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**Article:**

Dunning, R., Hickman, H. and While, A. (2020) Planning control and the politics of soft densification. *Town Planning Review*, 91 (3). pp. 305-324. ISSN: 0041-0020

<https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2020.17>

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## Planning control and the politics of soft densification

### Abstract

Increasing the density of existing urban areas can support urban regeneration and environmental sustainability by limiting urban sprawl and linking housing to transport infrastructure. However, making space for small-scale incremental densification poses challenges in managing the cumulative aesthetic, social and infrastructural impacts of incremental development. This paper uses the concept of soft densification to examine the planning challenges of incremental development of existing urban areas and how they might be addressed through planning policy. Case studies from the UK highlight the struggle to maintain an appropriate balance between meeting housing need and overdevelopment. Proactive policy frameworks are needed to manage an often overlooked but increasingly important dimension of global urban development.

Key words: Housing density, soft densification, urban planning, England

### Introduction

In the context of uneven spatial development there is often intense pressure for additional housing in and around economically and socially vibrant cities (Rae, 2013; Rérat, 2012). Whilst some demand will be met through development on greenfield land outside the city, there are powerful economic, social, political and environmental arguments for higher residential densities in already developed urban areas through densification (Dempsey, 2010; Touati-Morel, 2015). Densification of the existing built-up area can provide environmentally sustainable locations for housing, especially where development can be linked to existing transport and social infrastructure; a core component of the compact city (Burton et al, 1996). Whilst some cities are already densely populated, many cities in Europe, North America and Australia were planned and developed at relatively low densities, facilitated by urban sprawl. Economic restructuring can bring forward urban sites for redevelopment, allowing housing development and household densification, which can improve the tax base of cities. It is no surprise, therefore, that urban densification has re-emerged globally as a major source of planning and political challenges.

Whilst challenges in the implementation of large-scale densification projects are frequently studied, there can also be significant challenges in supporting, managing and regulating small scale incremental processes of increasing density. Research by Bibby et al. (2018) shows that small scale developments have been a major source of new housing in England and contributed extensively to incremental densification, termed 'soft densification'. The research behind this paper was funded by the French government agency *Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture (Puca)*, as the second phase to Bibby et al. (2018), to understand the political and planning dimensions of soft densification.

Small-scale incremental changes to density, such as in-fill development, sub-division and extension, can have cumulative strains on existing infrastructure such as utilities, transport, sewerage and drainage and education, but in other contexts might equally support local businesses and services. Densification can affect the existing character of an area and be opposed by existing residents and local authorities concerned about congestion and changes in everyday life (Touati-Morel, 2015). If not managed

appropriately soft densification can lead residents to leave desirable areas in search of a better quality of life.

In this paper we explore the politics of planning of soft densification in two English cities. England is interesting because national planning policy has traditionally restricted the densification of more affluent urban and suburban residential areas, in part to protect residential interests. Indeed, the policies of the 1980s and 1990s were framed around the idea of preventing 'garden grabbing' (one form of soft densification). Since 2010 the UK government has taken a more permissive approach to soft densification as part of national strategies for increasing housing supply whilst deregulating urban and suburban planning control. In this context, soft densification has been seen as an alternative to politically unpopular development on greenfield and green belt sites.

Through case studies from the London Borough of Ealing and the City of Bristol we explore how 'soft densification' is planned and the politics of its management. We argue that soft densification is largely taking place in the absence of strategic planning. Whilst elements of densification are welcomed, we highlight the dangers of under-regulation and incapacity to actively manage soft densification's side effects. The distinctive contribution of the paper is to explore the tensions in managing soft densification, an issue that has so far been under researched and under conceptualised. Next, we outline the definition and theory of soft densification before exploring the housing development context in England.

### **The opportunities and challenges of soft densification**

In many countries in the Global North there has been renewed interest in the opportunities and challenges in increasing the density of existing urban areas (Burton et al, 1996; Jenks, 2000; Dempsey, 2010). This is reflected in planning ideas such as the compact city and transit-oriented development that seek to minimise the need for environmentally damaging travel and the resource intensity of expansion outside urban areas. In Europe, Australia and North America urban densification also reflects and promotes the demand to live in cities following decades of urban flight and suburbanisation. Vibrant cities are tasked with finding space to meet demand or risk pricing out those who are needed to maintain and service urban development. For example, Touati-Morel (2015) highlights a range of initiatives by the French government to incentivise urban authorities to increase the density of suburbs in an attempt to restrict urban sprawl.

