

Affordable Housing Seminar: 9th November 2019, Barnham Community Hall.

Let me start by going back to those two words I used in the introduction, “AFFORDABLE HOUSING”. What is affordable Housing, what does affordable mean, who does it benefit, so says Michael Warden of CPRE Arun District Group. It seems to me that the most wanting and needy people are not being catered for although we are gradually carpeting all our valuable lands with development, including parts of our AONB and National Parks. Inheritance assets that we will be condemned for giving up by future generations.

The affordability of purchasing a house is whether your income is great enough to do so as with any other product, therefore if you are not able to afford the inflated prices of today’s houses, you are compelled to either rent privately, often paying exorbitant sums and sometimes in sub-standard accommodation, or endless waiting to obtain a Local Authority house, or taking up an affordable housing scheme of one sort or another.

All of these options are determined by your income, which has to be able to meet all the other needs of you and probably a family, such as food, clothes, gas, electric, water and so on.

There is an Architect, who is the presenter of Channel 4’s Amazing Spaces, and this is what he says about the housing crisis and I quote, (I have been given his permission) “Politicians can sit there and blame everybody else in the world, but as far as I’m concerned, the State has a responsibility to provide homes for those most in need.”

My sentiments entirely, but the State is not doing so and hasn’t done so for a long, long time. How did it come to this? When did society’s safety net stop working with regard to housing? When did we become beholden to profit-chasing developers and in a race to the bottom regarding standards?

He goes on to say, and at this point I must say that I am in agreement with him. The big change came in 1980, one year in to Margaret Thatcher’s government. The Right to Buy policy was heralded as making home ownership a possibility for thousands of working-class and low-income people and families. More than one million council homes were sold off in the 1980s alone.

Expanding homeownership to those for whom it had been cut off was not a bad plan. What came next was. The problem was the tiny, tiny proportion of housing stock that was replaced. Which has greatly added to the position we find ourselves in today. An increasing share of income raised from Right to Buy went directly to the Treasury, rather than the councils who were losing their housing stock alongside a guaranteed revenue stream, not forgetting that a large number of those council properties were built with your money, which was plundered. Council housing numbers plummeted, from around 6.5 million in 1979 to just two million by 2017. If selling off the family silver was harmful, failing to replace it then renting it back at vastly inflated prices seems positively reckless.

“Selling off state assets at a massively discounted rate and not replacing that house is just stupid,” says Clarke. “And worse still, more than 40 per cent of all the homes that have been sold off under Right to Buy are now in the hands of private landlords – who are renting them out at considerable profit, quite often to people on housing benefit. It is then costing the state a load of money. That, to me, is one of the biggest scandals of all.”

In 1919 an act of Parliament called the Addison Act, was passed and “The Addison Act was revolutionary because it was the Health Minister Dr Christopher Addison – not the housing minister – who said that truly affordable, state-built, well- maintained homes would be the staple of a modern and new society, providing housing for those most in need.

“Now, wouldn’t it be amazing if the Health Minister said the same today? Wouldn’t it be amazing if the Health Minister talked to the Housing Minister and to the Education Minister and realised that if we provided a huge amount of good-quality, affordable, stable homes for people most in need, it would transform the health of many people, it would transform the mental wellbeing of many people, and it would even transform the standard of education that our kids are receiving.”

“There are some developers whose sole aim is to make a massive amount of money to the detriment of communities and society,” he says.

“One of the biggest problems is that the home to them is not much more than a commodity to be traded and transacted, rather than a home being an affordable place to live. “There are some big, big, big powerful housebuilders out there whose only interest is to make a load of money and push up their share price. They move on from one site to the next without any regard for what is being built and how long it is going to last. And when it comes to council housing, they want to get rid of it.”

One century on from the Addison Act, hundreds of people in need of homes are now being offered temporary accommodation in converted shipping containers. Some accommodation has no windows as rules about minimum space for dwellings are circumvented thanks to new laws in 2015 about converting offices to residential use.

“We have massively gone backwards,” says Clarke. “In the 1950s and 1960s, if you weren’t doing the right thing on housing, you were unelectable. Now, they just don’t care.

“And the reason they don’t care is because they in effect privatised the whole system, so it is not their problem. The Welfare State was built on health, education and housing – if you decide to ignore housing, it’s a farce, isn’t it?”

I have some sympathy for councils, because they are battling against central government and failed policies from parliament. When I say Government, I mean all governments whatever party is or has been in power.

We should at this time be bringing in a policy to build more council housing. Councils need the power to be able to build again.

There should be a long-term strategy and cross-party consensus to set in law a policy that would be followed for the next 40-50 years, short term policies by one administration that are cancelled out by the new incumbents is a criminal waste of taxpayer’s money. A long-term policy to build

100,000 homes per year for the next five years without pulling the plug at the change of Governments, should be a priority.

The centenary of the Addison Act should spark a new wave of state-built housing, he says. Housing fit for the way we live now.

George Clark went on to say in his statement that: "This is going to be one of the most hard-hitting things I ever say. But the government doesn't care. Because if it did, it would radically change its policies. It is about action, not words.

"I am sick to death of hearing the same headlines. We all know what the problem is. We all know what the solution is. We as a nation should be standing here, proud that we have solved the housing crisis, that we have built fantastic state-owned homes, that we have provided homes for those most in need. If we can't do that there is something fundamentally wrong with the entire system."

There will always be a section of our society who work within some very essential industries, like agriculture and retail, amongst other jobs, whose earning capacity will never enable them to purchase a home of their own, even with the "so-called affordable housing schemes" and we as a nation have a duty and responsibility to provide for those people as the homeless numbers are rising daily and families are struggling through no fault of their own. The system does not work for them.

A great deal of the content of this presentation is attributable to George Clark and I take no plaudits for the majority of the content, but would emphasise that I am in agreement with his sentiments and there are people here today will agree that my sentiments have and always will be that this country needs a social housing programme that will meet the needs of those who are truly in need. If we don't address the problem, then the future does not look good for future generations, because a healthy life, a stable life, a good family, community spirit helps create stability and hope.

Thank you for listening.

Originator: Michael Warden, CPRE Arun District.