



**South East Regional Select Committee
House of Commons
INQUIRY: Housing in the South East**

Introduction

1. This submission is made by the South East Forum for Sustainability (SEFS). SEFS is recognised as the umbrella body for environmental groups in the South East. SEFS has good relationships with regional agencies, including the South East England Partnership Board.

2. SEFS is pleased to offer comments to the Housing Inquiry of the South East Regional Select Committee. We had a close involvement with the preparation of the South East Plan through previous arrangements of the Regional Assembly, and we continue to be represented on the new groups set up to prepare and deliver the single Regional Strategy.

Background

3. SEFS is aware of the nature and importance of housing policy reviews in this region. The planning of new housing continues to be an area of difficulty. Pressure for housing development is usually highest in the South East. We fully recognise the need for growth in house building, and for local authorities to be able to implement policies with better support. The region is one of the most highly designated (in terms of environmental designations) of any. This is because of the diversity of its landscape and habitat types. Regional planning has recognised the importance of landscape character and the natural environment to the region, and has increasingly played a role in identifying and protecting it. The overall sustainability aspects of housing should be fully considered in the current Housing Inquiry.

4. Housing will in most respects continue to be of major importance in the South East region. The sustainable construction of new housing in the South East provides an opportunity for improving the health, environment and economy of the region. Homes in the South East must minimise negative impacts on the environment while seeking to maximise social and economic benefits for occupants and society at large. These aims are complementary, rather than contradictory. Government policy should seek to ensure that the necessary provision of new housing in the region is affordable for people and the planet. The role of new settlements, eco towns and urban extensions should be carefully considered, to ensure greater sustainability.

How many new houses would be needed to support the economy and social needs of the South East?

5. Environmental limits as well as demographic projections should provide the basis for calculating housing need. CLG housing forecasts in 2009, suggest that 39,000 houses a year are needed in the region to 2031. This number is significantly above the 32,000 average build of the



five years to 2008, and the 32,700 target contained in the South East Plan. The economic recession has created a different climate for housing. This makes it difficult to establishing a reliable figure for housing need. Whilst the recession, according to reports based on the latest ONS statistics, has now ended, the economy will take time to recover. It is impossible to predict how long, as is the effect on the market and aspirations of the public. We do not think it is appropriate to reconsider the housing figures in the short term. A better emphasis would be to concentrate efforts on providing a higher proportion of affordable housing, especially in the rented sector, and to improve the sustainability, quality, design and location of new developments.

Where should these houses be built to satisfy housing needs in the most sustainable way?

6. Many areas that have suffered housing problems require more attention in the present climate. Areas to the west and south of the region need support for those unable to buy on the open market. It is these areas, including sub-regions to the west and south that need help in providing more social housing and local accommodation for those unable to compete or wishing to rent. Without such support these areas of housing difficulty will continue to overheat, and yet more essential workers will be dependent on long-distance commuting. This is an unsustainable option in regional policy terms.

7. A number of the sub-regions, such as the Milton Keynes area and southern Hampshire are expected to provide a large proportion of growth, due to their designation as Strategic Development Areas. However, South Hampshire will put considerable pressure on adjacent Natura 2000 sites. It may even be a development location that breeches 'environmental limits'. Beyond recognising such areas as the SDAs and New Growth Points, as designated for major development, SEFS would not normally provide commentary on the geographical location of new housing growth. Our view is that where housing should go is mainly a matter for local authorities working in partnership with other agencies, so long as the scale and distribution does not threaten natural resources, such as landscape, biodiversity and water. Sustainability Appraisal provides an important method of testing the viability of housing in key areas.

8. Sensitive small scale development in many rural settlements and market towns is much needed, to maintain the viability and sustainability of community life. The age structure of some smaller communities is unbalanced, and in need of new blood and invigoration. It is important to be creating employment as well as housing, and village schools, to reduce out-commuting and make really sustainable communities.

What types and tenure of new houses should be built? How many need to be 'affordable'? Is housing provided for older people in the South East fit for purpose? Should all new homes meet the necessary energy efficiency requirements?

9. There is a need for a wide variety of housing tenures and types. The population of the region is of increasing average age, and this will exacerbate existing problems. Much better



infrastructure will be needed which specifically supports the increasing numbers of the elderly in local communities. This will include low cost housing for carers, as well as more residential care homes. Current policy does not adequately address fuel poverty in sole occupancy, larger dwellings, and the substantial number of winter deaths this causes. The severe winter conditions of January 2010 have highlighted this problem. To meet this problem, funding should be made available to provide better choices, so that the elderly can move to more convenient accommodation only if they so wish.

