



# HOME FRONT

*Building a new vision for social housing*

*Edited by Kate Murray, with an introduction by shadow housing minister  
Mike Amesbury MP and contributions from Florence Eshalomi MP,  
Paul Dennett, Rachel Blake, Geeta Nanda and more*



**General secretary,**  
Andrew Harrop

**Editorial director,**  
Kate Murray

**Assistant editor,**  
Vanessa Singh

Like all publications of the Fabian Society, this report represents not the collective views of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the labour movement.

Supported by Shelter, which has no editorial control over its contents.



We exist to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society.

**FABIAN SOCIETY**  
61 Petty France  
London SW1H 9EU  
020 7227 4900 (main)

**Designed by** Georgie Lowry,  
[www.gslowrydesign.co.uk](http://www.gslowrydesign.co.uk)

First published in September 2021.

[info@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:info@fabian-society.org.uk)  
[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk)



# CONTENTS

Introduction	
<i>Mike Amesbury MP</i>	4
<hr/>	
1. A vision for all of us	
<i>Ben Cooper</i>	6
<hr/>	
2. A bold approach	
<i>Florence Eshalomi MP</i>	10
<hr/>	
3. Collective action	
<i>Rachel Blake</i>	12
<hr/>	
4. Quality streets	
<i>Geeta Nanda</i>	14
<hr/>	
5. Where the heart is	
<i>Alastair Harper</i>	16
<hr/>	
6. Higher standards	
<i>Tracy Harrison</i>	19
<hr/>	
7. A positive choice	
<i>Melanie Rees</i>	20
<hr/>	
8. Equal chances	
<i>Cym D'Souza and Mushtaq Khan</i>	22
<hr/>	
9. Hearing their voice	
<i>Jenny Osbourne</i>	24
<hr/>	
10. For all ages	
<i>Colin Wiles</i>	26
<hr/>	
11. A vital journey	
<i>Andrew van Doorn</i>	28
<hr/>	
12. Another country	
<i>Martin Collett</i>	30
<hr/>	
13. Blazing a trail	
<i>Paul Dennett</i>	32
<hr/>	

---

# Introduction



*Mike Amesbury MP*

For many of us, the Covid-19 crisis has shown just how important it is to have a safe, secure and decent home. For many, however, the pandemic has been made that much more difficult due to living somewhere that is overcrowded, too expensive or in a bad or even dangerous condition.

The UK faces an ever more desperate housing crisis. We simply are not building enough homes and the homes we have

are increasingly out of the financial reach of many. There is broad political consensus that we need to increase our housing stock; with the government stating we need to build 300,000 homes a year.

Social housing once made up a large part of overall new housing supply – the 1945 Labour government created hundreds of thousands of homes, so helping to rebuild the economy coming out of the war and transforming people’s lives,

lifting them out of overcrowded slums and putting them into comfortable homes with indoor toilets and gardens. Not any longer – in 2019/20, only 6,644 social homes were built, and 24,120 lost from the stock, resulting in a net loss of 17,476 homes.

Our chronic lack of social homes has meant council waiting lists of 1.2 million people and falling rates of homeownership due to rocketing house prices which are out of the reach of many working people.



Our chronic lack of social homes has meant council waiting lists of 1.2 million people and falling rates of homeownership due to rocketing house prices which are out of the reach of many working people

People are instead forced into private renting – paying higher housing costs than any other group, some relying on housing benefits to get through each month, and often receiving an insecure, overcrowded and even dangerous place to live in return.

The government has attempted to tackle this crisis by repeating what has already failed – half-hearted schemes that still rely on the market alone to deliver all the homes we need. Recent changes to building regulations will usher in a new generation of slums through the conversion of commercial properties into unsuitable flats, and proposed changes to our planning system threaten the delivery of the few social homes we currently build.

The last time Britain built enough homes to meet the needs of the population, success hinged on a bold programme of social housing delivery alongside strong private-sector output. We must bring social housing into the mix once again to get us out of the mess our housing system is in.

We need a new vision for housing. Building social housing improves both the affordability and availability of homes. Drawing on the spirit of Labour's post-war government, a big social housing programme has the potential to provide vital economic growth and skilled jobs. We can build and retrofit energy-efficient homes to fight the climate crisis and meet our net zero targets. In helping people get into stable housing, we can ensure residents put down the roots they need to be part of cohesive, thriving communities.



© Evelyn Simak / Council housing off Goldsmith Street

Any plan for social housing must also look beyond its construction. The inquiry into the Grenfell Tower tragedy has shown a clear thread of neglect by authority figures in the years leading up to the fire. When residents complained that they felt unsafe, they were made to feel like they were the problem.

Investment in social housing must be accompanied by better regulation of social landlords and a stronger voice for tenants throughout the system.

Conservative cuts have allowed progress on improving social homes to stall and left families in damp, cold and unsafe homes. Labour's track record of improving existing housing stock is something to be proud of – after two decades of Conservative neglect, Labour ensured through the Decent Homes programme that by 2010 1.4 million social homes that did not meet basic standards of decency were brought up to scratch with essential repairs as well as new windows, kitchens and bathrooms.

Despite the programme's success, the current Conservative government cut all central funding and until 2018, constrained local authorities' ability to maintain their housing stock through a cap on their borrowing for housing. Half a million social homes are now in a state of disrepair – and worse still, more than 40 per cent of those are classed as unfit for human habitation.

Rising out of the depths of our housing crisis will take strong political will and achievable plans. To build further support, it is vital we continue to make the strong moral, social and economic case for bringing back social housebuilding. But as with all bold plans, we must also detail how its delivery can and should take place. I hope here we can continue the conversation as to how, as we come out of the pandemic, we take on that challenge.

*Mike Amesbury is the Labour MP for Weaver Vale and shadow minister for housing*

---

# A vision for all of us

*Labour must set out a broad and inclusive vision of social housing, relevant to voters in every place, writes Ben Cooper*



The housing crisis is one of the biggest challenges this country faces, threatening our wellbeing and prosperity. Around 17.5 million people, or a third of British adults, do not have access to a safe and secure home, according to housing charity Shelter. This rises to 58 per cent of single-parent households, 57 per cent of Black adults, and 54 per cent of disabled adults. The features of this crisis include:

- **Low affordability:** home ownership has become increasingly out of reach for young people, with young people half as likely to own a home as the previous generation. Private renters in England spend an average of 32 per cent of their household income on rent.
- **Poor quality homes:** around 17 per cent of all houses in England are ‘non-decent’. As Cym D’Souza and Mushtaq Khan, chair and national co-ordinator of BME National, highlight for this collection: “The poorest in society, many of them from minority ethnic backgrounds, live in non-decent, poor quality homes ... where little or no investment has come from government or owners and landlords for more than 25 years.”
- **Widespread discrimination:** two million adults in Britain have faced discrimination when looking for their home.

Disabled adults are nearly six times more likely than non-disabled adults to report experiencing discrimination when looking for a home, while Black and Asian adults are nearly four times more likely than white adults to do so.

- **Significant insecurity:** short-term tenancies and no-fault evictions create distress and powerlessness, and contribute to a high number of moves within the private rented sector.

These challenges affect all parts of the country, but in different ways.

- The housing crisis is most associated with **London**, where house prices were 14.7 times earnings in 2019. On average, private renters spend 42 per cent of their household income on rent in the city, the highest of any region. Other **major cities** in England are experiencing their own affordability crisis.
- But **rural areas** also face affordability challenges, with house prices in 2019 8.6 times earnings in ‘predominately rural’ areas. This is higher than prices in ‘predominantly urban areas (excluding London) which were 7.4 times earnings. A quarter of all rural homes are non-decent, significantly above the national average.

- In **smaller cities and non-metropolitan towns outside of London and the South East**, housing costs are usually lower, but poor quality housing is a real challenge, especially in the private rented sector. Places like Blackpool, Hartlepool, and Stoke-on-Trent have a larger proportion of houses lying empty for more than six months than the national average.
- In **coastal communities**, there is a problem of “poor quality and multi-occupancy accommodation in contributing to adverse health outcomes”, as the Chief Medical Officer for England found in his 2021 annual report.

While this crisis is long-standing, Covid-19 has revealed and exacerbated the inequalities caused by poor housing, with often devastating consequences for people’s lives and public health.

**Around 17.5 million people, or a third of British adults, do not have access to a safe and secure home, according to housing charity Shelter**



Nearly a third of British adults reported mental or physical health problems due to the condition of their home, or a lack of space, during lockdown. The pandemic has also increased the popularity of rural and coastal Britain – creating a holiday lettings boom, reducing the supply of homes for local families and pricing renters out of their local community.

So tackling this crisis, and its complex and interrelated problems, requires an inclusive vision, and policies tailored for different places and their challenges. No place can be left out, and no one can be left behind.

Labour's housing policies must be ambitious and comprehensive, drawing together several government departments to coordinate reform of social security, of taxation policy, and of support to first-time buyers, for example.

But social housing must sit at the heart of this agenda. It is perhaps the most effective intervention in our housing markets to provide genuinely affordable, secure and good-quality homes on the scale required to make a difference to millions. To deliver social housing at scale, a Labour government will need to work in partnership with devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and English local government. This cannot be a top-down, centralised approach: devolved and local government should be used as delivery vehicles for the UK's government's objectives.

Labour's housing policies must be ambitious and comprehensive, drawing together several government departments to coordinate reform of social security, of taxation policy, and of support to first-time buyers

As Rachel Blake, deputy mayor in Tower Hamlets, writes for this collection:

*"Labour will have to empower local government to develop the skills and experience to take the lead in delivering new homes".*

Labour must also demand the very best quality of social homes for new and existing social housing. Homes must meet the needs of those who live there, with accessibility for disabled and older people, and access to green spaces. They must help meet carbon reduction targets: this includes taking advantage of green technologies and retrofit, to decarbonise and create sustainable homes, as Geeta Nanda, chief executive of Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, highlights in her contribution. Labour must use social housing to set the standards that the entire housing market must meet, especially the private sector, to ensure everyone can live in a home worthy of the name.

To deliver change, Labour needs to win power; and to win power, Labour's housing policies must speak to people's priorities and concerns. Labour cannot simply announce new targets of how many homes it will build over a decade. There is no doubt that any future housebuilding programme must be ambitious to tackle the scale of the challenge our country faces, but it is the vision of how we can all live well together, free from housing insecurity, that will win voters to Labour.

