

PREFAB: A POTENTIAL UK HOUSING SOLUTION?

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Abstract:

Prefab was a temporary housing solution post-WWII. These poor-quality prefabs caused a negative public perception; thus, it was disused. However, in the current UK housing market, there is an increase in interest in prefab. This research explores prefab, providing policies that could be implemented, using a particular example of Legal & General Homes.

Methods:

The methodology for this research was qualitative based, using a secondary data approach, in the form of a literature review. The search strategy for the literature review was purposeful – reading resources related to prefab. This is advantageous as it highlights the wide range of perceptions and narratives regarding prefab across academic, policy and media sources.

Definition:

"In itself prefabrication means no more than the manufacture of housing components in one place and their assembly in another"

(Habraken, 1999, p.67)

History:

Post-WWII, over 250,000 homes were destroyed (Blanchet, 2014). So, Winston Churchill rolled out the Temporary Housing Programme, in which he claimed 250,000



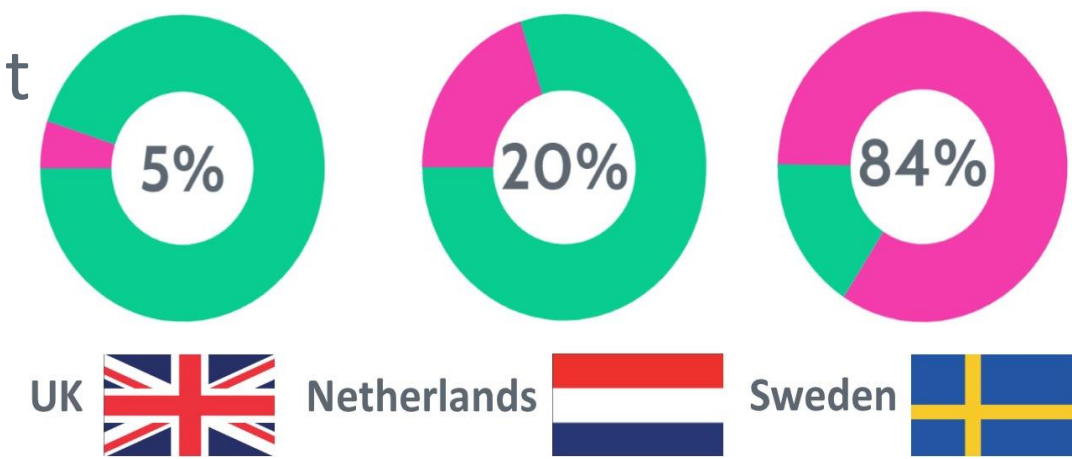
Figure 1. Post-war prefab from Amersham, Buckinghamshire. Source: Author using image from Brown (2018).

homes would be built (Stevenson, 2003). Only 160,000 homes were built, but this caught the imagination of the UK public. The poor quality (figure 1) led to the loss of this method and imbedded a negative perception in society (Blanchet, 2014).

WEAK
CHEAP
OLD-FASHIONED
POOR-QUALITY
DAMP
DETERIORATED
TEMPORARY
FLAT-PACKED

Current Situation:

The current UK housing market faces huge issues such as increasing demand, lack of economic viability, sustainability and 'eco-consciousness'. Due to this, there is an increase in interest surrounding prefab. Comparatively, the UK has not adopted the method as much as other locations, arguably due to the negative history. In the UK, 5% of permanent housing uses prefab, whereas in Sweden, a huge 84% of detached houses use prefab (Sweet, 2015).



Case Study and Policy Recommendations: Legal & General Homes:

Legal & General, best known for providing life assurance products, have been reconnoitring modern-day prefab, recently establishing Legal & General Homes (L&GH). Owing a 550,000 square foot prefab factory based near Leeds, L&GH have the potential to capacitate 3,000 homes a year (Legal & General, 2018). In 2017, they acquired land in Shrivenham, West Oxfordshire, where 180 prefab homes would be built. Shrivenham is situated on the M4 corridor and within commuting distance of London and Cardiff, making it a 'hotspot' for housing developments. Below, there are suggested policies that L&GH should implement, but these are not subjective and could be implemented on a wider scale.



1. Help to Buy 30% Prefab:

Currently the UK Government offer a Help to Buy ISA, where 25% is added on top of savings for first-time buyers (HM Government, 2018), only for new builds, using traditional methods. This scheme has been successful; in 2017 8/10 first time buyers used the Help to Buy scheme (Nemeth, 2018). I suggest that the Government offer a 30% Help to Buy ISA on prefab houses. This would increase financial viability and interest, particularly for first-time buyers. House prices in the past decade have increased at a rate that exceeds the growth of household incomes (Poon and Garratt, 2012), making it hard to get onto the property ladder. This would be especially useful in Oxfordshire where the average house price is £409,627 (Right Move, 2018).

2. Education:

To alter the negative outlook on prefab, education is key. I suggest to improve access to training opportunities in higher education institutions in the local area (Swindon College). This policy would entail L&GH funding a curriculum for a trade apprenticeship specialising in prefab, potentially earning a scholarship with L&GH. Swindon has pockets of social deprivation, Penhill Central and Upper Stratton are ranked 33rd in England for the most deprived in the domain of education, skills and training (Swindon Borough Council, 2015, p.23). It is imperative to empower and incentivise work and education in these areas. Additionally, by improving education, it sustains and diversifies the future of the construction industry in the UK, which is crucial with the uncertainty of 'Brexit'.



Conclusions and the Future...

- Prefab isn't the 'silver bullet', but can ease UK housing crisis.
- Policies will ensure the potential is maximised.
- Prefab has huge untapped potential in UK; with extensive benefits.
- L&GH just one company exploring prefab; it is a growing market.
- Prefab/modular building will be more commonly used.



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