



Minutes of the Roundtable between parliamentarians, housing and regeneration leaders & Baroness Neville-Rolfe, Chair of the House of Lords Built Environment Committee

Tuesday 25th January 2022 (online meeting)

Members

Ben Everitt MP (BE) - Chair

In attendance

APPG Secretariat

Guests

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (NV)

LPDF

RPS

Settle Group

Trent and Dove

MK Homelessness Partnership

Lord Porter (LP)

Aster

Dee Goddard - Clark (DG)

Meeting Started at 12 pm

1. Introduction

- BE introduced NV.
- The committee, though cross party, has managed to agree on most points. The committee decided to do a report on housing because it is so important. The committee thought about the public, the consumer, and the needs of builders, developers, and planners who are often constrained by the current system.
- There needs to be an increase in housing supply to resolve the housing crisis. 300,000 homes may not be achieved or enough to resolve the crisis, and even that number is unlikely to be met if barriers to build homes remain unaddressed
 - Firstly, the uncertainty of planned reforms for the planning system makes it difficult to build more homes. Secondly, the absence of local plans. Less than half of all local authorities have local plans. The committee supports the government's idea to make it compulsory for local plans to be made within 30 months of any new legislation. Additionally, local plans should be simpler, clearer, and more transparent, so people can engage with them, and they are not just plans made by experts, for experts. Thirdly, the planning system can only work if local authorities have staff and income. The report did suggest that local

authorities need to recover some of the loss of income, perhaps by putting up planning fees.

- NV is interested in the views that members of the APPG have on building more homes near railways stations. Also interested in the APPG's thoughts on solving the delays caused by the Section 106 system. You either need to sort the delays or bring in a new system
- SME housebuilders are currently neglected, and need to be restored to their historic role where they once built 39% homes, now only build 10%. However, the report does acknowledge that SMEs are seen as having more planning because they do not have the capital. Therefore more sites should be made available to them by Homes England or local authorities, as well as finance and, perhaps, a fast-track way to get through the planning process.
- Our current housing stock is not equipped to deal with the aging population. As the elderly population continues to increase, we will need more specialist and mainstream housing for elderly, as well as more housing for people living alone
- Another huge issue is skills shortages. The data the committee looked at demonstrated that the skills shortages in construction were worse than in any other industry, suggesting that the current set up is not fit for purpose.
- There is clearly a public funding issue. The report suggests a need for a transition from spending so much on housing benefit towards building more social housing. The committee were skeptical of the help-to-buy scheme, which they saw as having a tendency to inflate prices. There is a question of whether that money could be better spent.
- Overall, the main problem is that the housing crisis is exacerbated by uncertainty and unclear policy. Chris Pincher has, however, been very helpful thus far.
- BE adds:
 - It is a very good time to make productive changes. Michael Gove is a reforming Secretary of State who has a mandate to look across government, joining up with BEIS and DFE to deal with the skills shortages issue, and have those difficult conversations with the Treasury.
 - The nature of the economy being revenue restrained and in a relatively capital cheap environment calls for innovative solutions. All of this being set against the backdrop of the Levelling Up agenda.

2. Questions and discussion

LP: Why do we think that a council without a plan is a barrier to delivering more homes when the MPPF was written in a way that has a presumption in favour of sustainable development? If a council doesn't have a local plan, it could potentially mean that the entire area covered by the council is open to planning as opposed to zones within a council area.

NV: I am also in favour of a presumption towards sustainable development. Plans can be valuable so long as they are simple, transparent and have consulted all the appropriate people. There is a slight tendency to rush ahead and say that if you haven't got a plan you get a housing estate by appeal which means they don't put in the infrastructure needed. Section 106 does sometimes help with this but not always. Sometimes they agree to do something under Section 106 but then don't do it because it isn't viable, or



hasn't been thought through. Communities need to be involved. A good planning process would allow neighbourhood plans and get more consent. Another aspect is we have 450 councils of different scale and size. It is hard to get evidence from individual councils that people complain about. If we are going to have plan led system, all councils need to have plans.,

Q: One big issue we see as a housing association is that we only get grants from Homes England for net additions in regeneration areas. We can't get grants even if we are meeting local needs if they are not net additions.

NV: This is a perfect example of micro rules getting in the way of the right things. We did take evidence from housing associations and did find that it was difficult for smaller people in the sector to get the help they need to do some social housing projects. I will take this specific point back to the committee.

Q: I would like to commend you on an excellent report. The National Planning Framework has one flaw in terms of the presumption. If you are in a local authority that has constraints like the green belt, you don't really need to worry about bringing in a local plan. Certain local authorities are gaming the National Planning Framework knowing that they have these statutory constraints that protect them from development.

LP- The green belt is not a reason in itself to not have a local plan. It doesn't account from the space above your existing housing infrastructure. If you can't go out, you will need to go up. In reality, those areas need local plans more.