That will mean changing perceptions that have been with us for decades. Social housing is often seen as a 'residualised tenure of last resort' as Melanie Rees describes it in her contribution. It has not seemed relevant for the vast majority of the country, largely because there are not enough homes for anyone but the poorest households. The Chartered Institute of Housing found that in 1979, significant numbers of families in every income group lived in social rented housing, 'even 20 per cent of the highest-earning group'. Not today.







Labour must make a new, broader case for social housing. Social housing could help hundreds of thousands of older people who are currently renting privately, but fear they will find it unaffordable as rents rise and their income does not. It could help aspiring young homeowners save more for a deposit by cutting the cost of rent and helping them get on the housing ladder quicker. It can provide greater housing security so that people can get on with their lives, whether that's raising children or starting a business. It can help people stay close to family and vital support networks instead of being forced away. It can help people put down roots and participate in community life. Social housing could provide homes for a wide range of people – some for their entire lives, some only for a

**To deliver change,  
Labour needs to win  
power; and to win  
power, Labour's housing  
policies must speak to  
people's priorities and  
concerns**

short while, and others never using it, but knowing it is there if required.

Social housing can appeal to every part of our country, from London to our smallest villages, from our post-industrial towns to our commuter belts, and from Labour's heartlands to places that turned away from us in 2019 or even earlier. Housing affects

all parts of the country in different ways, and this agenda can be just as appealing in coastal or rural target seats Labour has never won, as it is in the major cities where it currently dominates.

An ambitious and inclusive social housing policy offers the best chance to tackle the housing crisis and the harm it causes to our communities, especially Black and ethnic minority, disabled, and low-income families. Labour's vision should draw from its ideals, applied to the housing challenges of today. And in doing so, a Labour government can deliver on its promise to make Britain "the best place to grow up and grow old in".

*Ben Cooper is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society*

# A bold approach

*If we are to have decent housing for all, we must build at scale.  
Florence Eshalomi MP makes the case*



No one can deny that the UK needs a new approach to house building. Decades of underprovision has meant that the ratio of house prices to earnings has increased drastically in recent years and many younger people in areas like my constituency of Vauxhall can not hope ever to own a property unless they move out of London.

At the heart of this lies the steep decline in the levels of social housing. In 1980, when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power, the UK built nearly 100,000 social homes. Just three years later this figure stood at under 50,000 and in 2018/19 only just over 6,000 social homes were built. At the same time, the UK lost vast swathes of its social housing under the right to buy scheme, and local councils were increasingly without the means to replace their housing stock.

The slowdown of social housebuilding has left the private sector to pick up the slack in our system. Unfortunately, it has not delivered anywhere near the number of properties needed to meet demand and has deprived many areas of the ability to deliver a solid and deliverable housing strategy. In addition, land banking by developers has meant that land assigned for development can lie empty years after work should have been started. And while housebuilding has stalled our population has grown – the UK population is project-

ed to top 70 million by 2031, adding even more pressure onto a housing market that is already struggling to provide for our population.

The low level of social housing provision has political consequences for its popularity. As accessibility to social housing has become rarer and rarer, fewer people in the UK have seen it as a solution to their personal housing problems. Nye Bevan's dream of a doctor, grocer, butcher and farm labourer all living next to each other has been slowly eroded. Bevan understood when he spoke of this dream that building the social housing we need has to have the full support of the British public, giving everyone a sense that a large amount of money being spent will benefit everyone in society.

If we are once again to aspire to decent housing for all, a new social contract is required for social housing. It would be foolish for Labour to make grandiose promises around social housing within the term of one parliament. In reality even a rapid building programme would struggle to empty the current waiting list within five years. Instead, Labour needs to look to the future and focus an offer on the homes the country will need in 20 years' time.

The UK's demographic challenge, and the housing crisis it will shape, is heavily driven by our ageing population. Office for National Statistics figures project that by

2049 there will be 7.5 million more over-65s compared with 2019, accounting for more than 25 per cent of the population. As people get older, the type of housing they need changes. Features such as tight staircases and narrow corridors become impassable and spacious, accessible housing becomes a necessity for everyone.

Unfortunately, the UK already faces an adaptability crisis in our housing stock, with the latest English Housing Survey revealing that one million households do not have all the adaptations they need in their homes.

To meet the challenges of our ageing population this must change: new homes in the UK need to be accessible and easily adaptable to meet people's needs if they are to make any meaningful dent in the housing crisis.



**To meet the challenges of our ageing population this must change: new homes in the UK need to be accessible and easily adaptable to meet people's needs if they are to make any meaningful dent in the housing crisis**



Labour's offer of a social housing building revolution must set high standards for accessibility and adaptability in the UK, ensuring that social housing is there for life.

Another consequence of decades of underprovision is that much of our remaining social housing stock is beginning to show signs of ageing. In addition, years of austerity and a failure by the government to address the huge social care bill have left councils in a dire financial condition. Councils now lack the money to carry out sufficient regeneration of their stock and many struggle to put into place repair programmes that efficiently deal with problems in people's homes.

The result is that social housing has become associated with low-quality housing. It is not only in the home where standards have slipped for social tenants. As the tradition of social housebuilding has stalled, local councils have had to move away from building self-contained social estates and towards mandating private developers to include a proportion of social housing within their developments.

While this has provided an important, if insufficient, flow of social housing into our neighbourhoods, private developers have found means to disadvantage the social tenants who occupy the flats they are obliged to build. Social tenants in some developments are expected to use alternate

### Another consequence of decades of underprovision is that much of our remaining social housing stock is beginning to show signs of ageing

'poor' doors away from the main reception areas of blocks and even playgrounds in some developments are restricted to private occupiers in certain developments.

While it is possible to see the utilitarian principles underlying these mixed private-social developments, the truth is that current iterations too often feature architectural segregation that compounds the idea that social housing is on the bottom rung of the housing class structure.

If we are to engender the idea of social housing for everyone, this must change. Social housing cannot be an undesirable last resort but must be something that people both aspire to for themselves and welcome in their communities.

We therefore need to ensure that any new council housebuilding programme must meet high standards. This means building high-quality properties that go beyond the minimum currently expected.

It also means ensuring that the communities we create around new build estates are strong, vibrant and resilient.

And while building at scale will likely require significant developments which are social housing only, we must also look to ensure that where mixed estates of social housing and private housing continue to be built, tenants must never be segregated. There can be no moral justification for social homes to fail to meet the same standards as other properties in a mixed development.

By setting out a vision of high-quality, adaptable and accessible homes, Labour can reinvigorate the debate around social housing. The new homes Labour plans and builds would not just be of a higher standard but would offer a safety net for current and future generations. Labour's new social contract on housing would mean that if we pay for mass housebuilding now we do not need to fear housing inadequacy and poverty in the future. It is a bold vision of a more secure future for all.

*Florence Eshalomi is the Labour MP for Vauxhall. She was previously a councillor in the London borough of Lambeth, where her roles included deputy cabinet member for housing*

---

# Collective action

*The next Labour government must embrace the challenge of ending the housing crisis, writes Rachel Blake*



Labour councillors across the country will know the impact a shortage of decent and affordable homes in our villages, towns and cities is having. Families stuck in temporary accommodation, not able to put down roots in an area or travelling long distances to go to school or keep up their family and friendship networks. Private renters paying more than half of their incomes on rents, without any security of tenure and weak regulation of the quality or management of the home. It is rare for a week to go by without a new report on the number of homes that must be built to catch up with demand or the scale of investment needed to improve existing homes so that they are fit for the 21st century.

Labour must put solving the housing crisis at the heart of our programme for government because growing up and

living in a decent, warm home, with space to learn and play is vital for our communities to thrive. Such a programme would be firmly built on Labour values: allowing everyone to fulfil their potential. We know that children in overcrowded homes, without a quiet place to do homework or rest, are held back in life. And according to a House of Commons briefing, by the end of June 2020, there were 98,300 households living in temporary accommodation, including 127,240 children. Too often, temporary accommodation is not temporary with families living with uncertainty for several years. Poor quality housing is also linked to poor health outcomes which can have lasting impacts. Investment in housing is recognised as supporting the economy and creating new jobs. The housing crisis disproportionately affects women, people from Black, Asian

and minority ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities: housing is a social justice issue where Labour should be pushing for radical change.

We need to make the case that a substantial and long-term increase in the supply of genuinely affordable homes is vital for our local communities to thrive, and vital for the long-term stability of the economy. Local authorities play an important part in delivering these homes both in building council homes and also working in partnership with housing associations and supporting genuinely affordable home building within their own local plans and housing strategies. We must also support leaseholders of new homes which need urgent fire safety remediation. Alongside this, we need to improve the quality of homes nationally – not just the bricks and mortar but also in promoting the role of tenants and residents in the management of their homes. The last Labour government made sure that, through the Decent Homes programme, people saw a tangible difference in the quality of their housing.

When Labour comes into office, it will face significant challenges in addressing years and years of underinvestment in both new and existing homes. If it is to deliver genuinely affordable homes, Labour will have to empower local government to develop the skills and experience to take the lead in delivering new homes, working with housing associations, making positive local plans and identifying sites for new homes. Local authorities know their communities and neighbourhoods and can bring together the resources to accelerate delivery.

In Tower Hamlets, which has some of the highest levels of housing need in the country alongside significant housing wealth, we have established a programme to build 2000 new council homes. We are delivering this programme through ‘infill’ development on Tower Hamlets



**Labour must put solving the housing crisis at the heart of our programme for government because growing up and living in a decent, warm home, with space to learn and play is vital for our communities to thrive**

---

estates and land and purchasing former right to buy homes. In order to identify sites, we carried out informal audits of council-owned land assets and set up a 'build homes here' tool on our website where residents can suggest locations for new homes. Following a full programme of resident consultation – including residents' workshops and ongoing engagement on estate-wide investment – we submit planning applications for new council homes and in many cases public realm improvements to the estates. Our commitment for each of these developments is to deliver genuinely affordable rented homes, a range of bedroom sizes, quality design and high sustainability specifications. We have also been able to design adapted homes to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Council homes were a municipal gold standard of design quality and by embracing innovative construction methods we should be striving for the highest standards for council homes. Modular construction can make it possible to develop difficult sites in new ways. I am proud that several of these early sites are now completed and occupied with Tower Hamlets residents who were previously on our waiting list. We have introduced a 'local lettings' policy so that residents of the estate are able to bid to move into these homes.

