

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

I first wrote most of this piece four years ago but it has become a hot political topic again so I have updated my thoughts. The then Minister of Housing blamed the 'baby boomers' of the 1950s and 60s for the reason why many young people are unable to buy their own house now. I sent this piece to my local Member of Parliament. He said that he found it very interesting and passed it on to the Minister of Housing. As I probably expected I got a standard formulaic reply.

When we bought our first house in 1960 it was nearly the first opportunity for the majority of couples to be able to afford their own home.

When we bought our first house, it was possible to buy a new 3 bed semi detached house or 2 bed bungalow, certainly in the Midlands and North of England for between £1850 and £2000.

Properties were built to the then current building regulation requirements. The properties were built with no double glazing, had softwood windows with no draught proofing to the window casements and no floor, wall or roof insulation. Internally there would be no central heating, one single electric plug in each room with possibly two in the Lounge and one TV point in the Lounge. The Kitchen would generally have a Larder, a single bowl drainer sink unit with a Formica worktop with probably one row of glazed wall tiles over the sink and worktop. There would be no fridge, oven or dishwasher provided. The Bathroom would have no shower or bidet with again perhaps one or two rows of tiles over the bath and wash hand basin.

The solid ground floors would generally be finished with plastic tiles and suspended floors with timber floor boards with no fitted carpets, curtains or even curtain rails provided.

The drive and paths around the property would generally be ash or some other industrial waste material with possibly a small area of lawn at the front. The boundary fences would be timber post and wire with no timber panels or walls unless the properties were built on a sloping site where ground retaining walls may be needed. There would be no Garage or Carport.

In 1960 there was no charge to the builder for local authority planning

approval or for building regulation approval and site inspections.

Since that 1960 home was built three major changes have been made. Firstly the Building Regulations have changed considerably to reflect the need to insulate our homes and to provide safety measures like electric smoke detection, burglar alarms, security locks and mechanical ventilation to Kitchen and Bathroom areas.

Secondly Local Authorities now charge for Planning Applications and for Building Regulation approval and subsequent site visits by Building Inspectors. In addition builders and developers now have to provide building design documents, structural calculations and an energy rating certificate none of which were generally required in 1960.

Thirdly and perhaps most significant is customer expectation. In 2017 a buyer of a new home would expect UPVC windows and external doors or at least draught proof windows and doors, central heating, multiple double electric plugs in each room and a number of TV and telephone points. They would expect a fitted Kitchen with cooker, hob and fridge and the Kitchen would have a ceramic tiled floor and a significant amount of glazed wall tiling. In the Bathroom, in addition to the normal bath, toilet and wash basin, the buyer would expect a separate shower cubicle or at least a shower over the bath with a glass shower panel, a glazed tile floor and at least half tiled walls. Increasingly buyers now expect an En Suite main Bedroom. In addition they would expect fitted carpets, curtains or at least curtain rails, ceiling and wall light fittings and a Garage.

If you factor into the 1960 house the additional cost of the changes to the Building Regulations, the local Authority Fees for Planning and Building Regulation approval and Structural calculations and then the basic additional items expected in any 2017 home, I calculate that the 1960 house would have cost approx. an additional 25 to 30%.

In 1960 a couple applying for a mortgage could only use the man's wage and the monthly mortgage repayments had to be no more than his weekly wage. Our mortgage in 1960 was for £2000 and the mortgage repayment was just under £14 per month. At that time I was earning £11 per week, which for a 22 year old was a fairly good wage, and Dot £4 per week so you can see that even in 1960 my parents had to guarantee our ability to pay the mortgage for the first year.

In additional many couples buying their 1960 house would not own a car,

would have one 2 week holiday a year and 5 Bank Holiday days with little opportunity for foreign travel. There were no fast food outlets, very few pub meals and no ethnic restaurants except for one Chinese restaurant in our city and there were no credit cards. Hire purchase was available but usually only for relatively small items and most people disciplined themselves to clearing one debt before starting another.

A far less proportion of young people in 1960 went to University or full time further education and none left with any debt to repay.

That 1960 property costing £2000 with 30% added would have cost £2600 a figure well out of reach for the vast majority of 1950s/60s home buyers.

Add to that the expectation and indeed necessity of a car, longer holidays, a culture of takeaway meals or eating out, the post University debt and the ease of obtaining credit with plastic cards and the apparent need for many young couples to have an expensive wedding with hen and stag weekends thrown in and it is perfectly obvious why young people will struggle to ever own their own property.

Many young couples now see us as the lucky generation in having the opportunity to buy our homes. We saved for 2 years for our house deposit. As well as working for five and a half days each week I did 'foreigners', drawing plans for builders and private clients for houses, bungalows, house extensions etc. and to support me Dot bought just one item of clothing during those two years. To reduce the cost of our house we painted the inside of the property ourselves finishing the work the night before our wedding. The outside was painted 8 months later when we had saved enough to have it done. We had a Lambretta scooter with nowhere to store it so we made a shed as we could not afford to buy one. We brought our shed with us when we made our first move and almost 60 years later it is still there. We had no carpets except for a stair carpet. We had a 12" black and white TV which we bought second hand for £1-00. We had no washer for the first two years, Dot washed our clothes in the bath. We had no heating except in the Kitchen. I could go on but they were really happy times as, like many others, we slowly shaped our homes acquiring things when we had saved to pay for them.

Now I am not suggesting that young couples today should not have higher expectations than we had. With diverse geographical work opportunities, nearly everyone needs a car but I do question how many

would be prepared to give up holidays, eating out, takeaways and shopping for things that they do not really need and not forgetting the high credit card interest they are paying, in order to save for the deposit on their own home.

When you then consider the country's financial problems that we are all now part of and the importance of the housing sector of the construction industry in helping our economy to grow, a lot of change and clear radical thinking is needed by politicians most of whom seem to live in another universe or, worse still, know the truth but are not prepared to tell us the reality of the situation.

Whilst wishing for long term growth, we have to face reality and I fear that our 60 years of growing prosperity will never be repeated.

Finally, those who took the plunge in the 50s and 60s to buy their home now have no mortgage to pay on their property. Whilst you could argue that the state pension should be higher and certainly, for many, private pension expectations were much higher than the reality, at least they do not have the burden of rent in their senior years and are therefore less likely to need State benefits.

For many of the current generation faced with a lifetime of renting and the prospect of an inadequate pension pot are, in my opinion, facing poverty in their senior years with a more than ever reliance on state help.

With an ever increasing ageing population and the inevitable prospect of lower standards of living **radical clear thinking** by policy makers is urgently needed.

I Hope that you found this of interest and I would love to hear your comments and experiences.

Brian