UK Housing and Planning Policies: Evidence from Economic Research

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1. The key policy issue – some stylized facts
2. Features of the British system of land use planning and testable implications
3. Empirical evidence: Impact of planning constraints on house prices
4. Assessment of housing policies in light of existing institutional setting
5. Conclusions
Overview

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Stylized fact 1

- House values in England – particularly in London and SE – are amongst highest in world

Mean price of single detached house (all transactions in 2008 – in-midst of Great Recession):

- Kensington: 4.3M £
- Richmond: 1.2M £ (greenish London suburb)
- Hackney: 770k £ (rather distressed London borough)
- Cotswold: 470k £ (rural West of England)

- Buying price per square metre second highest in the world (topped only by Monaco)

Sources: Land Registry; Globalpropertyguide.com (last accessed 6/2016)
Stylized fact 2

- House prices in UK (and particularly England) are also extremely volatile
  - UK as a whole substantially more volatile than single most volatile market in US
  - 1980s/90s cycle: boom/bust in real terms
    - UK: +83% / -38%
    - Los Angeles: +67% / -33%

Sources: Nationwide; Glaeser et al. (2008)
Volatility has increased in recent decades...

Real land and house price indices (1931=100)

Note: House and land price data for war years are interpolated

Source: Cheshire (2009) and own calculations for 2008 onwards / Land Registry & Nationwide

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Volatility has increased in London relative to rest of UK...

Average London house prices compared to average UK house prices

Source: FT
Real HP growth in UK over last 40 years has been extraordinarily high by international standards...

Real house price growth in UK vs. US & Switzerland
Rebased (1975=100) – Sources: ONS, Nationwide, SNB, St Louis Fed
Accumulated real house price growth in %
1970 – 2015 for selected OECD countries

Sources: Bank for International Settlements (BIS), World Bank, Bank of England
Real house price growth p.a. in %
Average 1970 – 2015 for selected OECD countries

Source: Bank for International Settlements (BIS), World Bank, Bank of England
Stylized fact 4

- Despite extraordinary price growth since 1970, construction has been in continuous decline...

UK real house prices vs. UK permanent dwellings completed
Rebased (1970=100) – Source: ONS, DCLG
Stylized fact 5

There are not only fewer new-build homes but these are also extremely small by international standards (Statistics Sweden 2005)

- A new-build house in UK is 38% smaller than in densely populated Germany and...

- 40% smaller than in the even more densely populated Netherlands

...and houses are built in the wrong places: very little construction in the prosperous South

- Very little new housing in e.g. Oxford & Cambridge (compared to say Doncaster or Barnsley)
Derived research questions

- What factors constrain housing supply (and thereby cause the corresponding high level and volatility of prices)?
  - Might the **British system of land use planning** be a – or the main – culprit?
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Some background: The British system of land use planning

- Today’s planning system established in 1947 through *Town and Country Planning Act*

- Key features
  - Expropriated development rights of land owners
  - Designated ‘use’ classes, whereas any change of ‘use’ requires *development control permission* (granted at local level)
  - Aim is ‘development control’ or ‘containment’
What green belt containment looks like...

Reading – 60km west of London
And in London...

Source: Barney’s blog
(http://barneystringer.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/londons-green-belt)
But not just green belt containment – many other planning constraints...

Source: Cheshire & Dericks (2014)
The planning system does affect urban form...

- Similar densities
- Less restrictive planning associated with more sprawl...

Source: Echenique (2009)
Who decides in UK?

- Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) grant or reject planning applications
  - Problem: Since 1947 virtually no fiscal incentives at local level to permit development (costs far exceed benefits)

- Underlying causes?
  - UK = highly centralized country, virtually no fiscal power at local level
  - Political power tilted towards homeowners (NIMBYs)

⇒ Local long-run supply curve nearly vertical...
Theoretical prediction...

- House prices
- Long-run supply
- Demand today
- Demand tomorrow
- Housing stock

Intro – Stylized Facts | Features of British system | Empirical evidence | Assessment of housing policies | Conclusions
How to test?

- Hilber and Vermeulen (2016)
  - Exploit spatial variation in three different types of supply constraints: regulatory, scarcity of developable land and topography
  - Interact supply constraints with demand shifters (local earnings; labour demand shock)
  - Use instrumental variable technique to identify causal effect of local supply constraints measures on local house prices
Average refusal rate (major residential projects) 1979-2008

Share developable land developed, 1990

Elevation range

Source: Hilber and Vermeulen (2016)
Main findings

- **Tight local planning constraints** in parts of England (in conjunction with strong demand) are to a large extent responsible for extraordinarily high house prices.

- **Local scarcity of developable land** matters but very non-linearly (only in most developed locations).

- **Topography** matters in statistical sense but very little in economic (quantitative) sense...
Quantitative effects (based on IV with *all* instruments)

- If planning were completely relaxed in *average* LPA:
  - House prices in *average* LPA: -35%

- *and* developable land were abundant:
  - House prices in *average* LPA: -45% (Δ= -10%)

- *and* LPA were completely flat:
  - House prices in *average* LPA: -48% (Δ= -3%)

*Note: These are likely lower bound estimates for a number of reasons (see Hilber and Vermeulen, 2016, for details)*
What would house prices in average English LPA be if...

