

University of Hertfordshire-Lafarge Sustainable Living Partnership

Think Piece

Sustainable Living?

What do customer surveys tell us about why people buy new homes and what those buyers want their homes to be like once they have bought them?

1. Introduction

At a national level we are pursuing ever more stringent environmental sustainability standards for new dwellings through the Code for Sustainable Homes.ⁱ Meanwhile, while government backed schemes like the Green Dealⁱⁱ to assist in home based energy generation have run into their own difficulties there remains a national commitment to improving the energy efficiency of new homes. We perhaps like to think that at an individual level homebuyers are equally focused on achieving a high degree of sustainability in their new houses and flats – with a preference for ‘eco’ features in their housing purchases; for energy generation and use, to support sustainable supply chains, and to reduce carbon emissions, for example. But what actually motivates people to buy new houses and flats? And what do buyers say they want those dwellings to be like once they have bought them? Are people thinking about issues of ‘sustainable living’ when they make their purchase decisions? This think piece for the University of Hertfordshire-Lafarge Sustainable Living Partnershipⁱⁱⁱ explores these questions through some primary data about buyer attitudes and behaviour in the south of England, kindly provided by an established building firm and relating to their housing purchasers.

2. The housing context

Of course people are not buying new houses and flats in a vacuum. This think piece needs to be situated within the context of an overall shortage of housing in the south of England which has helped push housing prices up dramatically, and sometimes in recent years been described as amounting to a housing crisis.^{iv} We do know that demand continues to outstrip supply for a variety of reasons. Housing supply has not kept up due to factors including the recession, the difficulty of obtaining mortgage credit, and planning rows about where to locate new housing developments. Similarly, on the demand side, population growth obviously feeds into demand for new homes, and although household formation rates tend to slow

at times of economic downturn, the long-term trend in England, as elsewhere, is for household formation to increase significantly faster than population growth. This again adds to demand – even if this can sometimes be partially damped down due to adverse economic and planning conditions.

We have also for some years seen a rise in the proportion of housing demand made up of smaller households, comprising one or two people rather than the traditional 4, 5 or 6 person households. Paradoxically some of these smaller households still want more space, so we cannot assume small households want small houses. In socially rented housing too, in a context of a shortage of supply and long waiting lists, the amount of housing space each household should claim has become an area of disputation. This has centred on allocation policies about the ‘right size’ of home for particular sized households. The private rental sector is similarly under stress, with high rents and low availability, and is becoming an increasing focus for government policy and remedial action. So overall, in the south east of England in particular we know that unmet demand, issues in relation to supply of new houses for sale and rent, and arguments over where new housing should be located, are a widespread context for buying new homes.

3. What this think piece does

Against this complicated backdrop, this think piece provides the opportunity to briefly review some fascinating primary data provided by an established, privately owned house builder active in constructing both private and public housing on greenfield and brownfield sites of various sizes. The data takes the form of 115 post occupancy customer surveys, each completed by new residents roughly six weeks after moving in to their new dwellings.

These surveys cover housing that ranges from small ‘village’ developments to larger residential building projects in and on the edge of towns in the south east of England. The think piece’s focus is on consumer attitudes about housing for sale, and the data reviewed here encompasses housing products that span affordable starter homes and apartments, through to town houses and traditional style family homes of up to 5 or 6 bedrooms. The spatial spread of the housing developments considered through this data stretches from Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire to the north of London, to Hampshire, Sussex and Kent to the south.

Through analysis of the 115 customer surveys we explore some intriguing findings about attitudes to new housing, and expectations of its design (both internal and garden features), that reflects social and economic changes in our living patterns. From these findings we draw some tentative conclusions about how new housing purchasers may be situated in relation to sustainable living.

It is worth noting that given the housing context briefly sketched out above, households able to deploy sufficient economic resources to fund a new home purchase in an overheated market represent a fortunate subset of those in housing need. It is acknowledged that others remain trapped on social housing waiting lists

or stuck in private rental when they would also prefer to buy if they could afford to do so.

