NewStatesman

Spotlight

HOUSING / HOW DO WE FIND 300,000 NEW HOMES PER YEAR?

Sadiq Khan / Lord Hollick / Helen Williams

Girls wanted – construction is #notjustforboys

Christine Townley, executive director of Construction Youth Trust, on the organisation's campaign to encourage young women to consider careers in the building sector

At Construction Youth Trust we are celebrating the first year of our hugely successful campaign encouraging young women to look at the opportunities that careers in the built environment can offer – because construction is #notjustforboys.

The #notjustforboys campaign aims to get young people talking about which careers are best for them. We hope this will lead to more young women looking at the hundreds of options in the construction industry.

It has been known in the industry for many years that we face a skills shortage caused by an ageing workforce. In a post-Brexit Britain it is vital that the industry secures the talent and skills needed, by ensuring the next generation is supported to consider and pursue Stem careers (science, technology, engineering and maths) – and this needs to include women.

Construction Youth Trust has been named as Education Partner and is hosting a fringe event at the Construction Industry Summit in London on 21 September. The event will form part of the #notjustforboys campaign with a panel discussion and Q&A on ways the industry can attract more women, both by celebrating success and by removing barriers.

The break-out session will feature the launch of the second edition of the Smith Institute report about women in construction sponsored by Scape Group, the CITB and the Willmott Dixon Foundation. The Trust issued a monograph with the Smith Institute, *Building the Future: Women in Construction* in 2014, which brought together a range of high-profile industry representatives, MPs and others to make the case for supporting more young women into the industry. The report's initial success was the inspiration for the #notjustforboys campaign, and its continued success has led to a second edition – *#notjustforboys: Women in Construction*. The report shows that only 11 per cent of construction workers are female and only 1 per cent of those on site.

As the current workforce ages and retires, we need to do more to nurture talent, recruit and retain the numbers needed. There is a need for skills, experience and talent in all areas, from the professions to the trades. We need architects and bricklayers, surveyors, site supervisors, project managers, plumbers, electricians and plasterers. To build a construction industry for the 21st century, women must become a key part of the workforce.

We call for the following:

- The encouragement of young women into the industry through the provision of courses and education;
- Careers support for girls and young women to ensure that they see construction as a realistic option;
- Employers' action to address workplace sexism, and development of family-friendly policies;
- Government support for girls and young women on to construction-based training courses.

Construction Youth Trust works to remove barriers for young people who would like a career in construction. Through free taster courses, we introduce them to various aspects of the industry and inspire them to look at construction as a career option. We are asking everyone to share their stories and join in the conversation at #notjustforboys. We hope this will bring about a sea change in thinking, and in practice, and inspire more organisations to join our mission.

To find out more visit: www.notjustforboys.co.uk

CONSTRUCTION
YOUTH TRUST

Gaps in the brickwork

In the hours following the Brexit vote, Britain's housebuilders appeared to be in dire trouble. About £8bn was wiped off the share value of the UK's four biggest domestic construction companies, with two of the biggest – Taylor Wimpey and Persimmon – losing roughly a quarter of their value. And yet, as prices plummeted, directors at Taylor Wimpey and the Berkeley Group are reported to have bought tens of thousands of shares in their own companies. At Grainger, one of the UK's largest property managers and developers, and at Savills, one of the country's largest estate agents, executives and directors are also reported to have invested heavily in their own businesses on the day their shares slumped. Perhaps this was a heroic attempt to reassure other investors, but estate agents are not known for heroics. A more likely explanation is that the people who build and sell Britain's homes know that they are offering a product for which demand hugely outstrips supply. The inflation that results from this is so reliable – it has averaged an annual 6.9 per cent increase for almost 35 years – that share prices in the industry could not help but rise again; they have done so already.

So, to expect that businesses might solve the housing crisis is to hope that they will willingly alter the situation that guarantees their sustained profit. Only government has the necessary muscle: in the 15 years between 1945 and 1960 local authorities built 2.53 million homes, peaking at over 219,000 per year. Even today, stock built in the postwar years adds up to almost 10 per cent of the country's housing. Last year, local authorities in England completed just 1,910 homes; the private sector built 111,630. In this supplement, you will hear from two of the country's most qualified voices, Sadiq Khan and Lord Hollick, on how we can begin to close the divide between supply and demand; between those who own property and those who don't; between what we should expect in a modern society and the present reality.

