

Pro-development alternatives to house building

By D Roberts

There is no analysis of how non-house building measures could drastically reduce unmet housing need

4.1. Building new homes is not the only way to fulfill unmet housing needs. The report ignores how infrastructure improvements and making better use of existing buildings could dramatically reduce the need for new-build.

4.2. The evidence shows high levels of under-occupation of Guildford's existing housing stock and exceptionally little overcrowding. Vacancy levels are higher than in the rest of the HMA, especially Woking (2.36). Houses in multi-occupancy (HMOs) are much rarer and urban densities much lower than in prosperous and attractive parts of Greater London with a comparable social composition. Shared ownership is up 40% up in a decade and still rising. Guildford's private rental sector is growing but still underweight at just 15.8% of tenures, with rents are rising more slowly than in Woking[1].

4.3. The rapid trend towards internet shopping is opening up unprecedented scope to revive high streets by converting retail and office space to attractive residential accommodation.

4.4. With higher occupancy levels, fewer vacant properties, greater multi-occupancy and urban density, more shared ownership, a bigger rental sector and change of use, affordability could be improved and the need for new houses greatly reduced. Modern, mobile lifestyles favour the flexible tenure offered by these options compared with conventional owner-occupancy. But, inexplicably, the report fails to assess their impact.

4.5. Windfalls also contribute to housing stock and should count against unmet need, as the Planning Minister made clear to local MPs and Councillors on 15 January[2]. In the case of the Tandridge and Mole Valley Core Strategies, Inspectors have already agreed that this is justified. Unfulfilled planning permissions should also be discounted. These include Surrey University's permission to build 2,400 rooms in halls of residence, which should be deducted from the unmet housing need total.

4.6. The unusually large proportion of urban properties occupied by students (over 11% in Onslow ward) is a huge, untapped pool of housing for working families, sitting in the heart of Guildford. 8% of Guildford's population is aged 15-24 (2.53), and census data show student-only households increasing from 403 to 851 in the decade 2001-11. Surrey University accommodates only 5,000 of its

12,000 full-time students on campus – only the 7th highest campus occupancy rate nationally. These students block accommodation for others, and at much lower densities than in halls of residence. Surrey University is wealthy but academically mediocre[3]. Its plans to increase student numbers are a major threat to Guildford’s housing supply and need to be discouraged unless, like Oxford City Council, GBC insists that the university accommodates all its own students. 60% would be a reasonable starting-point for planning purposes, considerably reducing unmet housing need projections.

4.7. Small changes to rental incentives (e.g. Council Tax breaks for resident landlords) or requiring (Council Tax-*exempt*) students to live on campus could make thousands of housing units available to (Council Tax*paying*) families far faster and more cheaply than building new homes. GBC should also exploit the New Homes Bonus and other help which the Government announced this month to bring vacant properties back into use[4]. The Planning Minister has confirmed that “student housing will also be eligible for the New Homes Bonus”[5].

4.8. For a commuter borough, better telecommunications[6], roads, footpaths, cycle ways and sustainable public transport could also be cheaper and developmentally more effective solutions than new-build. The accelerating trend towards mobile and home working, especially among the high-tech, high value-added firms Guildford wishes to attract, suggests these options could greatly reduce the need for additional local housing. Communications in the widest sense are as developmentally important as housing, with obvious trade-offs possible between them. But there is no strategic assessment linking the two.

4.9. G L Hearn exists to promote new development. But building new homes is expensive and disruptive. Their report gives scant consideration to alternatives to new house-building in the overall development mix. It is not clear at what stage, if at all, GBC plan to take a more informed all-round view on the balance to be struck between new-build and promoting a more rational use of existing property and infrastructure in the ways described. This is a key element in the planning equation, requiring a focused cost/benefit analysis.

[1] In many comparable countries such as Germany, renting is the norm.

[2] Joint press release of 21 January 2014 from Jonathan Lord MP, Anne Milton MP and Sir Paul Beresford MP.

[3] See, e.g., The Times World Rankings.

[4] <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/increasing-the-number-of-available-homes/supporting-pages/empty-homes>

[5] See footnote 1.

[6] Slowly being rolled out to rural areas by BT under Surrey County Council’s Superfast Surrey scheme.