it is being successfully done in the private sector
- it rewards those already living in the sector to accept further densification, (needs to be replicated in social housing sector)

Terry concluded his speech by focusing on the planning system which he considered/s to be inconsistent. Replicating K&C all over London*“could get another 2 million people into the City”*.

Despite there being an overall policy for London he felt that this does not reach down to the boroughs, which means that achieving this target would be difficult.

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Sustainable neighbourhoods and successful communities – getting it right in the heart of the city.

June Barnes, Group Chief Executive of East Thames Housing and Chair of the London Sustainable Development Commission

“Making housing work in London is a series of small solutions, with maybe one or two big ideas attached to them” June began. She said the key is the individual and what they might need.

While not speaking as a Commissioner of the London Sustainable Development Commission, June said that the word sustainability is a buzz word, which can be very confusing. For her sustainability equals long lasting, *“.....in terms of social, environmental and economic. It’s about creating places that people want to live long term”*.

June felt that we do not have the heritage of Hong Kong and therefore are unlikely to change our perceptions of high density. June summarised some recent work which she had done with the LSE and with Poplar Housing.

She suggested that council estates are medium density surrounded by grass areas, and that poor management ensures that perceptions of density remain negative. Infill on social housing estates should be handled sensitively she said with benefits being for people living there already, rather than *“bringing in richer people and giving them the best housing”*.

She suggested changing the terminology from “high density” to “compact” which may alter perceptions. June outlined work, which the London Housing Federation has done which showed that:

- Location works, with well located estates working very well
- Good management is key to success
- Low child density is an important factor
- Design is important, but won’t work if the management is not very good.
- Early engagement of people who will live in the properties is key
- Landscaping is integral to design and should not be left till last when saving can be made
- Like housing in Europe a mix of tenants is important, rewarding long term tenants, and not over allocating to homeless households.

The key to success June felt, was choice. Referring to the audience she suggested that if they had the choice they would buy an additional bedroom yet in social housing she said *“we pack it to the rafters when we let it the first time round and then we wonder why we have problems later”*.

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For June it is not the density of the building that was important, but the density of people and lifestyle, how they live their lives and what their options are. If members of a household are in their flat 24:7 their experience is very different to a household going out to work every day.

June outlined her view of high density as being that of a Victorian street pattern, with a mix of houses, flats and mansion blocks and significant amounts of private space.

June recommended *“building things which are going to be cheap to run long term”* because long term revenue funding is always an issue. She suggested that for many people parking becomes a worry when they begin to think about high density. Unless public transport is sorted out she felt that a car is almost a necessity.

In East Thames they have looked at other support requirements and have initiated a food access programme. She said that housing providers need to consider the knock on effects of increased densities on local services, and the possible disruption for local people. An example she gave was the impact on school places catering for households from the new development, which resulted in their being no spaces for siblings of existing pupils.

June identified a number of solutions to the issues she raised:

- The need to work out who we want to live in the Thames Gateway, and to then make them an attractive offer
- spatial, people and social master planning in the Thames Gateway will lead to success
- Pre allocating homes before they are built so that people are involved in designing where they will live
- Introduction of density ceilings as well as density floors
- Under allocation
- Innovative solutions to solve the revenue funding dilemma, such as leasing rather than buying land, public land holding trust etc.

To conclude June said that the small ideas which she referred to at the beginning of her speech are about *“understanding who we are wanting to house, understanding how they live and what their needs are”*.

Investing in new housing - an environmental perspective.

Jonathan Smales Chairman, Beyond Green, previously Director of Greenpeace

“Living on the planet as if we intended to stay” Jonathan said was his favourite definition of sustainable development. He said that although the WWF say that British lifestyles will need three planets to sustain us, that he felt it was worse than this. With growth in global economies and populations the *“impact on the biosphere by 2050 will be ten times greater than if we do nothing”*.

Jonathan stated that London is not intrinsically unsustainable, but it is the lifestyles which are lived in London which are unsustainable. He stated that the challenge was *“to design environments, buildings and places which make it easier and more attractive to be sustainable”*.

Using a comprehensive set of slides Jonathan outlined various ways that sustainability can be achieved:

- Designing shared environments for cars and people, which can be very attractive and are to be found in northern Europe
- Having a radical shift towards walking and cycling along the lines of Copenhagen where there is a real cycle culture
- Greening the city – greenery all over and around buildings – which are then energy efficient and good for the ecology of the city
- Innovative use of renewable energy technologies which can be built in or on properties
- Using household appliances – e.g. installations which can reduce the use of water by 50% without diminishing quality of life
- Employing expertise on sustainable energy in the planning departments of local authorities
- Imaginative design of the public realm, using facilities such as water treatment plants for educational purposes
- Changing the curriculum, but also the environment in which children are brought up in e.g. using local food producers, farmers markets etc.

