



COUNCIL MEETING – 19 April 2006

Question under Council Procedure Rule 14

QUESTION 6

From: Councillor Steel

To: The Portfolio Holder for Housing

"Is the Portfolio Holder for Housing aware that in 1990 only about one eighth of new dwellings constructed were flats but that by 2004 the percentage of flats had increased to nearly one half of all new dwellings constructed?"

Is he aware that in a MORI poll in March 2005, 50% of those questioned favoured a detached house as their preferred dwelling and 22% a bungalow whilst just 2% wanted a low rise flat and 1% a flat in a high rise block?

Is he aware that research by the Royal Horticultural Society demonstrates that there is greater biodiversity in the urban garden than there is in the countryside used for agriculture?

Is he aware that only around 8% of land in Britain is urban which is less than half the figure in the Netherlands and lower than Belgium and Denmark?

Is he aware that between 1971 and 2003, whilst the population increased by 7%, the number of households increased by 30%?

Is he aware that since the early 1990s, the number of new dwellings constructed annually has fallen year on year and the number constructed in 2002 was the lowest since 1924?

Is he aware that house prices in Britain have increased faster in Britain than in the other EU countries of Western Europe in the last 30 years but that the standard of housing has fallen relative to the rest of Western Europe?

Is he aware that land prices in Britain were more or less constant during the first half of the 20th century and only started to rise dramatically following the introduction of the Town and Country Planning system in 1948?

Would he agree that this demonstrates;-

(a) that the housing that is being provided does not meet the aspirations of the population?

(b) that there is a serious lack of provision and affordability of housing in Winchester District?

(c) that the Town and Country Planning legislation as applied nationally and locally may be part of the problem rather than the solution?

(d) that being young or poor (or both) and trying to find accommodation must be a miserable experience?

(e) that this Council should use every effort through seeking a change in legislation and by other means to try to ensure that everyone in the District should be able to find a suitable and affordable home?"

Reply

"Response to Question (a)

I note the statistics provided by the Member and agree that households will always aspire to the best possible housing (in this case a detached house).

However as a City Council we have to provide for new housing (having regard to Government density requirements) as well as protecting the natural environment for future generations.

As you acknowledge household formation is increasing and this is putting pressure on the housing market by increasing demand. What we know from the latest Government statistical information (14 March 2006) is that average household size is decreasing with single person households nationally increasing by 150,000 per year (majority in the 35 to 65 age group).

Statistics from our Joint Housing Register show that of the 1348 households registered 1066 are either singles or childless couples.

Having regard to this information then the provision of smaller accommodation in the form of 1 and 2 bedroom flats seems reasonable to meet the increasing single household demand. Flats are the most affordable accommodation currently available in the District. The average price recorded by the Land Registry is £182,000.

In summary whilst the building of flats does not meet the aspirations of the majority of households they provide an important contribution to a balanced housing market which seeks to provide a mix of housing that caters for all requirements.

Response to Question (b)

I agree that the lack of affordable housing is a serious issue in the District and this is acknowledged by the Council having the provision of affordable homes as a key corporate priority. The 2003 Housing Needs Survey showed that there were approximately 779 new households each year whose needs were unmet. There have been no major changes in the local housing market that would have led to this figure being reduced.

The Council has made strenuous efforts to provide as much affordable housing as possible; during 2005/06 129 new affordable homes were built in the District (the highest figure since 1996). Additionally 33 key workers have been helped with loans to purchase homes. Recently the Housing Corporation announced it would provide £8.7M to fund new housing development in the District over the next 2 years (about 250 new homes).

The Council is committed to looking for new ways to fund affordable housing and will report to Members later this year with various options.

The increasing numbers of households requiring subsidised affordable housing is a symptom of a failing housing market. Supply has failed to keep pace with demand and this has led to an increase in prices. Demand has and will continue to increase as,

- People live longer
- Rising expectations in terms of size, quality of housing and not wanting to move
- Care policies that encourage adaptations (and support) to a person's home rather than specialist accommodation.
- More people living alone
- Opposition to new housing delaying new schemes
- Constriction of supply leading to higher prices, whether directly by developers or by planning policies (Barker report on housing supply)."

Response to Question (c), (d), and (e)

The Town and Country Planning system has its roots in the need to control development for public health reasons and to ensure rational use of land and prevent ribbon development and other forms of development which threatened to seriously harm the British countryside. By removing the previous right of landowners to develop as they wished, the planning system inevitably introduced a new degree of control and in effect rationed the amount and location of land available for development. The effect of this has clearly been to increase the value of that land which is identified as suitable for development and the increases in value have become most acute where such land is in short supply.

In that sense it could be said that the Planning system is part of the problem of high land and housing prices, but that would ignore the benefits of a system which seeks to control the use of land in the public interest. Few people would advocate either doing away with the Planning system, or relaxing it to the extent that development is permitted solely on the basis of market demand. The problems of housing shortfalls are recognised by Government, which is taking action to seek to resolve them and to ensure that housing needs are met. The City Council has a role through its Local Plan and Local Development Framework, by allocating adequate land for local needs and putting in place policies that allow it to be developed.

With regard to affordability, the Council has always argued that affordable housing shortages cannot be solved by the Planning system alone. The Council has sought to put in place planning policies that achieve the maximum amount of affordable housing within the constraints of the housing market and Government policy. It has pressed for the site size threshold imposed by Government to be reduced or removed as this is a constraint to maximising provision. Therefore, whilst there are aspects of the Planning system that the Council would like to see improved, it accepts that it must work within the legislative framework that exists."