

HOUSING MJ

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Housing must not be hopeless



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Housing insecurity is a major issue for young people. It must be put at the heart of the levelling up agenda, says **Geeta Nanda**

Publication of the Levelling Up White Paper puts flesh on the bones of the Government's pledge to improve opportunities across the country. As the head of a major housing association, it has reinforced that the change of name for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) appears to be much more than a matter of semantics. Rather, it seems the Government rightly views housing as critical to bridging social inequalities and delivering levelling up.

Such an approach would be hugely welcomed. I have always passionately believed housing must not just be treated as a matter of bricks and mortar. Safe, secure and affordable homes are the springboard from which individuals, families and entire communities can thrive and fulfil their potential. Decent homes are the foundation of so much of

what life has to offer. In the context of achieving levelling up, there is perhaps nothing more impactful than increasing the opportunity to access quality housing.

We know that at the core of the levelling up agenda lies a commitment to address regional inequalities. There is no question that this is crucial to create a more equitable society. For too long, parts of our country have been underfunded and underserved.

However, applying regional disparities alone to the housing landscape would be equivalent to fitting square pegs into round holes. It is increasingly clear that the most significant dividing lines of the country's housing crisis are not geographical. New research soon to be published by Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing heard from young people from different parts of the UK in workshops and through opinion polling. The results demonstrate the most serious

schism in housing is generational and it is a rift we cannot afford to ignore.

Young people currently living in social housing believe not only that their housing prospects are bleak, but the cards are systematically stacked against them.

Seven in ten of those surveyed said their housing opportunities were restricted by the interests of others.

More than three-quarters said decision-makers, such as those responsible for the White Paper, simply don't take their housing interests into account. In other words, they feel marginalised and have little hope that their situation will improve.

Most shocking is the deep and damaging impact this hopelessness is already having on our youth. More than 60% of those surveyed said that thinking about their future housing situation is affecting their mental health.

Meanwhile, almost four out of five young people said housing uncertainty is affecting key life decisions, such as whether to start a family, or what jobs to apply for.

Tragically, the lack of a housing future is stifling their ambitions, curbing their aspirations and holding them back from achieving their dreams.

For the sake of an entire generation, and our collective future, this must not be allowed to continue. Time and again, the young people in our research described how they want much better housing options, yet they don't know how to go about it.

Political, community and industry leaders are duty-bound to help them. Decision-makers, including those who have put the finishing touches to the White Paper, must listen to young people when determining policy. Schools and educators must satisfy the thirst that those in our research demonstrated for housing information, finance education and other skills. Housing providers must engage and listen to young people about their existing homes and communities.

Above all, developers must build more affordable housing.

Of those quizzed, 69% want more homes built in their area, but view affordability as the most significant barrier to home ownership.

By taking these steps we can take huge strides towards a more equitable society. Housing is already on the levelling up agenda. By prioritising housing opportunities for young people, we can empower them to build the lives they wish for themselves, wherever they may live in the UK. Doing so would truly enable the next generation to 'level up' and give them the future they so richly deserve. ■

Geeta Nanda, OBE, is chief executive of Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing and Chair of the G15 group of London's largest housing associations

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A wake up call for



Media reports of the shocking state of some homes has given social housing providers a wake up call on standards and complaints. **Dan Peters** reports

Last Autumn, an ITV documentary shone the spotlight on the shocking conditions endured by some people and families living in social housing.

Residents, who have had to endure leaks, mould, damp, overcrowding, collapsed ceilings and rodent problems, spoke out movingly about being forced to live in unsafe and unfit properties.

It has led to some difficult questions for housing providers.

Chief executive of the Association of Retained Council Housing, John Bibby, told *The MJ* he had been 'shocked' watching the coverage and it had been a 'wake-up call' for the sector.

'Clearly, you can't defend the indefensible,' he said.

'Occasionally things go wrong. Most of our members are looking at the ways they monitor complaints. We're always going to have problems – the key is how the landlord responds to them.'

In many cases, that response has not been good enough.

'It shouldn't be this hard'

As one district gets ready to create a new garden town, **Heather Jameson** hears how it took determination and political will to make it happen

Handing housing targets down from central to local government is one thing, but delivering them on the ground is another. At a district level, many councils are stymied by local resistance to development or a lack of political will, but for Folkstone and Hythe DC in Kent, it is the political determination that has driven its push for growth.

Set on the very edge of the country, the district is home to the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Beauty, as well as Romney Marsh and Dungeness. Residents have an

older age profile than the UK average, as well as lower income, but the council has big plans.

Leader of the council, David Monk, explains some of his authority's history: 'Fifteen years ago, we were just short of intervention under the CPA [Comprehensive Performance Assessments carried out by the now defunct Audit Commission].'

