



Northumberland & Newcastle Society

For Our Future Heritage

GROWTH, CONSERVATION AND NIMBYISM

Speaker: Lord Shipley

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Members of the
Northumberland and Newcastle Society
at their AGM
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GROWTH, CONSERVATION and NIMBYISM

Thank you for your interest in this talk on 'Growth, Conservation and Nimbyism'. Let me start with a look at last Friday's newspapers because they explain the issues I am becoming increasingly concerned about and wish to discuss tonight.

In The Daily Telegraph on Page 10, a news item reported that Dame Fiona Reynolds, the former head of the National Trust, has warned that Britain is at risk of 'losing its soul' if politicians treat the beauty of the countryside as an out-of-date concept. Dame Fiona, speaking to the Hay Festival, said that rural beauty was under threat from clone towns and nondescript housing which was threatening to suburbanise the landscape.

The report added that her intervention comes after Nick Boles, Planning Minister, said that building houses would create more human happiness than preserving fields. Nick Boles had previously said that he wanted to increase the amount of land built on in Britain by 3% to 12% to meet demand. Dame Fiona argued that development should focus first on brownfield sites and urban regeneration before expanding into the countryside. She also urged people to get involved with the planning process.

Then, on page 22, there was a news report which claimed that the Government was 'lacking' on planning reform. Isabel Hardman said the Government had failed to offer a coherent approach to planning. She was critical of the Help to Buy scheme, which had been attacked by the International Monetary Fund, the Council of Mortgage Lenders, and Sir Mervyn King in recent weeks, for failing to help build new homes.

She pointed to recent figures for England which revealed that construction started on only 101,920 new homes in 2012-13, when economists estimate that 250,000 are needed. She said the Government's planning framework is chiefly responsible for the lack of new homes and she added that the Government is continuing to push through new housing on appeal, piecemeal style, rather than in consultation with local communities. As a result, she said it is no wonder many people are feeling a little 'nimbyish'.

Then, in the Business Section of the same newspaper, an article reported that more affordable homes were needed and that the National Housing Federation (NHF) had warned that the high cost of housing is choking the UK's economic recovery and leaving businesses struggling to grow. A survey had found that 78% of employers said house prices were a problem in their area, with 58% of them suggesting that building more homes would help them recruit and keep staff. Gill Payne, director of the NHF, commented: *"We need to build more homes that*

people can afford in the right places so that businesses can grow, take on local staff - and steer us out of this economic rut."

Finally, *The Times* reported on page 11 that a group of charities had called on the Government to set up a national 'downsizing agency' to advise older people on where to move home, the financial incentives of having a smaller property and how to de-clutter. The charities said that up to a million family homes could be released on to the property market if help was offered to older people. Research from the groups said that the barriers to downsizing highlighted how elderly homeowners struggled to find accommodation of the right size in the right location, close to amenities and local transport. Stephen Burke, director of *United for All Ages*, said that rather than blame older people for not moving, they should know where to go for help.

So, on Friday, we read about beautiful countryside, fields, design, clone towns, human happiness, increasing built-up land from 9% to 12%, the cost of housing, the amount of housing, brownfield sites, the role of individuals in the planning process, nimbyism, business growth and downsizing by older people.

My argument tonight is that most of these aims are compatible.

First, I have never heard a senior politician in the Government say that they want to suburbanise the landscape or anything close to it. Nick Boles talks about building on fields (not all of which are of high quality) to generate the homes we need whereas Fiona Reynolds talks about the beauty of the countryside. These are not incompatible objectives. We should be aware that brownfield sites (which can include parks) cannot deliver the number of homes our rising population needs. Secondly, it is undoubtedly true that lack of new housing has increased land values and house prices to the point that many young people cannot afford to buy their own home.

Thirdly, it is easy to blame successive governments for this predicament but in truth it is the responsibility of all of us to plan sensibly for the future.

I am constantly surprised by the number and extent of the campaigns reported in the local press objecting to housing developments across Northumberland and Tyneside. Some campaigns may be justified - I don't know enough about the detail of each to make reasonable judgements. That is for others. What I miss are press headlines such as 'Residents Demand More Housing' to maintain viability of local services - schools, pubs, village shops, post offices and bus services. The Government's planning reforms in the Localism Act 2011 enable residents to plan their neighbourhoods and many more should take up the opportunity. It is hardly the Government's fault if they fail to.

