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Creators: Field, M., Colenutt, B. and Cochrane, A.

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Thoughts on Opposition to New Housing Development

Public policy on housing development is often framed around an assumption that people are opposed to new housing development on their doorsteps. With this mind there is political resistance to regional or sub-regional strategies for strategic housing growth, and with strategic options ruled out, localist initiatives such as New Homes Bonus and Neighbourhood Planning are deemed necessary to persuade residents to accept new development. Politicians concerned with boosting housing supply live in fear of the Daily Telegraph campaigning against housing development in the name of the Green Belt or the protection of the countryside.

However, it is important to consider the evidence for this policy response not least because policy on new housing development is a fundamental to national economic development and social welfare. The question of where to locate new housing development and what planning regime should be applied to housing proposals is also at the core of the debate about the strengths and weaknesses of Localism. If assumptions about opposition to development are incorrect, policy will be distorted.

The ESRC research project on Tensions and Prospects for Sustainable Growth using Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes as case studies seeks to understand the tensions about housing growth as expressed by local authorities, community groups, development agencies and house building companies.

Though the research is only at the stage of data collection, some preliminary assessment of the assumptions and policies relating to housing growth are emerging.

1. Firstly, housing growth is plainly not a new phenomenon; but the politics of housing growth have become more intense in recent years. Recent political controversy ranges from arguments over "housing targets" (for example the housing targets in the now revoked Regional Spatial Strategies), to vocal resident campaigns against new housing in villages and towns in the South of England in particular. Going back 20 years earlier opposition to new housing certainly existed but it was more muted and gathered less national political force behind it.
2. In Northamptonshire, opposition to housing growth is localised – it varies from place to place depending upon local circumstances, often depending upon the level of economic prosperity. There is a contrast for example to community opposition to new housing in a relatively prosperous area like South Northants compared with the response in deprived towns in North Northants such as Corby where growth is welcomed. But even in more prosperous areas there are variations between rural parishes and town councils that want additional housing in order to remain viable communities and those parishes that want no change. Each local authority in our study area has a slightly different and locally specific approach to growth and new housing. Geographical variations to some extent capture differences between socio-economic groups, with lower income communities being less concerned about new housing (often welcoming it if it is affordable), and higher income groups tending to oppose because they want to protect their amenity and house values.
3. However, our research is beginning to understand that the reasons for objecting to growth are complicated and often contradictory. The most common "rational" position taken by local authorities and communities objecting to new housing development in Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes is that housing is not accompanied by "infrastructure", implying that if it was "infrastructure-led" it would be more acceptable. When asked what they mean by infrastructure, the most common response is road access, then schools and community buildings. In Northampton, lack of infrastructure also includes objecting to new housing because it will be built on the flood plain i.e. without adequate flood defences. There is rarely a full explanation of what infrastructure-led really means, or what the reaction to it would be if it was in fact planned in to housing developments. For some, lack of infrastructure is perhaps a cypher for outright opposition; or for not being consulted properly.
4. This leads to a related issue which underpins much of the debate about new housing development over the last ten years – is the new development "sustainable"? There is an assumption among the policy makers that if the development is of high quality or sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms (if feasible), it would be more palatable. Indeed the West Northants Development

Corporation saw as its role as giving local authorities the support and skills to ensure new developments were truly infrastructure-led, hence carrying out the Government policy of creating “sustainable communities”. When then took just this position they were criticised by some local authorities and community groups because the WNDC was “not democratic” i.e. it was imposed by central government (even though most of the Board members were from local authorities). In fact, part of the opposition to new development was political - WNDC was an unelected UDC. It was this fact rather more than a debate about the merits of the new developments themselves, or about infrastructure, that prompted objections to development in some areas on the edge of Northampton. This suggests that part of the nexus of views is not just housing development itself but WHO is doing it? If the new housing developer was a community development trust, would it make any difference?