Alongside an increase in homelessness and people in temporary accommodation, the Conservative government has also overseen a decline in home ownership – despite this being a tenure that is closely associated with Conservative administrations. A Labour government must be clear that reforming the housing market and addressing the long-term decline of home ownership will take time. Our party should support the development of homes for ownership through supporting local planning policies for housebuilding and simplifying low cost home ownership products so that they are more accessible

to a wider range of incomes. Leaseholders have often felt forgotten by government policy. Labour's proposals on fire safety which include setting a 2022 deadline for completing remediation works and protecting leaseholders from the costs of fire safety works should be implemented to support those who have been living with the uncertainty of major works bills.

A Labour government will also need to consider the long-term rent-setting framework for both new build and existing housing stock. The rents of a majority of social tenants are still determined by the formula developed by Labour in 2000/01. It needs updating to better reflect incomes – 25 per cent to 33 per cent of income seems appropriate – but this must also reflect regional variations and involve tenants in the rent-setting process. The current national rent-setting system for new build homes was set out under the Tory/Lib Dem coalition, introducing the 'affordable rent' product defined as up to 80 per cent of local market rents. This policy was established to reduce the grant subsidy needed to develop new homes and secure funding from additional borrowing by housing associations, reliant on a higher rental income from tenants. However, local authorities and housing associations, particularly in London where market rents are so high, made the case that 80 per cent of market rent was not affordable and argued for lower rent levels. The Greater London Authority has now set up a 'London Affordable Rent' product based on the principles of social rent-setting. Labour must reset this framework to provide long-term stability to councils and housing associations. The policy must also rebuild trust with residents and communities, many of whom no longer believe the term 'affordable'.

The national and local planning system is a regular area for calls for reform but proposals under the Conservative government have yet to focus on the

core challenges of delivering genuinely affordable homes and of viability of development which require long-term subsidy. National planning policy should actively support genuinely affordable homes and work with local authorities to bring forward land for development which supports communities to thrive.

Alongside these issues on supply, Labour must review the regulation of housing associations. The current Regulator of Social Housing is severely limited in its scope to intervene with management standards and quality. Active participation by tenants can have a major positive impact: tenants, leaseholders, local authorities and housing associations should work together on a new set of standards so that each is fully consulted and involved in decision-making. Many residents saw their landlords change with stock transfers and through subsequent mergers have felt a dilution of a local link to their housing association.

It is vital that a Labour government embraces the challenge of ending the housing crisis. Investment in new homes and reform of housing regulation should be at the heart of our manifesto. Our Labour vision of taking collective action to support people to be healthy, to tackle inequalities, achieve social justice and support community connections and jobs can only be delivered by investing in genuinely affordable homes, encouraging the delivery of more homes for ownership and putting residents at the heart of a new regulatory system for housing associations.

*Rachel Blake is a councillor in the London borough of Tower Hamlets, where she is lead member for adults, health and wellbeing and a deputy mayor. She is also a member of the Labour Housing Group executive and of the Local Government Association policy board for community wellbeing*

# Quality streets

*Social housing that is fit for the future must be of the highest quality for residents and communities. Geeta Nanda explains*



When Raheem Sterling scored England's first goal of Euro 2020 in the same borough he grew up in, the nation saw a young man fulfilling his childhood dream. The 'boy from Brent', who started out living in social housing not far from Wembley stadium, played a huge part in almost bringing 'it' home this summer.

As the country came to terms with another 'oh-so-near' at the same time as the coronavirus restrictions we have all been living with for well over a year began coming to an end, it was a time for reflection. For me, it was a chance to reflect on just how important home is to us all. I see this every day in my role leading one of the country's largest housing associations, and through my position as chair of the G15 – the group of housing associations which provide homes for one in 10 Londoners and are the largest builders of affordable homes in the capital.

Yet, whilst these roles give me a front-row seat to see the difference good homes are making to people's lives every day, it is important to acknowledge that, sadly, too many people do not currently have a decent, secure, and affordable home to act as a foundation to build on to reach for their dreams.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of home like no other event since the second world war. Our homes have been our offices, our classrooms, our

places of worship and they are, for many, what has kept us safe over the last 18 months. From millennials working from their bedrooms to parents home-schooling their kids, our homes have been central to our experiences of the pandemic. This time has also brought into stark relief just how significant not having a home that supports people to live well can be. For example, in YouGov polling for the National Housing Federation, a lack of space at home was cited by half of those who said that their housing situation was having a negative impact on their health.

As we look towards the recovery from the pandemic, now is the time to ensure that we have a bold, ambitious plan to ensure that everyone has a safe, affordable and secure place to live. Social housing must be at the heart of that brighter future.

**As we look towards the recovery from the pandemic, now is the time to ensure that we have a bold, ambitious plan to ensure that everyone has a safe, affordable and secure place to live**

Not only would a bold and ambitious plan to deliver social housing that is fit for the future make a huge difference for the 8.4 million people in housing need in this country, but it would also be a game-changer for the wider economy too.

At the housing association I lead, independent academic analysis has shown that for every £1 invested in MTVH, £1.53 is returned to society. This research estimates that MTVH social tenancies contribute over £700m a year to the UK economy through savings to areas of public spending and boosts from housebuilding and maintenance. We save the NHS at least £83m alone, through fewer GP visits and reduced health inequalities, something that has been critical in keeping the health service going under so much strain this last year. Imagine what we could do if more people had access to the homes they need and deserve by expanding the supply of affordable social housing?

But if we are to achieve this brighter future, we must also address the urgent issues of today, including the building safety crisis. The tragic events at Grenfell Tower must never be repeated. There have been important efforts to ensure that homes are made safer, through the Fire Safety Act and the Building Safety Bill, but we also need government leadership and further investment to put problems with existing homes right.



G15 members alone have set aside £2.9bn over the next 10 years to tackle building safety issues, and we are right to do so. But this does reduce resources available to build the new homes our country so desperately needs, and further government investment is needed.

As we recover from the pandemic, social housing providers can play a vital role not only in building homes, but also in creating thriving communities for people to live in. Green space has mattered so much in the last 18 months to people, and we know the immense benefits having access to parks, play areas, and sustainable transport infrastructure can have. Quality developments that show care towards their surroundings and for the daily lives of those who will move into these new communities are key.

These new homes must of course be genuinely affordable homes – in the last year, the G15 built more homes for social rent than at any other time in the last six years. But we also need to be delivering mixed communities with homes that help people to take their first steps on the housing ladder. This is especially important for the vast majority of people who will never qualify for socially rented homes and can't rely on the bank of mum and dad.

Quality has to be at the heart of ensuring social housing is fit for the future. Whilst the vast majority of homes in the social housing sector are well maintained, there are of course homes that are not and that is not good enough. Our residents deserve homes that are safe, warm, and dry, and we need a new Decent Homes Standard that builds on the improvements we have already seen.

These homes must also be fit for the low-carbon future that we must deliver to tackle the climate emergency. One of the great things about investing in social housing and those who live in it – is that it is a win-win for the economy and



**To meet the government's targets of net zero emissions by 2050, we need to invest in green, sustainable homes, ensuring that housing continues to be a public good rather than perpetuating an ever-worsening climate crisis inclusion is clear**

society. On no other issue is that clearer than in the role social housing can play in addressing the climate emergency.

As a country, we need to urgently address the climate emergency in every aspect of public policy. Social housing (and housing of all sorts) contributes a significant amount to carbon emissions each year. To meet the government's targets of net zero emissions by 2050, we need to invest in green, sustainable homes, ensuring that housing continues to be a public good rather than perpetuating an ever-worsening climate crisis.

The social housing sector can decarbonise on scale and have a huge impact

on the country's carbon emissions. We are already making progress, but through collaboration and with funding from government brought forward sooner, we can retrofit existing homes and pump-prime new homes to take advantage of the greener technologies. But this will only be possible through long-term investment and regulatory certainty from central government, coupled with a more joined-up approach with local authorities.

For decades, social housing has enabled people to live in safe, secure and affordable homes. After the second world war, the country was transformed through an ambitious plan of building social housing which acted as the anchor for the economic and social recovery. The vision for the future should learn from this proud past. By focusing on making sure our homes are safe, by having an ambitious plan to build much more social housing that will help reduce inequality, social housing can be at the heart of building this brighter future.

*Geeta Nanda OBE is chief executive of Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and chair of the G15 group of London's biggest housing associations*

# Where the heart is

*We need to build communities, not just units, as Alastair Harper explains*



Redvales Estate, just south of Bury, is made up of the clay-red brick semis typical of Greater Manchester. It has a handful of interconnected streets, with a corner shop, a Chinese takeaway that also does fish and chips, a couple of pubs, playing fields and a primary school; typical of the small few-hundred-home developments dotted around the towns of the North West. But similar as it is to so many other local developments, to the families and neighbours living there, it is home. They will have precise – and generation-spanning – opinions on the takeaway menu, the maintenance of the sports field, the eccentric Christmas decoration choices of the family at number 11. These few streets have contained the acts of kindness, the small animosities, the lives of these residents for decades. And though community isn't a static state, a dish preserved in aspic, it is this continuity that new residents benefit from, too, when they move into a securely bonded local culture.

So it was a dreadful shock when letters landed on the doormat, telling the residents of the estate that their rent was going up – and going up hugely. Debbie Bennett, who had lived on the estate for many years, told the Manchester Evening News this summer that her rent was to be hiked from £420 to £652. This would be devastating for the community – many would not be able to afford the new rent, and would face great hardship and the

risk of homelessness as a result. They would see their community ripped apart, as though a 'hard reset' button had been pressed.

For the residents it made no sense – their landlord was a housing association, so they had assumed they were protected from this sort of sudden hike. But they weren't at all. The housing association in

**It was a dreadful shock when letters landed on the doormat, telling the residents of the estate that their rent was going up – and going up hugely**

question had quietly sold the homes they lived in to a private property firm whose first act had been to send out the terrifying letters. From presuming they had the security of an affordable social home for life, the Redvales community were now the tenants of private landlords who had every legal right to increase their rents. The future seemed bleak.

What was at stake at Redvales was not just goodwill between tenants and landlord. It was not even the risk of homelessness faced by individuals, horrific as that was. What was at risk was something irreplaceable – a community that knew and supported one another, helped each other to thrive. The community was home – not just the red bricks and what they contained, but the streets around them, familiar and annoying and beloved.

I recently visited another development under construction in the North West. Appleton, just south of Warrington, has a fair amount in common with Redvales. There is a similar red brick estate, a community pub, a primary school (which I attended) – and for many decades a lot of empty fields, lying fallow and marked as private, awaiting development. This land finally got the thumbs-up for said development a couple of years ago.







