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Editorial

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The involvement of municipal engineers in the housing field goes back several decades and is always changing. This brief outline of the recent history of housing outputs and outcomes in the United Kingdom (UK) is aimed at providing the context for an understanding of developing policies and some indication of what the future may hold. The profession needs to appreciate the expected changes in social, economic and environmental conditions, to anticipate the future and to realise that change applies to housing as much as to any other aspect of society. The statistics in this editorial demonstrate that there are major housing problems to be solved. The papers in this issue will provide an understanding of some of them and suggest how they might be addressed.

The demand for and supply of housing has been on the main political parties' agendas during the whole of the post-war period, but it has rarely been afforded the highest priority. Given the primary human need for shelter and the poor conditions in which a significant proportion of the population has lived during this period, this is surprising. But housing is more than about providing shelter. The development of housing areas has a major impact on the organisation of towns and cities and the environment in which we live. In some parts of the UK, major additions to the housing stock are now being proposed. These will have a major impact on the structure of the urban areas that they adjoin.

During the period 1961 to 2001 the population of Great Britain (GB) increased from 51.3 million to 57.3 million, an increase of some 12% or 0.33% per annum.¹ A generally successful, growing economy should easily have accommodated this growth. However, during the same period the number of households in GB increased from 16.3 million to 24.1 million, an increase of some 48% or 1.2% per annum. But neither was the demand for additional housing indicated by these figures addressed, nor the need to raise much of the existing stock to an acceptable standard. It is clear that insufficient resources were devoted to investment in housing during that period.

The growth in households was inevitably translated into a demand for houses. In the first two to three decades after the war, the main responses were the creation of New Towns and the planned expansion of larger towns and cities. Much of the building was done by the public sector. Astonishingly, there were more houses built in each of the years 1948 and 1949 than in any year since 1990. With the need for industrial and infrastructure

rebuilding after the war it is remarkable that this was possible. That post-war housing achievement owed much to the role of municipal engineers.

Building continued through the 1950s, 1960s and most of the 1970s with a high completion rate in the range of 300 000 to 400 000 houses per year. But since 1990, the highest number of completions per year has been only 195 000 with a low of just 161 000 in 2001. So the growing demand due to the increase in households has not been matched by a similar increase in supply. It is not, therefore, surprising that activity in the housing market has led to price increases of several times the rate of inflation.

The total number of houses built is only part of the story. The proportion provided partly or wholly by the public sector has fluctuated considerably. In 1950 about 86% of new housing was provided by the public sector in response to the need rapidly to provide for dwellings lost as a result of war and slum clearance. By 1980, however, only about 45% of housing was provided by the public sector, and by 2003 this had fallen to 10%, the balance of the proportion of a diminishing number of completions being made up by the private sector.

The low level of housebuilding, resulting in effect in a reduction in supply, inevitably led to an increase in cost to the prospective owners (and tenants) as demand for houses continued to increase as a result of the demographic trends referred to above. In the UK, house prices have been estimated to have increased by 100% between 1997 and 2004. Some of this is due to those first-time buyers entering the private sector who in the past would have been local authority tenants. The reduction in supply to this sector (the social housing sector) from 40 000 new dwellings in 1995 to only 17 000 in 2003 has resulted in much reduced opportunity to it. The market is more complicated than this. Many other factors play a part, but it is clear that a major problem now exists with a high proportion of the population not being able to afford a home and a lack of social housing being provided.

Catching up on the poor performance of the housing sector in the last 20 years is itself enough of a challenge but anticipating future trends has to be added to understand what needs to be achieved. The number of households in England and Wales is expected to rise from 22.1 million in 2001 to 25.3 million in 2021. To accommodate these new households an average build

rate of 190 000 dwellings per year is required. This excludes the demand generated by the reduction arising from demolition of unsatisfactory housing and by the need to provide for those households otherwise inadequately accommodated. Regional variations in supply and demand, variations within regions and variations even within towns and cities further complicate the situation. Demand is especially high in London and the regions surrounding it, but some of the other regions are experiencing low demand, leading to other problems, such as those of deterioration and lack-lustre renewal activity.

Both central and local governments have made many attempts to solve what is one of the major problems currently facing the UK. Central government's response includes several policy and programme changes, which are relevant to the municipal engineer. It has recognised that one of the obstacles to increasing supply is the speed with which the planning system operates. Hence, one of the objectives of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 is to accelerate the local plan system.² Local planning authorities are now required to produce Local Development Frameworks and Supplementary Planning Documents, which will provide clearer indications of what development will be permitted.

Central government's strategic policy is set out in the Communities Plan.³ This includes several important elements: more investment in social (affordable) housing, Pathfinder renewal schemes, four major growth areas in London and the surrounding regions, advice aimed at securing better quality housing and advice aimed at improving the surrounding environment. Two papers in this issue are particularly relevant to the objectives of the Communities Plan.

The paper by Pett contains a discussion of what sustainable housing within the context of sustainable communities means. The author concentrates on examining the role of legislation in securing sustainable housing from the perspectives of social needs, the environment, economic considerations and of planning policy. She concludes that there is some way to go in defining sustainable housing and then to achieve the necessary legislation and regulations.