10. SEFS is concerned that building regulations, planning policy and regional spatial strategies are not providing homes or communities of properly sustainable quality or design. Many of the current regs are being ignored or circumvented. Sustainable does not simply mean low energy, it also means having enough storage space, and have a home office; generally not to need to move every few years. In this context, we feel it is important that the environmental dimensions of housing are addressed through partnership working with the Homes and Communities Agency and others. Such working should not only link to, but should help to deliver the targets and desired outcomes in other key South East policy documents, including the Regional Spatial Strategy, and the Sustainable Development Framework. The role of housing in helping to deliver these requirements should be fully recognised.

11. The delivery of social housing in the region has failed to keep pace with requirements. The emphasis of housing provision needs to alter from affordable to social rented housing. In this regard, the take up of key worker schemes has been poor in some cases. Schemes to assist or support first time buyers have helped, via some of the larger housing associations, such as Sentinel. These should be extended to make them more widely available. Affordable and intermediate housing should be planned on the basis of attainable requirements.

12. The 35% South East Plan target for affordable housing should be properly enforced. It has failed, and only produced about 11% overall, according to Christine Whitehead and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Recent examples suggest that local authorities need proper area planning to prevent a developer building on opposite sides of the road not in one tranche, which would have attracted 40% affordable, but in separate applications; 14 in each, so 0% affordable. In such cases, the council should be able to ask about landholdings and future plans, and if necessary apply the 40% standard retrospectively as further applications come in.

13. A good mixed provision of intermediate housing as well as social rented is desirable in most areas. The need for family size accommodation has been under appreciated over 10 years, and this requires the attention of planning authorities. Housing for older people may vary from basic accommodation to private retirement villages, and this variability is not always recognised. Life time and semi-life time homes should be expanded but not become the norm. Sheltered accommodation for the elderly needs a growing proportion of local authority budgets. Sustainable construction overall is vital, including energy efficiency, water recycling and heating systems. Improving environmental standards should be paramount.



What are the consequences of the increased number of multiple occupancy of houses in the South East? How is this affected by the enforcement of greenbelt area? What effect does this have on the ageing housing stock in historic areas?

14. Homes in multiple occupancy can be of great concern to neighbours. The expansion in student numbers, particularly in areas of privatised council housing, can be a problem. A house that once held a family of two adults and two children may now hold five students, each with a car, a major waste disposal habit and no council tax payments. University expansion or even continuation has recently been derailed, but there should be a greater requirement for them to house their own students or at least insist that they do not bring cars into town (which many older universities do). More conventional homes in multiple occupancy, are probably better than they once were because of licensing legislation, but are still not desirable. They are the result of excessive house prices and shortage of affordable housing, and the fact that single people usually cannot even get on a housing list.

15. A clearer understanding of Green Belt is needed. Not all land outside urban areas is green belt. There is a difference between green field and green belt, and this should be understood. The 'strategic gaps' are often a substitute for green belt and provide similar functions. We do not consider that the presence of green belt has resulted in a shortage of housing, or an increase in regional house prices. The Green Belt is an important designation for many people and it should be put to better use as part of a green infrastructure policy.

16. The planning system may be seen as inadequate, and not capable alone of delivering sufficient levels of affordable housing. However, it is otherwise effective, if used properly. Any such weaknesses may have been exacerbated by a failure to tackle issues such as appropriate density, design and layouts, especially in more urban areas. The incidence of nimbyism in local communities is also a significant factor and an influence on councillors and MPs. Many planning departments are underfunded, over-stretched, sometimes under or inappropriately qualified and generally seen as an easy target for cuts. There is a case to be made for better resourcing and stronger powers for planning departments.

Are the new houses being built creating 'sustainable communities', covering issues including affordability, eco-ratings, mix of housing types, and whether adequate social and environmental infrastructure is being provided?

17. Housing development has significant social and environmental impacts that extend beyond the immediate site. In environmental terms, housing is a contributor to global environmental impacts, such as global warming. Housing contributes some 28% of CO₂ emissions associated with energy use. This domestic energy use is projected to rise. It is essential to reduce domestic emissions from existing houses and from new build if it is possible to mitigate the effects of climate change.