Q: One point I couldn't see stressed is that there was no mention of Richard Bacon's custom and self build, where some of the industry see a big opportunity.

NV: It is true that there is a lot of self-build in other countries. We would love to see it take off in the UK

Q: You asked for our views on the work on development at stations. We think it is an excellent idea. It is sustainable development by definition and something to be encouraged within the overall framework.

NV: We did see it as an area with a large amount of potential. It would be housing that fits into our carbon reduction plans.

Q: On train stations developments, we also see that as a fruitful avenue to explore in local plans. We should look at existing stations and those closed during the Beecham era, especially where those stations could be brought back online.

What are the committee's thoughts on the reforms needed for the planning system and neighbourhood planning. We agree that growth should remain plan led. The government should make reforms to the planning system with speed in mind, especially keeping in mind that we will have to wrestle with the Leveling Up agenda and neighbourhood planning. Local authorities need funding to get local plans in order. There could be a slowing of the process if councils need to go through neighbourhood plans. How do we deliver the neighbourhood plan agenda without roadblocks housing plan delivery?

NV: We need to look at neighbourhood plans carefully to enable consent from communities. If we look at the government's proposals for zoning (which I think they have now been abandoned), it was adding an extra layer. It would need more resources and slow things down. As proposals are being put together, we need to be careful about bringing neighbourhood plans without extending the process. We also don't need them in every local authority. In some areas, they don't help. The point on the resourcing of local authorities is very important. I will repeat my point that local plans will only work if they are simple, transparent and quick.

Q: We have seen community land trusts being an excellent method to deliver community led housing and stimulate the SME construction market. They shouldn't be forgotten in delivery. Additionally, we need funding to regenerate and develop which will inevitably help Leveling Up.

NV: Sometimes there are some surprising developers that are thinking about community needs. They think about how to build a community. It is a different type of design and different type of housing. It is thinking in the longer term. The government, too, needs to think longer term, and need devices in the planning system to think longer term. There needs to be a bigger environmental consideration. I reiterate the point on good housing needs to get consent, so we need good people to lead discussions on planning committees. One key success we have seen is regeneration schemes in the centre of towns, where they are building housing, but also infrastructure.

DG: I will add that the committee found that, over time, we should aim to spend less on housing benefit, and more money on social housing.

Q: We were struck by the statistic that there are 340,000 homes required for those who are or about to experience homelessness compared to the 300,000 homes target the government has set for annual building. This is very true of the situation we see. More people are presenting as homeless. I would encourage those having those discussions to amplify this issue. So many of the issues highlighted by your points on the aging population are also relevant for homelessness, like the need for a network of support in-built into development. Local authorities and plans have good aspirations but lack of resources. We also agree that a lack of clarity, transparency and simplicity makes it hard for the community to engage.

NV: We have seen more housing being built for rent, and because housing for rent is expensive, it is hard to save up for a deposit. This means that the houses needed to house the homeless are not freed up because people are renting for much longer.

I would add that it would be helpful for local plans to be more similar, with standard format. This was we can do strategy across board by comparing and contrasting local authorities. At the moment, it is very hard to get the data needed.

Q: A few weeks ago we asked RICS about lessons learned from the cladding crisis, and the interim CEO said the biggest challenge is matching the lack of skills and resources. We need to grapple with building homes but also maintaining existing homes. How do we start investing in skills?

NV: We decided not to tackle the cladding crisis in this study because we needed to focus. We did see that the skills available are not adequate for building 300,000 homes, all

while retrofitting, improving biodiversity, and dealing with the cladding issue. There is a clear crisis of skills. I would encourage this APPG to put more focus on the need for skills and continue the conversations between industry leaders and the government.

Q: Culturally, we have forgotten that local authority planners are professionally qualified and people don't give them the respect they deserve. This doesn't help recruitment into the planning department. There is a large increase in householder applications which has impacted on workload and workload management. Resourcing is an issue that, as an industry, we need to help each other on.

Natural England's policies on nutrient neutrality have left many homes in south of England trapped in the planning process (especially affordable housing). We seem to be struggling to find a way through. The industry needs to ask Natural England to help us come up with solutions. We should also incentivise local planning authorities beyond the new homes bonus to deliver more homes. Rather than penalise, like under the current system, the consequence would be not having as big of a package to deliver infrastructure.

NV: Our Report did mention the Natural England issue. I would like to get more information.

Incentivising local planning is very hard. A turnout target didn't work in the past. The issue is that, though it might be a good idea to implement something in the system, it could also have adverse effects.

DG: We did discuss this with planning authorities. The planning white paper will lay out how to speed up planning processes.

NV: We may need to give a pot of money and ask authorities to report on how they could use it, as well as give us any good ideas they might have. Ideas for change rarely work top-down. More often than not, they come from the people on the ground.

BE thanks NV for her time.

Meeting ends 13:10