

LONG PRESTON HOUSING NEEDS SURVEY

How safe are its conclusions?

*an examination of the
validity of this (and other
similar) surveys
conducted by the Craven
Rural Housing Enabler*

This paper examines the methodology and conclusions of the report prepared by the Craven Rural Housing Enabler (CRHE) on housing need in Long Preston, a village sited in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

The CRHE report is based on data from a questionnaire distributed by hand to households in Long Preston during December 2003-January 2004. The purpose of the survey is to establish whether there is a need among residents and their families for 'affordable housing' within the village.

The author of this paper (see next page) understands that planning authorities take into account the data and conclusions from reports prepared by the CRHE when considering planning applications for social and similar housing.

In the opinion of the author the CRHE survey is seriously flawed and any planning decisions based on its findings would be unsafe. Hence the submission of this paper to those whom it may concern.

The author

The author has been a resident of Long Preston since April 2001. He has prepared this report on a *pro bono* basis as a matter of public interest. It is hoped that the following details will establish his competence in matters relating to market research.

Semi-retired, Peter Scott-Smith is the founder and former managing director of **Prolog**, a subsidiary of **AGB Research** - at the time the world's second largest market research business. Prolog remains one of the UK's most respected marketing and data management companies employing over five hundred staff.

Today he is consultant managing editor of an international daily email bulletin published by the **World Advertising Research Center** and sponsored by *The Economist* magazine.

During his long career he has worked with and briefed some of the UK's largest market research organizations, sometimes in cooperation with multinational corporations such as **British Airways**, **Unilever**, and **Imperial Tobacco**; also government agencies like **COI Communications** and **HMSO**.

It is against this background of long acquaintance with professional research projects that the author has prepared the following analysis of the methodology/validity of the survey and report by the Craven Rural Housing Enabler.

"I believe it to be ill-conceived and incorrectly executed," he says. "It conforms neither to standard norms of research practice nor the guidelines for such projects laid down by the **Office of the Deputy Prime Minister**. For these reasons, I advise caution in acting on its conclusions and recommendations which I believe to be unsafe."

Although the author is an ordinary member of LoPRA (the Long Preston Residents Association), this report is submitted strictly in a personal capacity. It should not be assumed that it represents in whole or part the views of LoPRA.

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1. Background to this document

Distribution of the survey questionnaire

- 1.1 In December/January 2003 the author of this paper called at the Long Preston Post Office and was interested to see a display of information about a survey of local housing need. In addition to this general information there was a 'ballot box' and a pile of questionnaires. The latter disturbed him, as they were available in bulk to any caller at the Post Office, **thereby laying the entire project open to manipulation and abuse by any person with a desire to do so.**
- 1.2 On returning home he telephoned Mary Russell (the CRHE) to express his concern. She was not available at that time but called him back later. The author explained to her that the availability of multiple questionnaires effectively invalidated data accruing from the survey and, presumably as a result of this conversation, they were later withdrawn from the Post Office. But the damage (if any) would by then have been done.
- 1.3 It should be stressed that Mrs Russell denies that the questionnaires were available in bulk. And, after several months, the proprietors of the Post Office cannot recall their presence one way or the other – hardly surprising given the passage of time and volume of materials, posters, forms, leaflets etc left at the PO on a near-daily basis.
- 1.4 But there is no doubt whatever in the author's mind that these questionnaires were present in bulk; he also has an equally clear recall of his subsequent telephone conversation with the CRHE, and of recommending that they be withdrawn as a matter of urgency in favour of a one-per-household distribution – which was implemented shortly afterward.
- 1.5 The author also wishes to make it clear that he does not question Mrs Russell's integrity in the matter of the questionnaires, concluding either that they were left unintentionally with the other survey materials – or perhaps without her knowledge by another member of Foundation Housing staff.

The involvement of third parties

- 1.6 In July 2004 it became known that there had been discussions of the survey's findings between the CRHE, a local greenfield landowner and Northern Heritage, a commercial property developer. This trio requested a meeting with Long Preston Parish Council – in whose name the survey had been conducted – to talk through elements of the CRHE's report **before it had been discussed in formal session by parish councillors.** Due to the intensity of public feeling over the matter, the meeting was called off shortly before its scheduled date.
- 1.7 This situation did little to foster confidence in the discretion of the CRHE, who despite repeated requests, has yet to explain how copies of the report fell into the hands of third parties prior to its formal discussion by the PC. Concern within the village at the implications of the above led to a public meeting and the formation on 31 August of LoPRA (the Long Preston Residents Association). ©

