

Britain: Report calls for "unwanted" housing to be demolished

By Robert Stevens
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A government-financed report has found that nearly one million "unwanted" homes in Britain are located in areas that are blighted by large-scale poverty, unemployment and crime. Large-scale demolition is advocated as one solution.

Entitled, "Changing demand, changing neighbourhoods: the response of social landlords", it is the first report ever commissioned to study the phenomena of the hundreds of sparsely populated and even empty housing estates to be found all over the country. Uncovering what they describe as "a problem that dare not speak its name", the report's authors studied 18 housing associations and local councils in Newcastle, Salford, Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool and Leeds. They found that many people refuse to live in such areas, and that in some cases there is no alternative but to "manage the decline" of such blighted estates. In some regions the unwanted housing stock was relatively new, the report said.

Measures should not be taken to attempt to rejuvenate areas of housing termed "low demand", the report warned—the demolition of the stock could be the only answer. The report estimated that there were 500,000 council and housing association dwellings located in areas of "low demand". This figure represents 10 percent of the publicly owned housing in England. A further 450,000 privately owned houses were facing the same fate.

The report, commissioned by the Housing Corporation's North East Region, was prepared by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The Housing Corporation is a government-funded national organisation whose function is to oversee and regulate the activities of local housing associations.

Research from Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University

was also included in the report, which said that the phenomena of "low demand" housing had increased significantly during the last five years. It found that almost 60 percent of councils were now reporting a rising number of difficult-to-let properties, mainly in the north of England.

Professor Ian Cole, from the research team at Hallam University, said that housing associations, which are now virtually the sole providers of new public homes, were still building homes in areas where there was no demand for accommodation. "Many housing associations have carried on developing new properties and there has not been the demand for them. Housing investment might be better targeted in other parts of those regions."

The report cites the collapse of traditional industries, such as shipbuilding and coal mining, as a major factor in the decline of many inner city areas. It points out that between the years of 1981 and 1993 alone, nearly 652,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in the densely populated conurbations of England. As a result, some 60,000 people a year are leaving the North to live in other areas of Britain. In contrast to the North, the report points out that in the South there is an acute housing shortage.

Cole said that some of the areas identified in the report were "beyond redemption".

"These are neighbourhoods in parts of the North East and in the North West, the older manufacturing cities and also particularly in old coalfield communities, small communities, where the last 15 years of economic decline have meant that there really is a lack of demand for many of the properties that are still standing.

"It's rethinking about the nature of where these neighbourhoods are based and what the functions of

these areas are because there is no point in going back to the time when they were near to coal mines, shipyards and other large industries because they are gone forever.

"For some neighbourhoods now, there is no prospect for complete regeneration. Some fairly radical rethinking is required to remodel the estates and in some cases to demolish properties."

The report states the answer is not to spend any more on "low demand" housing areas but to concentrate housing strategies in other areas where newer industries have been established.

The Housing Corporation and the government have initially welcomed the report. Rick Elliot of the Housing Corporation said, "Now we have a tool kit of measures which associations can adopt to tackle the problems they are facing. Whilst some neighbourhoods can be regenerated, decision-makers will have to grasp the nettle of managing the decline of others."

Beverley Hill, the Regeneration Minister, said that the government had recently published a report on "unpopular housing" and that the Housing Corporation sponsored report had reached similar conclusions. She said, "That report itself did say in some instances subject to local views—especially those of the residents—that some demolition may help to be part of a process of regeneration in the area as a whole."

The scale of the crisis of unwanted homes is most clearly shown by the fact that housing associations now find it impossible to literally give houses away in some areas. Last year, the housing association in the North Benwell area of Newcastle offered residents the chance to purchase a terraced house for 50 pence (80 US cents). They also committed themselves to paying out refurbishment grants to those who bought the houses. Hardly anyone has taken up the offer and many of the houses are standing derelict.

Uninhabited new housing can also be found in the same city. In the west-end of Newcastle an apartment block which remained largely empty since being constructed was recently demolished. The building was just five years old and had cost £1.7 million to build.

The stance of the government on the issue of the "low demand" housing estates identified in the new report is indicative of its broader social policy. The conditions that exist within such areas are the product of a decades-long assault on the social conditions of

millions of working people.

This assault has continued under the present Labour government and their response to the report will lead only to further social polarisation. A programme of demolishing decaying housing estates will do nothing to alleviate the conditions that have created such dilapidated areas in the first place. A government that favours a policy of "managing the decline" of whole housing estates deemed "beyond redemption" is one that has truly abandoned any concept of resolving social problems in a progressive manner.

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