The Conservatives got in with a minority administration, and 'spent a long time getting the finances in order'. At the time, it was Shepway DC, before a rebrand in 2018

created the new Folkstone and Hythe DC.

Now, the council is, he says, 'jobs conscious, skills conscious' and with a cohesive place plan and a nine-year corporate plan that focuses on 'community leadership, a thriving environment, a vibrant economy and quality homes and infrastructure' – but still the politics hang in the balance.

It is the plan to create homes and infrastructure that is driving a swathe of regeneration plans across the district – some of which are trying to harness the woefully underused seafront. In Hythe, a former waste tip on the seafront will be redeveloped to create a £20m leisure centre, public park, cafés and restaurants and 150 new homes. It is just one of the brownfield sites being brought back into use.

In Folkstone, there are plans to reinvigorate the town centre. The existing town parks nestle between the cliff top and the newly revived seafront beach huts, while work has started on the first phase of town houses and apartments next to the harbour.

While other councils have been reluctant to build housing in the face of local opposition, this authority has gone full steam ahead on its plans to build but it is its development at Otterpool Park that will

meet all its strategic housing targets in one go.

It is an ambitious plan – a new garden town development for 10,000 new homes and 9,000 new jobs over 25-30 years. The current site is largely a collection of fields and brownfield sites, with parcels of land held by the council and others.

'It has taken clear local leadership and political will. You can do things, but we haven't been handed things on a plate'

At its very centre lies Westenhanger Castle, a medieval castle turned manor house, and the now-defunct Folkstone Racecourse. After much lobbying, the local Westenhanger train station looks set to be linked in to HS1 within the next five years – a boost that looked unlikely at the outset.

Folkstone and Hythe chief executive Susan Priest says the council is so committed to the plan for a new development, it is moving the council's headquarters to the site as part of the commercial space available.

or social housing

The National Federation of Arm's Length Management Organisations (NFLMO), whose members manage 326,000 council homes across England, has acknowledged the 'appalling conditions' exposed.

It said: 'We do not believe that this is representative of the social housing sector as a whole but it does show the need for improved regulation in our sector and, for some types of homes, increased investment.'

'Although there have been some serious concerns raised by the media recently, which we agree need addressing, we do not believe the evidence points to this being a widespread issue across social housing.'

'The current regime puts far too much faith in organisations doing the right thing. While many social housing providers are well managed and deliver high quality services this is clearly not true for all.'

Housing ombudsman Richard Blakeway, whose remit has expanded since the Grenfell Tower fire, said there had been a 'significant increase' in the volume of complaints – 140% up this financial year – since a brief drop at the start of the first coronavirus lockdown. The number of complaints upheld also nearly doubled to 49% last year, indicating that this is not just a matter of residents becoming more aware of their rights.

Mr Blakeway continued: 'It is clear that people felt going to the media was their

best option – that shouldn't be the position people end up in.'

'The media coverage has brought focus and promoted a debate. Landlords have really reflected on their approach and produced action plans though different landlords will be at different stages in their learning journey.'

Last year a Housing Ombudsman report on damp and mould found there were 10.8 cases of maladministration per 10,000 homes between April 2019 and March 2021.

Mr Blakeway added: 'I think there were lessons across the sector. There's lessons for everyone.'

'No landlord should think this is not something that we are experiencing. Anything else is complacency. Landlords shouldn't be defensive about complaints.'

The most recent English housing survey found there were a lower proportion of non-decent homes in the social sector (13%) than the private-rented (21%) and owner-occupied sectors (16%).

Local authorities nevertheless featured strongly in the ombudsman's damp and mould report.

Hammersmith & Fulham LBC vowed to improve its performance after the report placed it at the top of the ombudsman's league table for maladministration in the report.

The council, which has 'apologised

unreservedly,' said 'years of austerity' had prevented it from upgrading its 'ageing housing stock'.

Ageing stock is a wider problem – with some properties now 100 years old and just 11% of local authority stock built after 1980. The financial pressures caused by the building safety issues that have emerged since the tragic Grenfell fire have also curtailed proposed capital programmes and delayed plans to build new council homes.

'It is clear that people felt going to the media was their best option – that shouldn't be the position people end up in'

NFLMO continued: 'The combination of severe funding cuts to local authorities, increasing demand for services and the lack of proactive regulation over the last ten years seems to have led to some local authorities taking their eye off the ball or using limited resources to prioritise more heavily-regulated services.'

In 2020, the Government's social housing White Paper concluded that the current regime for regulating the sector was not fit-for-purpose.

That is probably another reason why

there has been an upswing in tenants going to the media as a way to get their issues heard.

The Government has now pledged to give the regulator stronger powers to take action when things go wrong and has been reviewing the minimum decent homes standard, which is now 20 years old.

