

**T**he late Sixties saw an explosion of interest in communal living as a generation of younger people dropped out, rejecting the hallowed notion that the 'Englishman's home is his castle'.

But the idea never really took off. By the late 1970s, home ownership was back in vogue as council tenants' right to buy became the flagship policy of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government.

Since then, housing has become progressively less affordable – UK property costs are among the highest in the developed world.

The result is renewed interest in house building – not just in the overall volume of homes needed, but alternative ways to meet housing needs.

The latest household formation projections published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in February, show that 210,000 new homes will be needed each year for the next 25 years.

DETACHED FAMILY HOMES WITH GARDENS OR COMPACT APARTMENTS FOR SINGLETONS? DAVID BLACKMAN CONSIDERS WHAT KIND OF HOUSING BRITAIN NEEDS



ILLUSTRATION ANDREA MANZATI

### Demographic dilemmas

Scratch beneath the surface, however, and a more complicated picture emerges. The DCLG predicts that the size of the average UK household will shrink to 2.1 people, fuelled by an ageing population and declining numbers of younger people having children.

But current housing supply runs counter to these trends.

The coalition's scrapping of Labour government-era rules, which stipulated that plots should be built at a minimum density of 30 dwellings a hectare, has triggered a revival of the suburban detached and semi.

These two types accounted for nearly half of all registered new dwellings in 2014, according to the National House Builders Council. This figure compares with just 30 per cent in the late Noughties. Outside London, detached and semi-detached properties account for 59 per cent of new registrations.

House builders will say they are meeting a market need for family housing.

But Chris Brown, chief executive of the regeneration developer Igloo, believes they are building what they can easily sell rather than meeting emerging social needs.

"I don't think that's the future; it's developers wanting to pluck the low-risk, low-hanging fruit of the higher-end, executive, detached market," he says. "We should be building for 50 years, not what the market wanted 20 years ago."

Matt Thomson, head of planning at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, says demographic trends still point to less land-hungry development.

He says: "We often overlook that we have an enormous stock of detached and semi-detached houses with a garden. The fact that they are being subdivided and turned into flats and student accommodation at a high rate is a market sign that we need to be

# THE *idea* HOME EXPOSITION

building more apartments rather than what the development industry wants to do, which is to build more houses with gardens sprawling out into the countryside. We need to recognise changes in way that lifestyles are evolving."

Thomson admits that the minimum density rules became a "bit of a blunt instrument". The Urban Task Force vision of compact communities was tainted by a glut of speculatively developed blocks containing small flats that proved hard to shift when the housing market went sour in the late Noughties.

He says: "We have tended to go for the pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap approach to apartment living."

### Apartments versus houses

Ben Derbyshire, managing partner at North London architecture practice HTA, says in a recent paper for the London Society that urban housing needs to catch up with changing lifestyles, citing the emergence of the "sharing culture".

"The notion of independent, private apartments is a rather limited concept that does not recognise the emerging value to society of collective organisation," he says.

"The economic necessity of living close to each other and to work, especially for young people, is resulting in a culture of sharing," he adds, pointing to the innovative housing solutions being developed by companies like Pocket Living and The Collective (see box).

Many of the youngsters Derbyshire talks about will, however, want something bigger than a Zone 1 or 2 crash-pad one day, especially when tiny feet intrude on the hipster dream.

The CPRE's Thomson says the answer is to find ways of creating more family-friendly apartment living with adequate storage space.

But Nicholas Boyes-Smith, founder of the Create Streets campaign, believes it is important to go with the grain of people's housing preferences.

"Most people, given a choice, prefer a house. Living in a house is correlated with better wellbeing outcomes than being in a flat."

By encouraging apartment construction, the ex-banker says what we are warping the market to build "is almost imperfectly correlated with what

people don't want to buy".

For Boyes-Smith, the once-ubiquitous terraced house provides a good trade-off between the individual desire for privacy and society's wider desire to minimise land take for housing.

"In an urban context, the tall, thin terraced house is the best way of maximising the number of people without taking up too much physical footprint. We're not saying that all people should live in terraced houses, but in an urban context that seems to be the way of manufacturing those trade-offs."

He adds that by providing medium-rise flats and mansion blocks where building terraces is not feasible, the densities delivered by high-rise solutions can be near-matched, especially if regulations such as those surrounding minimum road widths are eased.

### Homes for older people

Igloo's Brown cites the examples of Dutch and German large, four-storey terraced homes as a way forward for upmarket urban family living.

Arguably though, the solution to our family housing needs lies less in new development than in the existing built environment. Left-wing geographer Danny Dorling caused a stir last year when he said the UK's housing problem wasn't inadequate stock but unfair allocation.

Much of this is down to fiscal policies, notably council tax banding structures that provide home owners with few incentives to move out of large and expensive properties, which planners are powerless to influence.

Many experts see a role for development in freeing up some of this valuable but often underused family housing stock.

