

Housing in Cornwall

Part Four, January 2015



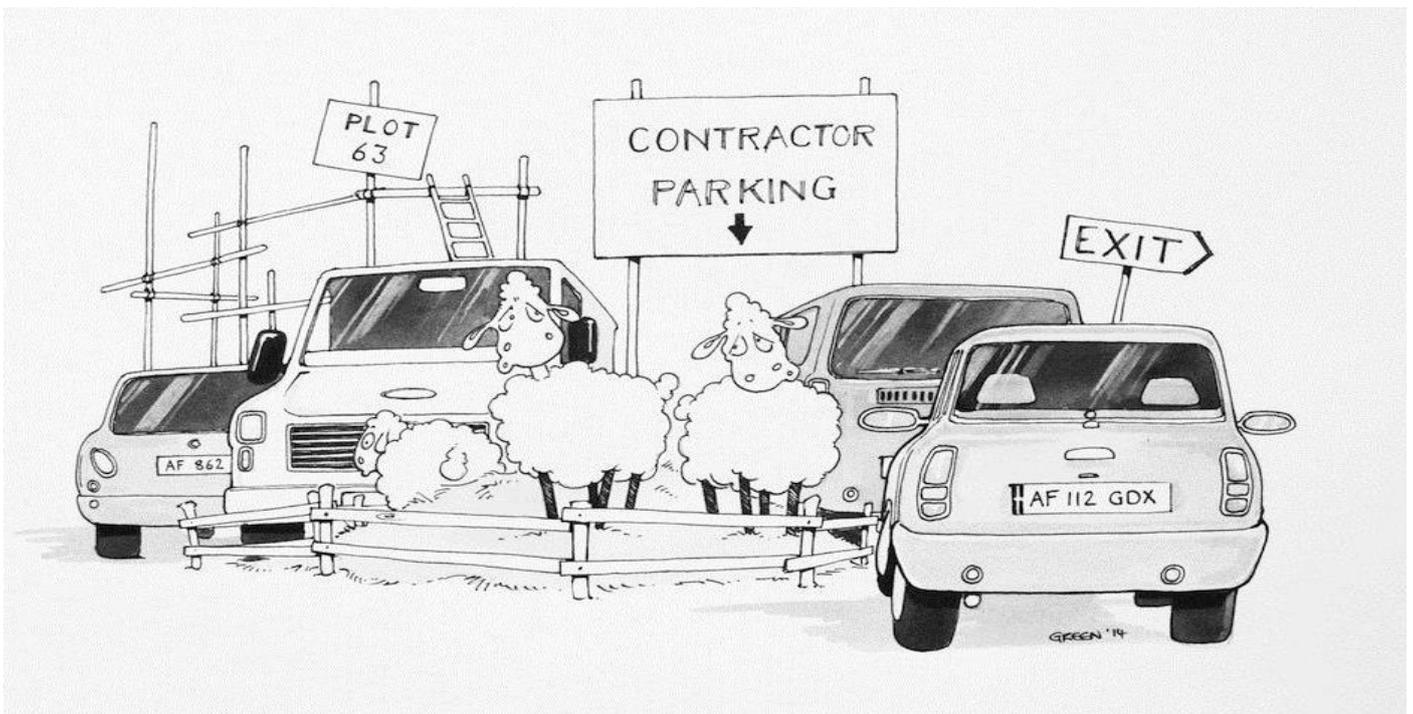
Introduction

The 'need' for more housing and the resulting targets set by local authorities are not easily opened up for democratic debate. Central Government pressurises local authorities to build more houses to fuel economic growth. In doing so, true local needs are not met, and the requirement to build sustainably is given short shrift. While developers make more and more profits the cost is paid by Cornwall in terms of losing its beauty, heritage, culture and the magic that once made it so special.

CPRE Cornwall, January 2015

Key points

- Austerity politics and dominant 'go for growth at all costs' ideologies make house building the only game in town.
- In Cornwall, out of county developers are pushing up the housing target to meet their own commercial aims.
- Cornwall's planners have been co-opted by a development discourse and have accepted a model where population and housing growth are taken for granted.
- It is time to ask whether the environmental, social and cultural costs of building houses, not required by local communities, to drive economic growth outweigh its claimed benefits.



