HOUSING PROBLEM DIFFICULTIES IN THEIR VARIOUS ASPECTS.

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BY

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THE housing question, as you are aware, is, from the public health point of view, one of the most pressing at present before the public, and calls for immediate attention.

Up to the present, local authorities have confined their efforts chiefly to the re-housing of certain classes of people who have been dispossessed by the destruction of slum areas, a proportion of whom are obliged to be provided for by the Regulations of the Local Government Board.

Now what are the classes for which the health authorities ought to provide in regard to housing, and what class of house should be provided?

The question is not altogether a simple one, as the economic side of it enters into the subject in a very prominent manner, and, in fact, puts a limit on to your powers of action.

The object of re-housing from the health authorities' point of view is, of course, the abolishing of slums, overcrowding, and such conditions as tend to the weakening and deterioration of the people in their present homes, and the social raising of the poorer classes and the "submerged tenth," so far as this can be accomplished—and the problem is how are you going to provide for the following sets of people?

- 1st. There is the person who cannot afford to pay more than from 2s. 6d. to 5s. a week rent.
- 2nd. There is the poor man with a large family and who cannot hope to pay such a rent as will enable him to occupy a house of the necessary room accommodation.
- 3rd. There is the housing of a family in which one of the members (perhaps the breadwinner) is ailing from some disease, such as phthisis, and whom it is desirable should have a separate sleeping room from the rest of the family.

4th. There is the person who cannot afford to pay more than 7s. 6d. per week rent.

In my opinion, it is no part of the duties of any local authority to provide houses for working men who can afford to pay 8s. 6d. or over that a week rent, as when you get to that limit you get to one in which the private builder can adequately supply his wants at a remunerative price.

We all know that the Government are proposing to give substantial aid towards the erection of more houses, and the question is as to what amount of rented house will this grant be given?

I do not think that houses above £20 a year rental (or 7s. 6d. per week) will be allowed to be provided out of any Government funds—and the question now is as to what can we provide for people who can only pay 3s. to 3s. 6d. a week.

Housing does not merely consist of putting people into so many rooms with a roof over their head, but in the provision of suitability of arrangements for the purposes of life and sufficiency of facilities for decency of living.

I find that in my Borough at the present time 45.4 per cent. of the houses are assessed at 7s. 6d. a week and under, and of these over 30 per cent. are assessed at under 5s. per week, and I take it this will be about the proportion in most large towns and urban districts in the country.

The great difficulty which we have to meet is the housing of this latter section, particularly of the lowest grades who cannot afford to pay more than from 2s. 6d. to 4s. a week, and who are now housed in separate rooms in larger dwellings, or in old dilapidated houses, which have none of the conveniences offered to them which are necessary for decent living.

In demolishing 88 houses recently in my borough, and thereby dispossessing some 230 people,

46.6 %	of the people	paid only	2s. 6d.	a week.
20.4 %	"	"	3s. 0d.	"
9.0 %	"	"	3s. 6d.	"
16.0 %	"	"	between 4s. and 5s.	a week.
5.6 %	"	"	paid 5s. 6d.	a week (this included a shop).

Now how are these people to be provided for?

I am of the opinion that it is impossible to provide separate dwellings at such prices except on the "Flat" or "Tenement" system, and in providing these houses certain things have to be considered.

- 1st. There must be a decent living room with a small scullery off if possible—and one, two, three, or four bedrooms, according to the family you are going to provide for,
- 2nd. There must be a separate food store against an outer wall, with proper light and ventilation into it.
- 3rd. There ought to be a separate w.c., a decent sink, and a bath provided to aid in cleanliness.

But it is no use providing baths for these people so long as they have to provide hot water by boiling it on a fire in kettles or pans because they cannot afford the coal, nor will they take the trouble to provide a sufficient quantity of hot water to make the bath hot—and for the same reasons they do not provide sufficient hot water for washing the ordinary food utensils—and the result would be that they would continue to exist in the new houses in the same dirty, filthy, shiftless, hand-to-hand manner of living they now do, a condition of things which is totally detrimental to the decencies of life and the health of the community.

The only way to meet the difficulty, I suggest, is by a central heating system whereby hot water could be provided at cost price and laid on to the dwelling in the same way as cold water and gas are provided; a small cost-price charge being added to the rent to cover this hot water. The matter would be a simple one as regards tenement dwellings, but might be a little more difficult in the case of separate houses (at, say, 7s. 6d. a week) built round a square.

Then having provided them with baths, hot water, and the means of being clean, to insist on them using the facilities and educate them by sanitary police or health visitors, and thus raise them to a higher standard of living. We cannot expect that there will be an instant transformation scene, everything must have a beginning; provide facilities first, and then educate the people to use them.

But what about town planning, limitation of the number of houses and population to the acre, ample air space and garden accommodation—very desirable things in themselves, but in my opinion impossible in connection with the housing of people who can only pay rents below 7s. 6d. a week.

There is a limit to your power of taking people from the centre of the town to its periphery. Not only is there the expense of getting in and out by tram or train, but there

is also the economical question of the time which must be spent in getting to and from such places, which at 5 a.m. on a winter morning is a consideration.