4. Exploring new home buyers' views and expectations

4.1. Why move?

The initial fact that strikes any reviewer of this data set is the diversity of motivations identified by buyers themselves for purchasing a new home. The motivational range noted from customer surveys is wide, but locational factors are strongly marked, with moving closer to work or family a common reason given, and often associated with substantial spatial shifts from the existing dwelling place. These buyers are tending to move more than 21 miles, and a few explain they have moved from over 100 miles away.

Unsurprisingly, the youngest movers, in the up to 25 years and the 26-45 age groups, are more often than others saying they want to purchase their first home or to stop paying rent: sometimes mentioning both factors as reasons for their move. House and flat buyers in the 26-45 age group feature substantially in the 'moving to be closer to work' category, while a few state that they are moving closer to schools, and two mention that they are buying a new home because they are divorcing.

In the 26 to 45 age group a considerable number of households are moving because they say they want a larger house. Larger household size in this age range is also notable, with 3, 4 and 5 person households predominating, suggesting the arrival of a first child, or additional children, is precipitating their buying behaviour. These moves are often from within 2 miles of the existing dwelling, and sometimes from within 3 to 11 miles from their current home; thus constituting a more local move driven by changing family size, than for the group noted above.

But these are not the only homebuyers keen to obtain a larger house. A number of one and two person households in the 46 to 60 age group, and some in the 60+ group, are also buying bigger houses. Some of these mention that they have children in situ 'part time' so can be assumed to be in a transitional stage where university age or young adult children are moving in and out of home. These purchasers appear to be easing their children's way into independent life rather than starkly excluding them by downsizing. The 'outliers' are intriguing, including a 60+ single occupant moving into a 5-bedroom house, but emphasise that there is no necessary correlation between purchasing behaviour and the actual need for large amounts of housing space.

Unsurprisingly, for some older movers in the 46 to 60 and 60+ age groups, the data shows a substantial number moving to smaller houses. Almost all of these are one or two person households, and some note that their desire to release capital, or to stop paying a mortgage is motivating the move. Perhaps fewer buyers than expected are purchasing a new house or flat as an investment, and while this is stated as a reason for five or six buyers, the great majority want a house or flat to live in themselves.

The investor buyers meanwhile have an interest in particular aspects of house design and features that we will return to below. A handful of buyers, meanwhile, state that they are motivated by the newness of the house (“I just want to live in a new house”); for others it is about the quality of the location (“I want to live in a nicer area”); and for one it is specifically about design features (“a larger kitchen and dining space”).

The overwhelming majority of buyers are planning to run at least one car, with most signalling that they will run two cars, and a few expect to house three or four cars at their new home. There is no sense from the data that locational factors such as walkability or proximity to public transport are influencing buying decisions but this may simply reflect that the questionnaire does not delve into these aspects. House size too is not significantly correlated with running fewer cars. A considerable number of those downsizing to a smaller house, for instance, still have an expectation that there will be a two-car garage and very few of those buying new houses or flats indicate that they do not own a car. Interestingly, the few car-free buyers are found in senior management and professional occupational categories, suggesting this is a choice rather than a financial necessity. Buyers’ views about their needs in relation to cars and car parking are a design aspect reviewed below.

Before turning to design aspects in more detail, it is worth saying a little about the social class and economic circumstances that can be inferred by the information purchasers give about their occupational status. The survey responses demonstrate that the largest group of purchasers is retired people, although there are also a substantial number in the 26-45 and 46 to 60 age ranges. So despite a demography in the south of England dominated by population ageing, house buying among this group at least is not just the preserve of retiring ‘downsizers’. The next largest category self identifies as professionals, and there are also significant numbers who describe themselves as senior managers. Middle managers, administrative workers and skilled trades people also feature in smaller numbers, as do self employed people, and those who own their own businesses. The range of occupations, and proportions within different occupational categories, provide a picture of a relatively upmarket cohort of buyers, including well-off retirees, but it would be misleading to suggest that buyers are comprised only of the well-to-do, as there is a considerable occupational diversity and dwelling size differences represented.

