

London Tenants Federation

London Housing Strategy Consultation Meeting 24th March '09 Hosted by Newham Tenants Federation and Involving also tenants from Barking and Dagenham

Informal drop-in: An exhibition of the LTF consultation pack with written information and photographs was displayed for an informal drop-in session with tenants' representatives prior to the meeting proper.

Meeting attendees: Mickey Lincoln, Mrs M Lincoln, Jophn Regan, Peter Clelands, George Shaw, (Barking and Dagenham), Peggy Chapman, Alan Taylor, Shilda Patel, Victor Adegbuyi, Sheila Garvey, Thonda Nolan, Ted Nolan, A Taylor, Alan Kiff, Vasantha Mahedevan, Reg Charles, Georga Mendrala, Hazel Reid (Newham)

LTF representatives gave a presentation of some of the key points detailed in the draft London Housing Strategy and information relating to housing need in Newham and Barking and Dagenham as well as statistics from the monitoring reports of the London Plan regarding levels of new build in each borough with percentages of social rented housing included.

Comments made on key areas of discussion:

Affordability.

- The average household income level in Newham is only £19,000 a year.
- People don't want and can't afford 'shared ownership' homes.
- The greatest need is for low-cost rented housing.
- There seems to be no statistical evidence that people who go into shared ownership actually progress to full ownership showing that this is not really a process of 'stair-casing'.
- How many will find the mortgage part of the shared ownership 'affordable' – especially in a recession?
- Younger people who are going into third level education are coming out with huge debts anyway and can't afford to get into further debt by taking on a mortgage or part mortgage.
- Shared ownership may allow a low ownership percentage, but demands payment of 100% towards maintenance. With people being pushed to their financial limits with this there is no way that a family can move to a larger family home. This is particularly difficult for those who want to live in larger extended family homes – with children, parents and grandparents.

Housing need / tenure type

- Statistics relating to what's being built in Barking & Dagenham and Newham shows the unfairness of the current system. Little of what is needed but lots of what's not needed has been built.
- It's a flawed perception that most people want to own their own home.
- In questionnaires designed to find out how many want to own a home, the questions are designed to get the answer the policy makers want. Asking "do you want to own your own home", is very different from asking "do you feel you will ever be able to afford to own your own home"?
- Historically it was a positive choice to become a council tenant.
- The 'property owning' democracy excludes those who want to rent.
- Mixed medium build and multi tenure in Newham has become a 'Buy to Let' ghetto.
- The problem with key worker housing is that once they are bought, they no longer stay in the social rented sector. Once it's gone, like Right to Buy, its lost for ever to those in housing need.
- Lots of Right to Buy has become Buy to Let, with leaseholders renting to over-crowded households who can't get council or housing association homes.
- Right to Buy is a big problem since many of the homes bought have been family homes, leaving a huge numbers left in overcrowded homes.
- Pressure needs to be brought on government, the London Mayor and local authorities to build council homes and family homes.
- How many voids are councils and government departments sitting on why can't these be brought back into use as family homes?
- Building has been taking place over the last few years but much of it is buying or renting from Buy to Let at market prices.
- If all the homes that were built were council or housing association homes it would go a long way to reducing waiting lists.
- In Barking & Dagenham the percentages of social rented homes originally promised in new schemes have been reduced. In one scheme they promised 15% social rented housing; then reduced the offer to 10% and in the end nearly all the homes were private / market homes for sale.
- The London Plan says 35% of the new homes should be social rented.
- If any new council homes are built, Right to Buy must be stopped.
- Ex council homes are being used as houses in multiple-occupation – are often very over crowded and at times occupied in shifts.
- Whist there can be some control of what happens in the council or RSL sector in the private sector there are incidents of families using garages and sheds as part of their home, as a result of overcrowding.
- Will the Mayor be increasing funding for social rented housing? There just isn't enough.
- Despite what we need to be done, Right to Buy still being allowed to erode the levels of current stock. Also 75% of all Right to Buy receipts goes straight to the treasury, only 25% goes to councils and even then they don't have to use it for housing.