Whilst the term soft densification is new, the concept of densifying urban environments through small scale changes is not entirely novel, whether it is termed 'intensification' (Williams et al 1996, Jenks 2000), 'consolidation' (Roseth 1991), 'urban compaction' (Breheny 1997) and what has been described as reurbanisation (Rérat 2012) through the 'return to the city' (Rae, 2013). However, Touati-Morel (2015) makes a helpful distinction between different types of densification policies and processes. In many post-industrial cities densification opportunities have centred on regeneration projects to maximise devalued or underdeveloped areas of the city. There has been a tendency in England to allocate limited planning resources to the management of large scale development – here considered 'hard densification' - to bring brownfield (previously used) sites into use for housing and associated infrastructure. 'Soft densification', by contrast, is about a more incremental process of increasing residential density through individual plot or housing subdivision, infill

development, extensions or the change of use from commercial to residential (see Touati-Morel, 2015). A process of working 'towards the progressive densification of low-rise single-family neighbourhoods through successive subdivision of the land into smaller plots, followed by construction on the newly created plots' (Touati-Morel, 2015, p.606). For Touati-Morel (2015) soft densification is primarily about suburban development, often representing a shift from suburban forms to a more densely populated 'post-suburbia'. However, this assumes that the centres of cities are already densely populated which is not always the case, especially in North America, the UK and Australia. Soft densification can apply to inner and central parts of cities as well as suburbs.

Soft densification occurs through different development forms, four of which are indicated briefly here. First, sub-division of an existing building into multiple dwellings. In England large Victorian, Georgian and Edwardian town houses are often sub-divided into multiple apartments. These houses – that may have been originally designed for family residences, often for relatively affluent households, - are capable of conversion into multiple apartments. Second, basement excavation to create additional floorspace within a dwelling to enable sub-division. This can be costly, so is most likely to occur in high value areas. Third, the extension of a house or creation of a new structure within a garden (attached to an existing residential property), colloquially called 'garden grabbing'. The extension may increase the existing housing size, create an additional dwelling, or facilitate access, such as the creation of a staircase to the side or rear of a property to enable a separate first floor entrance for a sub-divided apartment. Fourth, in-fill development. This is normally a new building created on a sub-divided plot of land between existing structures.

Hard and soft densification tend to have different development dynamics. Hard densification often depends on large scale government initiatives to overcome market disincentives to development in regeneration areas, provide supporting infrastructure and help share the costs of preparing brownfield land for development. By contrast soft densification is primarily driven by land and property owners and small-scale developers. Hard densification often requires active support from local authorities but soft densification can be fiercely opposed by residents and local authorities seeking to preserve existing residential amenity. Hard densification requires action to create market and consumer demand, soft densification is often about managing high levels of demand in already desirable places. Soft densification requires supportive land-use and building regulations to encourage and facilitate incremental individualised action (Touati-Morel, 2015). From the normative perspective of compact city advocates it might be argued that soft densification also needs a strong strategic planning framework to provide facilities and services whilst avoiding problems with overcrowding (Williams et al., 1996).

Literature has suggested that soft 'small-scale and incremental intensification is ... acceptable ... and small extensions in back gardens are hardly noticed' (Jenks 2000, p.245). However, soft densification can lead to significant changes in the demographic profile, appearance of buildings and street environment and the quality of life of target areas (Burton et al, 1996; Filion, 2010). Arguments in favour of urban densification focus not only on the protection of the urban periphery, but on support for facilities and services, improved public transport, and a more vibrant cultural life (e.g. Jenks 2000). But there is also debate about access to green space and the health and well-being effects of residing at higher density spaces (Schweitzer and Zhou, 2010). In the

UK these concerns have been captured by the term ‘town cramming’ (Williams 1996, p.86), used to suggest that some urban areas are at capacity.

There is scope for different perspectives on the importance of densification of existing settlements and also the most appropriate location and scale of densification. Should cities (or parts of cities) aim for a minimum level of densification? Should existing housing be demolished to make way for higher density housing, radically reconfiguring the layout of urban or suburban areas? How much weight should be given to existing residential amenity or historic character? Of course, those issues are difficult to define in the abstract. Precisely what soft densification means in practice and how it might best be regulated is a place specific issue reflecting existing residential morphologies, infrastructure provision, character and design, and prevailing modes of regulation. That is likely to vary between countries, between cities within countries, and within cities. Moreover, the outcomes of any strategy of densification will be subject to political struggles between different interests. As Touati-Morel (2015) argues further research is needed on the actual processes of densification, including (a) the material impact of different types of densification; (b) the role of spatial regulation in enabling, constraining and managing densification processes; and (c) the impact of local political attitudes and potential opposition from local authorities, residents and businesses. What is also important is the central role of planning and planners in mediating between different forms of development and choosing whether and how to regulate soft densification. These issues are now explored in our English case study.