4.2. Does house and garden design matter to buyers?

The data shows clearly that both house and garden design do matter very much to buyers, but moving beyond this facile judgement, their responses allow us to get beneath the surface to scrutinise in some detail the kinds of issues that emerge in relation to what matters in design terms to buyers of new housing. An overall judgement is that buyers, perhaps unsurprisingly for the most major consumer purchase they will make, have very high expectations of the design quality of their homes, both externally and for its interior features.

The survey questionnaire asks buyers 'how the design of their home has influenced their decision to purchase', and this elicits some interesting responses. Although few buyers make specific, detailed comments about external design in their survey responses, many rank it highly in terms of influencing their purchase decision. It should be noted in this regard that the houses this builder produces demonstrate a diversity of architectural styles. Some are traditionally styled in architectural design terms, with features that reflect their local built form context and vernacular, but the firm also produce some more 'modernist' inspired architectural styles. Similarly, the specification for the new house, its room layouts - and especially its room dimensions - are also important to a large number of buyers in this cohort. Most indicate that they care about how ground and first floor layouts and room dimensions are organised (and some offer suggestions for tweaking or improving these).

The questionnaire also asks what buyers would spend extra on if they had another £1,000 in their design budget and the answers are revealing of strong views about what features a new house should include. Buyers offer a range of highly specific proposals for design improvements that more money to spend would allow for, and these are explored below.

4.3. What would they change?

4.3.1. Room dimensions

A recent UK survey found that the generality of new homes in the UK are cramped, and too small to provide sufficient storage space for household appliances and the weekly food shop.^v In line with the importance of the issue of room size for comfort and utility, a number of respondents nominate room dimensions as important to influencing their decision to purchase and most are clearly happy with the dimensions as offered. A few others, however, note that rooms could be slightly larger and a couple want a useable loft.

4.3.2. Storage

Storage issues and design improvements are a focus for comments from buyers and this preoccupation again fits well with what seems to be a perennial issue in house design in the UK, as revealed by the survey noted above (op cit). In the survey responses considered in this think piece, storage issues come up across the range of houses and flats, suggesting that this is a design issue that may transcend house size or internal layout. Among the suggestions made by buyers for extra storage capacity or different storage arrangements are (more) built in cupboards and fitted wardrobes in bedrooms, "a wardrobe in the second bedroom", "more general storage space", "more cupboards", "kitchen drawers", "a kitchen carousel for the corner unit (or a pull out or tall larder unit)", "an extra unit in the kitchen", "a small full wine cellar" and "garden storage". Other buyer comments include:

“Remove the downstairs toilet and make it into a walk-in larder/storage room”.
“A tall cupboard in the kitchen to store the Hoover and the ironing board”.
“Somewhere to store coats and shoes in the hall”.

4.3.3. Kitchen and laundry design and appliances

Kitchens and laundries, and appliances for them, are also a focus for design suggestions from buyers, and they identify not only the storage ideas noted above but a range of other proposals for design, appliances and finishes. It is clear that with increased resources buyers would like to improve the specification of their homes to the highest level they can. Buyers suggestions (often from a number of buyers) include proposals for a range of appliances: “a dishwasher”, “a washer dryer”, “a larger freezer”, “an integrated dishwasher and washer dryer”, “built in kitchen appliances”, “a waste disposal unit”, as well as proposals for “tiles in the kitchen”, “tiles in the kitchen between units and work tops”, “splash back tiles”, and “a wet room”. Three or four buyers also suggest the inclusion of a water softener. Other buyer comments include:

“I have to say that the features are really good. A fitted dishwasher perhaps or an extra cupboard in the kitchen”.

“We spent extra on granite worktops, extra kitchen units, upgrading on the specification (Retired couple, smaller home).”

“More shelves in kitchen cupboards – pots of wasted space where cups, glasses stored. More drawer units in kitchen for cutlery”.

