

This report gives the gist of the discussion that took place in the recent Facebook Q&A on Housing.

Thank you to everyone who took part!

<https://www.facebook.com/events/1248873561864194/>

At the sharp end, we had Lee Dillon, Councillor for Thatcham North and Leader of the Liberal Democrat Council Group, and Judith Bunting, Parliamentary Spokesperson for Newbury and West Berkshire Liberal Democrats.

Discussion kicked off with social housing:

SOCIAL HOUSING

We opened proceedings, with a question from **Sue Farrant** asking:

"How many affordable homes do West Berks Council say they have provided in, say, the last 5 years and how many have they actually provided?"

Lee Dillon replied that 101 affordable housing units have been built in West Berkshire so far this year [latest figure]. Last year West Berks saw 158 completions. The Council has set itself a target of developing 1000 affordable homes by 2020, but has admitted that is unlikely to hit that target and looks set to fall short by at least 150.

Tony Harris joined the debate, asking about the situation with the affordable flats in Parkway. Out of 111 housing units in the development, 37 are allocated to be social housing. Sadly, 4 years since the units were all finished, the affordable unit were still not being late. Tony was looking for an update:

"Do you know if the situation with the affordable flats in Parkway has been resolved yet? We learned that due to another West Berks Council legal cockup the developers realised they could keep them vacant and still keep the council's money." He went on to ask, "Are the flats now occupied and have WB legal accepted responsibility?"

Judith Bunting answered with the latest news that, "The 37 affordable units have now been allocated to the social housing provider, One Housing Group. I understand, however, that only one flat is occupied. After all, it is just four years since Parkway was completed!" She went on to say, "West Berkshire Council accepted legal responsibility for this crazy situation some time ago, now. Sadly that did not speed up their quest to find in a housing provider."

"This is a disgraceful situation", commented Ian Hall. And so say all of us, Ian!

Lucie Thompson then asked:

"How much social housing has been replenished, and why do we see less and less being built. The housing list bidding system, how many families are living in cramped conditions because there is a shortage of 3 and 4 bed houses."

Judith Bunting picked up this question saying, **Lucie**, Afraid I cannot find precise information about the number of bedrooms. The latest figures from the National House Building Council show that in 2015 the UK built:

Detached Houses:	42,173	27% of which was social housing
Semi Detached:	35,423	23% social housing
Terraced:	26,531	17% social housing
Flats:	49,529	31% social housing
Bungalows:	2,484	2% social housing.

Judith continued, “The problem is that not enough dwellings are being built altogether. The country needs a major programme of house building, increasing the rate of construction until we reach at least 300,000 houses a year and giving more freedom to social landlords, local authorities and local communities. Funnily enough, when we were in coalition, the Tories nixed the idea of any major investment in housing, although Nick Clegg’s proposals for [a new garden city](#) at Ebbsfleet, seem to be going ahead.”

Lucie Thompson:

“My point is that so many houses from the social sector were sold to families during the last 40 years that they are not replenishing those homes. This in turn leaves a huge gap for families living in a two bed flat, waiting for a house, then you have this crazy bidding for the house to even get it! Some families wait years!”

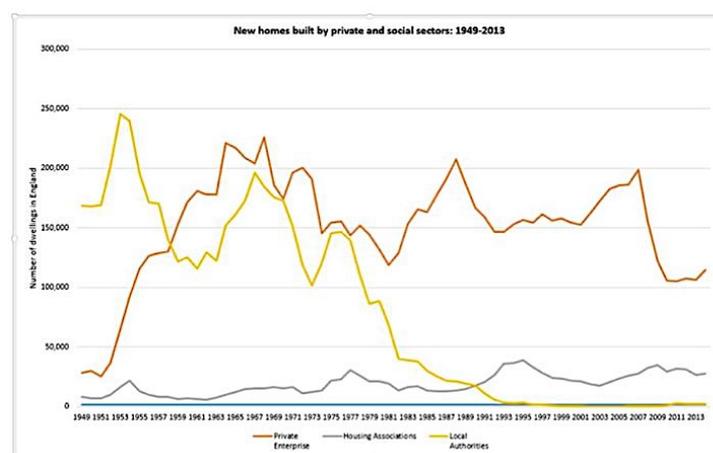
Rowena Lewis agreed:

“I agree Lucie, it is a nightmare for any family on a single salary or person trying to restart after a change in personal circumstances.”

