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Improving Housing Supply & Simplifying Planning

I am writing to you on behalf of Transport 2000 which, as you will probably be aware, is an independent organisation campaigning for a national policy on transport and land-use which is consistent with a good and sustainable environment.

We therefore noted with interest the Treasury's Press Release "Budget 2003" (9th April) with its section headed "Improving Housing Supply and Simplifying Planning", which called for "new Regional Spatial Strategies to take account of volatility in the housing-market and promote macro-economic stability as part of delivering sustainable development." We also noted that you had been given the daunting task of reviewing issues underlying the lack of supply and responsiveness of housing in the UK: presumably a reflection of Government concern over what it sees as a shortage of housing in the South East and a surplus in the North.

It seems to us that one of your big difficulties lies in the Government's assumption (perhaps reflected in your terms of reference) that the planning system just needs simplifying: whereas, in our opinion, it needs to be greatly strengthened. Some developers will never be persuaded to invest in brownfield land, in accordance with Government policy, so long as they see the planning system as weak, and likely to give way on that very policy.

The planning system, since its inception, has tended to bend unnecessarily to short-term political pressure at the expense of long-term sustainability; but, when it has stood firm, as in the case of the London Green Belt and in the case of historic buildings generally, it has been remarkably successful. A decade of saying "No" loudly enough did eventually lead developers to realise that the Government actually meant it: ironically, in the case of historic buildings, allowing them to make a greater profit out of conversions than they would have done through demolition and redevelopment!

Within the constraints of sustainability and the maintenance of a good environment in the South-East, we applaud the Government's desire to see housing provided where it is needed; and we particularly welcome the remit given to Sir John Egan to develop a skills and training strategy for economic development, regeneration and planning. This should help to ease the way towards realising the potential of derelict and under-used urban land. But much still needs to be done to persuade the public (including local councillors) that most urban densities are not only about half those of most European towns and cities but also far too low to provide self-sustaining communities served by a sustainable public transport system. Particularly it needs to be brought home that higher densities need not mean a return to tower-block housing.

Although the average density of new housing in London is twice that of the country as a whole, it is only half that of the nineteenth-century streets and squares which make up the majority of inner London's much-loved conservation areas (see "Compact Sustainable Communities", CPRE, London, 2001). In other words, London's population could, in theory, be doubled while still housing people in the sort of dwellings they aspire to: perhaps, when redevelopment takes place, through a modern interpretation of our Georgian heritage. Communities built thus would be sufficiently compact to support shops, primary schools, doctors' surgeries, pubs etc. within walking distance of everyone's front door. They could also be served economically by frequent bus services: thus reducing car-dependency and its environmental consequences. And, of course, at town centres which are also public transport nodes, densities can be considerably higher to accommodate those without small children who want to live close to their work or to town-centre facilities generally.

Densities could also be raised in towns in the South-East outside London: not so easily perhaps, because their inhabitants may have deliberately chosen a life which is "non-urban". But one reason for the collapse of community life in small towns and villages is the fact that most of them now have a density of population half of what it was historically: leading to the closure of local shops, schools and pubs, through lack of customers.

As Transport 2000 sees it, therefore, there is great scope for increasing housing in the South-East within the curtilage of existing urban areas and smaller settlements; and we have no objection to planning authorities in such areas being asked to set housing targets. We feel, however, that the Government should be advised strongly not to allow their enthusiasm for more housing in the South-East to lead to large incursions into the region's already dwindling countryside. Such a move might lead to short-term popularity through the hope of an eventual reduction in house prices, as supply more nearly meets demand. But it seems that the amount of housing needed to make a significant reduction in prices would lead to the very concreting-over of the South-East which John Prescott wishes to avoid; to a massive transport problem which always follows dispersal; and to a deterioration of the environment which would make the region a less pleasant area in which to live and work. And all this could lead ultimately to a decline in London's popularity as a world city, and a movement of businesses that needed to be located in large cities to more attractive locations in mainland Europe.

The alternative must surely be a firm "No" to the idea that a substantial part of new housing in the South-East can be on greenfield land, combined with much greater encouragement for developers to make use of brownfield sites: including any excessively under-utilised open land that is not designated as Metropolitan Open Space.

Such encouragement could take the form of subsidies to counter the obvious disadvantages like contamination, lack of infrastructure etc. It should also include the long-overdue reform of VAT so that the renovation of existing housing no longer suffers a tax which is not applicable to new housing. A curb on greenfield development in the south should lead to a market-forces-led renaissance in the north, which could be hastened along by encouragement from national and local politicians on the lines of the revival of Bilbao, the Spanish former industrial city which had suffered a similar fate to Britain's northern cities. Describing the renaissance of Bilbao in "Cities for a Small Planet" (Faber and Faber, 2000) Richard Rogers and Ann Power say "If Bilbao can achieve this transformation so can the ex-industrial cities of Britain".

In summary, there is great potential for increasing the housing stock within the existing developed areas of south-east England. And, if much of this potential is met by increasing densities, our urban communities could become less car-dependent and more sustainable: with their residential streets once again becoming places where people meet and children play, rather than mere thoroughfares to somewhere else.

If compatibility with Europe lies behind Treasury thinking, then raising urban densities to typical European levels can be achieved through the policies described above. But a significant lowering of house prices in south-east England, to make them more compatible with the rest of the UK and with Europe, will not be attained until the north of England is sufficiently revived to reduce pressure on the South-East.

I would be very pleased to discuss all this with you. If this is acceptable to you, perhaps your office could phone my office (7253 5979) to arrange a time. And, if you do agree to such a meeting, I should be very grateful if you would allow me to bring along with me Stephen Joseph, the Director of Transport 2000.

Harley Sherlock
(Vice-President, Transport 2000)

For further information on acceptable high-density housing see "Capital Gains – Making High Density Housing Work in London" published by the London Housing Federation in 2002; "Sustainable Residential Quality" by Llewelyn-Davies, published by the Housing Corporation in 2000; "Towards an Urban Renaissance" published by the Government's Urban Task Force (chaired by Richard Rogers) in 1999; and "Cities Are Good For Us" by Harley Sherlock, published by Harper Collins in 1991 and now distributed by Transport 2000.