

Comment piece for Inside Housing (full text)

This was published as 'Magic Numbers' on 11 October 2013, see:

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/home/blogs/magic-numbers/6528993.article>

- This omitted the reference to Demos report on older people's housing

As shadow minister Jack Dromey whirred and bounded round the numerous housing fringe events at Labour's Brighton conference, he paused everywhere to repeat the Party's promise to build new homes 'on a grand scale.' But as the conference progressed, there were some interesting shifts in what that would mean.

On Monday, shadow chancellor Ed Balls was talking about building 400,000 affordable homes for £10bn in the first two years of a Labour government. When Ed Miliband made his set-piece speech on Tuesday, this had become 200,000 a year by the *end* of next Parliament. And by the time Wednesday came, all questions about the exact 'grand scale' were being referred to a future commission to be chaired by Michael Lyons.

What happened? Call me naive, but I'd like to think that in between all that dashing about, Jack was listening. Ed Balls' figures, with a unit cost to the public purse of £25000, assume the Treasury's affordable housing model can be scaled up. On the fringe, boiling away in the cramped temporary meeting spaces erected in the upper floors of the seafront Hilton Hotel, David Orr explained how unsustainable this is – it calls for a level of Housing Benefit dependence that the associations cannot and will not deliver. If the government wants 'affordable' housing on that scale with that level of borrowing, there will be a seminal change in the nature of providers and the customers they serve.

Elsewhere the fringe heard how the new-build requirement recently projected by Alan Holmans assumes that average household size resumes its historic decline, from 3.2 in the 1960s to 2.3 today towards the 2.0 anticipated a few decades down the track. The growth the planners are being readied to expect is in one person households, and they currently have no strategy for approving that. In an outstanding fringe meeting on older persons' housing, chaired by the wonderful Esther Rantzen, Demos presented their new report aptly entitled 'The Top of the Ladder.' This shows how millions of underoccupying, mortgage-free homeowners from the post war baby boom generation are ready and willing to downsize – but there is precious little on offer for them to go to. So affordable solutions for the mass market could start with upmarket building for retirees.

The housing solutions of the past – starter homes and family housing – may be the wrong answer for today. We need some new thinking about strategies to unblock the housing market. Once the politicians grasp that – and I think they will – then we are in for some interesting times in our housing world. Housebuilding on a grand scale may not be the answer – housing *solutions* on a grand scale are what we need.

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