Lucie Thompson finished, saying, “I personally think there is a bigger need for social housing than affordable housing, currently, and that is nationally”.

COUNCIL HOUSING

Building on Lucie’s comments, **Judith Bunting** drew our attention to the graph below from the Local Government Association (LGA), posted by Judith, shows how the type of new homes being built has changed over the years:



“In 1981, you can clearly see the effect of Margaret Thatcher’s policies, in the dramatic drop off of

council built homes [yellow line, Local Authority Housing]. Interestingly, the increase in social housing (grey line) comes in 1990, while John Major was PM. This is when social housing overtakes council housing for the first time. During the Blair years, 1997 – 2007, the rate of building of social housing drops off again. Gordon Brown oversaw a rise in the building of social housing, which then remained pretty steady during the coalition years. “

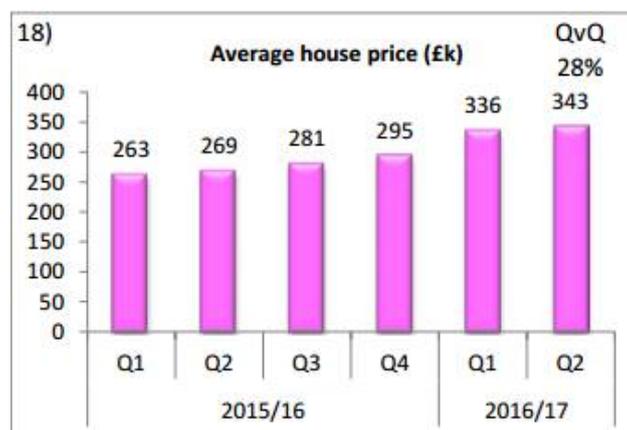
A **presubmitted question** asked specifically about Council Housing in West Berkshire:

[“Other Councils still have Council Houses, why is it not the same in West Berkshire?”](#)ow

Lee Dillon had no doubt about his answer: “West Berkshire Council could build Council Houses if it wanted to.”

Judith Bunting was also very clear: “There is no good reason why we do not have Council Houses in West Berkshire. The Conservative government of 1979 transferred the public housing stock to the private sector and created the right to buy. Today, though, it is a Council's choice whether to build Council Housing again. Our Council has chosen not to do so, and shows no sign of changing their minds. It is worth noting,” she said, “that Reading Borough Council still builds Council Houses.”

Lee Dillon picked up with a comment on the cost of housing in West Berkshire, “One clear reason why we are in desperate need of affordable housing, from social rent, through to shared ownership is this ...



The average price of a home in West Berkshire has risen to a whopping £336k. Assuming a 10% deposit (£36k) you would still need a mortgage of £300k which requires a joint income of over £75k per year.”

Lucie Thompson joined in with the comment that:

[“Sadly this also means the average earner and below will always be trapped in rented properties. It's not just the North/South divide, it's the rich poor divide and many middle class are being squeezed into poverty.”](#)

Lee Dillon: Spot on, Lucie.

This brought **Mel Macro** of Hungerford into the debate. Mel made the point that the staggering size of the mortgage required to buy a house in West Berkshire had pushed her and her partner go with SO [Shared Ownership].

“I bought a shared ownership house as for us it was the only option to buy. Whilst happy that it enabled us to buy, to buy the rest of it we are limited - we are only allowed to buy up to 25 % at a time, which means 3 more lots of fees, solicitor charges etc. This effectively stops it being sensible/affordable to buy your own home outright. I don't know if there is any talk so that all shared ownership homes have the same 'rules ' or that they make it as easy to buy your SO home as they do your own council house.”

Mel Macro went on,

“We bought the first one we were offered after losing out umpteen times, so there wasn't a choice. With that and the fact that solicitor costs are almost double for shared ownership and you can only get a mortgage from a few banks it just seems like everything is against you!”

Lee Dillon: “Hi **Melanie Macro**, some Shared Ownership agreements allow people to staircase up in 5% blocks.”