### **Soft densification and planning for housing in England**

Much comparative writing on the planning systems of Europe and North America notes the high level of administrative discretion and flexibility within the English system in contrast to some other countries; ‘characterised by a greater closeness to a “role of law” system’ (Cullingworth, 2015, p.6). The development plan in England is not legally binding and unlike the zoning systems of North America and much of continental Europe is ‘never wholly determinative of planning applications’ (Grant, 1992, p.4). Decisions on planning applications must be guided by the plan but other ‘material considerations’ can be taken into account, allowing for ‘interpretation and judgement in the implementation of policy, particularly through the development control process’ (Claydon, 1998, p.61). In practice, the interpretation of what is ‘material’ to a planning application allows for a wide range of planning matters to be considered in relation to the merits of an individual scheme and, according to Booth, encourages ‘decision-making that emphasizes the appropriateness of forms of development for the place and the time: and gives “formal recognition to the political nature of decisions about the way in which land is used and managed” ’ (Booth, 2007, p.142). Grant observes that this results in ‘much comparatively small-scale development’ being ‘caught up in the discretionary control system’ (Grant, 1992, p.3), a pertinent matter for the way in which planning for soft-densification is currently playing out in England.

Debate about the role of planning in increasing the supply of new homes has been an increasingly dominant narrative of UK Governments since the 1990s. This reflects repeated criticism that the English planning system has contributed to the affordability crisis through artificially limiting housing supply, well below demand and causing house price inflation (e.g. House Builders Federation, 2017). The result has been a strong emphasis in national policy terms on freeing up land for housing

development, and successive reforms attempting to re-configure the planning system to support the delivery of more dwellings. Local planning authorities are required to show how their land supply can provide enough housing for the next five years to meet projected needs, a policy which frames the authority as a hindrance to supply if not adequately addressed, and places developers in a stronger position to gain permission than if a land supply is evidenced.

These reforms have not, however, had any fundamental impact on the longstanding principle of urban containment (Jenks et al. 1996), a principle which has been supported since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 by the designation of green belts around many UK towns and cities to check unrestricted sprawl and prevent coalescence. Cultural opposition to development on the urban periphery and on greenfield sites (Inch, 2012) means that public support for the green belt remains strong (Sturzaker and Mell, 2016). The result is a policy narrative that focuses on maximising the use of previously developed sites, commonly referred to as 'brownfield land', within settlements and on increasing development densities to accommodate growth (DCLG, 2017; MHCLG, 2018). Where there is deemed to be a shortage of land to meet need, the National Planning Policy Framework states the need for 'optimal use of the potential of each site' and 'significant density uplifts' (MHCLG, 2018, p.36), with local authorities urged to refuse applications which 'fail to make efficient use of land' (MHCLG, 2018, p.37).

To date, reforms have been largely unsuccessful in meeting the scale of need, with evidence that fewer homes are being delivered than in the 1970's and below the government's housing need projections (National Audit Office, 2017). For some commentators (e.g. Dixon and Adams, 2008, DeSousa 2002), increasing housing supply cannot be reconciled with a continued emphasis on brownfield land, leaving local authorities stuck between a rock and hard place, facing parallel pressures to both increase housing supply and to protect the politically sensitive urban periphery. Where a local authority is faced with demanding housing targets politicians may feel compelled to approve any housing proposal 'within the gaps and shadows of our urban fabric' (Dunning et al., 2017, no page). Accordingly, concerns about housing shortfalls coupled with a more pro-developer stance in national policy have led to national frameworks that are more supportive of 'soft densification'.

This pressure has seen the density of English cities rise (Whitehead, 2012), albeit from a comparatively low base (Bessis, 2018). Soft densification has made a surprisingly significant contribution to housing supply (Bibby et al., 2018). In policy terms, support for soft densification at a national level has been deemed 'tacit', such developments aligning with policy focussed on seeking to accommodate growth within the existing urban fabric. Any 'explicit' policy - aimed at regulating or managing the impacts of soft-densification - has been left to local councils to mediate locally through local plan policies and development control decisions, as Rice observes; 'whilst the policy is normally considered at the "strategic" level, it is at the local level that its effects are felt and realised' (Rice, 2010, p.193), and are 'often problematic' (Williams et al., 1996, p.93).