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Building greater numbers of truly affordable homes, improving standards in the rented sector, and tackling rough sleeping: the capital's new mayor, Sadiq Khan, sets out an ambitious programme

SHUTTERSTOCK

In London, we are hitting the ground running

Fixing our capital's housing crisis is going to be a marathon, not a sprint. I want to be honest from the start – we'll work flat out to make a difference but we're not going to fix this overnight. And that's clearer than ever when you look at the mess we inherited.

When we arrived in City Hall, I asked for an immediate audit of what we had inherited from Boris Johnson. The situation was even worse than we feared. The audit showed that last year he built the lowest number of affordable homes since records began 25 years ago. The planning permissions for new homes he oversaw last year led to just 13 per cent being affordable. And rough sleeping doubled on his watch, a scar on our city after a Labour government and mayor dramatically reduced rough sleeping at the start of this century.

Let's not forget Boris's other legacy. His involvement in the successful campaign for Brexit has bestowed great uncertainty on London's housing industry. It has made our job that much harder, and it has made it even more important that we support the housing industry and give those who want to build homes as much certainty as we can.

In this climate, we knew we had to hit the ground running, which is why we've set up a new team at City Hall, called Homes for Londoners. Our team will draw together and strengthen housing, land, planning and development capacity across the Greater London Authority and its related bodies. I'm pleased to have authorised its first recruits who will be joining in the autumn: new "viability" experts who will make sure developers' applications include as much affordable housing as possible.

But we know that City Hall alone will not get London building – it needs everyone with a stake to come together.

Everyone with a stake must come together

So we have been criss-crossing London, speaking to councils of all political affiliations, housing associations, developers and homebuilders of all sizes, investors and businesses, and, of course, Londoners themselves to galvanise support around our plans to build more new and affordable homes.

This wide coalition – businesses, housing associations, councils, developers, homebuilders, investors and Londoners – is behind us as we make the case to central government that London needs substantial investment in affordable housing, which is essential to ensuring that London remains not only a vibrant city but a global centre of economic success. A recent report commissioned by the Peabody Trust and the CBI, *The Business Case for Affordable Housing*, underscored the strength and breadth of the coalition behind my plan to be a mayor for all.

We need investment that recognises both the scale of the challenge, and the need for different sorts of affordable homes. We know that "starter homes" at £450,000 won't be affordable to most Londoners, so we need to build more shared ownership homes that first-time buyers can afford. And we know that London needs homes for rent, too – whether that's social housing or homes offered at my new London Living Rent to people stuck in the middle.

We've had backing from across London for our plans to build more homes on surplus land owned by the public sector, starting with land under the control of Transport for London (TfL). I've made it clear that, from the autumn, TfL needs to bring forward its sites with higher levels of affordable housing, and that I want to bring forward land owned by other public-sector landowners, too. Boris Johnson led a London Land Commission that identified public land, but it included all landholdings, regardless of whether they were likely to be developed or not. It even earmarked 10 Downing Street! My team has been working with the NHS, Network Rail and central government to move beyond the commission's broad stock-take towards a programme of sites ready to have housing built on them.

New planning rules will be published in the autumn to set out how we expect more affordable housing to be built and what we think "affordable" means. These will give everyone greater certainty, speeding up development and ensuring schemes include many more affordable homes. We'll also be helping to drive up standards for private renters by naming and shaming rogue landlords, and my team has agreed with homelessness charities that they'll be part of a task force, launching in the autumn, bringing them together with boroughs and central government, to start getting rough sleeping back under control.

It will take time for these changes to have an impact, but Londoners can feel confident that we are working hard every day to get the city building the affordable homes we need.