The Government dictates that housing targets are set to meet the ‘objectively assessed needs’ of communities in terms of demographic change, affordability and job creation. In reality, the ‘need’ for more housing and the resulting housing targets set, are not easily opened up to democratic debate. Local planning authorities are leant on to keep housing targets high and not to deviate from official projections, even when those projections and the housing targets they produce are clearly flawed, as is the case in Cornwall, leading to a higher housing target being set than real need dictates.

So the question at stake is why the Government pressurises local planning authorities to build more and more houses, poorly suited in quantity and type to the real needs of local communities. It is clear that the ‘need’ for more housing and the associated targets for house building is driven by deeper factors than the true needs of local communities alone.

In reality, the targets for house building suit the agendas of politicians and developers. To achieve this agenda, the Government clips local planning authorities’ freedom of manoeuvre and in addition imposes an ideology within which planners and politicians take housing and population growth for granted.

Key message: Targets for housebuilding suit the agendas of politicians and developers

Growth and Sustainable Development

On the surface, the NPPF maintains a balance between growth - ‘we must house a rising population’ - and sustainability - ‘ensuring that better lives for ourselves don’t mean worse lives for future generations’.

The NPPF’s core planning principles include

supporting ‘the transition to a low carbon future’, ‘helping to improve biodiversity’ and conserving ‘heritage assets’, while recognising ‘the intrinsic character and beauty of our countryside’ and the fact that open land ‘can perform many functions’.¹

However, while planning authorities are encouraged to ‘use their evidence base to ensure that their Local Plan meets the full, objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing’, no equivalent evidence has to be produced to ensure that environmental aims are being met.²

As the environmental goal is vague the ‘sustainable’ aspect of ‘sustainable development’ shrinks. Translated into planning applications and planning documents, it loses all meaning, as it is ritually appended merely to make building houses, supermarkets, roads and other infrastructure appear more acceptable. The ‘balance’ between growth and true sustainability disappears from sight and ‘sustainable’ becomes an empty signifier.

Cornwall Council’s Local Plan contains the aim of ‘accommodating growth ... while respecting the natural and historic character of Cornwall’.³ Growth is quantified; ‘respect’ is vague and as a result the hopeful qualitative, and yet vitally important, aspiration of protecting Cornwall’s character soon gets lost.

In practice there is a fine balance between growth and sustainability. The government and Cornwall Council seem not to have considered the possibility that growth and sustainability may be incompatible and that a balance is hard to achieve.

Others are much less sanguine. Tim Jackson, Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey, argues that there is a ‘growth dilemma’; growth appears ‘essential for lasting prosperity’ but is also ‘ecologically unsustainable’ as it comes up against the limits of a finite world.⁴

Key Message: Growing Cornwall sustainably is a difficult game. We can have one or the other but we can't have both without very carefully and judiciously managing development.

The demands of everyday political policy tilt the playing field steeply towards growth and building more houses. From a local government perspective, swingeing cuts in budgets since 2010, coupled with devices such as the New Homes Bonus, which brings a financial reward for each new house built, combine to make house building more attractive. New housebuilding is now virtually the only means of providing new infrastructure for local communities.

Key message: Austerity politics and dominant 'go for growth at all costs' ideologies make house building the only game in town.

Increasing the number of houses built also meets the needs of developers for profit. In a capitalist society this need is as important, if not more important, than the need to accommodate demographic change or meet affordability issues.

The SHMNA found that 'it was evident throughout the consultation that a large number of developers are active in Cornwall'.⁵ Given the number of people outside of Cornwall who are attracted to living here, there is always a ready market for properties in the more 'desirable' parts of Cornwall and thus an opportunity for profits.