Over the last 50 years, the average share of their income young families spend on housing has trebled. The number of people living in the private rented sector has more than doubled over the last 20; there are now 11 million people renting privately

I watched the development progress over different sites, all carried out simultaneously by the same developer, but under different project names, which just happens to often be relevant to the amount expected to be contributed to local infrastructure. On one of the sites 30 per cent of the development will be 'affordable homes', a mix of shared ownership and 'affordable' rent (usually around 4/5 of market rents). None of them appear to be social homes. But these are meant to be stellar examples – the prime minister visited this area last year when he announced his intention to 'build back better.' Is it better?

In lockdown I jogged through the sites every day, often hitting dead ends where roads didn't connect. Homes were identical, with out of proportion windows making them feel like a Dr Who or Black Mirror set. You'd need a car to get out here. One finished home had a large printed banner outside it, telling people not to buy there as the small estate had only one entrance which led to constant gridlock at rush hour – and this was even before the full site was finished.

Work by the thinktank Onward has shown how security in your home – whether through ownership or by social housing – contributes to a sense of com-

munity; but will that feeling be created in these kinds of developments? They are built to a model that is being repeated up and down the country. Cheaply built (but not priced) accommodation, reliant on cars, harder to connect to your neighbours...Maybe building back better has to mean building further apart, but I don't think so. In 2019, the Norwich Council-led development at Goldsmith Street won the Stirling Prize for architecture and delivered 105 new social homes. It was, at the time, the biggest UK development built to the Passivhaus standard – meaning residents save 70 per cent on their fuel bills. It is a dense but interconnected development, child-friendly spots leading and blending into each other, encouraging community while providing a sense of space. Developments like these are exciting not just for the housing they provide but because, right now, our country faces three great – and interconnected – crises; crises that this kind of development is uniquely fitted to tackle.

The first one, as exemplified by Red-vales, is the housing emergency. Over the last 50 years, the average share of their income young families spend on housing has trebled. The number of people living in the private rented sector has more than doubled over the last 20; there are now 11

million people renting privately. These people are forced into homes where they have few rights and could be evicted for no reason whatsoever. They know, too, that if they are receiving housing benefit, it will cover only the bottom 30th percentile of rents in their area. That is telling in and of itself; we are spending more than ever on housing welfare, and it is covering less of the cost of rent. That, surely, is what a broken market looks like. When it comes to buying, average house prices are now eight times the average salary – and every year we have seen far more social homes lost from supply than have been built to replace them. In fact, we are losing almost four times as many social housing units as we are building.

Second, we have recently weathered a health crisis. The need to stay indoors for much of 2020 showed that our housing situation in this country was in no way ready for a pandemic. The Health Foundation reported that: "Poor housing conditions such as overcrowding and high density are associated with greater spread of Covid-19, and people have had to spend more time in homes that are overcrowded, damp or unsafe." People in poor housing were not just at greater risk from Covid-19; they faced poor health from the unsuitable housing they were told to stay in.

Social housing does not need to replace private development – it didn't in the golden era of post-war house building, after all. But we can't go on ignoring the former for the latter



Finally, we face the reality of the need to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. We know that much of the housing stock we have was not built for the extreme weather we are starting to experience. Look at how Hackney Wick was so recently redeveloped for the Olympics – derelict factories replaced by aspirational flats and Michelin-starred restaurants – and now faces unsustainable flooding. This area, flagged as being at the greatest risk of flood by the Environment Agency, had, at the time of that assessment, 2,500 new homes under development and planning permission in place for a further 2,000. Cars have already been photographed floating by those Michelin-starred restaurants, and this kind of image, and the damage and loss that goes with it, will only become more common as time passes.

Three great crises of our times, then, each contributing to and amplifying the others, make it harder to keep communities together. I believe it will only be by building together, not apart, that we will be able to contend with them.

There is some progress. Since councils were allowed to take on debt for building homes a couple of years ago, schemes like the one at Goldsmiths Street have become more common. Developments at first associated solely with places like the Duchy of Cornwall's Poundbury are now happening in Hackney, Plymouth, Bourne-

mouth, Bristol. These combine, invisibly, social housing with private ownership. They are architecturally playful, sustainably cheaper and easier to keep cool and warm, and are built largely in urban areas that encourage the use of public transport. They work because these exact outcomes can be set as the development's goal. If the boss is a private developer, they have to turn a profit on a group of units before moving on to the next field. But if the one paying the piper – and therefore calling the tune – is either the local or national government, then improving our society can be the intention from the outset.

Social housing does not need to replace private development – it didn't in the golden era of post-war house building, after all. But we can't go on ignoring the former for the latter. Community is powerful and heady stuff, and we need more of it. In Redvales, it drove the residents to fight for their home, and their homes, contacting local media and getting their story out there, putting pressure on their local politicians, creating a strong campaign that couldn't be ignored. On the evening of a local rally the landlord suddenly called to announce they were dropping their plans. They promised there would be no sudden rent increase, and that anything that came later would be affordable against local housing allowance rates, properly assessed and used for the upkeep of the properties.

It was a great win for the people of Redvales – but a win for community gets rarer and rarer the fewer genuine communities there are. And this is why social housing should be seen as offering more than simple security – it should offer the means of weaving people together, creating a social fabric, creating cohesion not distance and mistrust. Inspired by the now rather dated vision of reformers who led the Garden City movement, there should be a new vision for net zero villages across the country, filled with new social homes within and around our towns and cities. Doing so at scale would go some way to providing the amount of social homes families are waiting for, but also reduce the cost, through mass deployment, of the new zero-carbon technology we need – like heat pumps – at the same time.

Building strong communities is about more than building housing units – it is about building home. And home matters. A good home, beyond the bricks and mortar, is a luxurious state of mind: never having to worry about where you are, or question whether you are truly part of it. Not enough people today have that luxury, but they could – and should, and must – do again.

*Alastair Harper is head of public affairs at Shelter*

---

# Higher standards

*Millions of Northerners spent lockdown in non-decent homes – it is time for politicians to act, argues Tracy Harrison*



The north of England is a great place to live. We have always had amazing natural assets like beautiful national parks and stunning coastlines. In recent years, those natural assets have been augmented by buzzy city centres, as many of our major towns and cities bounced back from the decline of traditional industries and enjoyed a cultural renaissance.

But one legacy of the past that has proven more difficult to resolve is the many thousands of homes which were built at the time when those industries were still thriving. A quarter of the north's homes were built more than 100 years ago, and 40 per cent were built before the end of the second world war – most of these are solid wall terraced homes. These properties account for two-thirds of the 1.4 million homes in the north which do not meet decent homes standards, and because they are also energy inefficient, they make a huge contribution to the north's carbon emissions, a quarter of which come from our existing homes. The vast majority of these non-decent homes are found in the owner-occupied and private rented sectors.

**Households went into lockdown living in homes that were already in a poor state of repair, and we were ill-equipped to respond**

Huge investment in the 2000s through the decent homes programme ensured that the north's social housing reached higher standards, with fewer than one-in-10 of homes in the social housing sector being classed as 'non decent'. Living in a non-decent home means living in a home that fails basic safety standards, is in a state of dis-repair, lacks reasonably modern facilities or services; or fails to offer a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. It is a basic standard, and it is one that is being reviewed as part of the government's social housing reform agenda.

Yet millions of Northerners go to bed every night in one of these properties. And over the last year, they have been doing more than that. These non-decent homes have become temporary offices, classrooms and much more, as we have all spent extended periods of time at home during the lockdowns. Researchers from Huddersfield University, who spent lockdown speaking to those living in poor quality private rented or owner-occupied accommodation for our study *Lockdown, Rundown, Breakdown*, discovered that life under lockdown in poor quality housing was having a range of impacts. Lockdown had led to growing awareness of housing problems that had existed pre-pandemic: "It magnified [the damp] a lot more because I was stuck at home and I couldn't go out anywhere ... before lockdown because life was ... well,

I was busy with the children and things like that, it takes your mind off it a little bit more," said one private renter from Leeds.

Lockdown had increased household bills as people were using gas and electricity more: "Our rent's quite high, and the gas and electric bill is since lockdown ... that has shot up significantly, and I expect that's because we've had six people in the house night and day," said another private renter from Leeds.

Lockdown also made renters wary of reporting repairs, fearing infection or potential retaliation: "If the option is having somebody in my house and putting me at risk of Covid-19 or having the damp for another couple of months until it's a bit less frightening, then I'll choose the latter," a private renter from Bolton explains. "It's always a matter of is he just going to say, 'Sod it; I'm just going to sell up'? There's always that worry. It's not our house. There's no control over that," said another private renter, this time from Bradford.

Issues of housing quality did not begin with lockdown. Rather, households went into lockdown living in homes that were already in a poor state of repair, and we were ill-equipped to respond. As we slowly emerge from the worst of the Covid-19 crisis, we must push for two things. First, strengthen the lifelines that have kept people afloat. The £20 per week increase to universal credit, and the resetting of the local housing allowance so it reflected real local rents, have helped people make ends meet.

And second, we must invest in our existing homes. Investing in green home upgrades is a real win-win: both delivering on net zero targets and levelling up, with scope for 77,000 good green jobs across the north by the 2030s. We need our politicians across the north and beyond to recognise and support this ambition so that we can regenerate our people and our places.

*Tracy Harrison is chief executive of the Northern Housing Consortium*

# A positive choice

*Tackling the stigma that surrounds social housing is vital if we are to win public support for new social homes, writes Melanie Rees*



**S**ocial housing is of huge importance. In England in 2019, over four million households – 16 per cent of the population – lived in what is usually described as ‘social housing’: a home provided by a council, housing association or other organisation on a not-for-profit basis at a below-market rent. It also benefits society by contributing to health and wellbeing, tackling poverty, creating cohesive communities and stimulating the wider economy.

Despite these positive attributes, social housing and the people who live in it are subject to stigma. While this has been a recognised phenomenon for many years, we have recently seen a renewed focus on the issue. Tenants we spoke to for the Chartered Institute of Housing’s Rethinking Social Housing research said that although social housing, its affordability and the security it offers were all valued highly, stigma is a growing issue. As one tenant put it: “Social housing is stigmatised, people assume we are all on benefits. Community housing is a better description – it’s about community.”

It is hard to understand why someone would be judged negatively and even actively discriminated against because they rent their home from a social landlord, yet that is the experience of too many people and their families in England today. The causes are many and multi-layered. The print and broadcast media stoke negative

images of social housing tenants and are too often allowed to demonise them without challenge. Government housing policy and investment prioritises home ownership as the tenure of choice and aspiration and clearly sees social housing as only for the neediest and a waiting room for better things. While the Charter for Social Housing Residents speaks positively and directly to tenants, emphasising the importance of landlords showing them respect and being accountable, it devotes one of its seven chapters to home ownership. It should be possible for people who want to buy a home to do so, but it shouldn’t be promoted at the expense of social housing or by casting it in a negative light.

