



Non-Verbatim Minutes

9th October 2018

17.30 – 19.00

Committee Room 5, House of Commons, Westminster

Present

MPs and Peers: Ian Mearns MP (Chair), Baroness Gardner of Parkes, Lord Best, Rosie Winterton MP, Liz Twist MP, Liz McInnes MP, Andy McDonald MP, Angela Rayner MP, Chi Onwurah MP, Nic Dakin MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Jim McMahon MP, Lord Shipley, Melanie Onn MP

Apologies: Kevin Hollinrake MP (Vice Chair), Simon Clarke MP (Chair), Lord Taylor of Goss Moor, Baroness Hamwee, Lord Thurlow, Baroness Young of Old Scone, Julian Sturdy MP, Lord Richard Rogers, George Howarth MP, John Healey MP, Nigel Evans MP, Debbie Abrahams MP

Secretariat: Jo Boaden, Chief Executive, NHC; Tracy Harrison, Deputy Chief Executive, NHC; Kate Maughan, Head of Member Engagement, NHC; Liam Gregson, Member Engagement Officer, NHC

Annual General Meeting

A quorum was reached and confirmed. All existing officers, having indicated their willingness to continue in their roles, were re-elected with no objections.

The Hidden Costs of Poor Quality Housing in the North

Paul Hackett, Director at the Smith Institute (PH), began by introducing the discussion document. The Northern Housing Consortium, with support from Karbon Homes and Liverpool City Region, had commissioned the Smith Institute to complete a review housing conditions in the North, a “look under the bonnet”.

The aim of this research was to identify the scale of non-decent homes (NDH) in each of the northern regions and ultimately the cost implications, socially and economically, of these homes remaining non-decent. Today PH would guide parliamentarians through the preliminary findings based on English Housing Survey data and wider submissions. A final report will be prepared and published as a submission to the 2019 Spring Statement / Spending Review.

The North was characterised by a large number of old terraced housing 41% of which was built before 1944 and just under a quarter (24%) being built before 1919. Alongside ageing housing was an ageing population; over 65s will account for 25% of households by 2036. In tenure choices, the region was shifting towards the private rented sector, notably through the conversion of existing properties.

Overall, the North has done well to reduce the number of non-decent homes. This was particularly seen in social housing, where by tenure the lowest percentage of NDH lay. However, there were signs of strain in these improvements with the percentage of NDH increasing from 20% to 22% between 2013 and 2016. The perhaps unanticipated main finding of the preliminary research was the issue of NDH in private (owner-occupied) housing. In this tenure, around 1 million homes failed to meet the decent homes standard, a particular problem amongst the North's low valued properties.

These findings are a major concern given the prevalence of older people in owner-occupied NDH. A third of NDH house at least one person over 60, and nearly half of NDH house someone over 60 or a person with a long-term illness / disability. In addition to human cost and widening health inequalities, PH reminded parliamentarians that these challenges also brought costs to the state. The implications on a resident's health and wellbeing brings substantial cost to the NHS and places huge strain on the social care system. NDH adds to the housing benefit bill, has negative effects on employment, and increases energy costs and CO2 levels.

In concluding, PH noted that whilst the recent housing debate had focussed on increasing supply, it was important to address the existing number of NDH as well. Was it time to refocus policy on improving private housing and improving homes for older people? This would require imagination and commitment, with funding for home improvements being cut and councils under pressure. Having said this, investment upfront would bring savings in other areas and offers opportunities to integrate health and housing.

[The Hidden Costs of Poor Quality Housing can be viewed and downloaded here](#)

Chair Ian Mearns MP next welcomed Steve Rotheram (SR), Metro Mayor of Liverpool City Region and former MP for Liverpool Walton, back to Parliament. SR began by noting his shock at the findings of the Smith Institute research in relation to older owner occupiers and NDH, he had that morning met with the Housing Minister and had raised this issue.

Liverpool City Region (LCR) must, like many other areas of the North, deal with a post-industrial heritage which has left a housing stock in need of remediation. In addition to this problem, was the presence of new towns from the 1960s which today were disconnected. Together, too many housing markets in the North were characterised by low quality homes and high deprivation, this wasn't good enough.

It was no longer acceptable for housing to be compartmentalised with no links to the other policy areas that affect lives. The "build it and leave it" approach could not continue. Devolution was bringing opportunities to make these connections; between housing, health, transport, and employment as part of one investment strategy. SR was pleased to see that Housing Associations in Liverpool, with guidance from the Mayor's office, were increasingly working as one. Cooperatives too, were beginning to come on board.