The paper by Ellis *et al.* provides a review of recent housing policies aimed at delivering programmes to overcome the problem of insufficient housing, particularly that which is affordable. The paper then develops, in some detail, how it is possible to secure more sustainable drainage systems even when higher densities are proposed. It is argued that it is possible to have a more innovative approach to design, which would lead to cost effective solutions and attractive developments.

Pathfinder schemes are being developed to address the problems of low demand and consequent abandonment. This has resulted not only in the decay of houses, but also in decay in the quality of whole surrounding areas within some of the more northerly towns. These schemes will attempt to reverse the decline by removing surplus properties, improving the environment and providing a better choice of homes to create a more cohesive community. An example of a housing market renewal proposal is demonstrated in the older towns of North Staffordshire⁴ where it is envisaged that there should be an

investment programme of £2 800 million over the next 18 years. In the Pathfinder areas there will often be the need to improve the street environment by undertaking traffic calming and other measures.

The paper by Barrell *et al.* summarises the initial results of central government's Home Zones programme. The aim of the programme is to improve residential communities where the streets are shared between traffic and residents. Different uses, including play, are to be made of the street itself. The importance of community involvement in the development and implementation of schemes is emphasised and the paper suggests that the main outcome of Home Zones is likely to be stronger and more integrated local communities.

The four major growth areas for housing in England proposed by the government are Thames Gateway stretching out from east London to include south Essex and north Kent, Milton Keynes/South Midlands, London/Stansted/Cambridge and Ashford, Kent. At the time of writing these proposals are becoming more controversial as the details of the proposed development areas become clear. The headline on the front page of a broadsheet newspaper 'Homes plan "will swamp" countryside'⁵ indicates that there are conflicts yet to be resolved. The article goes on to show how 480 000 homes are planned in eastern England, which spans three of the growth areas referred to above. The main objections of some of the local authorities affected relate to the inroads that will be made into the countryside and the lack of transport facilities. Nonetheless, the Regional Assembly has approved the proposals. No doubt, the local authorities' concerns are real; but is there another way of providing sufficient housing? Some would argue that the new housing should be provided in regions away from London; but can markets be sufficiently developed in these regions?

The Barker Review⁶ of the housing market was commissioned as a response to central government's concern about the dearth of new housing and the rapid rise in property values in the last two decades. It concentrated on the problems of lack of supply and of the lack of responsiveness of the UK housing sector. One of its conclusions was that because new build is only about 1% of the existing stock, even very large increases in housebuilding would have a small impact on the real increase in house prices. The planned growth areas may have the effect of reducing house prices and thus making them more affordable but this is likely to be a long-term process, which will not address the immediate problems. The review rightly concluded that a large increase in publicly funded affordable housing was necessary as well as measures to increase the supply of private housing. The four growth areas are intended to contribute to this in tandem with the new Local Development Frameworks process. More information on the Barker review is in the paper by Ellis *et al.*

While the supply of housing is important, so are the qualities of construction and the environment within which it is set. The quality of urban design has been of concern for at least the last two decades following much criticism of earlier developments, both the public and private. The advice in *By design: urban design in the planning system*⁷ together with the advice in *Planning*

Policy Guidance Note 1 (PPG1)⁸ should lead to better environments and developments where people will enjoy living. Both are recommended reading.

The paper by Crookston describes how higher density of development can be achieved and at the same time produces a high quality environment in which people will want to live. It is suggested that this should not be just a 'numbers game' but be more about adopting a design approach appropriate to the housing area to be developed. A number of examples are given which are valuable to the engineer and encourages engineers to become more involved in the design process. The oldest question in the design of housing schemes is addressed, namely, how much parking to provide.

The Briefing article by Carey on brownfield sites shows how the difficulties faced on such developments can be overcome. With a government target of 50% of all new homes to be built on brownfield sites the practical experience obtained by a housing developer is particularly appropriate. The author deals with a number of technical matters, and the oldest question in the design of housing schemes is (again!) addressed, namely, how much parking to provide.

After a debate, commencing with the first edition of *Design Bulletin 32* (DB32)⁹ some 30 years ago, practice varies widely. Many residential roads still appear to be overdesigned with vertical kerbs and standard footways even in very small developments where an environment less vehicle-oriented could have been created. However, the advice on planning residential street layouts is confusing to say the least. *Places, Streets and Movement*¹⁰ has to some extent provided better advice but is in conflict with DB32. This has been recognised in a report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister,¹¹ which may lead to more acceptable street environments. Local authorities can do much themselves and some have produced supplementary planning guidance.

The paper by Raje is particularly relevant for a period when there will be a need to plan urban extensions in such a way that they are integrated with an existing town. The research undertaken of

a development in Oxford demonstrates how a poor road layout can actually impede access to local facilities.

Most of this editorial has been about urban development, as is this issue of *Municipal Engineer* itself. But there is also a need for rural housing policies. The paper by Gray *et al.* is concerned with the development of an index to aid location decisions with the aim of securing sustainable development in rural areas in Ireland. While the legislative and administrative arrangements in that country differ from those in the UK, the problems faced in rural areas is often similar and the paper will be of interest to those concerned with rural planning.

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