We can not ignore the part social landlords, their staff and contractors play in creating and reinforcing stigma, both directly and indirectly. The impact of negative language and behaviour and the way some landlords’ services are designed and delivered combine to leave many tenants feeling ignored, unworthy and ‘other’.

**“Social housing is stigmatised, people assume we are all on benefits. Community housing is a better description – it’s about community”**

Working with the tenant-led See the Person campaign, CIH produced *It’s Not Okay*, a guide which encourages housing providers and their staff to reflect on the ways in which they can challenge stigma, listen to and engage with tenants’ concerns and treat tenants with dignity, respect and kindness.

The increasing scarcity of social housing also plays a crucial part in its stigmatisation. Social housing should be so much more than a springboard to home ownership or a short-term tenure for people who have no other choice. It should be there for anyone who wants it, for as long as they want it – but we need a lot more of it for that to happen. As it is, we have an acute shortage of homes at rents that people on low incomes can afford and, in some parts of the country, even people on relatively high incomes are struggling to buy or rent a home.

In the mid-1970s, more than 30 per cent of the population lived in social housing with 27 per cent of them renting from a local authority. When more people lived in social housing there was little stigma attached to it. The introduction of the right to buy for secure tenants under the Housing Act 1980 resulted in the sale of two million homes in England which have never been replaced, despite proceeds totalling £47bn. The homes sold have also tended to be of the most desirable types in the most desirable areas which has further compounded the problem. This substantial reduction in the size of the social rented sector has been accompanied by growing stigma as it has come to be seen as a residualised tenure of ‘last resort’ for people on the lowest incomes and often with the greatest needs.

As the need for homes at genuinely affordable rents is increasing, the existing supply is shrinking. Some 280,000 homes at lower social rents have been sold, converted to higher rents or demolished since April 2012, while just 70,000 social rent homes have been built. Right to buy sales



Social housing has a unique and positive part to play in housing people, helping to create thriving, healthy, mixed communities, and meeting needs that the market will not

this could be reprioritised; and this level of investment would solve our housing crisis in just 10 years.

Although the evidence of the need for more homes is compelling, this is not just about numbers. We need the right types of homes, in the right places and of the right quality, including environmental and space standards. If we ignore this, we will be fuelling a future housing crisis. New homes must also meet a range of needs including those of our ageing population and disabled people. We also have to recognise that different parts of the country face different problems – so the solutions need to be varied.

Social housing has a unique and positive part to play in housing people, helping to create thriving, healthy, mixed communities, and meeting needs that the market will not. It is time to reclaim it as a pillar of the society we want to be. An ambitious programme to build social rented homes must be at the heart of current and future governments' plans to address the housing crisis and kick-start the post-Covid economy. Learning the housing lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, those homes and the areas around them must be well-designed and of the best possible quality so that people can live and put down roots in places they can be proud of. And, by greatly increasing the number of new social rented homes, we will benefit individuals, communities and the nation.

*Melanie Rees was until last month head of policy at the Chartered Institute of Housing*

resulted in a loss of 120,000 homes while conversion to higher 'affordable' rents at up to 80 per cent of market rents accounted for the loss of a further 116,000 homes. On top of this, there has also been a shortfall in new supply as a result of the pandemic. Just 10,531 affordable homes of all types were started under grant-funded programmes in the first half of 2020/21, compared with 17,980 for the same period in 2019/20. While the Conservative government has promised to deliver 32,000 social rent homes outside of London by 2026, this is just 4,000 more than in the previous five years and is not enough to replace homes that will be lost through right to buy sales. Furthermore, analysis by the National Housing Federation in September last year

showed that social rented housing would be the most appropriate tenure for 1.6 million households in England who are in housing need, yet in 2019/20 just 6,566 of those homes were built.

Heriot Watt University's 2018 research commissioned by the NHF and Crisis highlighted a need for 145,000 affordable homes in England each year over the 10 years from 2021 to 2031, 90,000 which would be for the lowest social rents. Investing in social housing on this scale would boost the post-pandemic economy, create jobs and improve people's lives when the country needs it most. A building programme of that scale would need investment of around £12.8bn per year. If this sounds like a lot of money, it's worth considering four things: this is an investment not a 'cost'; councils spent almost £1.2bn providing temporary accommodation for homeless households in 2019/20; the Conservative government already has a £38bn budget for housing but only 46 per cent of it is earmarked for affordable housing with the rest going to support private sector housing initiatives –

Investing in social housing on this scale would boost the post-pandemic economy, create jobs and improve people's lives when the country needs it most

---

# Equal chances

*Housing providers and policymakers must work together to improve the lives of our communities in all their diversity, write Cym D'Souza and Mushtaq Khan*



The brutal death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer in America highlighted the ongoing inequality, racism and discrimination that still scar black peoples' lives across the world. For BME communities it was a painful reminder of the parallels with the systemic racism here in the UK.

Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the inequalities that already exist in our society. Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities have been among those suffering the worst outcomes in the pandemic.

We are now at a tipping point with radical thinking required: those of us who work in housing must work with politicians and policymakers to ensure that how we deliver and manage our housing plays its part in tackling inequality.

Back in the 1980s, race riots in major cities across England, saw Black communities stand up against institutional racism. Recognising the key role housing plays in addressing disadvantage, the Housing Corporation which then funded and regulated social housing, launched its first BME housing policy to support existing and embryonic Black and minority ethnic-led housing associations to develop housing, board members, staff and to add value to the local community. The policy enabled the subsidy programme to be top-sliced to deliver homes directly to

those communities; saw slum clearance and regeneration in the most deprived areas of inner cities, where the majority of BME communities lived; developed housing trainee programmes to encourage young ethnic minority people to develop a career in housing and required targets for diversity in tenant allocations, staffing and on boards. It was a time of great hope for promoting community cohesion and multi-cultural living. Since then, sadly, too many of these targeted programmes have been lost.

It is still the case that BME households are less likely to own their home and many of those that do, live in poor quality, owner occupation. The majority live in rented accommodation that is too often overcrowded, damp and unsafe. Although more in need of social housing, local lettings policies often debar them from access. Add to that the fact that boards and leadership teams of social housing providers are predominantly white, and 30 years on, we see a sector that has gone backwards.

**It is still the case that BME households are less likely to own their home and many of those that do, live in poor quality, owner occupation**

The provision of truly affordable housing for all is a fundamental building block to a healthy, inclusive and prosperous society. Government must have a long-term stake in housing provision and not leave it to market forces to provide our future housing. We see in countries across Europe for example France, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries, that taking a long-term view in setting housing policies, based on the rights of all to decent quality housing, results in the provision of quality, affordable housing. But it is important to remember that it is not just about providing new homes. The poorest in society, many of them from minority ethnic backgrounds, live in non-decent, poor quality homes in the private sector and sometimes in social housing, often in inner-city areas where little or no investment has come from government or owners and landlords for more than 25 years.

The current government's 'levelling up' approach, using the affordable housing programme, as an economic can opener, is scheduled to see an £11.5bn commitment to build affordable housing during the period 2021–2026. Comparing the key tenures in the future programme with total delivery of new homes since 2010 we can see that:

- 180,000 new affordable homes are set to be developed, compared with a total of 517,100 since 2010.
- 90,000 of these – or 50 per cent – will be shared ownership compared with 29.4 per cent for all supply since 2010.
- 32,000 – or 17.7 per cent will be for social rent compared with 28.6 per cent for all supply since 2010.
- The remaining 58,000 – or 32 per cent – will be at so-called affordable rent, compared with 42 per cent for all supply since 2010.

Clearly, the emphasis is being put on encouraging more people into affordable home ownership – even though it remains out of reach for many in our most disadvantaged communities. People who have little job security and are often working on zero-hours contracts, need housing at truly social rents. Shared ownership schemes and even so-called affordable rents at up to 80 per cent of market rents will not meet their needs.

Of the £11.5bn promised by the current government, £4bn is going to London to deliver 35,000 new affordable homes to meet the acute housing affordability challenges for people in the capital, with the remaining £7.5bn earmarked for the rest of the country. In London, there is a distinct emphasis on social rent which reflects the mayoral priorities. This will have a more positive impact on the rehousing chances of minority ethnic communities. More social housing provision can take people out of temporary accommodation (often the only recourse to local authorities responsible for the homeless) into secure and appropriate homes. Elsewhere in the country, it will be a different story.

This country has become a world of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ with class playing a key role in your life chances. If we truly want to improve social cohesion, we will need to address this disparity: different sections of society should not have to compete against each other for limited resources. There is a place in our housing landscape for homes across a range of tenures. However, this should not be at the expense of the poorest, who, as research confirms, are disproportionately from BME backgrounds. Social class should be considered as much a protected characteristic as others, defined within the Equality Act 2010.

For change to happen, we must take a long-term view of what housing in this country needs to look like, not just now but 50 years from now. Policymakers must

tackle a range of issues, delivering new homes for those who desperately need them but also tackling the condition of existing homes. They must too, recognise the crucial role government has to play in investing in housing if we are to have high-quality, long-lasting and safe homes for all our residents. We need a housing system that is fair for everyone, with a greater emphasis on new-built socially rented housing to address the needs and aspirations of all communities, but especially those communities who are the most vulnerable to the impact of inequality. Mainstream housing providers, the housing regulator and government should work together not just at a strategic level but on the frontline. They should use those with the lived experience of not having a decent home to inform their priorities. They should use local knowledge and expertise to build new homes, maintain existing homes and empower communities.

In the private rented sector, the poor condition and management of many homes by some inner-city landlords impacts disproportionately on those from a minority ethnic background. There is a desperate need for rent controls, better regulation and a review of minimum housing standards in this sector. More widely, the structural underrepresentation of people from diverse backgrounds in both leadership and governance positions in the housing sector must end. The Equalities Act 2010 must be implemented through regulation – with consequences for those who do not act. This must be combined with recruitment and retention programmes which help ensure that housing organisations reflect the communities that they serve.

We need a greater role for local, and in particular BME organisations, in an inclusive and open society, providing new spaces and opportunities for local activism and participation in the community.



BME National, a collective of housing associations working in diverse neighbourhoods, has set out a shared ambition for thriving, diverse communities.