Housing size and design

- The reality is that the developers are dictating the terms and what's more, they are only producing one and two-bed properties. None of what they are doing meets need.
- In Newham much more larger sized homes are needed – up to 10-bedroom properties
- Local authorities have created overcrowding, by selling off street properties to convert into small units.
- It's the same as the new build stuff you 'get more bangs for your bucks' in terms of the amount of rent you can collect from two small properties rather than one larger one.
- Housing, planning and environmental health legislation should be updated in order to outlaw such practices.
- There are incidents in Barking and Dagenham of private lets, where they squeeze 10 into a 3 bedroom property. Then they get allocated a council or housing association home because of the extreme levels of overcrowding. Once one family has been re-housed in this way, the property is then rapidly over occupied again. This practice should be stopped.
- In Barking and Dagenham, key workers are being allocated larger dwellings than they require.

Regeneration

- In Newham, decants from regeneration schemes, where homes are due to be demolished (but the properties are sitting empty) are taking up all the void properties.
- The credit crunch has made an impact on these schemes – they are not quite all at a stop, but have slowed right down. One area is not now expected to be built until 2012. The whole system needs to be looked at again.
- There needs to be a reassessment of the allocations policies. It seems that people who are sitting for years in overcrowded homes or on the waiting list are being ignored. Choice based lettings is open to abuse. It's inaccessible to people who are not IT literate, which includes all sorts of people including elderly and those who are not able to speak English.
- The regeneration schemes are dependent on funding and access to decants. System built and high rise are more expensive to refurbish than to build new, but need to be developed in phases.
- Regeneration is a bit of a chicken and egg scenario. All sorts of things can hold up the freeing up of land – the planning system or leaseholder pressures.
- If there are big delay problems in any redevelopment, then all the existing problems are magnified.
- High densities and overcrowding are rising significantly.
- Land values have been inflated due to the Olympics.

- Canning Town and Customs House are supposed to be high on the list for regeneration, but where is the money going to come from? Will the 'product' be suitable for local residents? All new builds seem to be about social engineering. There is a constant miss-match between what's being built and redeveloped and what people actually want and need.
- The DLR extension to Barking and Dagenham was supposed to bring with it 15,000 new homes, schools and a shopping mall, but now only 1,000 new homes maximum are expected from that development, so where has the money, that was supposed to be allocated to this scheme, gone?
- The problem is that the majority of money for anything is supposed to be from the private sector – but at a cost, we don't ever get as much as we need and when there is a credit crunch like now, we get nothing. The private sector just doesn't deliver what we need.

Mobility

- The allocations system should be should be fair and transparent, only then can housing need and demand for housing be effectively addressed. Former local systems that identified homes and facilities worked well and met local needs. The Mayor wants to build homes in East London to house people from other boroughs – when we already have huge need.

The Private Sector

- Local authority hands are controlled to some extent and are paying out a fortune to house families in leased private sector homes – money that should be spent on building new homes. The cost of this private housing is disproportionate and leaves tenants in a situation where they will never be able to get off benefits.
- Empty private homes should be brought under council control and ownership.
- Buy to Let brings with it mismanagement, anti-social behaviour, high profits for private landlords and misery for neighbouring council tenants.
- The owner doesn't care as long as the money is coming in.
- Whilst local authorities have a duty to address these problems, they tend to pass the buck and hold their hands up to say 'what can we do'?
- Council tenants are often subjected to abuse from leaseholders or tenants of leaseholders. Housing Officers should be dealing with this, but often they don't.
- Most of the new private market homes are Buy to Let. This is creating ghettos. No one knows who the owners / landlords are. They are a nightmare for communities and local authority or RSL landlords.

LTF is an umbrella organisation bringing together London's borough wide council tenant federations and organisations

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