After an eight-month inquiry into the housing shortage, peers from across the political spectrum are calling for a fundamental shift in government policy. Lord Hollick has some ideas for the Chancellor

Councils have the will. Allow them to build

In her first speech as Prime Minister, Theresa May put a high priority on housebuilding. Her Chancellor announced that he was easing his predecessor's debt reduction targets. Could this be a government prepared to provide the funding to local authorities to build the homes we need, in particular social housing, if we are to tackle decades of underinvestment in housing stock?

There are multiple problems; none of them is new. House prices have increased sharply since the mid-1990s and continue to rise. First-time buyers are getting older and wealthier. Private tenants spend an increasing proportion of their income – the latest figures suggest 43 per cent – on rent. Social tenants have moved in large numbers from social and council-owned homes to the more expensive and insecure private sector.

These difficulties arise because of a long-term failure to tackle the inadequate supply of new homes. The House of Lords economic affairs committee recently concluded an eight-month inquiry into the housing market. The report, agreed by peers from across the political spectrum, concludes that the focus of government policy is too narrow and its policies too short-term and often conflicting. It recommends a more radical shift in approach.

The new housing minister, Gavin Barwell, has reaffirmed his predecessor's commitment to building a million homes. Alongside this runs the government's manifesto commitment to double the number of first-time buyers. The committee questioned whether these are the right targets. Experts lined up to tell the committee that one million homes by 2020, or 200,000 homes a year, would not be enough. To begin to meet demand, tackle the backlog, and moderate house prices and rental levels,

The Heygate estate in south London, which comprised over 1,200 council flats, has been demolished. Just 82 of the new homes will be social rented

We need to build 300,000 homes a year

at least 300,000 homes a year are needed. In other words the government needs to increase its target by 50 per cent.

The intended recipients of the million new homes are owner-occupiers. The government's focus on home ownership neglects other tenures; those on the cusp of ownership are helped and those who need secure, low-cost rental accommodation are not.

Historically, local authorities were the largest builders of new homes. In the decade to 1959 councils built over 1.4 million homes. By 2009, local authorities had only built just over 2,000 homes in the preceding ten years. The gap has not been filled by the private sector or by housing associations.

Local authorities are, the committee was told, eager to build. But they cannot borrow to build social housing. The complex rules laid down by Whitehall are geographically arbitrary (some local authorities can borrow more than others) and anomalous. Local authorities can borrow to build a swimming pool but not to build social housing.

The restraints were imposed partly to meet the previous Chancellor's fiscal rules. This was short-sighted. Taking advantage of low borrowing rates to fund income-generating social housing makes economic sense. An increase in social housing would provide secure tenancies for renters and reduce the long-term housing benefit bill. The new Chancellor should abolish or relax restrictions on local authority borrowing.

Over one-fifth of freehold land in London is owned by public authorities. In other urban areas about 15 per cent of land is owned by public bodies. It has been estimated that up to two million homes could be built on public land nationwide and 130,000 of those in London. It is essential that the release of public land announced in the 2015 Autumn Statement is properly managed. Leadership should be provided by a senior cabinet minister who has overall responsibility for identifying sites and cajoling departments into releasing their surplus land. The National Infrastructure Commission should take the lead in overseeing the release of identified land and in monitoring to ensure that the homes promised are built.

Local authority planning departments are under-resourced and understaffed. If local authorities were allowed to increase planning fees and ring-fence the money for planning, they could run a more efficient service. At the other end of the system is the issue of the gap between the number of planning consents granted in a year and the number of houses built. We recommend that local authorities be given discretion to charge council tax on developments that are not completed within an agreed time.

We must build enough homes to make housing more affordable for everyone to rent or to buy. This ambition must be matched by political will. The Prime Minister and Chancellor can now demonstrate that they are prepared to make the fundamental reforms required.

How the housing sector can save on energy and costs

Outsourcing utility bill management can result in surprisingly large savings for landlords, writes Alan Little

Since April 2016, social housing rents have dropped 1 per cent and will do so each year for the next four years. This has made many housing associations seek new ways to cut costs. With a more strategic and transparent approach to energy procurement, accurate consumption data and better supplier contracts, significant savings can be found.