Our four priorities are:

- **Ageing well:** creating an environment where older BME people can live healthy and fulfilled lives.
- **Tackling BME homelessness:** enabling people from diverse backgrounds to access and sustain housing.
- **Equality of opportunity:** facilitating access to good quality education, training and jobs for BME people.
- **Diverse and thriving cities:** investing in inner-city areas to facilitate social cohesion and vibrant places to live and prosper for all.

If policymakers and community stakeholders join us, we can together make a real difference in addressing housing inequality and ensuring equality of opportunity.

*Cym D’Souza is the chief executive of Arawak Walton housing association and the chair of BME National*

*Mushtaq Khan is a board member of Manningham housing association and the co-ordinator of BME National*

---

# Hearing their voice

*Tenants must have a real say in the decisions about where they live – and that means politicians need to have the right priorities, writes Jenny Osbourne*



The organisations that provide social housing have huge influence over the lives of their tenants and other residents, such as leaseholders and shared owners. They determine the quality and safety of people's homes, they control the day-to-day services that affect their quality of life, and they plan for the long-term that could result in life-changing regeneration or redevelopment. From the horrifying tragedy at Grenfell Tower to the recent shocking revelations by ITN's Daniel Hewitt over the state of too many council and housing association homes, it is clear that social housing tenants have suffered when their voices have not been heard, or when – shamefully – they have been sidelined, or labelled as troublemakers. Tenants' lives matter; accountability matters; tenant engagement matters.

In an era when many seem to believe that market power and consumer influence will solve everything, the current social housing systems can be disempowering. Structures are often designed to limit access to a limited resource, and priority is given to those displaying the greatest need. Pain and distress are the currencies of this warped system, and in areas of the highest housing need, holding onto your privacy or your dignity feels like simply not an option. For many, social housing is seen as a safety net or, at worst, an ambulance service – there for people in times of trouble but with

the expectation that they will 'recover' and move on. And in this view of social housing, tenants must somehow be lacking in ability, or lacking in ambition. If this is how you see things, no wonder tenants are stigmatised, and why on earth would you listen to them?

Obviously, as chief executive of Tpas, England's leading tenant engagement specialists, I do not subscribe to that image of social housing. It is true that many people come to social housing at a time of crisis, but those I know and work with are generally highly skilled, articulate and committed people. They are working, caring, studying, retired, and they're often involved in multiple volunteering activities – from youth groups to sports clubs, campaigning to supporting older people – and it's the stability and affordability of social housing that makes all this possible. Genuinely affordable social housing is an important part of our national infrastructure, enabling people to support their communities and local economies. The people living in social housing have valuable insights, as well as a fundamental right to have their voices heard.

Social housing, once provided overwhelmingly by councils, is often now managed by arms-length management organisations (ALMOs), such as Stockport Homes where I'm chair; or owned by housing associations, some of them with homes across the UK. Although all social housing

providers have to comply with regulatory standards; the Regulator of Social Housing currently has a restricted remit with very limited powers to intervene over the quality of homes and services. There are almost 1,500 housing associations in England, (80 per cent of them fall under the 'light touch' regulatory regime for smaller HAs, although this accounts for fewer than five per cent of HA homes nationally) and almost 200 local authorities providing social housing directly or through an ALMO. The regulator relies on 'co-regulation' to oversee the sector, and the unpaid work of engaged tenants is critical in making this work. Whilst it might be tempting to see local democracy as the key to accountability – and therefore council ownership as the solution to poor quality homes and services – the evidence does not support this view. Social housing tenants account for fewer than 20 per cent of the electorate, are less likely to vote in national and local elections, and are usually low on the list of priorities for the wider electorate (although housing is seen as an electoral priority in London). As we have seen with the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, lines of accountability can be complex, and liability hard to pin down. Neither local authorities nor housing associations can really be seen as inherently more accountable, and all social housing providers live with conflicting priorities, competing for cash.

So we have got these complex, bureaucratic organisations, providing homes and services to people whose experience of accessing a home has required them to emphasise their challenges not their strengths.

**The people living in social housing have valuable insights, as well as a fundamental right to have their voices heard**



How can the organisations be helped to embrace accountability and become open to influence? And how can disempowered people be supported to hold their landlords to account?

Engagement can be designed and fostered at all levels in an organisation, from governance and service scrutiny through strategy, complaints, communication and providing the right resources to supporting both community and wider engagement. Framework, standards and accreditation, such as those we have developed at Tpas, can help organisations shape their approach. Transparency of information, and practical support, such as access to technology are also important and so too is training for engaged tenants and residents, because there is no one born knowing all the regulatory standards, or the compliance requirements for building safety. Tenants and landlords need opportunities to get together and learn from each other, because no one has a monopoly on good ideas. The move towards digital working can help with this: at Tpas we have learned that online meetings with their chat bars and their emojis can be more inclusive and

## How can the organisations be helped to embrace accountability and become open to influence? And how can disempowered people be supported to hold their landlords to account?

accessible to those with mobility challenges or caring responsibilities. Digital analysis can help landlords learn from tenants' behaviours, as well as from their comments and feedback.

But fundamentally, the ability to listen and learn from tenants comes down to culture, and how that is reflected in the behaviours of everyone in an organisation. Tenants have a real influence in organisations that have the self-confidence and empathy to embrace diverse voices, and the maturity to understand that a friendly and mutually respectful relationship is a sign of strength, not weakness. That kind of partnership relies on trust, which means getting to know tenants and residents as people in all their complexity. It takes time

and patience, and a genuine will to get things right.

So that brings me to national housing policy. There was much to welcome in last autumn's social housing white paper – the Charter for Social Housing Residents. We have been advocating proactive consumer regulation for a while now, so it is important to be working with the Regulator of Social Housing to help shape its new approach. And we have also been encouraged by the developments in tenant participation at the Housing Ombudsman, where a new tenants' panel is engaging regularly on matters of policy.

But positive as this activity is, I can't help reflecting back on the Charter for Social Housing Residents. Whilst it rightly highlighted the stigma that is often associated with social housing, it did not have much to say about how to tackle it. And despite its title, the charter chose to include a final chapter about everything the government is doing to promote home ownership. There is no new policy in that chapter, it is just there to remind us of the administration's priorities. What does that say about the government's attitude to social housing and the people that make it their home? As long as government policy remains so determinedly focused on promoting home ownership, social housing will always be treated as the tenure of last resort – which makes the prospect of a genuinely influential national voice for tenants pretty remote. But we must continue to press for it. Only when tenants across England have a meaningful mechanism to influence and shape national social housing policy will we unlock the potential for the long-term change and the long-term commitment to social housing that this country so desperately needs. And that tenants deserve.

*Jenny Osbourne is chief executive of tenant engagement organisation Tpas and chair of Stockport Homes*



---

# For all ages

*Progressive housing policies must tackle the intergenerational divide, argues Colin Wiles*



Social housing has a proud history in the UK. It provided decent, affordable homes for millions of people for more than 150 years. Nineteenth century philanthropists like George Peabody and Joseph Rowntree built model homes for working people, and by 1900 local authorities had started to build council housing at scale. Over five million council and housing association homes were built between 1900 and 2020, providing safe, secure and affordable homes for millions of families who would otherwise live in overcrowded, insecure and unsanitary conditions.

Yet in recent decades social housing has been attacked, denigrated and dismantled by a succession of governments, relegated to a 'safety net' tenure of last resort, its occupants often stigmatised as scroungers and workshy layabouts. Instead of investment in bricks and mortar, governments have increasingly subsidised rising rents rather than affordable homes.

In 1981 councils and housing associations owned 5.2 million rented homes in England. By 2020 this had fallen to four million, a loss of 1.2 million homes, mainly as a result of homes being sold under the right to buy and not replaced. Home ownership has been promoted as the natural tenure of choice, and almost every government housing initiative since 2010 has been designed to encourage people onto the housing ladder, through such pol-

icies as the misguided Help to Buy scheme. Meanwhile the supply of new social rented housing has dropped almost to nothing.

The housing crisis we now face has an intergenerational aspect. It is the young who are one of the main victims. To begin with, house price inflation has prevented millions of young people from entering the housing market and many have been forced into the private rented sector, often into unsuitable house shares. Only half of people in their mid-30s to mid-40s had a mortgage in 2017, compared with two-thirds 20 years earlier. Overcrowding in both the social and private rented sectors

is increasing, while in the owner-occupied sector more than half of all homes are under-occupied, with too little purpose-built housing available to encourage older owner-occupiers to downsize.

During the pandemic, it is the well-off and well-housed that have been able to deal best with lockdowns. All the evidence shows that the poorly housed – and young people in particular – have suffered most during the last 18 months. Well-housed people have been able to increase their share of the market, buying up properties in the countryside and coastal towns: they have coped relatively well with lockdowns, being able to work and self-isolate in their spacious properties, often with access to a garden. Meanwhile, younger people in shared houses have been unable to benefit from gardens and open spaces, and have found it harder to work at home.

**All the evidence shows that the poorly housed – and young people in particular – have suffered most during the last 18 months**



Then of course, there is the cladding crisis which followed the catastrophic Grenfell Tower fire of June 2017. It is young people who have suffered the most from this crisis: they are more likely to have bought the high-rise flats that are now found to be defective, and many have been landed with huge bills for waking watches and remedial works. Bankruptcies, depression and some cases, suicides, have resulted from this crisis.

How did we reach such a terrible position? It is worth retelling the recent political history of social housing in this country.

From nothing in 1945 the post-War Labour and Conservative governments increased house-building to nearly 300,000 homes a year in England by 1954, of which almost 200,000 were social rented homes. When Harold Macmillan was made housing minister in 1951 he treated it as 'a war job' and boosted UK production to 354,130 per annum of which 239,580 were council houses and only 92,420 were private. The Labour manifesto for the 1964 election said:

*"Labour will also increase the building of new houses, both for rent and for sale. While we regard 400,000 houses as a reasonable target, we do not intend to have an election auction on housing figures."*

During the 1960s building started to rise again, to a peak of over 350,000 homes by 1968 in England, of which 150,000 were social rented and 200,000 private. Private house builders have never since exceeded their 1968 achievement of building 226,070 homes.

So, for 35 years after the war both Labour and Conservative governments competed with each other to build the most homes. They understood the importance of housing as the bedrock of stable civic and neighbourhood life, and recognised the importance of house building for national



## Social housing in 1968 was far more affordable than it is now

economic growth. But above all, they understood the key role of social housing in a mixed economy and promoted the idea of genuinely diverse communities, where renting from a council or housing association had no negative connotations.