The higher the housing target, the easier it becomes for developers to obtain planning permission and make their profits. This explains why, in the first round of consultation on the council's housing target in 2011, 87% of businesses responding - most of them directly

dependent on the construction sector - preferred a target of 57,000 houses or more, a sharp increase on the historic building rate. In contrast, no parish or town council wanted more than 48,000 and no voluntary organisation more than 38,000.

Meanwhile, 64% of residents who responded preferred 38,000 or fewer. Virtually all developers who responded were based outside Cornwall.⁶

Clearly, developers have a vested financial interest in the outcome of the local plan. But this doesn't prevent the Council giving their arguments special consideration. Quite the reverse. In the second round of consultation in 2013 another wave of representations by out of county planning consultants was made on behalf of house builders and developers; these contained a repetitive pattern.

The Council's planners found themselves in an echo chamber. The developers took selected aspects of the various documents produced by Cornwall Council and spliced them together to conclude that a target of at least 50,000 or 60,000, was required to meet an 'under-provision of housing' in the draft Local Plan. The developers' targets were a mere rehashing of statistics that suited them and clearly 'not based on an objective assessment of housing need'.⁷

Key Message: Out of county developers in search of profits are setting the housebuilding agenda in Cornwall and driving up housing targets to meet their own ends.

The close fit between developers' assumptions and arguments, a central government presumption in favour of building houses and the technical data produced by Cornwall Council illustrates the shared values and assumptions of developers and planners. Planners appear to have been captured by the

developers' discourse and are unable or unwilling to escape it.

The developers' voice is institutionalised via devices such as the Cornwall Private Developers' Forum and the Council Housing Partnership. These were set up by Cornwall Council to 'discuss national and local planning policy' among other things and met quarterly, at least until January 2013.⁸ Use of planning performance agreements with major house builders and negotiations over planning gains mean that developers and planners meet regularly and are in constant communication.

It would be unusual if a close working relationship did not lead to shared values. In Cornwall's case its planners effectively act as a bridge between developers and elected representatives. This may help explain why Cornwall's planners vehemently resist criticisms of the official ONS/DCLG models and react so negatively to pleas to them to produce a stronger negotiating case when faced by central government pressure to increase house building rates even further.

This could include arguing that measurements of 'objectively assessed needs' have been misleading and that meeting such flawed projections would have an 'adverse impact' which 'would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits'.⁹ In contrast, planners describe the official projections as 'a fairly sophisticated model' and 'the best available approach to estimate change'.¹⁰

Key message: Cornwall's planners have been co-opted by a development discourse.

We have seen that the demographic need for more housing is based on flawed data, that affordability issues are exacerbated by increasing the quantity

of the wrong kind of housing and, while there is little evidence for their material benefits, powerful political and commercial interests are bent on continuing policies of endless housing and population growth. **It is therefore time to ask whether the environmental, social and cultural costs of such a project outweigh its claimed benefits.**

Sign up to the [CPRE Charter here](#)

Research: Dr. Bernard Deacon

CPRE Cornwall can be contacted at admin@cprecornwall.org

References

¹ NPPF, pp.i, 2, 4, 5 and 6.

² NPPF, pp.6 and 12.

³ Cornwall Council, *Local Plan submission draft (LP)*, 2014, p.9.

⁴ Jackson, pp.50 and 67-86.

⁵ SHMNA, p.107.

⁶ Responses available from this webpage - www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/planning/planning-policy/cornwall-local-plan/cornwall-local-plan-strategic-policies/our-preferred-approach-for-a-core-strategy-and-options-and-preferred-options-for-minerals-energy-and-waste/?page=32791#Response

⁷ For an example see Home Builders Federation response number 559, p.11, available at www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/planning/planning-policy/cornwall-local-plan/cornwall-local-plan-strategic-policies/strategic-policies-pre-submission-stage/strategic-policies-pre-submission-version-list-of-representations/

⁸ www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/planning/housing-delivery-partnerships/?page=27133

⁹ NPPF, p.4, para 14.

¹⁰ Communication from Cllr Hannaford, 3.1.14 and meeting with Cornwall Council planners, 8.10.13