

Double Standards

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Are we confident we have coordinated policies in place to deliver high quality and sustainable housing? Given the complexity of government with planning, housing and building control overseen by the ODPM, construction by the Dti, transport by DfT and environmental standards championed by the privatised BRE it seems a reasonable question.

With the revisions to Part L of the Building Regulations and The Code for Sustainable Buildings looking in doubt we would do well to review the mismatch between regulation, policy and standards? Why for example do we have national legislation that sets minimum density targets of units per hectare and maximum car parking requirements but no requirements for the amount of space within a home? Why does planning policy protect a persons right to light from new development but not protect an individual's right to a decent amount of daylight within a new home?

The current Part L of the Building Regulations focuses more on heat loss through windows than light levels into a house. Regulations allow us to get away with deep plan single aspect apartments, in my mind no better than back to back terraces, or windowless bathrooms, kitchens and corridors, despite the fact that everyone knows these spaces would be better with natural light and ventilation. House builders generally do the minimum required of them by the regulations, which is not necessarily what makes for good housing. Sustainability is more than just environmental performance.

So we have Standards such as Eco-Homes in order to meet the shortfalls of planning policy or building regulations though generally these are only adopted for publicly funded projects. Kate Barker has acknowledged that her review of housing overlooked the environmental impact of increasing supply by 120,000 homes per annum, an oversight that could be addressed by the simple demand that all new housing should reduce carbon emissions by a third.

The Housing Corporation's new requirement of Eco-Homes 'Very Good' goes some way to making up for this and will save 35,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions a year. A further 120,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions could be saved if Eco-Homes 'Very Good' were a compulsory requirement of all new homes. When global warming affects us all why do we apply one value to public sector housing and settle for a lower standard for the private sector?

Eco-Homes Standard focuses on environmental sustainability but what of the qualities that make housing pleasant to live in? The failure of Parker Morris' *Homes for today and tomorrow* of 1961 to deal with place-making has been addressed by the introduction of *By Design*. Now without the mandatory space standards offered by Parker Morris good space is often the thing that gets jettisoned in the interests of reducing costs. Well-planned, generously lit and spacious homes are as important in delivering sustainability as urban design and building performance. The fact that space standards are, on average, back to where they were at the time of the Tudor Walters report of 1918, introduced to deal with slums and overcrowding, should give us cause for concern.

In delaying the Code for Sustainable Buildings perhaps the government could use the time to review whether the qualities that make for decent homes are actually reflected in the plethora of policies at large and whether by making tried and tested standards such as Eco-Homes mandatory and reviving Parker Morris as part of the legislative equation we can do without a new Code whilst getting better homes.