



Charlotte Rogers

Ian Gough

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Solving the housing crisis without building new houses

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*There is a cross-party consensus that the way to tackle the housing crisis is to build more homes. But this approach isn't working, and does little to address inequality and the environmental impacts of construction. Instead, governments should be pursuing innovative policies that make efficient use of the existing housing stock, of which there is plenty, argue **Charlotte Rogers** and **Ian Gough**.*

It is no stretch to claim that housing in the UK is a persistent and intractable public policy problem. It is also no stretch to suggest that current policy strategies are broadly frustrating goals of inequality reduction and decarbonisation. A housing market predicated on the generation of capital for owners, rather than the fulfilment of people's needs, is severely failing low-income households, who increasingly struggle to gain access to housing of

any type. A long-established **governmental focus** on **quantity of housing** (as opposed to quality or tenure), epitomised in the current **cross-party consensus** that seeks to build 300,000 new homes a year, has done little to alleviate the market-generated burdens of disadvantaged and low-income families.

It has also done little to further the vital goal to decarbonise the housing stock. Housing is a vastly carbon intensive sector, accounting for 17 per cent of all **CO² emissions in the UK**. New builds, even of energy efficient housing, come with high material and embodied carbon costs, and do nothing to tackle the inadequacy and inefficiency of the large existing stock.

To tackle urgent, inter-connected social and environmental crises, we must shift our focus to the *existing* housing stock, and pursue innovative policies of re-distribution and re-utilisation, alongside efficiency-enhancing measures. Only through such fundamental shifts in our housing strategy can we promote the wellbeing of our people and planet.



Widely spread assumptions that we do not have nearly enough housing space for everyone, and therefore must keep building houses at immense rates, are simply misleading.



The existing housing stock

The rapid retrofitting of existing stock is essential, and will have a more immediate and extensive impact on overall emissions than the building of

new efficient housing. If appropriately subsidised, it will also benefit the least well-off by reducing energy costs, and making homes easier to heat. This, however, does not go far enough. We also need a more efficient *use* of the existing housing stock.

Widely spread assumptions that we do not have nearly enough **housing space** for everyone, and therefore must keep **building houses** at immense rates, are simply misleading. Findings from our **recent research** demonstrate how much underutilised, surplus housing exists. We found that over one third of households possess two or more bedrooms above the national bedroom standard and that one quarter enjoy more than double the national space standard. This means that households and individuals enjoying excess housing are *more* numerous than the numbers in deprived housing.

It is worth noting that excess housing also carries a significant environmental cost. One seventh of total **housing emissions** – 9.9 million tonnes of CO² – come from excess housing space. To make matters worse, the intensity (per square metre of floor space) of these excess emissions is 25 per cent higher than the average. This supports other findings on the ecological burden of the richest emitters.

The sufficiency approach

The argument to reutilise and redistribute our existing housing stock is informed by an overarching sufficiency strategy. Unlike efficiency approaches, which focus on quick-fix technological innovation, the concept of sufficiency recognises limits to production and consumption. It also draws from long-standing normative arguments which highlight the profound injustice of forcing the worst off to bear the brunt of decarbonisation by reducing their necessitous consumption, while luxurious consumption by the rich continues.

A transition to a state of sufficiency requires the reassessment and reconfiguring of our collective behaviours and social practices, in order to ensure both environmental sustainability, and a minimum standard of wellbeing for all. It is therefore not something that can be achieved quickly, but rather entails a long and complex process of transformation over time. In

the pursuit of reducing emissions and compressing inequalities, it importantly takes as a starting point luxury consumption and excessive personal wealth.



Experiments in co-living, house-sharing and other collective forms of householding in the UK and Europe can be used to develop alternative tenure arrangements.



The policy proposals

So, what policy objectives could bring us closer to a sufficiency outcome by reshaping our use of the existing housing stock? We might start with a radical reform of housing taxation and pricing, incorporating more progressive property or land tax and the regulation of second homes and excess housing. This would exempt housing needs, while levying surcharges on excess housing. Since there is significant evidence that government regulation is effective in ensuring that minimal standards are met, outright bans of harmful activities such as second home ownership should also be considered. There is already a growing practice in imposing licensing requirements or bans in [Cornwall, Wales](#), and various [locales in Europe](#).

However, a sufficiency strategy requires a suite of distinct policy programmes going beyond tax and regulation reform. These include, firstly, policies which better match housing stock to households, and enable “empty nesters” (elderly owner occupiers) who want to downsize to do so. This would require

a joined-up series of local interventions embracing information, incentives and, where necessary, provision of alternative housing.



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Secondly, an important source of housing demand is the continual rise in **single person households** across the global North. Experiments in co-living, house-sharing and other collective forms of householding in the UK and Europe can be used to develop alternative tenure arrangements. In improving the feasibility of and access to co-living arrangements, damaging cultural attitudes promoting self-isolated, atomised living may be challenged, to the betterment of both environmental and wellbeing objectives.

Thirdly, our research clearly demonstrates that social housing broadly allocates floor space according to need rather than market demand. There is a strong case that any new build should be for social renting, not buying. Beyond this, greater democratic control over the use of housing space should be achieved through the expansion of forms of tenure. The public acquisition of housing assets which staunchly conflict with sufficiency objectives, such as vacant and non-decent private rental homes, will be central to this endeavour. Local authorities and housing associations should have rights of first refusal to purchase, repurpose and upgrade empty rental property.

These are radical proposals but without them, however carbon *efficient* the housing stock is made, it will not become more *effective* at delivering decent accommodation to households who need it. Failing to redistribute the existing stock will also continuously encourage new house building with associated environmental costs. There is evidence that **sufficiency policies**

are gaining public support: a recent survey of European citizen assemblies found a greater willingness to countenance sufficiency policies than European governments who were influenced by short-termism and interest group lobbying. Supplementing the escalating public hunger for change is clear-cut research indicating that both the social and environmental dimensions of the housing crisis necessitate more radical and structural shifts in our housing strategies.

This blog is based on the CASE Paper 'Fair decarbonising of housing in the UK: A sufficiency approach' by Ian Gough, Stefan Horn, Charlotte Rogers and Rebecca Tunstall.

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About the author



Charlotte Rogers

Charlotte Rogers is Research Assistant to Professor Ian Gough at LSE's Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion.



Ian Gough

Ian Gough is a CASE Visiting Professor and Associate of the Grantham Institute. He is the author of *Heat, Greed and Human Need* (2017) and several articles advocating eco-social policy.