

Plans to boost housing are hampered by a lack of land, says Homes England

Councils have a lot to offer the government to help fix the broken markets

Birmingham is using modern construction – and it is proving a game changer

# HOUSING MJ

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# Our chance to build

**Tony Clements** looks at the large-scale work Ealing LBC has embarked on to provide affordable homes, which is being mirrored by councils across the country, and says that in the shadow of crisis now is the time to show we can deliver

Councils are back in the business of building homes and it's desperately needed. The facts and figures of the country's housing crisis are well rehearsed. Britain has only ever met society's demand for housing in the decades when councils contributed millions of homes on top of private sector supply.

There is ever more appetite from councils of all political persuasions to deliver more themselves. In Ealing, we have delivered around 500 council homes over the last six years. We're scaling up now to build one of the largest programmes in London: 1,200 genuinely affordable homes at the lowest rents. And we're far from alone in having this scale of ambition.

At a national level there has been an ideological turn around on council housing and social housing. In 2015 the Government pledged to force councils to sell their highest value council homes to fund right to buy for housing association tenants. Today the HRA cap has been lifted and there is grant available from Homes England and the Mayor of London for councils to build again.

Indeed, the key demands of the sector over many years have been met. We argued for the HRA cap to be lifted. It has been. We argued for subsidy at significant levels for council housing. We now have it.

Looking at councils from a developer's perspective, we are in an enviable position. Access to low cost finance from the PWLB, grant programmes and developable land already in our ownership. Furthermore, we are far less dependent on the sale of private homes to fund our affordable housing. As the housing market continues to drop, housing associations and the private sector will struggle to deliver more affordable housing. That's not the case for many local authorities.

This is the moment to seize the chance to re-establish councils as a major provider of the homes in our communities into the future. The onus is now on councils to show we can deliver.

However, it will be far from easy. The skills and expertise of the past have been largely lost. We start from a low base: the council homes built last year were delivered by just six local authorities, of which Ealing is one. Councils are seeking to scale-up a new area of business at a time when our organisations are under unprecedented financial stress. And time is tight. For example in London, by this time next year, we will be halfway through the political terms of the London boroughs and the GLA grant-funded housing programme. We will either be set up and delivering – or not. In many places, it's in months rather than years that we will be able



Ealing LBC has delivered around 500 council homes over the last six years, with more on the way

to make a realistic assessment about councils' ability to build at scale again.

If we don't there are plenty of critics in central government and the private sector who will be proven right in their traditional opposition to council building.

As an official at the DCLG some years ago, I occasionally went to the Treasury to argue for more freedoms to scale up council building again. CLG civil servants approached the Treasury with a level of trepidation akin to Frodo approaching Mordor in *Lord of the Rings* – and typically with less success. Our arguments received short shrift. We heard the familiar orthodoxy that prevailed then, and in many places now: councils don't have the ability (despite the millions of homes built since the war); that housing was essentially a private sector activity, and that we should liberalise planning and sell our land to developers (despite the 470,000 homes with planning consent unbuilt by the private sector).

The failure to deliver the sector's housing programmes now would close the door ideologically and financially to this renewed role in our communities.

So, we are all invested in each others' success – but there are a few things we can do to give ourselves the best chance. Rebuilding the lost development capacity, skills and expertise is, in my view, a huge challenge. As we build it back up again, we need to share resources and people

across council boundaries as well as what we learn: our mistakes and successes. Every authority competing for staff to set up their own development functions is counter-productive in time of austerity and will take too long.

We also need to grow a new cadre of housing professionals to sustain our activity. As I've been reviewing the CVs of potential staff, especially those with decades of experience, at the bottom is often training or a first job in a council. Many of our social homes today are the result of historical council investment. The same is true of many of our most experienced housing professionals. It's time for a new generation.

We also need to take our communities with us. Council housing does not enjoy a universally popular reputation among the general public (and sometimes our tenants).

High quality, attractive homes, communities where people will enjoy living, public services and green spaces should be as much our story as rents, tenure, units and supply. We want our communities to be the biggest advocates for our developments and to keep housing high on the political agenda.

Reclaiming our role as housing providers at scale again is within our grasp. It's over to us to show we can do it.

*Tony Clements is executive director of regeneration and housing at Ealing LBC*



# Landing new homes

The Government's ambitious plans to boost housing supply is being hampered by a lack of land, so Homes England is working with councils and partners to free up spaces to build, says Stephen Kinsella

A lack of land available for housing, especially in the least affordable areas, has been one of the key reasons for England's undersupply of housing.

A combination of fragmented land ownership, protective land use designations, an absence of infrastructure and other local barriers to development mean there is not enough land to meet England's housing need.

Last year at Homes England we launched our five-year strategic plan, which laid down a challenge for the industry to rethink the norm.