Jonathan said that *“if you are going to ask people to change their lives for sustainability you have to invite them in and involve them”*.

He said that the challenge was to create neighbourhoods of choice, where people on low incomes can find a place to stay as their income change and as regeneration happens.

Jonathan concluded by questioning why Scandinavian people live much more sustainably than we do and asked why they create and celebrate place in a way that is not done in this country.



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Kelvin offered the other two members of the Panel an opportunity to add their thoughts to the debate before opening it up to the audience.

**Dickon Robinson, Former Development Director at Peabody Trust,
CABE Commissioner**

Dickon emphasised the unique nature of the housing market in Westminster, calling it *“the second home capital”* of the country.

He suggested challenging the market as there are solutions to be gained by engaging with the private sector. He said that this sector is often demonised by local authorities, but through an expansion/extension of the buy to let sector can deliver an expanded private rented sector.

David Lunts Head of Policy & Partnerships at the GLA and Observer to the Westminster Housing Commission

David concluded that all the previous speakers were worried about one thing or another but suggested that we shouldn't be depressed because *“London is working exceptionally well”*.

He queried whether the fundamental problem is about housing the poor or whether it is about dealing with some of the underlying issues around poverty. *“The most unsustainable thing about London is that we have the highest proportion of people outside the labour market in the UK and it is getting worse not better”* said David. He suggested that it is the latter issue which needs to be dealt with and not just the lack of affordable housing which is a symptom of it.

He felt that we will need to encourage more mobility in the sub market sectors in housing in London rather than the historical dependency on mobility within boroughs.

Referring to Terry Farrell's presentation David said that there are good examples of standardised design and standardised management. He said he disagreed with June Barnes about the need for density ceilings which he said could constrain good design and management.

David was in agreement with Terry Farrell on the issue of planning in London which he felt contained too many risks and delays. Similar to Dickon he suggested that the private sector needs to be harnessed better. However he felt that in addition to a house building sector which is not interested in increasing supply, the lack of investment in social housing will continue to hamper progress.

Comments made from the floor.

- Balancing needs: keyworker housing should be an important feature of any new housing development, and higher densities should be considered in all areas not just those with high levels of social housing
 - A high quality transport infrastructure is important in ensuring that:
 - a) keyworkers can commute from areas with more affordable property prices
 - b) rehousing opportunities across London & the Thames Gateway are attractive to existing Westminster households
 - Poverty, employability and shortage of affordable housing are inter-linked and need to be tackled together
 - Creative models of ownership other than shared ownership are needed, enabling units to be retained and making ownership an option for those in the social rented sector
 - Security of tenure – should social tenancies be in perpetuity?
 - Housing providers should focus on under occupation to free up larger units. In addition they should be encouraged to look at ‘knocking through’ flats into larger family units
 - How do we tackle the quandary of persuading households to move to Thames Gateway and beyond, given their current desirable location in the centre of London
 - Housing providers can enable tenants to become keyworkers of tomorrow through job placements and other employment initiatives
 - Waltherton & Elgin Homes (WECH) was advocated as an example of successful involvement of residents in managing their own homes
 - Private developers and RSL’s – Local authorities perceived as being reluctant to work with the former and different funding streams were seen as delivering different standards of design and built product
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Closing Remarks

The chairman invited each member of the Panel to make some concluding remarks.

Dickon Robinson concluded that the debate was rather depressing but that *“we need to be much more radical in our whole approach, in providing housing, in planning, and we do need to look abroad for models of institutional revolution, to break the mould”*.

David Lunts added that government policies very often do not favour London, and that the time has come to challenge this. The Mayor and the GLA is the route to do this. In conclusion he added that there may need to be a proper debate to include a challenge to the notion of security of tenure.

Terry Farrell said that *“London is an entity, it works as an entity..... yet we run it in bits and that doesn’t make a lot of sense”*.

He reiterated his earlier point about the prejudice which surrounds high density and that getting the organisation and management right is crucial.

June Barnes concluded that choice is key and that we needed to reinvent some choices for people, including those on middle incomes.

Jonathan Smales acknowledged the quality of the debate but said he was very disappointed that his presentation had not triggered one question or comment. He urged the audience to start taking action now on environmental sustainability. He acknowledged the structural and social dimensions to lifestyle choices. Jonathan suggested the need to address issues of under occupation before talking about the scale of new build, particularly as we are not dealing with environmental issues.

Kelvin MacDonald concluded by saying that none of the issues can be addressed in isolation.....*“you can’t separate out environmental sustainability from allocations, equality of design from funding streams”*.

He said that there were actions arising from the debate, one of which is to look to schemes which are working, and those that are overseas and capture what could be done in Westminster.

Kelvin closed the event by thanking the speakers for their excellent presentations and the audience for their participation.