SR informed parliamentarians that one of LCR's ambitions was to introduce a City Region wide Landlord Licensing scheme. Currently implemented in certain areas, the aim was for a scheme to cover all six areas under SR's authority and allow LCR to become a 'petri-dish' for Landlord Licencing which will allow schemes to be developed in other areas.

Design is also an area LCR are focussing on. SR queried why homes should come to need adaptations, surely now we have the ability to 'futureproof' housing to allow people to live independently for longer. With partners such as RIBA, it was hoped that SR would be able to announce plans soon that will facilitate good design as part of future housing developments.

Ian Mearns MP thanked SR and highlighted the long game attendees were playing, landlord licensing being an issue during one of his first council election campaigns in 1987.

Next, Paul Fiddaman, Group Chief Executive of Karbon Homes (PF), explained why his organisation had decided to support the NHC and Smith Institute in their work. There was a clear need for additional new homes but also a need to look at our existing stock. Support should be given to those looking for a first or new house but what about the people happy in their homes who want to continue living in comfort and with independence?

PF felt that the links between housing and health were well understood. It was clear that NDH can have a detrimental effect on a person's health whether physically, for example respiratory diseases, or environmental impacts such as defects and poor design leading to slips, trips and falls. These challenges were understood, the revelation of the research lay in the concentration of NDH amongst older owner-occupiers. Whilst PF was confident that social housing providers had done well to lower the percentage of NDH amongst that tenure, the assumption was that it would be the private rented sector where the highest percentage of NDH would be found.

However, whilst the findings had taken people by surprise, PF questioned whether this should have been the case. Amongst owner occupiers was undoubtedly a collection of homeowners who were income and asset poor, who couldn't generate money for necessary repairs let alone desired improvements. For example, a home owner retired at 65 may still need a few boiler repairs or kitchen renovations over the course of a lifetime.

In looking to see what can be done to address these challenges, PF hoped that the research would spur on a conversation that would develop a range of ideas. Homeowners, particularly older homeowners, needed choice and the ability to move to more suitable accommodation. Similarly, the current housing provision had failed in the sense that we haven't anticipated the needs of population that is ageing and living longer. People are reactive and would wait until something goes wrong, we all needed to be proactive. This has repercussions that goes beyond the home, communities had to be well designed as well with access to services and medical facilities.

PF noted that the sector should also look to create financing options to support people in funding improvements. New tenures for example such as shared ownership or ethical equity release products to arrange wealth accordingly. Overall the sector, like everyone, wants to create a society that helps people live healthily.

Finally, Ian Mearns MP welcomed Melanie Onn MP to address the APPG in her role as Shadow Housing Minister. Melanie began with the welcome observation of how important an issue housing had become in the national debate. Whether the private rented sector, sheltered accommodation, or waiting lists, housing was a challenge in many people's lives. Importantly, housing played a critical role in supporting wellbeing and happiness in life for the individual and for the family.

Melanie Onn MP agreed with the assertion made by all speakers that we were at risk of concentrating too much on the numbers game. Supply was important, but we cannot lose the nuance the impact unsuitable housing can have on people's lives. It was clear that housing that wasn't fit for purpose existed on a large scale in the North. Melanie Onn MP agreed with PF on the detrimental effects housing can have and added that this can go beyond older generations. In her constituency Melanie hears first-hand how unsuitable housing can have a detrimental impact on the lives of disabled people and their families. It was also important to think beyond the default option of adaptations and create a situation where all homes were decent and there was genuine choice in being able to move. Similarly, funding was important but also flexibility in how it was spent, this should be dictated by a person's needs.

Melanie Onn MP finished by highlighting the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill 2017-19 which was soon to be considered at the report stage.

Chair Ian Mearns MP thanked Melanie Onn MP for her contribution and opened the room for comments and discussion.

Andy McDonald MP welcomed comments promoting the integration of housing, employment, and transport policy. Similar holistic attempts at rejuvenating areas had been attempted previously, notably John Prescott's Pathfinder schemes.

A lot could also be said of the bold ideas coming from the bottom, up. For example, the work of the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust had created a buzz despite being on a small scale. However, it was clear that some homes were never going to recover from neglect and would remain as voids. The challenge moving forward is in deciding which homes or streets should be demolished and started afresh or which buildings remain and receive the bold and local ideas.