Melanie Macro:

“It doesn't make any sense to buy 5% in my opinion, because it costs thousands in fees. You're better off saving and waiting to buy a larger chunk, it's the upper limits that upset me for that reason.”

Lee Dillon: “I think there should be a standard agreement that allows stair-casing without new legal fees at each point.”

Which sounds like a very good idea to us!

HOUSING WHITE PAPER

Judith Bunting drew our attention to the Government's Housing White Paper, currently making its way through Parliament:

The full white paper can be read here, [*Fixing our broken housing market*](#).

Judith Bunting said that although the paper shows that the Government recognises the scale of the housing problem, sadly, it still misses the main point. The paper omits any plans for new, genuinely affordable homes to rent.

Judith also drew our attention to the Joseph Rowntree Trust's review of the paper, which makes the point that: "For many families in the UK, high rental costs make the difference between just about managing and not being able to manage at all: poverty in the private rented sector has doubled in the last decade, leaving millions trapped in insecure, expensive housing."

A question from **Sue Farrant** highlighted the worst of the current problems.

Sue Farrant asked,

“How many households are living in temporary accommodation at the moment? What's the average length of stay?”

Lee Dillon answered, "Hi again Sue. Sorry I don't have those figures to hand but what an absolutely on topic question - especially here in West Berks where have seen recently local companies stepping up to help out.

Only last week the Executive at WB considered the future of the Homelessness service going forward. They decided to cut the budget by £349k which will see a reduction in the amount of places where people can sleep from 108 units to 73 units.

So sadly those living in temporary accommodation with decrease but not because more is being done to get them into permanent homes but because there will be less provision or them going forwards."

As in any discussion of housing in West Berkshire, the topic finally moved on to Sandleford:

Presubmitted Question:

["It looks like the 500 house development in Sandleford is not going ahead. What does that mean for housing developments elsewhere in West Berkshire?"](#)

Lee Dillon took this question: "Sandleford is expected to provide 2000 homes in the not too distance future, but a poorly chosen site has led to delay upon delay with the latest decision not now expected until the Autumn when we should have had a decision around about now.

The impact of Sandleford not being built will be massive for communities across the district as it is designed to provide such a large percentage of our housing, and what the Council has to provide in terms of a thing called 5 year land supply (which is where the council have to show the government how it will provide homes over a 5 year rolling period). The major riss is that the Council puts all their eggs in one basket with Sandleford. Now it is in trouble, we could see many more planning appeals ahead.

This means developers will be free to put new sites up for approval and will have a higher chance of winning them [whether we like it or not] at Appeal as the Council wont be able to demonstrate to the inspector that we have a good supply of housing coming forward.

Judith Bunting picked up: "Part of the problem is that Councils need to start insisting that developers to buy into the community focussed district plan. I understand that developers need to make a commercial profit, but we need to challenge 'requirements' for super-profitability. Developing large sites such as Sandleford and the London Road/Faraday Road trading estate is a privilege. Where such huge sites are concerned, developers should expect and be expected to accept community needs.

In West Berkshire, the Conservative Council should have started planning to develop London Road/Faraday Road years ago, when they first took power. By now we could have a shiny new headquarters for Bayer at the Robin Hood Roundabout, as well as many flats across the site, mixed in with light industry. At a meeting of the businesses on the site in 2015, almost all agreed that the area needs to be developed. Most people said would be happy to move temporarily while building work went on. 2 years later, though, no development has started. Largely because the Council is insisting that a single develop takes control of the whole site AND that they expect the plans to be as profitable as possible. Here, there is no doubt that money is being put ahead of community needs.

They should be also working with Newbury Football Club to make the most of the ground on Faraday Road. With cooperation, the Council could help the club create a modern site with artificial pitch, which the main team could share with women and the 350 youngsters that play with AFC Newbury each week. If development has started soon enough, the Council could have incorporated the recent Travelodge development as well.”

And finally, here is a graph that shows how the number of private renters, across the population, is increasing. It’s not something people asked about, but it is a distinct trend and a dead good graph.

For comparison, below we have posted a pie chart showing home ownership vs rental housing in Germany.

What is your opinion? Do you think it is healthier for society if more people rent their homes, or should be encouraging everyone to buy their own?

Follow the link in the UK graph to post your thoughts on facebook.

