

Another bad algorithm

On Wednesday the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local government listened to concerns from MPs in private at a meeting. Yesterday he listened in public to more of those concerns in a Parliamentary debate.

I have put my issues with his Planning proposals to him on several occasions now. I think planning needs to have three principles at its heart. The first is planning solutions should allow local communities and their Councils to shape the built landscape they live in and preside over. The second is levelling up is an important and popular policy. That means diverting more of the large investment in new housing to the parts of the country that welcome more investment and need to attract more talented people to their communities who may well want to be buy a new home as part of the attraction. The third is the promotion of home ownership, which is going to be easier to do in parts of the country with lower house prices and most difficult in affluent communities with highly priced land.

The government proposal genuflects to the first principle and says it wants local communities and Councils to have their say, but that is overridden by the algorithm which decides in advance how many extra homes a place will have whether they want them or not.

The second principle and policy aim is not only overridden but overturned by the algorithm. By making high prices of homes the main determinant of where to put new ones it guarantees increasing the build of homes and the investment and jobs that goes with it in the most affluent places, and starves the places that want more jobs and investment by actually reducing the numbers of homes built there to below the current level.

The third principle is also thwarted by the algorithm, ensuring new homes will remain expensive.

Instead if there is to be the other reforms of planning the government wants, we need an algorithm or a way of calculating how many homes based on the reverse principles. It should offer more new home investment where house prices are low, where there is a shortage of good new family and executive homes, and should be linked to a community and Council which it says it buys into levelling up and welcomes new talent to come to the new homes.

Areas like Wokingham have attracted disproportionate amounts of the talent and well qualified people through the building of large new estates of executive and family homes. It is time to share this growth and prosperity more widely. We should not reinforce the growth by the planning system in the most successful areas, but copy the success elsewhere. This rogue algorithm will do the opposite of levelling up.