What savings can be made?
Ensure you pay only for the energy you use. This can be achieved by fully validating invoices. This entails checking over 50 elements, ranging from dates, meter readings and unit rates to all non-commodity charges. Undertaking this process in-house will result in billing errors being missed, and possible overpayment. Validation software will detect more errors than a manual process. In most cases, the savings more than pay for the service.

Challenges faced by the sector
Housing organisations are required to manage large estates' utility data which have a relatively small consumption. This can often present the challenge of being able to justify sufficient resources to manage all of the important and detailed data. By opting for an experienced outsourced bureau provider you can help to ensure that large energy contracts and utility data are dealt with effectively.

Here at STC Energy, part of Inspired Energy plc, social housing is one of our main market sectors. We provide an energy and water bill validation service which checks that the bills are correct before payment, ensuring refunds are provided, should an error have been made. Our service is focused on helping the housing sector achieve significant efficiency gains in accounts, estates, energy, procurement and building management departments. Since 2005 we have recovered over £142m in billing errors for our clients.

Our transparent approach to energy procurement is also important for social landlords, who must pass on costs. These charges need to be fair and open to challenge. Our web portal allows users to see copies of their bills. This service will help to reduce queries from tenants and therefore reduce admin. All our services can be tailored to meet specific needs, and agreements can be amended at any time.

The key features of our service are:
- Energy portfolio database set-up and management
- Utility invoice collection and preparation of electronic invoice files
- Bill validation, correction and query management
- Production of invoice payment files and cataloguing of paper invoices
- OJEU compliant frameworks
- Cost-coded utility invoices
- Handling of all invoice reminders and threats of disconnection
- Online energy reports/dashboards
- Online meter reading service
- Half-hourly and AMR profile data collection and management

Compliance
Legislation requires stringent OJEU frameworks to be used. STC Energy has a transparent approach to procurement and provides OJEU frameworks, and also has thorough knowledge of Section 20. We understand the challenges the housing sector faces, including internal rules, so that you can be confident in complying with procurement legislation.

Want to know more? Call Alan Little on 020 8466 2915. Find us at EMEX 2016, stand B36

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ENERGY BUREAU SPECIALISTS

A helping hand through the maze of regulations

All too often, housing projects are held up by delayed building control sign-offs. But it no longer needs to be this way, says jhai's Terry Warren

If the construction industry is going to catch up with the UK's huge need for housing, it will need to take a fast, proactive and efficient approach to necessities such as building control.

The good news is that there are signs of progress. Building control used to be a phrase that struck fear into the hearts of architects and developers. Often it would herald the arrival of an officious council inspector with a clipboard who would list every building regulations contravention that might apply. But those days are gone. Building control is now a market in which companies compete to offer the most helpful, efficient and cost-effective service.

As one of the largest approved inspectors in the UK homebuilding sector, jhai offers this government-licensed service to thousands of commercial and domestic construction projects as an alternative to local authority building control. Last year alone, jhai carried out 12,000 approvals, quickly, efficiently and professionally. A well-managed building control process, with well-structured plan checking, site visits and observation of structure, fire, access and energy, can help any project run more smoothly, be it a small self-build (jhai supports the burgeoning self-build homes movement and is a business partner of both the National Custom & Self Build Association and the National Self Build & Renovation Centre) or a major development.

So why are so many projects still being held up by delayed building control sign-off? One reason is that the sector suffers from a skills shortage. Competition for qualified surveyors is fierce, and many local authorities and approved inspectors struggle to keep up the required level of plan checks and site visits. Too often, a builder will secure planning permission and be ready to start, only to face the costly delays that can arise from non-compliance with the regulations.

For this reason, jhai is not only recruiting qualified surveyors and graduates, but it's investing in the University College of Estate Management's Trailblazer Apprenticeship Scheme. Subsidised in part by the government, this supports GCSE and A-level students through a building control surveying degree while learning on the job. This career option is open not only to the young – workers such as bricklayers or carpenters, who might be seeking to leave life "on the tools", can use their experience and knowledge to gain a fast-track qualification.

Jhai has always provided free building regulations training to architects, developers and builders, and so is well qualified to develop and educate new recruits alongside the required college courses. It has recently expanded its seminar programme to partner with the Green Register architects' group to provide expert seminars on energy and CO_2 emission requirements in buildings.