Robin Tetlow, managing director of specialist housing consultancy Tetlow King, says: "Providing for older people releases housing stock. It doesn't just solve a problem for the older people – it potentially helps to provide housing for younger people too."

Tony Burton, chair of the Sustainable

Homes campaign, agrees. "Small houses are being provided but what is being built doesn't meet standards that people want. They generally have capital locked up in their existing houses, but nowhere to spend it.

"To make that big emotional jump from leaving the family home it has to be of a standard they will want to live in."

Tetlow says: "If you are providing incentives for people to move out of a four-bedroom house, it won't be sufficiently attractive to provide a one-bed."

Birkbeck says two bedrooms is the minimum that older people will contemplate in return for giving up the family home. But the benefits are substantial. He adds: "If you can free up a three, four or five-bed house you are freeing up accommodation that will sleep a minimum of two people. By building a one or two-bed flat you are housing six people."

HTA's Derbyshire champions the conversion of tired suburban shopping precincts into mixed-use developments for older people.

In his report *Superbia* he calculates that the number of people housed on such sites could be doubled by replacing shop terraces with four or five-storey building over smaller but higher-quality cafés and restaurants.

He says: "The liberated space in the hinterlands of these high streets could then be remodelled with much more flexible planning to accommodate many more people."

But Birkbeck says retirement home developers find it hard to compete for sites with mainstream house builders.

"They have net-to-gross ratios way below what you get by knocking out little boxes, where there's no need for circulation space. If there's no common

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lounge or a health centre on the ground floor, the whole building is saleable. They (retirement developers) can't compete in land tendering. Even Pocket Living kicks them out to touch."

### Can planners prescribe housing type?

Andrew Whittaker, director of planning at the Home Builders Federation, says the viability of retirement schemes could be improved if they were subject to less demanding community infrastructure levy tariffs than mainstream housing.

Planners could draw up development briefs to specify the housing types for sites.

Paragraph 50 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that authorities should plan for a mix of housing that caters for demographic and market trends, embracing the needs of different groups. They should then "identify the size, type, tenure and range of housing that is required in particular locations, reflecting local demand".

Burton says: "The NPPF clearly expects local authorities to audit the type of housing coming through in their areas."

But it is tough for planners to be this prescriptive. The CPRE's Thomson says that implementing these policies is difficult – appeals on home type are "almost impossible" to defend.

"The emphasis on being positive about development proposals and taking account of market signals in the NPPF means you don't have much of a leg to stand on, even if the most pressing need for housing in an area is for apartments."

The developer's argument that they have their finger on the market's pulse often trumps any evidence that policy has been based on, especially when it is out of date, adds Thomson.

Whittaker counters that the nature of the housing market means developers do not have to fully address needs on every site.

"Newly forming households will buy into the existing stock and therefore the houses you provide are for the people moving out of those houses, vacating smaller properties."

All political parties promise to boost housing supply. But a more robust approach to housing typology could guard against the risk that the new homes debate is once again reduced to a simple numbers game. **Q**



### Filling the niche

Pocket Living is one of a new breed of developers seeking to offer fresh solutions to the housing crisis.

Pocket Living develops in London, targeting its schemes at first-time buyers who would otherwise be priced out of the market. All apartments are offered at a 20 per cent discount on local market prices, and are limited to people living or working in the same borough.

To ensure that the housing remains affordable for future generations, they are subject to covenants that restrict resale to others who meet local affordability requirements, so depressing the price that they can fetch.

And it entails no erosion of affordable housing. "Our model enables us to bring forward sites where a normal speculative developer would be able to avoid providing any affordable housing," says

Russ Edwards, Pocket Living's design director.

Elsewhere in London, The Collective offers its mainly young professional clientele studio flat accommodation with lavish communal facilities.

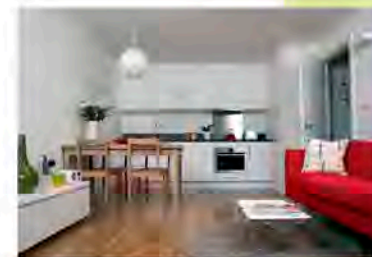
Igloo's Brown is an enthusiast for The Collective's approach. "You have a private dining room that you can hire a laundry room and all kinds of services that you can buy. This is 100 per cent what kids in London of that age want. It's not just a response to affordability, it's delivering a lifestyle."

At the other end of the spectrum, specialist retirement housing developer Pegasus is building the kind of high-quality housing that might tempt older people out of their family homes.

An example is the company's scheme at Taunton, part of Somerset Cricket Club's redevelopment of its county ground. When they buy a home from Pegasus, residents get free membership of the

Somerset club's facilities.

Brown believes that all three developers share an innovative approach. "These are all people who are trying to deliver accommodation for smaller groups that are not being catered for by the current system. They have seen a demand in the market that the planning system is not delivering."



**London-based Pocket Living targets its homes at first-time buyers living or working in the same area**