2. 'Affordable Housing' – and other fuzzy terms

- 2.1 'Affordable housing' is a term much bandied about by the media, politicians and property developers. It is used nine times in the CRHE's survey and report. Regrettably, neither the source questionnaire nor the report assists respondents or readers with a definition.
- 2.2 Despite its common usage, the term has no universal definition. It does, however, like other marketing 'triggers', have an emotive feelgood ring. Who but the stony-hearted could be against it?
- 2.3 All housing is 'affordable'. Just as those on the first rung on the housing ladder have by scrimping and saving been able to 'afford' a one-bedroom flat, so too do dukes, popstars and sporting heroes 'afford' their mansions and multi-hectare estates. **In short, the term means everything – and nothing.**
- 2.4 Also lavishly used – but undefined - in the CRHE questionnaire is the term 'need'. Do respondents mean real need (defined by the OED as 'essential; necessity')? Or do they mean 'wish, desire, preference'? **There is a semantic chasm here – which is unacceptable in a purportedly scientific study.**
- 2.5 The CRHE's questionnaire features other equally woolly but comforting terms: 'Small Housing Association development', for example. Surely no reasonable person could object to that? But what is 'small'? Up to five dwellings? Ten? Twenty? Fifty? It is difficult to believe that planning decisions can be made on data obtained through such inexact terminology – although this appears to have been the case in Grassington and other local villages.
- 2.6 It is a generally accepted tenet of professional market research that terminology and the phrasing of questions – even the order in which they are posed – exert considerable influence on the outcome of a research project. Indeed, some in the MR industry contend that only when a client is unsure of the results he/she seeks, will that client obtain pristine data and a non-partisan result.
- 2.7 Here are examples of two recent public opinion polls carried out on behalf of organisations with opposing aims. Both will have been certain from the outset as to the results they desired:

82% of the public believe deer hunting should not be legal; 69% think fox-hunting should not be legal; and 77% think hare hunting and coursing should not be legal. 76% is the average of these three figures.

Poll conducted by MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) on behalf of 'Campaign to Protect Hunted Animals'

Only 38% of the public favour a ban on hunting with hounds. 57% of the public favours hunting continuing in some form.

Poll conducted by ORB (Opinion Research Bureau) on behalf of the Countryside Alliance.

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3. Survey methodology

There are five fatal flaws in the CRHE report methodology. They are ...

3.1 **Validity of postal surveys**

Postal surveys are viewed by market research professionals with some scepticism. In the jargon of the trade, those responding are dubbed a 'self-selecting sample'. Data thus obtained are usually regarded as statistically invalid **unless the percentage of respondents exceeds 50% of the group surveyed** (in which case it clearly represents a majority sample). But the Long Preston survey response is 36% - a figure claimed to be 'good' ¹. Good or not, the data remains invalid.

3.2 **Definition of 'Need'**

Much is made in the report of housing 'need' in Long Preston. But the extent of that 'need' is very much open to question, especially when an unknown number of the CRHE's assumptions of 'need' are based on anecdotal data.

In a court of law, research jargon like 'anecdotal data' would be called by a plainer name – 'hearsay' – and disallowed as evidence.

The questionnaire² asks: "Are you, **or anyone else** that lives at this address, in need of alternative accommodation within the next 10 years?"

The pivotal words are 'anyone else' – and all answers on behalf of third parties are mere hearsay **and should be as inadmissible in rigorously conducted research as they would in a court of law.**

Also, the report's conclusions fail to specify how many people answered on their own behalf and how many spoke for others. **What percentage of purported 'need', the author wonders, is based on hearsay?**

3.3 **Crystal ballgazing**

Some sections of the report are more appropriate to fortune-telling than professionally conducted research. For example, one question³ invites respondents to identify a possible need for 'alternative accommodation within the next 10 years'. Such need may be reliably predictable in a few cases, for example degenerative illness, children starting work or returning from university.

All other data regarding future need reported in the CRHE study are nothing more than crystal ballgazing (a prediction technique arguably more reliable over a ten year period).

Regrettably the conclusions drawn from such data by the report⁴ fail to distinguish between probability and prophesy. Neither the assessment of genuine need, nor the expenditure of large sums of public money, should rest on such a scientifically unstable foundation.

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¹ CRHE report, page 5

² CRHE questionnaire (Q8)

³ CRHE questionnaire (Q8)

⁴ CRHE report, section 4.9

3.4 **Anonymity - a door wide open to abuse**

The market research norm when collecting data from a self-completed questionnaire (as distinct from those completed by an interviewer) is to require respondents to state their name and address – or some other unique identifier.