Rents and house prices were also relatively low. In 1968 unemployment stood at 2.5 per cent and an average house cost 2.6 times an average income. House prices have increased at roughly four times the rate of general inflation since the seventies, and this has added to the pressures upon the social housing sector. Social housing in 1968 was far more affordable than it is now. The welfare bill was around 6 per cent of GDP. In 1968 many more people could afford to live a decent, productive life without recourse to benefits. Social housing tenants could save and spend as a result of having surplus cash in their pockets. This brought benefits to their local communities as well as the wider economy.

In order to bring an end to the housing crisis, and to ease the plight of younger people in particular, we need to restore the political consensus that existed during the post-war period from 1945 to 1979. All parties need to understand the benefits of genuinely affordable social housing. Investing in 100,000 social rented homes a year would slowly ease pressure on the wider housing market, bringing down rents and house prices. In order to redress some of the intergenerational inequalities, there should be specific schemes aimed at younger people, either to access good quality rented accommodation or to gain a first step on the housing ladder, whether through shared ownership or outright ownership. More too should be done to encourage older homeowners to downsize, including support for new, good-quality retirement homes through the planning system and targeted help for retirement housing providers.

In general, social housing should be let according to need, but the needs of younger people should be recognised and accommodated within this framework.

A sustained programme of social housebuilding – creating a million new homes within a decade – would help to lower private sector rents and to reduce the long-term ratio of house prices to incomes. Younger generations would be a primary beneficiary of such a policy.

Social housing has rescued millions of people from appalling housing conditions and allowed them to lead dignified and useful lives by providing homes at affordable rents. We need a new contract where investment in social rented homes is seen as the foundation stone of a healthy, fair and prosperous society for all age groups.

*Colin Wiles has worked in the affordable housing sector for more than 30 years and is now an independent housing consultant. In 2014 he became a founding member of SHOUT, the campaign for social housing.*

---

# A vital journey

*Making our social housing greener is a once in a lifetime opportunity for our communities and planet, writes Andrew van Doorn*



The drive to deliver net zero in social housing is not about the challenges of retrofitting millions of old homes. It is not about the amount of money it will cost. It is not just about the chance to test and scale new technological solutions that will change the way we live.

It is more than that.

The drive to deliver net zero provides the social housing sector with an unheralded opportunity to fundamentally address inequalities in our society.

It provides social housing with an opportunity to lock investment into our poorest communities across the UK for the benefit of the people who live there.

And it provides social housing with an opportunity to work in partnership with other asset-based organisations to create infrastructures that stimulate and deliver prosperity at a price that we – and the planet – can afford.

But it will not be an easy journey.

The scale of the challenge is huge. Domestic energy consumption accounts for 20 per cent of all UK greenhouse emissions. And social housing accounts for half of these.

Delivering net zero emissions from new builds is the easy part. The Welsh government is showing how it can be done, banning fossil fuel heating systems in all newly constructed social homes from October 2021.

## The drive to deliver net zero provides the social housing sector with an unheralded opportunity to fundamentally address inequalities in our society

The challenge for social landlords is in retrofitting the homes we are already living in and here it is worth remembering that 80 per cent of the homes we will be inhabiting in 2050 have already been built.

In one sense, of course, the social housing market is perfect for this task. Just as it demonstrated in delivering on the last Labour government's Decent Homes standard, social housing can be encouraged and supported to take a longer term view of housing quality and performance. At the same time, the size of the sector – 4.5 million homes – is a sufficiently large market to develop and deploy scalable retrofit solutions that can then be used across other tenures.

With social housing at the forefront of the innovation needed to decarbonise our nation's homes, we can accelerate and test the many solutions that will be needed, now and in the future.

But retrofitting won't be cheap. One estimate is that it will cost £104bn to decarbonise the UK's social housing stock.

Thus far, the government has committed to a social housing decarbonisation fund of £3.8bn over the next 10 years.

So there is a significant funding gap that has to be met. Greater ambition and urgency will be needed to create the environment for accelerated change. After all, as professor Sir David King, former chief scientific advisor to the last two Labour prime ministers, recently said: "There's no argument. We have four to five years to put in place everything that is required to manage civilisation for the next millennium."

At the same time, there is also an issue around technology. The sector's size means it can and should be used as a testing place for technological solutions that might improve energy efficiencies.

A word of warning, though. These technological improvements might improve energy efficiencies, but they may also result in negative impacts on residents living in those homes, as some of the recent experiments with heating networks have shown, leaving many residents with huge bills and without hot water.

Co-creation and engaging with residents to understand their environmental challenges is going to be key to enabling the sector to effectively manage its journey to net zero carbon, as highlighted in a recent report from PlaceShapers and TPAS.

For many, this approach – taking a whole home or deep retrofit approach – will be critical to the success of the social housing sector's journey to net zero. At the moment, there has been a lot of tinkering around the edges, looking at replacing boilers or improving EPC ratings.

On their own, these might result in reduced carbon emissions. But they will not result in homes and communities that are fit for living for the future.

When we consider the many other climate risks posed to current housing, from flooding to heatwaves, building or retrofitting homes to be warmer will only be one part of the solution. Trends indicate

that extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, are becoming increasingly frequent. It is alarming to note that four out of five social homes are at risk from overheating, while one in five social homes are not relatively safe from flooding.

If the social housing sector is driven solely by an ambition to reduce energy emissions and hit net zero targets, it will risk building and retrofitting housing that won't be able to cope with the volatilities of a future climate. We do not want to find ourselves 10 years down the line having to choose between providing carbon costly air conditioning, or seeing the health and wellbeing of our residents suffer. Adaptability will be key, not only to variances in temperatures, but also to the demands of geographical differences in climate.

When we think about what's happening globally, we talk about interconnected ecological systems. We need to be applying that same perspective to how we deliver the net zero carbon agenda, exploring how local and community-based interconnected systems and economies can become a driving force for investment and change.

The investment we need to make in our homes has to benefit those who live there as well as those who live in our communities. The opportunity for the social housing sector is to take a social procurement approach that develops local markets, local green enterprises and other local social purpose businesses, which provide long-term sustainable employment for people living in our homes.

People living in social homes should not just be passive recipients of environmental improvements to their homes. We must enable them to be active contributors and co-designers, benefiting from the huge investment we need to make. We need to deliver the solutions and behavioural change together and ditch the paternalism that is too often rife across the social sectors.

The decarbonisation agenda should be framed around the agenda for social jus-

tice. Social housing organisations should be mindful of the importance of a just transition, so that those who are already economically vulnerable, as well as those who may become more vulnerable as part of decarbonisation, are not negatively affected by our decarbonisation plans. The closure of the South Wales coalfields in the 1980s is a stark example of the social costs that can result without a just transition plan in place.

### Social value should be used to enable us to understand the impact of environmental changes we make on the wellbeing of local people

This is where our understanding and drive for social value can play a part. Like decarbonisation, social value is not an abstract concept. Delivering impact with people and communities is real, and how we design, plan for, and enhance this, must be part of everything we do. Social value should be used to enable us to understand the impact of environmental changes we make on the wellbeing of local people. We should look to drive further social value in how we act, in how we spend our resources and how we partner with businesses and people. We have to use social value to be transformational.

Local authorities face many of the same challenges around retrofit as housing associations. They do, however, have the advantage of being key actors in drawing up the priorities and opportunities for the communities they serve. They have the levers for driving place-based transformation that stretches much further than housing and the built environment. But many lack the revenue and readily available access to capital needed for the task ahead.

Housing associations, by contrast, have relatively easy access to funding. They can also blend funding from sources like the Shared Prosperity Fund and from institutional investors not only to deliver on net zero, but also to work alongside local authorities and other asset-based organisations – like health organisations – which are also committed to their communities for the long term.

The power of these anchor institutions working together will be a key enabler to deliver a just transition. The creativity of anchor networks and partnerships has only just begun to be realised. As an example, a new energy centre for Northwick Park Hospital that will increase the annual carbon savings of the hospital by around 2500 tones, will also provide affordable energy for the local homes being built by Network Homes on the same site.

Imagine the NHS, local government, local education bodies and social housing organisations working together to deliver the infrastructure needed to deliver on net zero, while simultaneously stimulating sustainable local economies.

To do this we need to act now, but also take the long-term view. Economic and social development and the net zero ambition cannot be delivered overnight. But with new collaborations, creativity, and investment we can as a country drive the social justice we need and deliver a future that values and protects people, places and the planet.

We need to use the social housing sector's journey to net zero as an opportunity to transform the homes and communities our people live in and put wellbeing and social value at the heart of our plans.

And to those who say that this is going to cost too much to deliver, my response is simple: how much will it cost if we do nothing?

*Andrew van Doorn is chief executive of HACT. He writes here in a personal capacity*

# Another country

*Building more social housing in rural areas would help tackle disadvantage in the countryside, writes Martin Collett*



The picture for social housing in the countryside is bleak. Decades of underinvestment, erosion of stock through right to buy and an urban bias within Whitehall policymaking are the primary reasons for this. Two facts show the scale of the challenge. First, social housing in rural areas equates to just 8 per cent of stock compared to 19 per cent in urban. Second, in rural areas the house price to earnings ratio stands at 9.5 for lower income households, compared with 7.5 in major urban locations, pricing many out of a home.

For low-income households living in the countryside the lack of access to an affordable home is compounded by a wall of disadvantage. Higher living costs, reduced transport options and limited access to services. Research suggests that on average these households spend £1,400 per year more on transport, household goods and services than their urban peers. They also earn, on average, less. Young people in rural areas have reduced access to education, training, and employment accounting for an outward migration of 16 to 30-year-olds. By contrast, overall net migration is from urban to rural locations and there are proportionately 8 per cent more households over retirement age in rural areas compared to urban; a trend set to continue.

The national reaction to the coronavirus pandemic has shone a light on synergies

between rural and urban – including on issues such as the relationship between food production and national wellness, climate emergency response and energy production. The countryside will play a leading role in tackling these and to do so will rely on a skilled local workforce, who will need a secure and affordable home.

A shift from urban to rural living has accelerated since the pandemic, but only for those with the financial means. Estimates are that an extra 124,000 more urban households could make this move over the next decade. Without a sensible plan to build more rural homes things will only get worse. Low-income families will face a stark choice. To move away from their communities, places of work and support networks or accept even harsher inequalities.



## What social housing offer does the countryside need?

Directed by the National Planning Policy Framework, local planning authorities seek to support growth. More homes, more businesses, and more services to provide for them. Pace, price, and politics have resulted in rural communities and low-income families living in them being left behind.

There is no silver bullet that will resolve this. Instead, rural advocates have consistently called for a series of policy measures that will deliver short, medium, and longer-term benefit.