For avoidance of doubt, I regard the Green Belt as vitally important (most of the time) and that we should applaud the 1948 Town and Country Planning Act which established the current planning system. It has proved itself and preserved a lot of our countryside as a national park or an area of outstanding natural beauty. I agree entirely that we need to be very careful about encroaching further on the countryside.

However, house prices are too high and rents are rising too fast. Housing supply is too low and more land is needed for housing and not just brownfield sites. The failure to build council housing for twenty years is now proving a massive problem, and whilst housing associations have done a very good job they need empowering to do more. Finally, whilst it is right to concentrate on brownfield sites, that won't be enough to meet future housing demand.

Let me talk further about growth. Growth can mean several things -growth in population, economic growth (which increases tax revenues and thereby resource for infrastructure investment), the growth of individual income, wealth and aspiration, and finally the physical spread of development.

First, let's look at population. There is an 8% rise forecast in our population by 2020 – half from there being more births than deaths, and half from net migration. The latter figure may be an over-estimate but the growth will still be substantial.

In the twenty-five years from 2008 to 2033, households are expected to rise by almost six million or 27%. If those figures prove correct, we will need 232,000 new homes every year. Yet, since 1990, annual housing completions never exceeded 170,000 and were as low as 107,000 in 2010/11 thus averaging about 140,000. Most building (some 80%) was for owner occupation with the bulk of rented property constructed by housing associations not councils.

Yet, the rise in owner occupation has gone into reverse from a peak of 68% down to 64% and one consequence is that private rents continue to rise as demand grows in the private rented sector.

It is fair to say that we have a crisis in housing – rising prices caused by lack of supply in turn caused by a lack of finance for builders and purchasers coupled with a failure to build enough social housing.

In the North East, there are two thousand homeless people, ninety thousand on social housing waiting lists and a general population rising by around five to six thousand a year. Nationally, one in twelve families is on a housing waiting list and rents have gone up so much that 500,000 people in work are in receipt of housing benefit.

Next is economic growth which drives growth in wealth and tax income which in turn enables further investment in infrastructure. Think of the impact of the car and the Metro which have meant people can commute longer distances. This infrastructure growth can have unintended consequences. For example, the A1 western bypass may have reduced through traffic in Gosforth but it also became an artery road with the poorer quality agricultural fields to the west of the by-pass becoming housing land (and popular housing land) in the Newcastle Great Park.

Growth due to rising aspiration and personal wealth has also been a key factor in housing demand over the past century. My great grandparents lived in crowded accommodation in Liverpool Street in Newcastle (now the Morden Street car park). Previous generations to ours aspired to better housing conditions and they achieved it. For owner-occupiers this led to wider geographical spread arising from reducing densities such as in Darras Hall. For council housing this meant, for many, high-rise flats with no garden. Of course, those high-rise flats were needed to improve conditions and replace the slums. Today, many are liked by their current residents but they are unsatisfactory for families.

We should note that as a consequence of green belt policy around Newcastle, housing development over the last 40 years has been concentrated in south-east Northumberland, North Tyneside and north-west Durham as well as in the new towns. Inevitably development has had to leap over the green belt and because of that urban sprawl has resulted in some places. People have further to travel to work (over 80,000 people who do not live in the city come to work each day in Newcastle) and the population of Newcastle has fallen even though it covers a bigger area.

My point amounts to this - rising house prices impact on social equality and social cohesion and the gap is widening. Because most people are adequately housed, there is not a mass public movement demanding more housing when there needs to be. I have concluded that we must all take more responsibility for identifying potential housing sites to give hope to young people of owning their home, with lower prices and people being able to live nearer to where they work.

Let me now discuss conservation. When I think of conservation I think of renaissance Italy, its towns and cities, its world heritage sites and those wonderful northern cities of Mantua, Padua, Parma, Verona, and the Vicenza of Palladio. I think of Siena where planning controls have existed since the early fourteenth century. We see these cities as tourists and we recognise the conservation of their centres as unequalled anywhere in the world.

Now let's pause in Treviso, home of Benetton and Prosecco, some fifteen miles north of Venice where the impact of the local planning system was brought home to me last year.