When you pull down slum property or remodel existing blocks of houses, or have to utilize small plots of ground in the centre of your town, you have not the ground at your disposal for idealistic schemes which we should all like to see carried out if feasible and if the population of this country was not quite so dense as it is.

I now submit for your consideration plans of different types of houses and tenement dwellings, showing how it is proposed to deal with the different classes of tenants (see Birkenhead Health Report 1914).

The architectural work has been carried out by Mr. T. T. Rees, F.R.I.B.A., who acts as Special Architect for Housing under the Birkenhead Health Committee.

It will be seen that in our model scheme at Gilbrook there are a number of houses on the outer fringe of the estate providing separate houses at 8s. 6d. a week, and others at 7s. 6d. a week; these are small houses of the ordinary type with all the necessary conveniences above referred to, except the provision of the hot water—and I need say nothing more respecting them here. Conveniently arranged in the centre of these blocks of houses are a series of three-storied tenement dwellings arranged round large squares which provide playing grounds for the children and ample air space round the buildings. The dwellings in these flats are all separate and self-contained, and have all the facilities provided to which I have already referred.

But I must expressly state that as regards the cost of the land on which the houses and tenements have to be erected, whether it is got by purchase of fresh land or by the demolition of old buildings in slum areas—so far as the housing schemes are concerned, the primary cost of the land must be considered as a dead loss on the scheme, and will have to be provided for out of the rates as a health matter—the rents yielded not being more than sufficient to provide for the interest, up-keep and sinking fund on the buildings themselves.

The schemes here submitted show how the poorest tenants can be decently provided for down to a rental of 3s. per week, but we have still to deal with the man who from the number of his family is unable to pay such a rent as

will give him the necessary number of rooms. This we propose to do ; on the top flat of the tenement dwellings, either by so constructing the roof (in a way that will economise the, at present, lost air space in the roofs) that two or three extra small sleeping apartments can be provided, and reserving these dwellings for men with large families at very little extra rent—or as an alternative there might be at the end of each block of tenements a sort of fourth turret story, providing rooms for this purpose.

Finally : some of the tenements might be provided with flat roofs on which a special wooden room can be provided for the case of a consumptive member of a poor family requiring separate and out-of-doors accommodation.

Thus, I think I have shown how we can provide for the different classes to which I have alluded.

Closely associated with this subject is the present method of converting large old houses into separate dwellings for the very poor, let off into one, two, or three rooms to each family, according to what they can afford to pay, but which, as you all know, have no conveniences for decency of living ; are hot-beds for the producing and spreading of fevers, and are altogether totally unsuitable to a civilised community in the present day.

In my opinion, the Society of Medical Officers of Health ought to move at once to obtain powers for sanitary authorities to prevent people converting houses of the kind I have mentioned to such uses, until they have been properly reconstructed to meet the requirements of decency and suitability for their purpose.

There is a great demand and there will shortly be a great boom in the building of workmen's houses of the higher rents of from 6s. 8d. to 14s. a week rental, and which, in my opinion, ought to be, and will be, provided by the ordinary builder if proper facilities are given to him.

I have frequently thought, as has been mentioned by some of you here, that this building of new houses by private people would be much increased if the enormous proportion of cost, incurred by the laying-out and construction of the roads, in the laying out of new areas, was taken from his shoulders.

The estates when built upon become valuable to the sanitary authorities as rate-producing factors—the roads become public property,

and once they are completed and handed over to the town, cannot be reclaimed. Under these circumstances, if the owner gives the land, surely the sanitary authority might reasonably bear the cost of sewerage, channeling, and making the roads. In this way the builder would be saved a great deal of expense, and be able to give a much better house for the rental to be charged, and which would then be insisted upon.

A STATE MEDICAL SERVICE.

[*A Memorandum issued by the State Medical Service Association concerning the relative merits of a whole-time and part-time Public Medical Service.*]

THE aim of the State Medical Service Association is, stated broadly, the formation of the most efficient medical service possible, in order to put within the reach of every member of the community the greatest possible measure of health. To do this, it maintains that it is imperative to harmonize the many competing agencies which at present are vainly attempting to cope with clinical and preventive medicine.

These agencies may be roughly divided into public and private. The former comprise those groups of medical men and women who are engaged in different branches of the Government Service, such as Medical Officers of Health, School Doctors and Factory Surgeons, and those in the Tuberculosis, Venereal Diseases, Infant Welfare, Maternity, Poor Law and other services. A large proportion of the work is done by whole-time salaried doctors, and the tendency is to increase that proportion at the expense of those employed for part time. Now all this work at present is not only being done, both centrally and locally, under conditions of jealousy and competition due to a lack of co-ordination, but there is in addition friction of a more serious kind between these officers and the bulk of the profession who constitute the second group of agencies referred to above.

The second group comprises about 80 per cent. of the total profession, and its work is at the present time carried on under conditions essentially and fundamentally adverse to its own scientific interests, as well as to the interest of the public welfare.

Public and professional interest and efficiency alike demand the fullest specialisation and co-operation. These are almost impossible when the practitioners are divided into com-