4.3.4. Bathrooms

Bathroom design and heating is also a spotlight for considerable interest from buyers, with a significant number interested in changing both major elements and minor details. Suggestions include “more bathroom cabinets”, “a shower built in over the bath in the main and ‘guest’ bathrooms”, “improved provision of shower screens”, inclusion of “a bidet”, and “tiling the downstairs toilet”. Heating bathrooms is of particular interest, with five or six suggesting that heated towel rails should be built in rather than bathroom radiators. Details seem to matter: one buyer would even like to see “towel rails to match toilet roll holders”. Extra cash would be spent on:

“Under floor heating in the en suite and towel heaters instead of radiators in bathrooms”.

“The family bathroom needs a proper shower and screen rather than hairspray at the end by a window so one can’t put up a screen there. Or turn the bath around”.

“The bathroom would benefit from having a shower fitted, being a three bed house with only one en suite shower in my opinion devalues the property”.

4.3.5. Electrical

A number of buyers would like to see TV aerial and satellite provision (“TV points in every room”). Buyers want “more plugs in their study and garage”, “more expensive

switches and sockets”, “better specification of sockets and switches” and there are requests for a “landing light switch near the living room” and more obscurely “a socket for a plug for a second freezer”. Changing lifestyle patterns, including the rise of social media, are reflected in interest from in this instance younger buyers in provision for iPods. One asks for

“An iPod system for all rooms (seen in many new homes)”.

4.3.6. Walls, flooring, window coverings and light quality

A few buyers are concerned about sound and heat insulation and the quality of flooring finishes. One comments on “problems with floor (noise)” and suggests the need for “better flooring on the middle floor – noisy”. Another suggests that “laminated flooring would be good for the living room and master bedroom”. Similarly a few buyers would like to see window covers such as blinds, shutters or curtain rails included. Light quality also concerns some buyers who would prefer more light in various parts of their new house:

“As the kitchen is dark, if I had the choice I would have chosen a white kitchen to reflect some extra light”.

“Under cupboard lighting in the kitchen”.

“Two windows not just one in the largest top floor bedroom”.

4.3.7. Gardens, patios, sheds and landscaping

Buyers equally have a strong interest in the design, storage arrangements and landscaping of the external spaces around their new homes. Larger patios are something of a theme with one proposing their “patio is extended to fit a table and chairs”. Another buyer suggests they would like “a paved and decked back garden”, and a third “a greater amount of garden storage”. Buyers want sheds included and in one case their shed “moved to a better position”. Others note in relation to landscaping they would like “a levelling of turf in the back garden”, and:

“Better landscaping – under dining room window ie garden/shrubs or preferably railings as the houses opposite”.

“Some landscaping to the garden might be an area”.

“Garden planting to rear and larger patio area”.

4.3.8. Parking and garages

Perspectives on parking and garages seem to differ depending on the kind of dwelling buyers have purchased and their reasons for buying. Suggestions include for “a larger driveway”, “better parking arrangements” and design that increases the linkages between the house proper and the garage such as “a side entrance to the garage”. One buyer would like a “remote controlled garage door” while another suggests that they would benefit from “double garage doors as cars are getting too big to go in a single door easily”. Attitudes to parking provision seem to be related to owners’ intentions for their new homes. Investor buyers of flats, for example, are

interested in greater parking provision, on the assumption that their new apartment may be occupied by a number of individuals with cars:

“Development design – parking places **not** on roads in whole development area – including next to apartments. Now many people are forced to park on roads”.
“Instead of shrub garden to the front I would have extra parking”.

4.3.9. Gates, fences, house numbers and entrances

Were an extra £1,000 available, some buyers would give further attention to the specification for gates and fences. One suggests “lockable gate access” while an apartment building dweller would “form a covered way from the car parking area to the front door”. Some buyers are also interested in fencing and railings, with one suggesting they would like:

“Better fence to make the property more private and secure ie not iron bars but wood panels”.

