

Housing

It has become a popular question to ask those who recommend welcoming more migrants to the UK for whatever good reason if they will open up one of their spare rooms at home to provide accommodation. I guess it can make good tv to see the responder hunt for some plausible reason why they themselves would not take such action.

It is however a diversion from the big issues that underlie the problem. It is no solution to a refugee family to find cramped accommodation in someone else's home. It is not even a good long term answer for a single economic migrant, as they too need some independence and opportunity to cease to be single if they wish. The British dream is to own your own home with your own front door and with reasonable freedom over how you organise it and what you do in it. The British reality for most with no capital and lower incomes is to rent a property which also affords the independence of your own front door, independent kitchen and bathroom facilities and sufficient sleeping accommodation.

We are not looking to downgrade expectations, or to seek to place more families in permanent accommodation where they need to share kitchens and bathrooms or lack the space they need to sleep and live in their homes.

Given this we need also to accept there are limits to how much accommodation we can provide and therefore to how many migrants it is possible to accept in any given year. Whilst housing is the main constraint, we also need to think about the provision of other public services. There are limits in the shorter term to how many school places are available, how much NHS capacity there is, how much roadspace and how much water and electricity can be delivered from the existing wires and pipes. When Wokingham was experiencing really fast growth some years ago there were problems getting the water and power system to catch up with rocketing demand. It was one of the arguments I was able to use to move us down then from a fast growth area.

In order to get housing supply and demand into better balance we do need to consider the pace of increases in demand as well as supply. Government tends to look at net migration figures, but in any individual place it may be the gross figure that matters, as people leaving the country do not necessarily free up both the number and location of properties needed for the new people arriving.