In the centre of Treviso, shops were mostly small selling fashions, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, newspapers and books, bread and confectionery. There were lots of cafes and bars. Missing were larger shops with the result that people went out of the centre to do much of their shopping. As we drove north out of Treviso (to follow the route of the Northumberland Fusiliers in 1918), we went through ribbon development for mile after mile caused by the conflict between the need to conserve the city centre and the demand for consumer goods by an economically thriving city population.

At Udine, close to the border with Slovenia, we were even more surprised. We wanted to visit the WW2 cemetery which is the most northerly in Italy. Although only a little to the north of Udine and despite having a map, it took us two hours to find. There it was next to the Shell filling station in the middle of a Carrefour car park duly landscaped to disguise it. To be fair, it felt like a normal Commonwealth War Graves cemetery once we were inside it but I cannot imagine a hypermarket getting planning approval in the UK in such a location. Of course, views of what constitutes conservation can vary. This cemetery was conserved internally if not externally which makes you ponder how we should marry conservation with new demands. Buildings and neighbourhoods don't stand still.

Think of Graingertown where Richard Grainger knocked down parts of medieval Newcastle. Think of the Brunswick Methodist Church café opened last week enabling more activity to take place in an old building in the heart of the city. The test of conservation is not that we keep buildings in aspic. Ask instead whether the originators of a building would have approved. In this case they would.

Then think of the 1960s and Eldon Square - would we have preserved it had the decision been one for today? Yes, we would. Times change and we are more conscious today of the need to conserve than we were those fifty years ago. Preservation should only relate, of course, to good quality architectural design and would not necessarily include the brutalist school of the post war period of which Tyneside had several examples.

Think of housing growth to the north of the Regent Centre decade by decade after WW1 from Garden Village to Newcastle Great Park. All this land was fields and allotments. Was it right to build on it? Of course it was because there was a need for housing. Existing residents were often uncomfortable in the face of further encroachment and reacted against it. Were they Nimbys? Sometimes, but not always, not least because planning decisions need full challenge and debate.

In some parts of the world, Nimbyism is associated with energy extraction and production. Perhaps we should note in passing that in the UK every form of energy has campaign groups opposing it. Yet, there is a serious danger of power cuts

before long as well as rising energy prices. The public interest cannot be secured by appeasement.

Now Nimbys have been elevated to the status of an 'ism'. They shouldn't really. Nimbyism is not a philosophy but a reaction to a proposition in a specific area.

It is worth noting that the use of the term grew in the UK in the 1980s and became prominent in 1988 when the then Environment Secretary, Sir Nicholas Ridley, criticised the rural middle class for their opposition to development calling it '*crude nimbyism*' since '*our English countryside is one of the most heavily man-made habitats in Europe. To make it into a green museum would be to belie its whole history.*'

Is a nimby reaction understandable? David Aaronovitch in The Times thinks it may relate to the fact that more people in the UK own their home than elsewhere and fear a loss in value. I think it may result more from people not wishing to see change in the area where they have invested financial and personal capital. They want the ambience and character they know to stay the same.

The crucial point here is that people tend to want to protect what they are used to. A few years ago there was a campaign group established to prevent the closure of the Royal George pub on Brunton Park and conversion of the site into a care home. The campaign was lost but a couple of years ago I found a newspaper article from the early 1960s about a campaign by local residents on Brunton Park to stop the pub being built in the first place on the grounds of noise and late-night nuisance. It's all about preferring the status quo. In time, of course, the status quo changes and opinion shifts. Whilst reading Gosforth Urban District minutes a few years ago, I came across a reference to residents complaining about the speed and volume of traffic on Gosforth High Street – in 1924! Undeniably there was a problem people felt strongly about but then people adapt gradually to new circumstances and, in any case, younger people who arrive in a neighbourhood tend not to perceive problems in the way longer established residents do because they have no experience of how things used to be.

We visited New Zealand at Easter. The town of Napier on North Island has the most wonderful Art Deco centre and deserves its status as a World Heritage Site. Had anyone proposed in 1931 that the centre of Napier should be knocked down and rebuilt in art-deco style they would have been sent packing. In that year, the centre was destroyed in an earthquake and was rebuilt quickly in the style of the day. Napier is now an acclaimed international tourist destination.

New Zealand takes renewable energy seriously. Just north of Wellington, there are wind turbines on the tops of mountains and they are a beautiful, graceful sight. I was brought up close to the North Yorkshire Moors and I see electricity pylons

as complementing their austere natural environment. I realise I am probably in a minority here and I certainly would not permit turbines or pylons to be erected without strict planning controls to protect areas of natural beauty. However, development can be beautiful. Think of William Wordsworth's line *'Earth has not anything to show more fair'*. He was talking about buildings and an urban skyline.