For many years, jhai has participated in popular exhibitions such as Grand Designs Live, Build It Live and the National Homebuilding and Renovating Show. The construction industry can be very slow to develop in some areas, and the results of a failure to react to change, to concentrate on skills and to invest in the right services become frustratingly and expensively apparent in every delayed project.

With a streamlined set of in-house services such as energy efficiency, air, sound and structural testing, jhai offers a one-stop solution to make sure that these delays don't happen.

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What price affordable housing?

Getting to grips with the supply and demand of homes has been a problem the government alone has proved unable to solve for decades. **Greg Campbell**, a partner at the management consultancy Campbell Tickell, calls for a rethink

Policy and funding changes since 2010, together with market shifts and post-Brexit uncertainty, have added to an already complicated picture. Here are some of the issues:

Development and housing supply

The Housing and Planning Act 2016 aimed to facilitate a step change in supply, focusing on home ownership through initiatives such as Starter Homes, in effect ending grants for affordable rented housing. But significant increase in delivery will not be easy: housing association (HA) and local authority (LA) landlords have less income following the 2015 requirement to reduce rents by 1 per cent a year for four years. Meanwhile, the commercial development sector shows no signs of ramping up supply. This is not surprising: releasing more supply would tend to reduce prices, and hence developers' returns; moreover, housing market uncertainty is a disincentive to increasing sales risk. Private developers and housebuilders are accountable to shareholders, who prioritise high profits. The supply position is exacerbated by shortages of materials and labour, and the availability of skilled workers from abroad could be affected by Brexit.

Although many HAs intend to continue developing affordable rented homes, this will generally only be fundable via cross-subsidy from market sale or market renting. Section 106 "planning gain" deals delivered up to a third of HA new supply, but the redirection of these to Starter Homes could cut that off. Many LAs are seeking to develop housing themselves, though they face similar challenges to HAs.

The government's Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) are piloting taking on the developer role

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for land they own, commissioning housebuilder-contractors. This may in time extend to some 160,000 plots.

Under the right to buy (RTB) for HA tenants, properties sold should be replaced by new supply. Because of the cost, this is unlikely to be achieved, especially in the same areas or with the same tenures.

House prices
Wildly different predictions abound. There are signs of a modest reduction post-Brexit, mainly in London, but this is likely to be balanced by fewer properties for sale. Some have said that economic difficulties in China and Russia will reduce demand for high-end properties; others that the fall in sterling will make UK property more attractive to overseas buyers. We are unlikely to see a drop in prices large enough to affect most people's ability to buy.

Affordability
With lack of supply, the unaffordability of many areas is likely to grow, widening beyond the south-east to areas such as Manchester. This applies both to house prices and to private rents. The phenomenon of "hidden homelessness" (adult children living with parents because they cannot afford to move) has reached mid-level markets. This is likely to be exacerbated by "pay to stay" (council rents increasing towards market levels, where tenants have household incomes above £31,000 – or, in London, £40,000), the reduction in the benefits cap, and the bedroom tax.

There are signs of people leaving the south-east, in some cases because of councils relocating homeless people to cheaper areas; in others, of their own volition. Banks are relocating staff outside London to save costs; and the "big four" accountancies are buying homes for staff to live in or helping with housing costs. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, is seeking to achieve 35 per cent affordable housing on larger private developments, but with "affordable" defined as up to 80 per cent of market rent, they will be unaffordable for many.

Home ownership *v* private renting
The previous housing minister trumpeted that the government was bringing home ownership within the reach of those on the lowest incomes. What government has not addressed, however, is the financial ability of people on low incomes to meet mortgage commitments, other than in less expensive areas. Just eight years ago, the "sub-prime" mortgage phenomenon in the United States triggered an international financial crash. Many are not in a position to own homes, or may not wish to do so. If people in need of housing are unable to buy and there is a shortage of affordable rented homes, that leaves the private rented sector, where there is an increase in stock owned by institutions and corporates but a reduction in properties owned by smaller-scale investors, following tax changes on buy-to-let.

