

The implications of the SoS's rejection of an estate regeneration on grounds of social housing loss

3 January 2019 by David Dewar

The decision by housing secretary James Brokenshire to refuse plans for an estate regeneration scheme in west London is an important marker for the way social housing is valued in such renewal schemes, practitioners and politicians have claimed.



An artist's impression of plans to redevelop the William Sutton Estate

The proposed regeneration of the Sutton estate in Chelsea, proposed by housing association Clarion Housing Group, would have seen the demolition and rebuild of the estate to provide 343 new homes. The proposed scheme incorporated 237 socially-rented homes, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea refused the proposal on the grounds of the net loss of social rented housing, when compared with the existing 383 homes on the estate, contrary to its local plan policies.

The applicants' argument at the subsequent appeal was that the loss of units as part of the scheme would include 159 flats which are vacant and cannot be viably refurbished.

This floorspace should be omitted from the calculation as it could in theory be used for market housing instead, it argued.

But Ware dismissed this argument. "Increasing vacancies are a common manifestation of estate renewal and the appellant's choice not to commit expenditure on improvements to the estate is not considered to be a sound planning reason for not counting the estate as social rented floorspace," he said. "This would be an incentive for landowners to run down social housing estates to reduce social housing replacement policy requirements."

Graham Stallwood, executive director for planning at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, said the decision had allowed "a line to be drawn under" the idea that applicants for renewal schemes can value existing properties as private market housing rather than social housing, and that they can disregard vacant homes when assessing the social housing floorspace to be provided.

Stallwood said the decision also has wider ramifications for the future of estate renewal schemes, pointing to the demise of the regeneration model of demolishing estates and rebuilding them with a mixture of private and affordable housing. "Most people have come to the view that that model is coming to an end," he said. "And this decision is another indication that it is, and that community-led regeneration is the way forward."

London mayor Sadiq Khan said the decision vindicated policies in the new London Plan seeking to protect the level of social housing in estate regeneration schemes.

Following the council's refusal, Clarion Housing Group had devised a revised scheme with an increased social housing offer of 270 homes, but this had been judged by the inspector as being submitted too late to be considered at the appeal.

The group said it was "disappointed" with Brokenshire's decision, and that the objection to the plans "on a technicality" means that future of the estate is now "uncertain".

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