Yet, as in many other countries, densification can be fiercely resisted by local residents, especially when it impacts directly on residential amenity, for example, through increased congestion and pressure for car parking. Garden amenity has been particularly significant in the UK, with popular press emotively asserting that

'Thousands of gardens stolen by developers' (Gilligan, 2009), and 'garden grabbing could cost lives' (Alleyne, 2009, p.1). This reflects the curious decision of the pro-development Coalition Government to exclude private residential gardens from the definition of brownfield land in 2010, describing their prior brownfield classification under the previous Government's national policy as 'ridiculous', forcing communities 'to sit by and watch their neighbourhoods get swallowed up in a concrete jungle' (Clarke, 2010, reported in the BBC, 2010, no page). The Coalition Government explicitly encouraged local authorities to 'consider the case for setting out policies to resist inappropriate development of residential gardens' (DCLG, 2012, p.53). According to the incoming Coalition Government, 'the proportion of new houses built on previously residential land such as gardens has risen dramatically, from one in ten to one in four between 1997 and 2008' (DCLG, 2012, p.1). Meanwhile, the demand for housing in cities like London has led to increased concern about the illegal and unregulated development of housing in suburban garden sheds and garages (Lombard, 2018).

Opposition at national and local levels to aspects of densification through garden development runs counter to the promotion of all types of housing development through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (DCLG, 2012; revisions 2018). The NPPF has generally made it more difficult for local authorities to refuse planning applications for suburban development, as the location more likely to include a greater proportion of dwellings with gardens, because the balance is tilted in favour of increasing housing supply in response to chronic shortages in housing provision in areas of high market demand.

Changes in national planning policy, pressure for new housing and the lure of rising house prices and rents have set the scene for new struggles around development in England as local residents and local authorities seek to manage competing pressures. It is in this context that we turn to case studies of two areas of particular stress around soft densification.

## **Methodology**

The research underpinning this paper was part of a larger study on soft densification for the French national government agency PUCA, the first part of which is reported in Bibby, Henneberry and Halleux (2018). They demonstrate that between 2001 and 2011 60% of new dwellings in England occurred in urban areas, with urban 'soft densification' accounting for around 17% of total growth. To quantify soft densification, they define it as 'development that did not require the creation of a new unit postcode or that occurred on a site of less than 0.4 hectares' (Bibby et al., 2018, p.4). At regional level geographies within England, there was large variation in the number and proportion of soft densification dwellings accounting for growth in dwelling stock. The largest growth rate in dwelling stock was found in the North West, at 48%. 42% of the growth in stock in London was soft densification, while in the South West it was much lower, with the North East and Midlands also having lower percentages of soft densification (Bibby et al., 2018).

Our case studies were selected from the analysis of Bibby et al. (2015). The selection criteria was: an urban area; a significant proportion of suburban stock; soft densification present; and, discussion of densification within local media discourses. The London Borough of Ealing and the city of Bristol were selected as contrasting case

studies within these criteria, displaying two different patterns of densification. Ealing reflected a balanced growth approach in which soft densification was evident, but pressure for conversion and deconversion were balanced, and subdivision was also present. In part, this reflected the additional powers to control development afforded to London's local authorities through the London Plan produced by the Mayor of London. The city of Bristol was selected as an area that experienced a high level of infill and subdivision of existing buildings contributing to overall growth in densification and concerns about the significant change in key residential areas and growing congestion. Although the Bristol case reflects the impact of permissive national policy it also reflects a strong pro-development stance by the local authority, Bristol City Council, with suburban development being seen as important for the regeneration of the city given restrictions on development in the city's tight green belt (Boddy and Hickman, 2013).

Table 1: Soft Densification in Bristol and Ealing, 2001 to 2011

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Source: Bibby et al., 2015

We focus on the politics of policy making related to soft densification over a longer time period; 2001-2015. The case study draws on desk-based statistical analysis, densification mapping through GIS and site visits (see Bibby et al, 2015), a review of national and local policy, a review of planning decisions related to suburban development, and twenty semi-structured interviews across Bristol and Ealing with local authority planning officers, estate agents, surveyors and community representatives (undertaken in 2015). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis under the University of Sheffield's ethics policy and reviewed by PUCA. For the interviews we used a broad definition of soft densification as small-scale development that makes a small change to density, comprising of normally less than ten units.

### ***Ealing (London): the struggle to control densification***

There has been strong demand for housing in London since the 1980s, reflecting its economic strength and international inward investment. The population has increased over that time and house prices and rental costs have continued to rise vastly in excess of the national average. A succession of London Mayors and national governments have sought to increase the density of population in and around London through supportive planning policies, local authority targets for new housing construction and investment in infrastructure and development.