- Predicted real house prices in average English LPA
- Prediction with refusal rate set to zero
- and share developed set to zero
- and elevation range set to zero
- and earnings assumed constant

Year:
- 1974
- 1980
- 1990
- 2000
- 2008

Price Levels:
- 50000
- 100000
- 150000
- 200000
- 250000

Intro – Stylized Facts   Features of British system   Empirical evidence   Assessment of housing policies   Conclusions
Had the SE the restrictiveness of the NE, house prices in the SE would be 25% lower!
But large variation across locations...
1. Planning system effectively assigns development rights to local policy makers, planners & NIMBYs
   - In contrast: In most other countries, development is rule based – if land is zoned as residential, presumption is in favour of development

2. Lack of fiscal incentives to develop at local level
   - Discourages local authorities to permit development (most costs – little benefits!) – NIMBYism reinforces
   - Creates incentives to impose horizontal restrictions (Green Belt) and vertical ones (height restrictions)

⇒ 1. + 2. **jointly cause affordability crisis!**
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1. Housing construction targets
2. Help-to-Buy and other demand subsidies
3. Devolving fiscal power by abolishing uniform business rate *(Chancellor announcement in Oct.)*
4. Increase in stamp duty on buy-to-let properties & second homes *(Autumn Statement)*
5. Limit on increase of rents for social tenants *(Chancellor announcement)*
6. Allowing local authorities to build starter homes on Green Belt *(DCLG consultation document)*
7. Expansion of Right-to-Buy *(Autumn Statement)*
1. Housing construction targets

- **Idea**: Announce housing construction targets to encourage development

- **Problem**: Targets alone neither tilt development rights in favour of development nor do they provide fiscal incentives

=> **Expected effect: Nil!**

=> **Evidence**: Construction in decline since 1970 despite ever increasing targets by all parties and consecutive governments of different colours
2. Help-to-Buy & other subsidies to homebuyers

- **Idea:** Subsidise demand for owner-occupied housing
- **Problem:** Local supply extremely price inelastic, in particular in London & South East

≡ **Expected effect:** Policy raises prices but does not spur development

≡ **Evidence:**
  - House prices in London rose by 25.8% b/w 2013Q2 and 2014Q4 & there was no housing boom!
  - Evidence from US: In tightly regulated cities demand subsidies are counterproductive (Hilber & Turner 2014)
3. Devolving fiscal power by abolishing uniform business rate

- **Idea:** Devolve fiscal power to tax businesses to local authorities (LAs)

- **Expected effects:**
  - If LAs can keep revenue should provide more incentive to permit commercial development on brownfield land, **great but...**
  
  - **Problem:** May divert brownfield land away from housing (substitution effect) so probably even less new housing!

  (If central government grants were to fully offset business rate revenue: then no effect at all)
4. Increase in stamp duty on buy-to-let properties & second homes

- **Idea**: Discourage buy-to-let & second homes

- **Expected effects**: Makes buy-to-let and second homes less attractive compared to owner-occupation

  - **Buy-to-let**: Increase in stamp duty will reduce supply of private rental homes ⇒ Increase in private rents & possibly slight reduction in price of owner-occupied homes

  - **Second homes**: Might increase supply of primary homes in short-run and slightly reduce house prices (good!) but may provide even fewer incentives to add new housing (bad!)

- **Overall**: Likely zero sum; private rental will become less affordable and owner-occupied housing slightly more affordable
5. Limit on increase of rents for social tenants

- **Idea**: Make social housing more affordably by limiting social rent increase (to e.g. 1% p.a.)

- **Problem**: Reduces book value of social rented housing stock \(\Rightarrow\) reduces ability of housing associations to finance additional social housing development

  - **Expected effects**: Less new social housing \(\Rightarrow\) few lucky social tenants but even greater affordability crisis for all other young and low income households
6. Allowing local authorities to build starter homes on Green Belt

- **Idea**: Relax (somewhat) constraints to build starter homes at edge of green belts & on brown-field land within green belts

- **Expected effects**:
  - Tiny fraction of green belt is brownfield
  - Only possible if local authority wants it!

- **Problem**: Local authorities still have no fiscal incentives to develop, especially not in green belt, so at best ‘a drop on a hot stone’. 
  - **But** does send signal that low-amenity-value land in green belts *may no longer be* sacrosanct!
7. Expansion of Right-to-Buy

- **Idea**: Expand RTB to housing association tenants

⇒ **Expected effects**:

- Incentivises owner-occupation – *may or may not be welfare increasing*

- But in any case: at huge cost to taxpayer because housing associations must be compensated for losses

- **IF** they are not: Policy will endanger ability of associations to finance new homes, *so may reduce new construction*

- Also creates more ‘homevoter’ NIMBYs, which in turn *may further reduce new housing construction*!
Conclusions

- Planning serves important purpose - in principle it can improve welfare through correcting market failure such as externalities and public goods

- But British planning and tax systems have serious “design flaws”:
  - ‘Development control’ blindly favours containment and generates great degree of uncertainty
  - Lack of local fiscal incentives reinforces problem

- Existing and proposed policies do not tackle these flaws – policies are, at best, ineffective but often counterproductive
So what ought policy makers do? *Some guiding principles*...

- Radical reforms needed that simultaneously address flaws of **planning and tax system**

- Planning system ought to...
  1. **Focus on correcting market failures:** Designate parks, areas of natural beauty, historic buildings etc. that are off hands from (re-)development and

  2. **Change to rule based zoning system:** Introduce presumption in favour of development in areas that are not protected
So what ought policy makers do?

*Some guiding principles...*

- Tax system ought to...
  1. **Align fiscal incentives to develop**: Local residents & neighbours who bear costs also ought to be able to reap benefits
  2. **Move** away from stamp duty & demand subsidies *towards impact fees* (reflecting marginal social costs) and **genuine local property tax or LVT**
  3. **Consider** permitting **private compensation payments**
Thank you!

*Presentation with references & hyperlinks will be downloadable from:*

http://personal.lse.ac.uk/hilber/


