

The strange death of Conservative housing

The proposed NPPF looks like a manifesto for the haves in society

One can only scrutinise the latest attempt to deliver nirvana via the National Planning Policy Framework draft revisions with amusement, tempered by incredulity. Needless to say planners themselves are pleased that there is a consultation exercise, since endless rule changes and consultations are part of the working processes of the planning system itself. Over the last decade, funding for local authority planning departments has dropped by 43 per cent, according to the Royal Town Planning Institute, so tinkering with the system is presumably a pleasant diversion from ensuring an adequate planning service.

There is plenty of guff in the draft about the need for more housing, which in line with general government tautology should be 'well-designed, beautiful, attractive and sustainable', as should the 'places' created as a result of development. As usual, there is no attempt to define what 'beautiful' means, so far from injecting greater certainty into the system, things have become more ambiguous. For example, it is stated that proposals that are not well designed should be refused planning permission. However, there is no statement that buildings which (in somebody's opinion) are not beautiful should be similarly refused.

Nor is there any attempt to acknowledge the importance of 'good ordinary' in respect of the design of housing. Rather than absurd demands for beauty, it would be more impressive if there was greater focus on decency – for example in respect of space standards, about which there is scarcely a mention in the new draft framework. That is because on ideological grounds, this government is utterly opposed to regulation in principle, except in those cases where arguing against regulation (think fire) would invoke public wrath.

Ever since Michael Heseltine abolished minimum standards for public housing, we have been on a downward slope in the race to produce dwellings which are efficient in the manner of kennels or rabbit-hutches. The so-called Department for Levelling Up (always beware of marketing propaganda transformed into Whitehall names) has nothing to say on this subject, but prates on endlessly about beauty. The Secretary of State has threatened to call in 'ugly' housing developments, without ever defining what ugly means. He is very keen on the idea of 'place', apparently unaware that such a notion was the centrepiece of the last Labour government. Amnesia – that most essential of political attributes – is alive and well.

Far from levelling up, government policies in respect of housing appear designed to further limit supply by scrapping the requirement for local authorities to identify five years of housing land supply, and dropping an election manifesto commitment to build 300,000 homes a year. Meanwhile the latest statistics for total annual housing benefits funded by taxpayers is an extraordinary £23.4 billion. There is no extant government policy to generate a mass housebuilding programme by the public sector to address this gigantic burden. Instead, we fiddle about with meaningless phraseology in the NPPF and pretend that design codes are the answer >>>

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>>> to the housing shortage.

Conservatives, both nationally and locally, used to have an interest in provision of decent housing, partly because of a one-nation attitude to politics, and partly because it was a proven vote-winner. It is hard to say precisely when this changed, or why, but the proposed NPPF looks like a manifesto for the haves in society. It is not levelling up; it is dumbing down.

Build budget hotels over hospital car parks



Permitted Development rights just need a tweak to boost hospital capacity

“One in eight beds in NHS hospitals are occupied by older people who are well enough to be discharged but can't be, because there isn't a social care place for them. Until our broken care system is fixed, the NHS will be swimming with a millstone around its neck, with predictable consequences for patients and staff”, says James Kirkup writing in *The Times*.

The Government is now paying for care home places and expanding 'discharge waiting rooms' in hospitals to free up beds.

What might the planning system and the development industry do to help?

Planning could finesse permitted development rights to facilitate the building of convalescent accommodation over hospital car parks. PD rights were introduced only in April 2021: “*New and expanded rights for new buildings and extensions on existing Hospital sites. – Amended Class M of Part 7 of Schedule 2*” of the General Permitted Development Order.

There are height restrictions to this right which need to be relaxed away from boundaries but no Prior Approval is needed from the local planning authority.

The budget hotel branch of the development industry is notoriously capable. Their standardised, modular product can be built in a very few months and needs little modification to serve as a civilised holding facility in the grounds of hospitals.

Government should support the NHS in contracting with budget hotel developers, and maybe modular housing manufacturers such as Legal & General, to deliver a standardised facility and provide necessary non-medical support staff to operate and maintain them. ■

IMAGE: from *The Spectator*