

First Homes Consultation

I strongly support the aim of the First Homes proposal. More people want to own their own home than currently can afford to do so. We need more affordable homes for sale.

The essence of the proposal is twofold. The first is that some of the large gains that landowners and developers stand to make on the grant of planning permission should be shared with First Home buyers by giving them a discount on the normal market value of these new homes, paid for out of the money that is released by the development. The second is that a buyer of such a home accepts a restrictive covenant on the property that means when they come to sell they need to offer a similar percentage discount to the buyer that they enjoyed on purchase.

I have no problem with the idea that some of the gains on development should be shared with buyers. Currently these gains are effectively taxed to allow the state to spend more money on supporting community infrastructure and on affordable homes to rent. It is no greater distortion of the market to allocate some of the winnings to subsidise affordable homes to buy instead. It has the advantage from the state's point of view that the buyers take responsibility for repairs and maintenance, whereas with rented social housing the obligation remains with the state or Housing Association. Given the strong wish of many people to buy not rent, surely we should do more to help them.

The second proposition is a new intervention in the housing market. It means creating a parallel market to the primary market for buying second hand homes out of a group of people who qualify for the scheme. This will only work if the pool of such people is sufficiently large so a potential vendor of a First Home has enough potential buyers to make a decent market. The Consultation wishes to limit the ability of First Home owners to rent out their property, as it has to be their home that they live in, and asks about reward for improvements. The danger in the scheme is the person will suffer a discount on the improved value of the home, not just on the underlying investment. So if someone bought a two bedroom First Home but was able to add two more bedrooms and extra downstairs accommodation they might not get back all they had spent on such a substantial extension given the application of the discount. The more restrictions that are placed on the First Home buyer the less attractive it is as a proposition, and the less like normal home ownership it becomes.

My view is I would rather share some of the gains with a First Home buyer than with some local Councils and their choice of projects to spend planning gain receipts on. We should not be afraid to help make people a bit better off by allowing them to buy a home at a discount. It is difficult to stop them renting out their homes if they suddenly get a requirement to work abroad for their employer or if an elderly person has to go into a long stay care home.

For this to work the rules need to be flexible. The issue is who should

qualify? There does need to be some means test to stop people with substantial capital or high earnings from cashing in . The aim is to help local people, veterans and key workers like teachers and nurses. There does also need to be a cap on the price of property involved. I suggest this should be done by principal Council area from average prices in that area, where the cap is not above the average price. There will only be a satisfactory secondary market in First Homes if this is done at scale.

www.government.uk/government/Consultation/First-homes

We need change at the Treasury

Congratulations to Rishi Sunak. He is able and hard working, with a knowledge of the expenditure side of the Treasury from his role as Chief Secretary.

The immediate task is to challenge Treasury officials into completing the change from the Maastricht economics of austerity to a pro growth optimistic economics that chimes with the Prime Minister's vision. Boris has been clear we want growth, opportunity and levelling up. The aim is prosperity, not austerity. The purpose is more people in better paid work, more owners, a better spread of wealth and income around the whole UK.

You do not achieve that by writing the Maastricht rules back into the fiscal framework, nor by hiking taxes or trying to tax the rich out of the country. I think The PM was right to want common working between the Chancellor's team and his own. The leaks, briefings and rows about the forthcoming budget were not helpful. I expect Rishi to spend more time on persuading Treasury officials to complete their journey. They need to move on from pessimistic Hammond style economics which said the UK cannot be a success on her own and needs to beg to stay close to the EU, to an optimistic global UK approach. We need to grasp the future by investing in it. We need a bigger and more prosperous private sector, which requires lower tax rates and a holiday from yet more prescriptive regulation.

The cost of homes

It is not surprising the cost of homes is so high, given the large increases in demand from new household formation, and the attempts to ration or limit supply by the planning system and the actions of the main housebuilders. It is also the case that pumping money into the system at low interest rates

makes higher mortgages affordable for more people, so home prices like bonds and shares have risen thanks to QE and low official interest rates.

To contain prices we need to cut demand and raise supply to better balance. Markets would do this for us but we have instead migration policies, housebuilding standards and planning policies that give government crucial roles. The government via Councils and Housing Associations is also a major developer itself. All the time interest rates remain low we should expect mortgages at higher multiples of earnings to be affordable.