This information acts as a safeguard against dishonest duplication and manipulation of results. **Without such a failsafe, there can be no certainty that the results have not been tampered with.** And given the relentless pressures for commercial development extant within Long Preston, such manipulation by third parties cannot be ruled out.

Only those respondents claiming housing 'need' (on their own behalf or that of others) were asked to give names and addresses and, according to the report, fifty-eight people – 'mainly couples' – did so⁵.

The report claims that 36% of Long Preston households responded to the survey but fails to state either the number of questionnaires distributed or returned. **The sole certainty, therefore, is that only a minority of the returned questionnaires are verifiable by name/address.** The authenticity of all other responses is open to question.

3.5 **Duplication of data in assessing 'need'**

The CRHE questionnaire invites respondents to give details of third parties known to them who may have a 'need' (wish, desire, preference?) for accommodation. Although details of this 'need' are recorded on the questionnaire by the respondent, there is no requirement to furnish the name and address of these third parties.

This fundamental flaw means that two or more survey respondents acting in good faith could give details relating to the same third party. **Therefore the likelihood of data duplication in quantifying 'need' cannot be dismissed.** ©

⁵ CRHE report, table 5.1

4. Response to criticisms of the survey methodology

- 4.1 Shortly after publication of the CRHE report, the author of this paper requested a copy for his inspection. This duly prompted the concerns aired on the foregoing pages, a précis of which he subsequently submitted in writing to members of the Long Preston Parish Council prior to its meeting on 6 September 2004.
- 4.2 As a result of the questions raised, the PC decided to delay adoption of the report until they had been answered to its satisfaction. The CRHE was accordingly invited to attend the council's next meeting on 4 October. She was unable to do so.
- 4.3 Concerned that Mrs Russell would not be aware of the misgivings aired by the author over the report, he telephoned her on 7 October and, at her request, emailed a copy of the Parish Council précis so that she could prepare a response. Below is a verbatim copy of that email.
- 4.4 "Further to our telcon this morning, I attach as requested a copy of my private briefing for Long Preston Parish Council.
This raises several points of concern as to the survey's methodology and conclusions. I am disturbed that in its present form the survey has been (and may again be) used to justify housing recommendations to other parish councils.
In these circumstances I feel it may be in the public interest to alert the appropriate authorities to its inherent weaknesses. However, it would be wrong to do so before exploring with you whether the flaws in the methodology can be rectified to the benefit both of the general public and those in genuine housing need.
If you feel a meeting might be constructive, I would be happy to come and see you."
- 4.5 On 12 October Mrs Russell replied, denying that copies of the survey had been left at the Long Preston Post Office. She made no reference whatever to the other concerns I had raised. Nor did she agree to a meeting.
- 4.6 The Long Preston parish clerk has also reported a lack of success in contacting Mrs Russell despite making several unreturned telephone calls. Nor has she met as requested with the PC to discuss issues arising from the Housing Needs Survey.
- 4.7 In addition to the events described, the author has also engaged in correspondence with the CRHE's host agency, Foundation Housing. Although the detail of this correspondence is only marginally relevant to this paper, it is available on request.

Postscript:

Foundation Housing notified the author in writing on 26 November that Mrs Russell will leave the CRHE post in January; also that Foundation Housing is withdrawing as host agency after that date. ☺

5. Analysis and interpretation of data

5.1 There are many elements essential to ensuring accuracy in a market research project – but two are especially crucial. They are ...

5.2 *The questionnaire*

All research can be manipulated by the phrasing of questions – even their sequential order. And as almost all surveys have an underlying agenda, it is relatively rare that a study, however professionally conducted, fails to produce the results desired by one or another of its sponsors (see this paper, section 2.7). There is no reason to believe otherwise of the Long Preston Housing Needs Survey.

5.3 *Interpretation of data*

Although the report claims 'evidence' of 'need' within the next ten years for fifty new households in the village⁶, does the interpretation of this 'need' take account of the twenty-one social properties currently extant in Long Preston⁷ (7% of the village's housing stock)? Is it recommending 50 *more* properties; or a *total* of fifty including those already in existence? Has it factored into the equation any social property that might currently be unoccupied; or those that will inevitably become unoccupied periodically over a ten year period?

Even the most accurate data are open to differing interpretation (is a glass half full or half empty?). If a reader wished, it would not be difficult to take the same numbers used by the CRHE and arrive at a diametrically opposite conclusion – possibly that there is 'evidence' of over-supply?