18. In social terms, efficiency also has advantages for people who have difficulty in affording to heat their homes properly. Construction is a major issue because of its resource use and the implications for continuing resource consumption. About 70% of timber goes into construction, with a high proportion used for housing. It is therefore essential that new housing and refurbishments in the region demand timber that comes from well-managed and independently certified sources. 14.6 million hectares of natural forest are lost each year worldwide. This is a rate of 30 hectares every minute, and is also a breach of sustainability.

19. There are many other impacts related to the construction of new homes including: quarrying to provide basic raw construction materials like aggregates; and the often wasteful and inefficient use of water. The use of toxic chemicals in building materials can pose health risks for the occupants, as well as environmental impacts during the construction phase. The amount of waste produced by construction is large: figures vary between 20% and 35%. A high proportion of this is new materials over-ordered. There are also major environmental savings in reusing existing buildings, and this should be recognised.

20. Sustainable and balanced communities are important to ensure the longer term viability of the region. We need a better mix of housing types in market housing, with recognition that there is an excess of flats and smaller houses. Social, and especially green infrastructure, is important with open space being at a premium. The over-supply of flats and smaller houses also connects with house size generally, with on average new houses being half the size of those Denmark. This is socially damaging as an unhappy, overcrowded community is not a sustainable one.

21. There should be a training programme for planners, housing officers, developers and other stakeholders to raise awareness about sustainable homes. A sustainability 'league table' might be formulated for housing developments in the region. We might also wish to form a sustainable housing buyer's group to develop economies of scale and ensure that the cost of developing sustainable homes is competitive. Insurance products and 'green' mortgages for homeowners should be encouraged in the South East.

What impact will the recession have on the provision of housing, and the associated infrastructure, in the South East?

22. The consequences of the recession will be severe for many years to come and are described in preceding paragraphs. While housing delivery may recover to some extent investment by the private sector in a social infrastructure may never be replaced. The housing market is itself quite resilient, but the recovery may be sporadic across the region, and these effects will be felt for many years. In addition, planning for new infrastructure takes much time and requires public support. Changing perceptions will not help to give a stable basis. Public finance has also been slow in meeting regional transport priorities.



23. There is a good current example of the risks associated with tying in social housing market sites. Winchester city currently risks losing nearly 300 new housing units, including 40% affordable on a brownfield, city centre site because the developer has gone into receivership. The resultant dangers of this are that a new developer may step in but refuse to provide either the 40% affordable or the environmental benefits. The council may be forced to accept this, as the ability to resist applications for greenfield reserve sites is thus diminished. This is happening in other parts the region. Local authority powers need to be strengthened to resist these dangers, and in some cases the council should be able to take over the building itself.

What are the social and economic consequences of a shortage in housing supply in the South East?

24. There are a range of health impacts from crowded and inappropriate accommodation, family breakdown and the impacts of stress in family relationships. A continued lack of affordability and access to appropriate housing to permit the uptake of employment, or the formation of new households for young families will be a major problem. There may be constraints on economic development and employment caused by the lack of an adequate and trained workforce in the right place. One result could be a poorer quality of life and a negative perception of the region as a crowded area where housing is difficult to come by. There is already considerable in-commuting to expensive towns from less expensive areas. London prices mean the South East has its share of out-commuters, and hence a high CO₂ footprint.

What are the roles of regional bodies, such as the Government Office for the South East and the Homes and Communities Agency, in providing housing in the South East?

25. Since 2004, the main regional activity on planning for housing has been through the Regional Housing Board. This body is now a delivery partnership called the Regional Housing and Regeneration Board. The Board and GOSE can work with all other partners in the monitoring and delivery of policy on housing. There is also a need for recognition of the joint working needed between government and the development industry. The Homes and Communities Agency is developing new forms of working with the Board. It will be important to continue effective regional aspects of working, and to base this on partnerships and on working with local councils.

Are the governance and partnership relationships between central government, regional agencies, local government, neighbouring regions and the private sector working effectively to deliver housing in the South East?

26. Governance and partnership relations have been working quite well in providing a context for the delivery of housing. The tensions that exist as a result of top-down housing policies have not ensured a smooth path for housing delivery or for the consideration of sustainable outcomes. Local decision making, with the support and assistance of housing



associations, will be of growing potential importance. This will help to increase understanding and build support for viable new housing policies.

27. GOSE has a potential role in developing improved relationships across the region, and ensuring the government's aims of promoting sustainable communities are understood and better supported. There is much potential for achieving more widely accepted housing policies, and GOSE and the Regional Housing and Regeneration Board could play a pivotal role in that process.

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