5. Sustainable living?

What is striking about the picture this data presents is how ‘high specification’ buyers expectations are in relation to new housing in this part of the housing market. Buyers appear both knowledgeable and demanding – with a strong sense of what will increase the quality of design features and appliances in and around their new homes, and how these can in turn be deployed most effectively to maximize their comfort and enjoyment of these living spaces.

On first analysis, there appears to be almost no interest demonstrated in ‘sustainable living’ as we might understand it. For example, no one surveyed mentions proximity to public transport, or being able to walk to the shops as a feature influencing their locational decision, nor for instance are there any comments about house design providing the capacity for generating electricity or heating water using solar panels. None of the suggested garden improvements mention compost bins, which could help householders contribute to reducing food waste.

However, this rather harsh judgment may be unfair for a few reasons. Firstly, many of the sustainable features of these new homes are built in at the supply chain, materials procurement and construction stages, with the firm having its own in-house assessor for the Code for Sustainable Homes. The builders also note on their website that they do what they can to maximize the sustainability level of the housing they produce: *“We design and build homes to meet the needs and aspirations of local people whilst endeavouring to minimise the effect on the local environment.... We take care to design our product and site layout to meet the needs of local people, and recognise that consideration of the environment is of ever increasing importance”*.^{vi} From the consumer side, through their research into house builders, buyers may well be aware of this environmentally conscious approach; it may even have influenced their choice of housing provider. Given this backdrop,

buyers may as a result take the view that there is less necessity for them to undertake individual action to achieve 'sustainable living': the hard work has already been done.

Secondly, in making judgments about sustainable living and new housing the edge of town locations of some of the reviewed developments may well not be thought especially walkable or cycling friendly. However, this description from the home search website, *Right Move*, suggests 'connectivity' would be likely to be an area new buyers research before making a purchase. In text relating to one of the developments reviewed in this paper, the capacity to cycle easily to services and shopping is emphasised: *"It would be difficult to find a better location for living than [name of development]. Within just a few minutes' drive or cycle ride of [name] town centre, you'll discover an extensive range of sport, leisure and shopping facilities"*^{vii}

Thirdly, it is also worth remembering that the data has been collected for a particular purpose – helping a highly successful building firm to better understand their customers' needs and preferences – so expecting it to also provide direct insights into attitudes to sustainable living could be judged as somewhat unreasonable. There is space though for more analysis of this data and for primary research into consumer attitudes that we hope to explore in a further think piece next year, where some of these sustainable living themes can be interrogated in more depth.

In conclusion, what the consumer survey data does provide is both an absorbing picture of homebuyers' views, and a clear indication that the market for new housing is a complicated, nuanced and challenging one. Motivating factors for making a move to a new house or flat vary widely, as household formation and social and economic patterns shift buyers housing requirements and influence their buying responses. Buying decisions then made are subject to external structural forces such as changes in the jobs market, the planning system, building regulations, government housing policies, housing finance and availability of land, and all these interconnect with individual circumstances in unique ways. There is clearly more work to be done to see how the connections between house buying and sustainable living can be brought closer together – this think piece suggests that understanding what motivates new home buyers is a good place to start.

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ⁱ The Code for Sustainable Homes is *"The national standard for the sustainable design and construction of new homes. The Code aims to reduce our carbon emissions and create homes that are more sustainable"*. For information about the

Code see

http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/buildingregulations/greenerbuildings/sustainable_homes/introduction

ⁱⁱ http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/tackling/green_deal/green_deal.aspx

ⁱⁱⁱ The partnership combines Lafarge's and the University of Hertfordshire's individual practical and academic expertise, in order to inform and influence the agenda in three specific areas of designing sustainable places to live, moving away from fossil fuel dependence, and supporting sustainable transport choices. In so doing the partnership aims fit well within the Centre's focus on aspects of sustainable communities including urbanism, transport and energy.

^{iv} <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18416365>

^v <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/newhomes/9267158/New-houses-are-too-small-research-finds.html>

^{vi} Text from house builder's website

^{vii} Text from Right Move.co.uk website