Investment and funding
The bulk of HCA/GLA development grants are now for home ownership initiatives, with some funds available for vulnerable/older persons' schemes, though the GLA may fund affordable rented development. The levels of grant remain well below what is needed.

The credit rating agencies have been downgrading HAs post-Brexit, amid concern about greater commercial risks in development programmes. In driving HAs towards more commercial risk to substitute for falling grant rates, the government is causing some to look more like commercial developers to potential investors. Nevertheless, potential investment funding is available. Low yields on gilts and a lack of attractive alternatives for UK pension fund investors have enabled some HAs to take advantage and issue new debt, or restructure existing debt.

HAs with large outright sale or shared ownership programmes are waiting to see Brexit's effects on the market. Falling prices would increase the risks of accepting low levels of grant to build shared ownership (the main thrust of the current HCA programme). The sector has been lobbying the government to allow a grant switch to rental products in the event of the ownership market stalling.

Homelessness
There are clear indications of rising homelessness, both in inadequate housing and in rough sleeping. There are fears that the reduced benefits cap, combined with Universal Credit, could lead to more rent arrears, more evictions and more homelessness. For LAs, this means higher spending on temporary accommodation.

So, what are the prospects for improving supply and affordability? Unless government rethinks its focus on ownership at the expense of rented housing, and looks at significantly increasing grants to reduce HAs' and LAs' development risk, it is hard to see short-term prospects for improvement.

Can social housing flourish in the open market?

Neil Hadden, chief executive of Genesis housing association, explains his 21st-century approach to housing provision

One cannot help but notice that social housing is going through a paradigm shift. As a result, the way we do business has had to change. Where once we looked to government for subsidies and grants, we must look to the markets, and capitalise on assets.

This modified approach has ruffled a few feathers. After all, people are cautious of change and not everyone is ready to embrace the direction in which the sector is moving. Detractors say we are becoming too big and too commercial; that we've lost our social purpose. Yet the fact is that our social purpose hasn't gone away. It remains at the heart of everything we do.

We may now provide properties for full market rent. Yet, compared to private landlords and letting agencies, our market-rate rental provision offers longer tenancies, fairer costs and the peace of mind that comes from renting with a responsible landlord that puts people and communities before profit.

On average, a single tenant pays £436 in upfront fees: through Genesis that fee is just £74, about a sixth of the average fees charged by other agents. We also offer homes for full market sale. But when we make a surplus from our commercial activities, it is put straight back into the business, allowing us to cross-subsidise building badly needed affordable homes.

Sheltered housing, mental health services, homelessness support and domiciliary care are all services we provide for very vulnerable people and will continue to be a big part of what we do, because we know that they enable people to live independent and fulfilled lives. We are also the largest provider of temporary housing in London, working with local authorities to house 3,500 homeless households.

The dedicated people in our social and economic regeneration teams helped 182 people find employment and encouraged over 700 to access our training opportunities this year alone. Not only that: we are encouraging enterprise among our residents, with 12 business start-ups receiving our advice and support to get off the ground.

This year we broadened our training work with young people, hosting 47 work experience students across the business. The teenagers were not only given the opportunity to learn work skills "on the job", but also enabled to find out more about the world of social housing and experience various parts of the business, including neighbourhood management, development and property services. This involvement is fundamental if we are to encourage the next generation to join the sector and carry on our work in the coming years.

Our Wellbeing Fund has launched, awarding £139,268 to third-party organisations for grass-roots projects that enrich the lives of our residents. The grants range from £5,000 to £50,000 and the successful projects will deliver 32 residents into employment, ten new business start-ups, 169 training places, 91 volunteers and 43 work experience opportunities. We estimate they will save the public purse roughly £1.9m.

From teaching people how to make healthy low-cost meals on a budget, to encouraging people to take up jogging or join a free exercise class in order to lose weight and get fit, over 300 people have accessed our health-related services. So we know we are making a real difference in local communities.

The social, political and economic climate in which we operate may have changed. However, our social purpose remains, and we will continue to offer much more than bricks and mortar.