To the west of central London, the borough of Ealing experienced population growth up to (and after) the study year (2015), resulting from natural growth and despite net out migration (Office of National Statistics, 2014). In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Ealing grew rapidly from agricultural to residential suburbia through the growth in sporadic settlements connected by the expansion of the rail and bus network to central London. Over the early twentieth century households migrated from central London to the periphery in search of larger dwellings and spacious gardens, forming Ealing. After the Second World War Ealing grew rapidly through both private and public

housing construction and large-scale international in-migration, which has continued to the present. Ealing's population is projected to continue to grow from 340,000 in 2011 to 362,000 in 2021 and 368,000 in 2031 (Ealing, 2018), not least as a result of the development of CrossRail, a new rail connection to the major business centre Canary Wharf:

One of the most significant factors is CrossRail. CrossRail is coming to both Ealing Broadway, Ealing and Hanwell. As a crude thing that has pushed up house price about 20-30% in the last year. (Interview, Residents association representative)

The borough has a large number of early twentieth century dwellings (Ealing, 2011). Most dwellings are either flats or terraced houses (ca. 77%; Ealing 2011). Ealing has a higher proportion of private rental dwellings than the national average, but still has a majority of owner-occupied housing (Ealing, 2011).

Ealing's neighbourhoods are heterogeneous, with distinctive characteristics, architectural styles, tenures, population structures and policy foci. Some areas such as Acton, Hanwell and Perivale are considered discrete urban entities or city-villages. As such, there are distinct housing market and development patterns. Across Ealing, between 2001 and 2011, five different types of soft densification were identified: internal subdivision of houses into flats; extension and reconfiguration of large properties to provide new units; construction of auxiliary dwellings in gardens (garden-grabbing, including developments without permission); limited infill development on spare or undeveloped plots; and change of use (Bibby et al., 2018). Both soft densification and de-conversion of multiple occupancy properties back to single dwellings occurred (Bibby et al, 2015).

The investments which people have been putting into these properties has revived some streets...in a purely visual and architectural point of view that has to be welcomed. In other terms...and this is a general social point, it is adding to the price inflation effects. Ealing is driving out lower income family groups. Houses that are being bought either by extremely wealthy families or by people buying the properties as an investment rather than a dwelling. Certainly, in terms of social cohesion, that raises lots of questions. (Civic society representative)

Affordability in the rental market has been worsening (Ealing, 2013). In the period 2011-2015 there was a 30% increase in average rents, rising to £1,383 per month, which is higher than the average in Outer London and the South West of England, but £500 per month lower than the Inner London average (Valuation Office Agency, 2015). House prices have matched the rental market trend and in 2015 had an average price of £470,000 across the borough (Land Registry, 2015).

### *The planning context*

Within the *National Planning Policy Framework* (DCLG, 2012), the jurisdiction for setting planning policy lies with both the Borough and London Mayor. The Mayor's *London Plan* covers strategic planning across all boroughs, through a medium term (25-year) vision of economic, environmental, transport and social development. The plan includes issues of housing density, but does not directly address soft densification, giving the boroughs some autonomy in implementing the Mayor's

housing targets (Mayor of London, 2015). Ealing's assessment suggests nearly 2,000 homes per annum alone are needed with a target of 50% affordable housing, but having only 1,300 units per annum identified in the 2013 *London Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment*.

The *London Housing Supplementary Planning Guidance* (2012) does not give prescribed formulas for soft densification, but supports 'optimising' density rather than maximising it per se. Ealing's *Core Strategy* (2012), a form of spatial vision overview, confirms that whilst proper regard shall be made to relevant *London Plan* policies which support higher densities in areas of good public transport accessibility, the density matrix should not be applied mechanistically and the council will, in particular, take into account the quality of the design, the context of the site and the need to provide a suitable housing mix. It also stresses that, subject to public transport capacity, areas with high Public Transport Accessibility Levels can expect relatively high-density development.

Garden planning policies can influence density. A requirement for a minimum provision of at least 5 square metres outdoor space per dwelling prohibits some soft densification proposals, but this can also be provided off-site through financial compensation. The *Supplementary Planning Guidance* argues that private garden land is important for the 'physical context' and 'local character' of a development and should duly be considered in a planning determination. Thus, both density and gardens are part of the form, function and structure that warrants respect and coordinated and consistent strategic protection, where the existence of a threat is evidenced.

In 2013 the council introduced a *Residential Gardens Supplementary Planning Document* to restrict garden development. However, it had limited regulatory power because it was not based around agreed measurable standards, leading to concerns that refusals for garden development might be overturned on appeal.

