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More than just Housing

Miffa Salter

According to the latest London-wide MORI survey, Londoners are understandably up-in-arms about the cost of housing. Nine out of ten of us believe it is fundamentally too expensive; while, over half go on to highlight the overall cost of living, as the worst feature of life in the Capital.

No wonder, then, that more homes – particularly more affordable homes – will be so central to debates running up to the next election. But, as Blair, Brown and Prescott continue to wrangle about the *real* implications of additional housing growth in the South East, local authorities are already having to respond to an almost unprecedented level of resident opposition.

Unfortunately, many of the efforts to consult on the newly emerging Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks are stoking the coals of NIMBY-ISM. The failure to set out the parameters of the debate – most notably, that for many places “no change” is not an option - means that complex mediation and negotiation with an existing population is often over looked in favour of tick box answers or equally pointless petitions.

These are difficult times for those engaged in community dialogue. Ill-thought out consultation exercises are already resulting in a ‘vox pop’ which just cannot be reconciled with the economic, social, and demographic trends which define a mature Capitalist system. In essence, while it may make you feel better to rage against the machine, this is one serious set of intricate relationships which we would be better to influence and accommodate rather than brush under the carpet for another generation.

And, of course, the debate is not just focusing on loss of open space. In between, the calls to protect the countryside and the village green, one can clearly make out a more unsavory set of messages which – like it or not – are often explicitly racist; age-ist; and, class-ist. Nothing, it would seem terrifies us more than our fellow man.



This leaves the poor old planners with a real dilemma on their hands. After all, these are the men and women appointed to undertake what is fundamentally no more and no less than a coordinative function. No where is it written, that planning must also take on a far more disparate array of societal ills – from race hate; to the imperfections of a free market economy.

In inviting public comment around something as tangible as bricks and mortar, we are already unleashing much more amorphous and poorly articulated concerns in relation to social cohesion; culture; identity; and, aspiration. Moreover, whether we like it or not, these are the kind of debates, which like the homes themselves, just won't go away.