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Rewriting the old rules of the regeneration game

How the private, public and voluntary sectors can work together to revitalise communities. By First Choice Homes Oldham's CEO, Cath Green

The award-winning £20m BGreen project is a successful community pilot involving five housing estates spanning two electoral wards in central Oldham in Greater Manchester. By bringing together public-sector reform and place-based change, the town's largest social housing provider, First Choice Homes Oldham (FCHO), worked with British Gas on a co-funded scheme, supported by other partners, to transform homes and lives in the local area.

BGreen, which was also in partnership with Oldham Council and NHS Oldham, initially aimed to help residents save energy. When the project started in 2014, three out of the five areas supported by the scheme ranked within the top 1 per cent of the most deprived areas in England.

Today, this partnership has delivered warm homes for hundreds of people. It is also the driver for a community regeneration project that aims to transform the area for years to come.

Since the 1960s, roughly 1,400 homes in the area have received heating and hot water via a communal heating system. Keen to improve energy efficiency for residents, FCHO partnered with British Gas to bring forward improvements.

British Gas provided £10m Energy Company Obligation (ECO) funding and delivered the works to help improve the district heating, and instal external wall insulation in more than 650 homes. The final works were completed in March this year. At the time as work started on the homes, FCHO was part-way through its initial, five-year £149m investment programme across 12,000 homes, just under £10m of which was to be invested in this area. A place-based approach was taken, aligning FCHO asset management and neighbourhood strategies with a vision to address the wider needs of the community.

The project had two core elements; "Your Home" and "Your Life". "Your Home" improved the energy efficiency and environment of 1,400 homes. A masterplan was developed to improve the surrounding area, addressing security, accessibility and image issues by removing unsightly features, repainting communal areas and redesigning entrance areas. The boiler house was replaced with a biomass boiler and two gas boilers, saving 2,325 tonnes of carbon dioxide each year.

The "Your Life" element is a commitment to tackle deep-rooted issues, aiming to increase resilience and make estates safer, more enjoyable places to live. It led to six community pledges that aim to improve:

- Engagement;
- Neighbourhood pride;
- Community safety;
- Employment outcomes;
- Health and well-being;
- Access to affordable warmth.

Throughout, residents were engaged and consulted, leading and shaping activities, influencing three community agreements, and developing their own community planting and activity groups.

Local people were trained to carry out research, used by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to evaluate the project. The results show residents are now more likely to get involved in their community, that they feel safer and take more pride in their area. There has also been a decrease in rent arrears and in empty homes and out-of-work benefit claimants.

The innovative approach highlights how, by working in partnership, and combining large-scale improvement works, we can deliver real change.

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firstchoice HOMES OLDHAM

Ways of building Britain's capacity

Edward Nash, senior partner at the built environment consultancy Nash Partnership, says there is huge scope to diversify our housing stock

Increasing inequalities of access to housing through income and across generations is a divisive issue. The housing story is often presented as reluctant release of green fields to meet a "five-year land supply". Little is said about understanding the rise and fall of neighbourhoods as employment, demographics and tenures change.

At this "leading edge" of supply, a de facto conspiracy of convenience exists between how site allocation works and the interests of speculators and housebuilders. The former speculate on sites and, when allocation comes, the builder is there to deliver. Their products service the needs of narrow bands of buyers but, over time, each house merely adds to a monolithic suburbia, without any intrinsic fertility for longer-term economic, social or environmental place-building.

But now, something else is going on that offers a different outcome for reducing inequality of access, illustrated by the offer of latter-20th-century Greater Bristol, now in the queue for city region devolution.

Bristol began expanding across its present governance boundaries 75 years ago. About 40 per cent of the present urban area was built field by field, poorly structured and serviced. Development was so extensive that even though it now nudges the green belt almost all the way round, hardly any of the recent fringe would be judged "aspirational" by those looking to make their home in this city. Much is far out enough that those who do live there have their eye on the roads that take them to work in other places. Aspirational developments have been regenerating the waterside heart, but between the main fringe sites and the centre lie miles of monocultural suburbia. Except in areas where a local employer is strong, or where a transport node, good school or good amenities dictate, much of this housing is now visibly on a pathway to decline.