A spokesperson for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said: 'The Government is bringing forward wide-ranging reforms to the sector, including making sure complaints are dealt with fairly and promptly, and giving the regulator greater powers to take action, such as through regular inspections of the largest landlords.'

However, reforms will only have a limited impact unless the culture also changes.

Mr Blakeway said: 'Culture comes up a lot in the work that we do. We were really concerned about some authorities' language that appeared to apportion blame and suggested residents' lifestyle was the cause, which can be profoundly offensive.'

He called for landlords to be proactive instead of just relying on residents' complaints and for them to adopt a 'zero-tolerance approach'.

When those complaints do come in, at the very least, it is vital they are dealt with sympathetically, professionally and swiftly. ■

While the project is making progress, it has not been without its problems. The council has spent five years, and around £5m, on the development just to make sure it was not going to be delayed by a judicial review – an issue the council has faced on other development projects.

'The barrier for entry for people wanting to challenge these things is very low,' Ms Priest says. The district council has also worked hard on its relationship with the local parishes to get them on board.

Ultimately, Ms Priest says, they explained they could create a garden town to deliver all the district's housing obligations in one go, or it would need continued and piecemeal growth.

All the housing and development has been delivered by the council with, aside from some garden towns funding, very little Government support.

'It has taken clear local leadership and political will,' Ms Priest says. 'You can do things, but we haven't been handed things on a plate.'

With all the Government's talk of levelling up, she says working across all the agencies involved does not make it easy for councils to deliver housing and growth. She adds: 'It really shouldn't be this hard.' ■



Regeneration plans have begun in Folkestone, including a significant housing build



Social housing deserves decarbonisation primacy

Tim Wood examines the importance of decarbonisation measures across housing

As a species, we are all becoming well versed in the dire need to tackle greenhouse gas emissions and the UK has outlined several policies and introduced bespoke funding pots to achieve its net zero carbon ambitions.

The challenge is vast and multi-faceted but something that has become abundantly clear to us, as a business, over the last few years, is that the power of introducing decarbonisation measures across social housing stock is often far greater than any other sector.

That's not to say, it's needed less across general housing, education, or healthcare, but the cumulative effect from introducing low carbon solutions for social housing is incalculable.

Reducing energy bills and offering warmer homes for tenants, helps to combat fuel poverty and plays a pivotal role in the Government's levelling up agenda, offering greater opportunity for health, welfare, and pride of place.

It's something we have had the pleasure of witnessing through our work with local authorities, housing associations and registered providers across the country.

We recently completed a multi award winning Ground Source Heat Pump (GSHP) project on behalf of Gentoo

Group in Sunderland, in what we believe is the largest gas replacement in high-rise tower blocks across the UK.

By degassing 364 flats across seven blocks, we renewed the heating and hot water supply to all seven tower blocks, removing aged and inefficient gas heating and hot water systems from each dwelling. This introduced high efficiency and cost-effective heating to every dwelling via Kensa GSHPs; uniquely heating both their home and water with renewable heat from the Earth's core.

The cumulative effect from introducing low carbon solutions for social housing is incalculable

Heat accounts for around a third of all CO2 emissions in UK homes and this GSHP installation will provide savings of more than 2,686.32 tCO2 over 20 years – contributing to Sunderland's net zero carbon ambitions.

Off the back of this, we have also recently won a ground-breaking

project with Your Homes Newcastle, to deliver low carbon heating for 164 homes.

Centred on the Denton Park House and Hilltop House tower blocks in the West Denton area of Newcastle, the £3.8m project will see the complete removal of the gas-powered central heating systems, and this will be replaced by GSHPs. The work is being supported by partners Newcastle City Council, which secured funding from the Government's Renewal Heat Initiative to help fund the scheme.

It's fantastic that organisations like Gentoo, Your Homes Newcastle and Newcastle City Council are not only recognising the need to decarbonise but are prioritising their communities and investing to make positive change.

Schemes such as the Social Housing Decarbonisation Scheme (SHDS) have been monumental in supporting this agenda and we have successfully secured millions of pounds for our clients, through the fund, to deliver vital net zero carbon technologies that are changing lives for the better. ■

Tim Wood is Director of Sustainability for EQUANS UK & Ireland

COMMENT



By Cllr Clare Penny-Evans – Cabinet member for climate change and public safety, Newcastle City Council

Housing is one of the most challenging areas when it comes to achieving our net zero ambitions, with homes in the UK producing more carbon emissions than all the cars in the country combined.

Existing, older homes are by far the worst polluters, and with more than 80% of the homes people will live in in the city in 2050 already built we know we need to take decisive action, retrofitting properties to improve their energy efficiency.

We are working on a programme to improve our own housing stock and this project is key to that, with new low carbon heating systems and projects to improve insulation also helping to reduce energy demand.