5.4 In addition to these fundamentals, the CRHE survey fails to comply with the guidelines laid down by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It signally ignores two of the ODPM's key requirements:

"Survey results should be validated by comparing household profiles with data from the Census, demographic estimates and local administrative records."

and

"Projections of housing need should not rely solely on surveys but should draw on demographic, economic and administrative data."

5.5 But the most damning indictment of the survey's methodology comes not from this paper but the CRHE report itself. The last paragraph of its 'Overall Summary' (page 3) states: "There is evidence to suggest there is a need for affordable housing for local people in the parish of Long Preston. **It is prudent to halve the registered need when aiming for provision.**"

5.6 Disregard **fifty per cent** of what claims to be credible data? So much for the CHRE's confidence in the accuracy of this purportedly rigorous research project. ☹

⁶ CRHE report, page 3, paragraph 1.

⁷ CHRE report, page 5, paragraphs 3 & 4.

6. Conclusions and recommendation

- 6.1 As stated on the cover page of this paper, the author believes the CRHE survey to be ill-conceived and incorrectly executed. It conforms neither to standard norms of research practice nor the guidelines for such projects laid down by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.
- 6.2 For these reasons, he advises extreme caution in acting on the survey's conclusions and recommendations which he believe to be unsafe.
- 6.3 Affordable housing for those denied a place on the property ladder is a social right which the author unreservedly supports. But not when based on fourth division research methodology and indistinct key criteria such as 'affordability'.
- 6.4 And categorically not while local 'need' remains unproven and unquantified.
- 6.5 This paper therefore recommends that the Long Preston Housing Needs Survey (and where it is not too late, earlier CRHE surveys affecting other Craven District parishes) is abandoned forthwith as an unreliable method of establishing local social housing need. ©**

Footnote

The author is encouraged to note that more professional research methods will be employed in future. According to a report in the *Craven Herald* (31 December 2004):

[*Extract only*]

'A district-wide housing needs survey to complement those already carried out in villages has received support from local councilors. Members of Craven District Council's performance and resources committee agreed to find £35,000 to meet the cost of the survey which will be carried out in early 2005.'

[*The report continues*] 'Chief executive Gill Dixon said the survey was a "completely different animal" to village surveys using different methodology.

"It will give us the rigour we need to address affordable housing in the future," she said.'

Is Ms Dixon's desire for more rigorous research methodology in future an acknowledgement that earlier surveys lack the required degree of rigour? If so the author of this paper endorses her view. ©

7. Distribution List

This paper will be / has been distributed to the following ...

**Council for the Preservation
of Rural England**

*Mrs Hilary Fenten
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The Shaws
Selside
Settle
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Countryside Agency

*Pam Warhurst,
Deputy Chairperson
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Cheltenham, GL50 3RA*

*Mike Barningham,
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Craven District Council

*Council Offices
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*Gill Dixon, MBA
Chief Executive*

*Sian Watson, BA (Hons)
Head of Planning & Building Control*

*Alison Leech, MA
Housing Strategy Manager*

*CHRE Steering Group
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Carleton Business Park
Carleton New Road
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Mardy Wright, Chairperson

*Councillor Helen Firth,
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Long Preston Parish Council

*Alison Fawcett, Parish Clerk
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The Green
Langcliffe BD24 9NN*

*David Inglis, Chairman
13 Ribblesdale Estate
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**Long Preston Residents
Association**

*Gillian Jones, Chairperson
Heather Thomas-Smith, Deputy Chairperson*

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**Member of Parliament for Skipton
and Ripon**

*Rt Hon David Curry MP
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**Office of the Deputy
Prime Minister**

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Yorkshire Dales National Park

Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority
*Yorebridge House
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*Carl Lis, Chairman
Jerry Pearlman, Deputy Chairman
David Butterworth, Chief Executive
Nancy Stedman*

Planning Committee

*Harold Brown, Chairman
Wilf Fenten, Deputy Chairman
Peter Watson, Head of Planning
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John Blackie
Ann Brooks
Graham Dalton
Nicky Grace
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Roger Harrison-Topham
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David Ireton
James Kendall
Allen Kirkbride
Kevin Lancaster
Steve Macare
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Joe Nicholson
Yvonne Peacock
Malcolm Petyt
Gina Ramsbottom
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Steve Shaw-Wright
Gill Travis*

Planning Service - Central Area Team

*Daniel Child, Planning Officer
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Note

For reasons of personal privacy the author has withheld his address from this document as it will be posted on the internet at www.lopra.org and www.longpreston.info. If required, Peter Scott-Smith can be contacted either by email or mobile phone, as below.

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