In a managed system the government could reduce migration numbers as it has promised to do. It can continue with efforts to increase the number of homes built. It can also ask whether its standards and specifications are the right ones to encourage more building. A combination of UK government standards and wish to produce traditional looking buildings by the industry means a lot of work takes place on site. The UK has not taken up factory made sections and components on the same scale as in some other countries. It means the task of building is prone to delays for bad weather. It requires a lot of on site supervision to ensure decent quality, matters which would be partly taken care of by precision machinery in a factory prefabricating more of the home. The structure of the house building industry with its heavy regulation and high financing demands mean that most of the housing is supplied by a few large companies. They say they are constrained by a lack of skilled people and the need to maintain and supervise high standards from building more homes more quickly against all the planning permissions already granted.

Tomorrow I will look at the latest proposed government intervention into this government steered sector with their plan to use planning gains to offer discounts to some people on buying a new first home.

Purchase of the Denmark Street Car Park

I have received this update from Wokingham Borough Council:

There's great news for visitors to Wokingham town centre today as the council has just finalised a deal to re-open the former Eurocarparks section of the Denmark Street car park. Completion is due in the next couple of weeks.

WBC has exchanged contracts to purchase the car park and surrounding properties from the current owner who was seeking to redevelop them. This means the future of the site is now safe and the car park can be operated as a council pay and display public car park in the same way as the existing smaller car park alongside.

The 130 space car park has been closed to the public since the end of August

2019. A planning application to redevelop the area for residential use was refused in July 2019 for a number of reasons including permanent loss of town centre parking.

Cllr Stuart Munro, executive member for business and economic development said: "We've invested significantly in creating a future for Wokingham town centre over recent years and facilities, like the Denmark Street car park, are an incredibly important part of helping the town and its businesses thrive. Its closure has proven an issue for visitors to Wokingham over the last few months and we know this is something so many of our residents have asked us to address.

"The car park is ready to operate as a council car park using the existing ticket machines in the lower car park but more machines are being added after completion. Recognising the impact this closure has had on the town and the pressure it has placed on other car parks, we want to allow people to start parking again as soon as possible. Just buy a ticket from the existing machines in the adjacent car park, as directed on the local temporary signs."

The new car park will operate in exactly the same way as the current Denmark Street car park and tickets will be interchangeable across the combined car parks. The parking regime allows a maximum stay of four hours. Charges will apply Monday to Saturday between 8am to 6pm.

Cllr Munro continued: "We've bought these properties as part of the council's property investment portfolio which is proving a great success in securing the council a regular source of income that can be used to fund essential services across the borough. This purchase has the double benefit of also allowing us to secure and protect the future of this popular car park which has such wider importance for the town itself.

"Given the previous owners application to redevelop the site I'm sure some people will think we have bought this to submit a similar large scale scheme ourselves and I'd like to reassure people this isn't the case. As a council we firmly recognise the importance of parking in the town centre and, whilst this demand remains so strong we have no plans to stop providing public parking in this location."

Planning for a green future

Many of us want a green policy, but definitions of what constitutes a good green policy vary. To me a good green policy protects the beauty of the English landscape. It encourages fresh air and clean water, prevents litter and facilitates good recycling or disposal of waste. We should not prevent all new development, but should seek to preserve much of the natural environment and the farms we see around us. The single most important green policy we can follow is to limit migration, as a rising population of course

requires us to build on more green fields.

Since 1945 government and Council led planning has become more and more intrusive, trying to limit the volume of development, and having a heavy influence over where it should go and what it should look like. Substituting the judgement of civil servants for that of private landowners, homeowners and investors has not produced a notable improvement in the beauty and utility of development over say the Georgian terraces of Bath or the Victorian villas of London, nor has it arrested the steady erosion of the countryside around every main town and city. It leaves the market short of homes, helping prices of them upwards to choke off some people's reasonable ambition to own a home of their own.

It has managed both to create artificial scarcity of development land, and to encourage concentration of development. In my own county of Berkshire large acres of West Berkshire are protected from most development by being registered as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, whilst much of Maidenhead and Windsor constituencies are protected by Green belt designations. This leaves my own central Berkshire area prone to high levels of development as it does not benefit from any green space special protection.

We need to ask ourselves some basic questions about our current system of planning. How does it manage to let homebuyers and conservationists down at the same time? Why does it require high density of development and such large mortgages to buy? Why does so much development end up in London and the South East? I will explore further in future blogs.