Driving in New Zealand and looking at those wind turbines caused me to ponder development in the UK today. Would the Romans have got planning permission today to build the wall? Just imagine the objections at the public inquiry against restricting north-south public rights of way, challenging why so many turrets were needed or why it couldn't be located south of the Tyne – and so on. To be even more absurd, if the Romans had invented wind turbines, would they now be grade one listed?

Think of the railway bridge by the Castle Keep. That wouldn't get planning permission today, would it? For me, it is the most wonderful juxtaposition of contrasting periods and I'm delighted that Victorian engineering and enterprise won through.

Builders today have a pretty tough time. Some have land-banks and hold existing planning permissions (for some 400,000 homes only at the latest count) but these are often stalled because of the financial climate. Their problem is that they need to build what buyers want, where they want to live and at a price they can afford – which takes me to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) because that defines what is acceptable and what process has to be followed.

Under the previous government, housing requirements were calculated at a national level and targets were set for each region. That target was divided up for each local authority so each council would have to set aside enough land to meet that target for housing. Once land was zoned for housing, individual planning applications would be more likely to be approved.

Regional planning has now been abolished. Councils never liked it anyway but they still have to meet demand for land.

The NPPF gives broad guidance on how to calculate housing land supply and stipulates there must be a 5 year supply of deliverable sites which includes sites with current permission. All councils need a local plan, which can include a core strategy, adopted by a planning inspector which sets out housing need in the particular area with the previous regional plan the starting point.

Councils have to deliver a wide choice of high quality homes, widen opportunities for home ownership and create sustainable, inclusive and mixed communities

reflecting local demographic trends, size, tenure and range of housing needed, and they must set out policies to deliver affordable housing either on or off a specific site. Councils are also encouraged to bring back empty homes and buildings into use. They must prepare a Strategic Housing Market Assessment and a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment working with other neighbouring councils. Councils have a legal duty to cooperate with each other.

One worrying outcome from the process so far is that English councils are planning for 272,000 fewer homes than under the 2010 regional strategies – this includes un-adopted plans.

Neighbourhood planning can help. The Localism Act 2011 placed a legal duty on councils to help parish councils and neighbourhood forums (where there is no parish) to develop a plan for their area. Forums have to be designated by a council but any group can set one up to establish general planning policies for the use and development of land in a particular area through a neighbourhood development plan. Once a neighbourhood development plan has been completed it has to win majority support in a referendum. Crucially, where a neighbourhood plan is in place, the neighbourhood gets 25% of the new Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) for that area (CIL is a new tax on planning gain). Only 15% would be paid without a neighbourhood plan and the difference reflects work put in.

Our population is growing, and the Government is trying to get the next generation decently housed. It is pleasing to see that around 250 areas have been designated as developing plans and it is even more pleasing that one has won its referendum already.

The Upper Eden valley around Brough has seventeen parishes and in its referendum earlier this year the result was 1310 voting yes and 138 voting no with a 33% turn-out. The plan will make it easier for the development of homes on farms and housing for older people.

There are five areas in Northumberland devising neighbourhood plans– Allendale, the North Tyne valley, Alnwick with Denwick, Morpeth and Cramlington. I hope they move ahead speedily and that other areas will follow because it is through communities working together and identifying their needs alongside the needs of their neighbours that we can secure better planning for the future.

My conclusion is an appeal. I want everyone to engage pro-actively in the planning process so we can build the consensus that will build the homes we need. I see no reason for the National Trust to be 'at war' with politicians as they and the press have suggested. There has to be a better way to decide planning needs.



Founded in 1924 the Northumberland & Newcastle Society's aims are the protection of the environmental wealth and cultural heritage of the County and the City.

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LORD SHIPLEY

Lord Shipley was Leader of Newcastle City Council until September 2010, and has been a Liberal and Liberal Democrat councillor for 34 years. He has lived and worked in Newcastle for more than 40 years. Lord Shipley worked for The Open University for 34 years, retiring in 2005 as Regional Director for the North of England and the European Union. Until recently he was also the Chair of the Princes Trust North East and Newcastle Theatre Royal Trust.

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