Garden grabbing has been one area where Ealing has been pretty successful in resisting. There has not been much garden grabbing, and where it has happened it has been pretty well publicised and heavily opposed, but that doesn't mean to say it hasn't happened at all....Garden-grabbing, for authorized development, has been pretty well resisted in the borough, partly through the successful application of the conservation area rules....without those rules the situation would be a lot worse. (Civic society representative)

This approach to restricting planning permission for garden developments does not preclude development activity. There is evidence of garden structures becoming residential dwellings without permission (i.e. illegal) in many locations in London, and Ealing, as with other boroughs has not been able to monitor and restrict its occurrence.

Garden sheds are becoming semi-habitable rooms. I do know of one guy who owns the house has turned his garden shed into a gym with a shower in it. I know bloody well what he is doing, he's sleeping in it and saving himself £100 per night when he comes up from his country cottage. (Surveyor)

Zone-based planning offers one strong instrument through designation of areas of historic interest. Ealing borough council has a long history of restricting soft

densification through Conservation Areas, dating back to the 1970's and covers a large proportion of the housing stock. Conservation Areas are special planning zones, designated by the local planning authority to cover areas perceived to have special architectural or historic interest. They impose greater restrictions on development than elsewhere in the authority through section 69 of the 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act. The Conservation Areas in Ealing have acted to maintain neighbourhood characteristics, for example, in the Hanger Lane estate external alterations have been refused permission because the design is not in keeping with the Art Deco buildings.

There have been quite a number of re-conversions back to family homes, from ones that have been split...it has been a significant and notable characteristic of the area...With a large number of conservation areas, which came in the 1970's there was a lot more restriction on splitting up properties and so that trend virtually stopped. So, in the traditional areas of Ealing, that hardly happens at all now. (Civic society representative)

#### *Soft permission through hard instruments and discretionary planning*

Whilst there is very little direct reference to soft densification in the policy framework in Ealing, it can be seen that the reuse, subdivision, and subterranean extension (basement development) of buildings is not discouraged providing that the resulting development does not have a detrimental effect on local quality and character (particularly private garden space), and that the developer can demonstrate that the needs of residents can be met by existing physical and social infrastructures.

The housing market and development context in the London Borough of Ealing is such that hard, soft and de-densification can all be profitable in certain locations in the borough, depending upon the existing morphology and planning policy. Planning permission policy sits within a dense national and city-wide planning policy context. The priority in London at the time was driven by the *National Planning Policy Framework* and *London Plan* to support conversion of the existing stock through prioritising delivery of housing numbers regardless of type and opaque density policy. The borough council, however, is pro-de-densification, and the local population is also largely in favour of increasing the number of 'family residences' but can be undertaken without planning permission from the council through some forms of soft densification. With the planning authority's limited capacity and prioritising the scrutiny of hard densification, there is policy space for soft densification. Ealing's permissive approach to soft densification directs development to particular spatial locations and forms in the borough. A soft permissive approach means that planning instruments are applied to prevent and direct soft densification to occur in controlled spatial zones with limited scrutiny.

#### ***Bristol: the politics of permissive planning***

The City of Bristol, one of England's eight 'core cities' and the largest city in the South West of England, has experienced 'unprecedented population growth' over the last two decades, with growth 'particularly concentrated in Central Areas of Bristol' (Bristol City Council, 2018a, p.1). Population growth is set to continue with 95,100 additional people between 2016 and 2041 (Bristol City Council, 2018a ). Housing supply has not kept pace with demand and Bristol has been described as one of the least affordable places in England, with attendant economic and social impacts (Shelter, 2015).

Bristol City Council's administrative boundary is tightly drawn, with the extent of its built-up area - and the majority of the Bristol and Bath designated green belt area - extending into the three neighbouring local authorities of North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset and South Gloucestershire. All three authorities have resisted housing expansion, particularly where development would involve loss of green belt within their jurisdiction (Boddy and Hickman, 2013).

### *The planning context*

Against that backdrop, 'Bristol's policy stance towards densification is unsurprisingly pretty proactive and positive because we are under such pressure to increase housing stock' (City Council interviewee). Strategic planning policy within its core strategy 2011-2031 emphasises the importance of development on previously developed land (Bristol City Council, 2011).

Whilst there is no explicit use of the term 'soft densification', support for such types of development is an assumed part of the wider language of intensification / densification in Bristol's policy framework evident in the assumption that it is 'reasonably likely' that developments on small sites will contribute 4,200 homes over the plan period. Achieving higher densities is encouraged through 'imaginative design solutions' (Bristol City Council, 2011) where accessibility would allow, and there is a strong emphasis within the core strategy on the council working 'proactively with applicants ... to find solutions which mean that proposals can be approved wherever possible' (Bristol City Council, 2014, p.7).