Finally, Andy McDonald MP agreed that home adaptations remained an important issue and it was critical that these adaptations must be tailored to an individual's needs. It was also lamented that in some circumstances incredibly important adaptations only materialised after a litigation process or through charity. Homes that can be easily and affordably adapted through life should be part of the culture of this country.

Liz Twist MP followed and noted that many of the issues discussed have also been highlighted in the work of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. The work of the committee on housing for older people was noted and particularly the acknowledgement that housing can have a positive impact on a person's health and wellbeing. In this sense there was clear scope for future cooperation with the committee on these issues.

On the The Hidden Costs of Poor-Quality Housing in the North, Liz Twist MP queried why the report put forward ‘talking points’ as opposed to ‘recommendations’?

In response, PH advised that the document was a starting point with an initial aim to generate discussion to progress from. One million homes needed to reach the Decent Homes Standard, this would require policy initiatives on a macro level that had a big impact on the ground.

PH highlighted that the social housing sector had done well to reduce non-DHS properties and perhaps more needed to be done to highlight and transfer this best practice. Was there a role in this for the Housing, Communities, and Local Government Select Committee?

Matt Forrest, Executive Director of Business Development at Home Group, remarked how striking the report data was between owner occupier and the PRS. With the Social Housing Green Paper dedicating a lot of focus to the issue of stigma, it was interesting that the evidence shows that social housing should be enviable for its quality. With this in mind, how do we strike the balance between new supply and addressing these issues in existing stock?

Lord Best offered one suggestion- Home Improvement Agencies (HIA). Part of the interest generated by the Smith Institute document was in asserting it was the owner-occupier sector which needed a different mindset. Why can't we make HIAs the new Housing Associations – a big one in every town. Lord Best recalled a visit to a Leeds HIA where the biggest complaint was not the need for adaptations, but central heating.

Paul Teverson, Director of Communications at McCarthy and Stone, commented that it was great to see the owner occupied sector come into focus. Specialist housing should be part of the solution given the evidence highlighting the benefits of linking housing and health. The challenge of this is to factor health into the planning system. The next step should be to get this work on the radar of Government.

Steve Hepworth, Chief Executive, Ongo Partnership, felt a strength of the report was in shining a light on challenges that will only grow in importance i.e. in the owner occupied sector. A worry would be that in an attempt to raise finance, some elderly owners would be tempted by equity release who would not be suitable and regulations may not be able to fully protect the vulnerable.

Matthew Gardiner, Chief Executive, Trafford Housing Trust agreed that it was worth looking at alternative ways the sector could finance these works. Some mortgage products are clunky and are hampered by the different expectations people place on them. Also worth looking at was how digital advances can help alleviate burdens.

John Cockerham, Director of Customer Services Operations, Guinness expressed that also essential was how to engage, help, and educate people who don't understand or believe that they are affected by a poor-quality home.

Summary

Chair Ian Mearns MP thanked attendees for their contributions and invited the APPG's guest speakers to offer their concluding thoughts.

SR ended by underlining the increasing importance of digital connectivity, the process of futureproofing housing needs to begin now. This process also involves design, and Liverpool City Region will be working with partners to instil good design in future developments.

PF was heartened by the consensus in the room. The dialogue that had begun today needed to continue to build answers. In an ideal world the people at the heart of the issues discussed would be at the centre of the engagement process and hopefully we would find some way to include these groups.

Melanie Onn MP finished by arguing for a holistic approach that ensured areas were fit for all residents irrespective of age – children’s play areas, benches to rest, smooth walkways with no trip hazards, accessible public transport. With local decision making in planning and integration we could make areas genuinely place based.

PH concluded by underlining the negative effects of NDH. From inhibiting health and wellbeing to holding areas back economically – a variety of pressures are put on the public purse which ultimately cost us all. This poses a policy challenge that goes to the heart of the integration agenda. The role of housing in capturing savings for the NHS needs to be evidenced and promoted. Where is the plan to capture and redistribute those savings?

Chair Ian Mearns MP closed the meeting by reiterating the importance of having an APPG dedicated to northern housing issues. The discussion today had taken in many issues; life expectancy, property and land value, ageing; all of which pose regionally specific challenges. It is these all issues that the APPG Housing in the North will take continue to take forward.

The next meeting of the APPG Housing in the North will take place Tuesday 26 February 2019, 16.30 – 18.00, Committee Room 5, House of Commons, Westminster