5. Throughout the last ten years, ideology has been a big factor in influencing and creating tensions. Much of the vociferous opposition to the growth areas in the East of England and to a degree on Milton Keynes South Midlands was directed at “Prescott’s plan to concrete over the South-East”. Many parishes and local authorities in the “shire counties” blamed the threat of new housing on the fact that there was a Labour Government, this playing an important part of the landslide of local councils and MPs to Tory control in 2006 -2010. Ideology did not create the tensions over new housing but it did exacerbate it and generate effective political action.
6. A further factor in the mix is the variation in reaction to growth over time. To an extent communities in Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes have come to terms with it. There has always been growth in these areas so it is nothing new. Most local authorities have been quite pragmatic – “we cant oppose it so let’s see what we can get out of it, and anyhow we want our towns to grow and prosper and this is a chance to attract investment from both the private sector and government”. This message has taken root, assisted perhaps by the housing recession which has reduced pressure for new development.
7. Milton Keynes, a former New Town, has its own special politics of housing development. There is evidence that since the dissolution of the New Town and the assumption of powers by Milton Keynes Council, there a complex internal political battle has emerged which has placed housing growth (and the growth of the town) at the centre of the political debate. When development was run by the New Town Corporation or the MK Partnership and Milton Keynes Council had relative weak powers, there was a consensus about growth. Opposition was localised and had little political impact. But as the Council assumed more control over planning and development in the late 1990s, the politics of growth began to dominate party politics on the Council (Labour for, Tories against, Lib Dems in the middle) such that growth is more controversial now than ever, even though the town has always seen itself as a go-ahead growth town. In this context localism is perhaps unpicking the ambition of the New Town, although some may say it will not make any difference; Milton Keynes will always grow whatever is going on in the Council chamber.

Some conclusions

It is not true to say that there is strong opposition to housing growth in Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes, although it is a sensitive policy issue. The region has always been a growth region (“growth is inevitable”) and opposition is not as strong a factor as in some other areas of the South-East. To a degree opposition to growth in the South-East has been exaggerated for political reasons. In the MKSM area, most local authorities take a pragmatic approach and some are enthusiastic for new housing as long as it is done properly. MKSM as a sub-regional spatial strategy was arguably quite a well-received plan for housing growth.

Nevertheless there is considerable local variation in the politics of growth. Many communities in our case study area are not opposed to growth, nor do they hold inflexible views. In Northamptonshire, even the most vociferous critics of housing growth do not want to be labelled “anti-housing” and in reality want to be listened to and taken seriously (see Roger Kingston and Sally Townsend interviews). Some schemes have been opposed outright for example the Croudace schemes in Daventry, but is for good reasons of poor design. .

The research suggests reasons for opposition to growth are complex. The mantra of “infrastructure-led” often obscures a host of different reasons and does not automatically mean that if there was properly

planned infrastructure, housing development would be welcomed. Yet from a local authority point of view, it helps to be able to put across their case for growth if the scheme is infrastructure-led.

The quality of housing development matters and there is evidence that the more local communities are genuinely involved the more likely it will be accepted or tolerated.

However, the central political point is that the protection of the countryside has become a subject of growing concern in itself (a threat to amenity and community) but also a signifier of political resistance to being taken for granted by the state (Whitehall) and big business (the developers).

The policy implication is that communities do not necessarily oppose development. But housing development is a highly politicised activity that requires a political as well as technical response. Communities expect to be fully consulted and sometimes they are right to be uncompromising. Regional and sub-regional strategies are notoriously difficult to consult on but a way must be found to do just that if they are to have a local endorsement.

One hypothesis to be considered is that it is not strategic planning ("imposed" housing plans) that creates opposition in itself but the limited choice of type, location and quality of housing offered by the landowner/housebuilders model of development. With much of potential housing land optioned off to developers by landowners, there is limited scope for more sensitive housing location and sustainable housing design and community development. One way of testing this would be to explore community reactions if development was led by community land trusts for example.

Does this rule out strategic spatial planning for housing? The MKSM experience suggests that this is not the case. This was a spatial plan which at that time most authorities bought into at both political and officer level. There was reluctance in South Northants and East Northants, but the "growth towns" of the County were reasonably comfortable in principle. The problem became one of delivering the infrastructure, and also of justifying the level of planned growth which was unrealistic. The growth figures were driven by a rose tinted view of national economic growth and supply of credit, and were not rooted sufficiently on local and regional needs.

But if there is to be significant housing growth then strategies for strategic spatial planning and housing delivery are essential. In this context a minimal localist approach does not match up in any way to this challenge and indeed could make it worse by setting communities against each other.

Even in relatively growth friendly area like Northamptonshire, a localist approach is insufficient. Medium to Large scale growth (with schemes of 500 homes plus) has a strategic impact on a wide area, so a shared strategic view of where and when major development should take place is essential. Moreover, local authorities are unlikely to vote for growth in urban extensions of new settlements unless there is funding for infrastructure and services, and this funding is unlikely to come from the private sector alone so that local authorities and communities must look to central or regional government.

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