To support the delivery of its strategic objectives, Bristol's *Site Allocations and Development Management Policies* (Bristol City Council, 2014), provide detailed planning policies to assess the merits of individual planning applications. These show that support for densification is not unequivocal. Residential sub-division, for example, is acknowledged as providing 'an important contribution to people's housing choice' (Bristol City Council, 2014, p.8), but 'proposals that result in a harmful concentration of such uses or have the potential to harm residential character or amenity' (Bristol City Council, 2014, p.8) will not be permitted. Development on residential gardens is not to be permitted unless extensive criteria are met including 'where the proposal would represent a more efficient use of land at a location where higher densities are appropriate' (Bristol City Council, 2014, p.8). Despite the positive strategic policy environment for densification, on a scheme by scheme basis there was a regulatory framework that could, in principle, ensure a balance between residential amenity and development.

Bristol City Council's Annual Residential Survey shows that soft-densification has delivered substantial numbers of dwellings over the 11 year period 2006-2017. Of the 19,880 net dwellings completed (92.5% of which were on previously developed land) almost 20% of total dwellings were on small sites (10 units and under) and over 10% arose from residential sub-division. In addition, nearly 5% of total completions counted as development on 'garden land' (916 homes over the 11 year period), with the annual total seemingly unaffected by the re-classification of gardens from brownfield to greenfield land. Geographically, soft-densification has occurred across the city. Interviewees observed that this reflects strong market demand: 'if there is money to be made – it will happen. That's the fundamental driver for these kinds of development in Bristol' (Surveyor). Only a limited number of low density, low value suburban

wards, where market demand has been more limited, have seen little densification of any type.

### *Planning outcomes and impacts*

The outcomes of soft densification have varied according to the specifics of a scheme and the views of the community in which developments are situated. At the strategic, city-wide level, soft-densification has been viewed politically as positive in terms of its net contribution to housing supply. As one planning officer stated, 'it's great [because] we've got housing targets to meet'. One politician reflected 'Let them [have permission] if it's meeting a need?' At a more local, site specific level, the contribution of soft densification to bringing derelict sites back into use has been widely welcomed, with one participant noting a scheme involving the conversion of two garages to be 'so much better ... having previously been a magnet for gangs. I'm delighted there'll be two families living there now' (elected local councillor). Schemes on 'tricky urban sites' were also seen as 'encouraging modern designers to be more inventive, resulting in more interesting architecture' (surveyor). One residential area close to the centre of Bristol – Southville – experiencing high rates of all types of soft densification, has seen its local centre transformed over the last decade. For local businesses and shops, soft-densification has been positive, with local business groups frequently writing in support of planning applications.

But there has also been a powerful backlash against the densification of the inner city and suburbs from residents and elected politicians. This has partly focused on congestion but there have also been significant concerns about the quality of development. Contrary to the potential for soft densification to support high-quality design, many research participants perceived soft densification, particularly schemes at the smallest scale, to have provided schemes that 'are really not that great' (surveyor). One architect noted, 'some really grubby, nasty silly schemes ... low budget conversions promoted by DIY television programmes – jumping on the bandwagon to make money, really just garages with two windows' (architect). A recent news report on a garage conversion was accompanied by the comment, 'horror stories about tiny spaces being converted into flats are usually reserved for the capital, but it seems Bristol's housing crisis could also be about to reach its peak' (Davis, 2018, p.1).

Many communities appear circumspect about the relationship between soft densification and support for services: 'I'm not sure if densification is better for an area or just neutral. In theory development should accrue benefits to an area... but I'm not sure...' (architect). Interviewees spoke of communities perceiving themselves to be 'under threat' from densification, concerned about the impact of soft densification on morphological character in particular, but also about planning precedent, 'every garden application is a perceived crisis' (elected local councillor). Residential subdivision seems particularly unpopular, with communities raising concerns about subdivision leading to rental properties or student accommodation, and therefore a more transient community, perceived as less focused on contributing to the local area and caring for the local environment. Many interviewees noted that increased residential densification put pressure on transport, school provision and health care: 'public services are impacted badly by densification' (residents association representative).

