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Opinion

insidehousing

Climate change could soon drown out sector's worries

The world is finally getting serious about climate change. Scientists have issued a fresh set of warnings on global warming, Europe has announced this week it is getting even tougher on car emissions and even President Bush has committed to doing more. But what about our housing? Global warming might seem a peripheral issue for social landlords, particularly when the next inspection is due, or a pressing complaint about anti-social behaviour needs to be addressed. But eventually, climate change could make all those other concerns pale into insignificance.

Some housing providers have already been doing their bit to tackle global warming with impressive eco-friendly developments. Others have a way to go. In a few years, the government says, all new homes should be zero carbon. Getting there will prove demanding. Our existing stock poses even more of a challenge.

But what about the way we are planning for the future? Housing is responsible for a big chunk of our carbon emissions so going carbon zero is clearly crucial if we are to make any inroads. But what if, as Colin Wiles suggests in this week's *Inside Housing*, we are already too far down the line to stop some of the worst effects of climate change? Shouldn't we be planning for rising sea levels and extreme temperatures by putting new types of housing in places that will be safe from the sea? We might need homes on stilts, tropical-style storm defences or even floating cities. All of this may seem like science fiction. But if the predictions from scientists are even partially borne out, our housing in some decades time may need to be very different from how it looks today. While our work tackling the causes of climate change will intensify, so too should our planning for a future where changes to our environment are inevitable.

Comment Rough sleeper count must keep consistency at heart

The sum of all parts

Jeremy Swain

Rough sleeping remains the most visible form of homelessness. For many, the commitment to tackling it is symbolic of a nation's claim to be both civilised and progressive. The regular count of rough sleepers is used by the government as the primary indicator of progress in reducing rough sleeping in England and the Communities and Local Government department's decision to review how counts are undertaken and to consult on the guidance (*Inside Housing*, 2 February) is to be greatly welcomed.

The greatest controversy, highlighted last week in *Inside Housing's* lead article, is the suggestion that people without recourse to public funds should not be included in national estimates. This translates into not counting eastern European nationals from the accession states who joined the European Union in May 2004.

The argument runs that if you can't help them, why count them. Some local authorities feel it unjust when their rough sleeping figure is compared with that of a neighbouring area which does not have a similar problem.

Thames Reach's view is that each local authority must produce a primary street count figure that includes everyone found sleeping rough on the street on the night of the count.

Over time, the likelihood of, for example, a Polish rough sleeper having recourse to public funds will increase, as some will be entitled to claim benefits after having legally worked for a period of time and paid the necessary contributions. So there is a practical problem in assessing who does have recourse to public funds which cannot be resolved only by reference to nationality.

More importantly, to the person on the Clapham omnibus, not counting someone based on something this abstruse would be inexplicable and dramatically undermine the credibility of street counts.

Counting rough sleepers is never going to be a wholly scientific exercise – some individuals will be missed – but the objective must be to get as true a picture as possible of the real number of people sleeping rough on any one night.

A 'snapshot' street count does not illustrate the overall picture of street homelessness over a year. In London the CHAIN database, managed by

homelessness charity Broadway, indicates that 2,807 different individuals slept rough over the year 2005/06, a 9 per cent increase on the previous year, and a very different figure to the London street count figure of 250 to 300. This is the kind of background information that the CLG would be well advised to make more explicit when it reports on numbers of rough sleepers.

The achievement in reducing rough sleeping over the last 17 years has been enormous.

There are more rough sleepers along one major thoroughfare in Los Angeles than in the whole of England.

Against this positive background, the CLG must set out the national rough sleeping picture in full and pull into line those few local authorities no longer counting with the thoroughness evident in previous years.

Without this transparency and discipline, government – central and local – will remain vulnerable to the accusation that while the official number of rough sleepers remains stable or declines, the real figure continues to rise.

● **Jeremy Swain is chief executive of homelessness charity Thames Reach**