The 2011 census showed a vast shift towards ownership for rental rather than occupation in these places. If poorly managed, there will be a clear differential between those areas owner-occupiers want to live in, and those renters can live in. At the same time, the larger commercial private rented sector operators are strongly aware of the quality agenda necessary to avoid being caught in a "race to the bottom" and in order for their income model to work over 30 or more years.

Behind the front doors of established housing, change is going on all the time, as occupation passes from one generation to another and employment or tenures change. Research we carried out recently compared houses of the same size and type in differing parts of the city; we found they vary in price by over 320 per cent according to perceptions of neighbourhoods. This is a potential energy to be worked with in making such places perform better in mix, size, condition and tenure.

There is huge scope to diversify stock by building up run-down district centres, building flats over shops, and incentivising affordable sector providers to accumulate small sites.

For decades, it had seemed the fragmentation of plot ownership would mean this could not happen. But now, perhaps the accumulation of such housing in new, small-scale commercial hands will make the creation of pockets of dynamic change possible. It might be the precursor to their revitalisation and a much more diverse population of both owners and renters. If so, it will not be the large housebuilders who deliver this, but the smaller operators, householders, builder developers, affordable sector providers and charities.

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Community-led regeneration works. It deserves a hand

No one wants to live on a street of boarded-up houses, and programmes aimed at bringing empty properties back into use have had success. Helen Williams, chief executive officer of Empty Homes, urges policymakers to give them support

More than 200,000 homes in England had been standing empty for longer than six months, a snapshot survey taken by local authorities in October 2015 found.

Let's not pretend that all empty homes are problematic. Sometimes there is a gap between tenancies or a delay in a planned sale. But in other cases properties stay empty for reasons that may be complex. There, a policy response is justified if you believe in making the most of the country's housing stock. We do.

Local authorities, housing associations and community-led organisations can buy long-term empty homes to refurbish and create affordable housing for rent or discounted sale. Under the coalition government dedicated empty homes programmes supported the creation of roughly 9,000 new homes. But government investment in such programmes ended in March 2015. Their reinstatement shouldn't be off the table – the evidence suggests they work.

In many areas local authorities employ staff to persuade owners to bring their property back into use. In most cases advice and encouragement seems to do the trick. Such casework is popular with local people who do not want to see such waste, or to live next to vacant properties. We encourage all local authorities to invest in this empty homes work.

Empty homes are not spread evenly across the country. There are higher levels primarily in the north and some coastal areas, and lower levels in much of the south. However, there are exceptions to this. Comprehensive data is available at a local authority level only, but dig beneath that and you will find some neighbourhoods with higher levels of empty homes – 10 per cent or more. In some streets, residents have boarded up properties for neighbours. Other streets appear to have been abandoned as regeneration projects stalled.

What is going on in these areas? We are surveying local authorities to find out more. But we already know that often these neighbourhoods come to be seen as places of last resort. Much of the housing on offer is poor-standard, insecure accommodation in the private rented sector. The streets can look uncared for. These are often neighbourhoods where people are trying to get by on low incomes and where good jobs are rare.

Yet these areas have groups of committed residents who want to see improvements and who could do with some support. We have seen in places such as Hull, Leeds and Middlesbrough how community-led organisations have worked to renovate empty properties to create decent affordable housing. They can readily let those homes, even in areas once labelled as low-demand.

A greater impact can be achieved when this work is coupled with action by local authorities and other public-sector bodies. This can include addressing poor management in parts of the private rented sector, or improving the street environment, or the police tackling crime. These approaches not only benefit existing residents, but can also incentivise owners to invest in their properties and lead to more people being attracted to move into an area, or stay for longer.

But the level of resources for tackling concentrations of empty homes and the wider issues these areas face falls considerably short of what is needed. National housing policy needs to catch up. For a start, central government should create funds that enable community-led organisations and local authorities to tackle concentrations of empty homes, as part of wider neighbourhood improvement approaches. Government could then have a housing policy that works better for different parts of the country.

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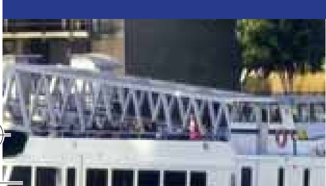

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