Where the tools of planning are perceived as falling significantly short in relation to soft densification in the Bristol case, is in the inability to regulate for the cumulative impacts of development. Planning officers are under pressure to recommend schemes

for approval to contribute to increasing housing supply, but unable to control for the cumulative impacts of such schemes. An individual scheme, in isolation, may pose little impact on, for example, residential parking or school places, but when a neighbourhood receives a substantial number of small scale schemes, the impact is more discernible, but there are no planning controls to deal with these impacts, resulting in the neighbourhoods considering themselves under siege. One planning officer commented on the challenge of ‘planning service provision in tandem with soft densification’. Developments of under 10 units are not required to provide Section 106 (planning gain) contributions for social housing or infrastructure. Some forms of soft-densification do incur the Community Infrastructure Levy (a charge on development to fund infrastructure in the area), but sub-division and residential annexes are exempt in Bristol and payments are not ring-fenced to the community in which the development takes place. Interviewees, therefore, observed that communities ‘do not see the benefits, because they are not accrued to them, only the pressures’ (City council interviewee).

After 2014 the backlash against soft densification in Bristol led to a decline in the number of approvals for residential sub-division in Bristol, with schemes being refused on the grounds of, for example, impact on residential amenity or insufficient space for waste recycling. There is also evidence of applications for small in-fill development being declined on the basis of ‘over-development’. However, the overall balance of decision making is largely in favour of soft-densification, best evidenced by the continued approval for developments on garden land contrary to policies which set a presumption ‘against’. This reflects a broader push for development in the city: ‘such is the need to accommodate housing within the city, pretty much every housing unit is welcomed, however poor’ (City council interviewee). One politician intimated that ‘only’ high-value residential areas were ‘protected’ from soft densification because of the strength of oppositional voices. However, in 2018 Bristol City Council published maps showing areas with little residential sub-division presented as opportunities for development (Bristol City Council, 2018b), leading one planning officer to observe that ‘nowhere is off limits now ... we are not even so bothered about conservation area protection now’.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper has been to explore the political and planning challenges in making space for increased densification of urban areas. In doing so we have drawn on international discussion of the idea of ‘soft densification’ to refer to the processes of incremental development intended to meet demand for housing in locations that are more environmentally sustainable than urban sprawl. As authors we have different views on the ideal density of urban spaces, but broadly align with arguments that there are locations in many cities in which increasing residential density could make more vibrant and sustainable places, but this argument requires localised assessment. In line with this view, there has been growing interest in soft densification in Europe and North America but there are challenges for planning in balancing development with the cumulative aesthetic, social and infrastructural impacts of small-scale change. Moreover, densification of more affluent areas is often resisted by local authorities and residents seeking to protect existing residential amenity and quality of life (and house prices) (see Jonas et al, 2010).

In England pro-housing development changes in national policy and market demand have broadened the scope for increased soft densification of urban and suburban

areas. Our two examples exemplify the challenges faced by many urban planning authorities in England. In Ealing (London) the local authority was struggling to develop planning policies to help manage development pressures of soft densification. The concern was not densification per se but the need to steer and manage development so as to avoid congestion and maximise appropriate sites that might be less attractive to developers. In that respect it might be noted that soft densification in Ealing coexists with de-densification whereby affluent incomers join or re-join houses and gardens to create larger dwellings. In Bristol the council's tacit (and sometimes more explicit) enthusiasm for densification has led to growing concern amongst residents about the quality of development and its impact on residential amenity and possible displacement of existing residents.

In both cases there is recognition of the need and capacity for increased residential density. The challenge is to find ways of managing densification through active planning policy. Potential planning policy responses include:

- Identifying priority zones for different levels or types of densification, highlighting limits to densification and supporting infrastructure;
- Analysis of the carrying capacity for residential densification, including the environmental impact of development;
- Design and layout guides for managing the specific issues raised by densification in different types of residential area, including issues of design, privacy, waste management and urban drainage;
- Further exploration of the potential levels of, and mechanisms for capturing, financial contributions to offset impacts; and
- A strategic approach to the redevelopment and configuration of particular priority areas identifying opportunity sites.

The problem in England is that the planning response to soft densification pressures in local planning authorities like Ealing and Bristol has been restricted by a combination of: austerity cuts in local authority planning; the rolling back and deregulation of national planning controls (including the extension of permitted development rights and reduced design control) to facilitate additional housing; intense pressure to meet housing targets alongside continued resistance to greenbelt and greenfield development; and the sheer speed of soft densification activity.

Looking beyond our English examples, this paper responds to and confirms the importance of Touati-Morel's (2015) call for more research on the actual processes, politics and experiences of soft densification in different urban contexts (see also Filion, 2010). Our research also demonstrates the importance of thinking about cities and urban development through the lens of soft densification, and its challenges and opportunities. Indeed, perhaps the most significant finding from our research is that the retrofitting of existing cities to achieve higher densities is a significant planning challenge that requires nuanced strategic management. The scale of development, the impact of everyday lives and the costs of inaction mean that soft densification needs to be taken more seriously by politicians, planners and urban theorists.

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