Ten steps to a better social housing environment would be:

- 1. Halt right to buy sales in rural areas.** Social housing erosion through the right to buy policy has devastated and disadvantaged rural communities. The meagre replacement ratio has been one to eight. Halting the policy will prevent further decline and reassure landowners and communities, encouraging increased support and land supply.
- 2. Funding for rural housing enablers.** Rural communities are well placed to understand and address the need for more social homes. Through neighbourhood plans, housing needs surveys or community-led action, they have a role to play in creating place-based solutions. The support and brokerage role carried out by rural housing enablers has been shown to translate local activism into social housing delivery.
- 3. Plan for rural housing growth.** All too often delivery of social homes in rural areas results from windfall, rather than planned-for, growth. Supply pressures have created an environment in which larger urban sites are prioritised. In many areas, there is little or no positive planning policy for the countryside.

Rural housing needs should be measured and planned for within growth ambitions, either through site allocations or the rolling use of the rural exception site approach.

4. **Local influence on affordable housing contributions.** Where market sites emerge in rural areas, local planning authorities should have the ability to determine their own reasonable on-site affordable housing threshold and contributions. Increased local discretion and control would enhance land availability, whilst better managing land value expectations and site viability negotiation.
5. **Protect the integrity of rural exception sites.** The mainstay of delivery in small rural communities, but trust has been eroded through the introduction of entry level exception sites and more recently first homes exception Sites. Both policies have raised land value expectation, stalled site availability and will reduce the supply of genuinely affordable social homes.
6. **Increase the level of public investment.** In 2020 the government's housing agency Homes England introduced a 10 per cent rural delivery target. Instead, an investment-focused target should be set at a level based on the chronic nature of the affordable rural housing crisis. This would encourage a greater degree of confidence and interest.
7. **Simplify rural definitions.** Rurality directly impacts the ability to deliver and protect social homes. Exemptions from policies such as the right to buy and first homes exception sites, the threshold at which on-site affordable homes are required or whether public investment counts towards an agreed

rural target are all impacted. Rural advocates believe that a more current, simpler, and transparent approach is needed.

8. **Proper funding for rural planning authorities.** Financial pressure means that rural planning authorities are overwhelmed and can lack an adequate skill base. Actions are often reactive, focused on larger urban sites that better meet delivery targets. Capacity to effectively manage social housing delivery through smaller rural sites is rare. Design, place, and beauty are elements essential to good social housing provision and risk falling short when planning authorities are under-resourced.
9. **Promote good design and high quality.** The way that social homes look is important, but so is the way that they perform and meet the needs of those who live in them. Energy efficient homes will address the premium costs of rural living and lack of access to services. Homes that can be adapted to meet lifestyle changes and health vulnerabilities will also deliver long term savings. The way that people live is changing. Social residents are not separate from this and traditional views on sustainability that disadvantaged rural development should be revised.
10. **Tackle social housing stigma.** The stigma associated with social housing has gone on for too long. Tackling this prejudice will remove barriers to delivering more homes. To thrive, rural communities need greater diversity and a clearer understanding of the benefit this secures. Whether it is better access to services, economic growth, productivity gains or enhanced social fabric, all rely on more social homes being built.

**Investing in a programme of social house building in rural communities would secure a lifeline for disadvantaged economies and those in need of a home they can afford.**

**The economic and societal gains that social homes in the countryside deliver**

Small-scale developments in rural communities have a big impact and are often the largest investment in a generation. With a greater dependence on construction, as well as tourism and retail, rural economies have been amongst the hardest hit by the business and financial consequences of the pandemic. Investing in a programme of social house building in rural communities would secure a lifeline for disadvantaged economies and those in need of a home they can afford. Research shows that building just 10 affordable rural homes would secure a £1.4m boost for the local economy. The same research evidenced that over a 30-year cycle, each home would boost productivity, save welfare support, and overall improve public finances by £54,000. Social homes provide somewhere for a local workforce to live and customers that will help rural businesses and services succeed.

There is also a strong social argument for investing in social homes in the countryside. They keep family and support networks together, improving individual wellness and health. Social homes ensure that rural communities remain diverse and accessible places, where low-income households have access to a safe, warm, and secure home, with the life opportunities that this affords them.

*Martin Collett is chief executive of English Rural housing association*

# Blazing a trail

*Local authorities face huge challenges in building council housing at scale. But Paul Dennett sets out how his council is attempting to do just that*



When I was elected Salford mayor in May 2016, tackling our city's housing crisis was amongst my top priorities.

With more than 6000 residents still on the housing waiting list it remains a significant and growing challenge. The ongoing regeneration in Salford clearly shows that it is a place where people want to live and work. That demand has created economic growth, opportunity and has breathed life back into areas of our city which were decimated by deindustrialisation, but few of the new housing developments have been 'affordable' to either buy or rent given the average income of Salford's residents.

In my initial term, the council changed its planning policy to ensure more affordable homes are delivered by private developers and that, coupled with homes delivered by registered providers (hous-

ing associations), started to deliver more 'affordable' homes on the ground. But it is nowhere near enough.

So, to ensure that the longstanding residents of our city are not priced out of their communities, we took the decision to directly intervene in the market by securing and building new homes. Our approach involved the creation of a wholly-owned council housing company, Derive, whose fundamental mission is to build and deliver council housing at scale, contributing to tackling the housing and homelessness crisis we face in the city.

**We believe that council housing, provided at scale, can have a hugely positive effect on the housing market more broadly**

Derive will also look to deliver alternative housing including market rent accommodation to support the affordable provision and provide a genuine alternative to private sector rented properties. We believe that council housing, provided at scale, can have a hugely positive effect on the housing market more broadly; providing positive competition with the private rented sector, increasing standards and putting downward pressure on rents, and even encouraging home ownership by allowing for tenants to save for their own deposit and mortgage.

Derive is already on site with 97 homes, with plans to deliver 3,000 homes within the next 10 years. We have also applied for Derive to become a registered provider and we hope this will be secured by the end of 2021. RP status is essential if we are to secure Homes England grant funding to support our future delivery ambitions.

This has all been achieved from a standing start and to get to this point we have had to overcome many obstacles, and still face numerous more which continue to compromise the speed and scale of our ambitions in the city.

When I first told council officers at Salford that our intention was to build council housing again, the overwhelming response was that it was effectively impossible to do so in a sustainable manner at scale.

For a great many years, national policy had rendered the sustainable development of council housing uneconomical, primarily because of the right to buy, a policy which poses several key problems for councils that wish to build council housing. The first, most obvious, problem is the obligation on the council to sell the home at discount should a qualifying tenant wish to purchase.

In the first instance, the discount offered to tenants effectively means that a significant amount of the investment in a given property is lost by the council in the event of a sale. Add to this, up until





---

April this year the bulk of the receipt of sale returned not to that local authority, but to the Treasury nationally. Since April 2021 have had the right to receive the full receipt, however this money still has the value of the subsidy subtracted from it and if it is not spent within five years, it returns to government. Then there is the issue of land: government seemingly assumes that councils are awash with land to build new homes on, which simply isn't the case, especially after 11 years of austerity in which the realisation of council assets has been critical in trying to offset central government cuts, as well as being used to grow the local economy, especially in post-industrial parts of the UK.

A further problem with the right to buy is that it leaves councils unable profile the debt they accrue from developing the homes – due to the asset (the council house) being insecure. Profiling debt repayments – sometimes over a period of 30 to 40 years – is a hugely important element in enabling borrowing to develop council houses. When making these calculations, councils will not only be profiling their risk against the value of the 'asset', but also the rental income which it will accrue over a given period of time. Right to buy fundamentally removes this security, rendering it impossible for councils to develop new homes sustainably through borrowing.

Another obstacle to building homes is the absence of government grant for council housebuilding. In years past, significant sums would have been available either at heavily discounted rates of borrowing through public sector financial institutions like the Public Works Loans Board, or through housing revenue accounts.

At the time I was elected leader in 2016, borrowing from housing revenue accounts was capped well below the level needed to build new homes – although these restrictions have since been lifted. But in other areas, the government has

consistently made it more and more difficult for councils to borrow.

After many years of austerity and budget cuts for local government, the question of accessing finance is an acute one.

All in all – the twin issues of right to buy, and the interrelated question of accessing sufficient capital, were widely considered to be insurmountable blocks to delivering council homes for rent on any kind of scale. Our project could therefore have been stymied at the first hurdle, had it not been for the influence of our determined lead member for housing, the late councillor Paul Longshaw.

The initial model of Derive reflected Paul's determination to get a project – any project – off the ground and the evolution of Derive and what it delivers will be his legacy. Sadly, he passed away less than two years into my term – but any account of the building of Derive would be remiss not to note his contribution.

In the first instance, Derive's business model was based on projects funded 100 per cent through the council via borrowing through the city council's capital budget or commuted Section 106 monies from other developments – allowing for the homes to sit outside of the scope of right to buy. The early model was predicated on building no more than 300 new units over a five-year period, with most, if not all, acquired through purchases of homes built by alternative developers negotiated through Section 106.

Following the development of Derive's first homes, I returned to officers to request a review of existing Derive arrangements, with an aspiration to deliver at a far greater scale. As our explorations deepened, it became clear that inhouse development could reduce costs, particularly on council-owned land. It was also recognised that to attract Homes England grant, Derive would need to develop an official registered provider model. And we also wished to integrate the council's desire for

*The model is enabling us to expand our initial aspirations, and exponentially increase our aspirations for housing delivery. However we are not out of the woods*

Derive developments to represent the best of low-carbon energy consumption into the plans.

Our new structure is a bespoke solution to meet the city's needs, based on these demands. Through it, Derive has been transformed into a cluster of organisations operating under the Derive branding, each pursuing a separate area of the development process – initially split between the inhouse development vehicle of Derive, and the management organisation.

The model is enabling us to expand our initial aspirations, and exponentially increase our aspirations for housing delivery. However we are not out of the woods. Becoming a registered provider brings with it the risk that some of our homes may be subject to the 'right to acquire', legislation which extends elements of the right to buy into the social housing sector. Continued local government austerity continues to put pressure on our budget. Post-Brexit and post-Covid, we have also seen a dramatic rise in construction costs – and access to land remains a perennial issue.

But the distance that we have come over a short period of time, and in the face of huge obstacles, is a true testament to the commitment and dedication of all of those who have put in place such a huge effort to get this company off the ground. We hope it can offer a good example to councils up and down the country.

*Paul Dennett is the Labour mayor of Salford*