To increase housing supply across the country, our plan highlighted the need to build strength and depth across the house-building sector and help ambitious partners to unlock land and overcome development obstacles.

Not only do we need to release land for housing development, we also need to make sure each site is developed in the right way to meet the needs of the local area. We committed to a place-based approach and are working alongside civic and business leaders, combined authorities, county, borough and district councils and local enterprise partnerships to deliver on that commitment.

Where we acquire land, we use our resources and expertise to bring these sites to market, supporting both major developers and small builders.

We are also making it easier for organisations to work with us. Having spent the last few months engaging with registered providers and SME developers, we have made significant changes to simplify our sales structure for smaller sites. We have also streamlined our tender process so that a wider range of developers can access opportunities to work with us. For larger sites, we are tailoring the tenure and construction method to meet specific local need and accelerate delivery.

In addition, we are working to establish

innovative new partnership models with a series of public sector bodies to help them unlock their land. The support we are providing is varied – and includes everything from directly acquiring their sites or acting as land promoters, through to providing grant funding to help local authorities coordinate their own site de-risking.

Great examples include our recent partnership work with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation to promote the de-risking and disposal of Ministry of Defence sites across the north of England and the £450m Local Authority Accelerated Construction programme. Through this, we have recently awarded £55m in grant funding to unlock surplus

local authority land across England by investing in infrastructure and enabling works. In return, we seek to secure commitments from local authorities to progress sites at pace encouraging the use of modern methods of construction.

*Stephen Kinsella is executive director of land at Homes England*

## Case Study

### LINCOLN CITY COUNCIL

Lincoln City Council is one of 12 local authorities to have recently been awarded funding through the Local Authority Accelerated Construction (LAAC) programme.

Lincoln City Council's ambition is to work with local partners to create a sustainable community that acts as an exemplar for the other growth sites surrounding the city.

Homes England's planning and enabling team is supporting the city's work with partners to agree Smart Place principles that will define the developments quality, sense of community and technologies to support sustainable living now and into the future.

A total of £2.1m grant funding has been agreed with the council to accelerate the delivery of new homes in Lincoln. The funding will unlock the development of the first phase of the Western Growth Corridor Sustainable Urban Extension.

The Western Growth Corridor is close to the city centre and represents a major opportunity to deliver 3,200 new homes and create an attractive place for people to live and work.

The site has been allocated under the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan but is a large and complex project requiring significant upfront infrastructure to unlock and create a developable site.

Through the provision of £2.1m of LAAC funding the development will be accelerated by two years and will enable development of



52 new homes on land owned by Lincoln City Council.

The LAAC funding will facilitate enabling works including construction of a new road junction into the site at Skellingthorpe Road effectively opening the site for development. A further 130 new homes will be funded and developed by Lindum on its land, which will be made possible as a result of the new road junction.

This is an important first step in a project which has the potential to deliver up to 3,200 new homes, new employment and community facilities by 2036.



# When all the housing markets are broken

**Eric Bohl** argues that local government needs to campaign assertively on a range of housing issues in order to benefit from, take part in and shape the market, as well as deliver on local priorities



**W**hen former communities secretary Sajid Javid said in 2017 the housing market was broken, which one did he mean, exactly? The land, development, construction or residential end-markets? Or the markets in each region (and sub-region)?

His 2017 white paper was promising and touched on all these markets, but their web of problems remains the same. We're not building enough; too much housing is unaffordable; renting is precarious; design, quality and sustainability are poor; the wrong type is being built in the wrong places; the cladding scandal is still not resolved; and the new scandal of permitted development is emerging blinking into the limelight.

It does not have to be like this. There are advanced European economies that do not have broken housing markets. In a series of policy debates this year, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (Solace) is examining how local government can best consume from, participate in and shape the markets in which it operates.

The housing market is probably the most complex. How can we regulate and intervene better? What should we be lobbying for next, after the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) cap? What capacity do we need?

'There's a deficit of skills in this space and we're competing with blue chip businesses. This is high stakes,' says Niall Bolger, chief executive of Hounslow LBC and Solace spokesperson for innovation and commissioning.

The starting point is to make sense of the scale of the challenge and its interlocking dimensions.

'You need to think systemically. There are regional and local differences that affect the private sector's propensity to build and you have to incentivise it differently,' argues Tom Stannard, corporate director for regeneration and growth at Wakefield City Council.

This means challenging misplaced truisms about the solutions and avoiding Whitehall's London-centric prism. We need to articulate better the scale and complexity of

the problem and help Government resist knee-jerk policy disasters such as Help to Buy, which fed super-profits for developers.

In each sector of the market, local and combined authorities are intervening to deliver on local priorities, despite perverse laws and regulations on land, development, construction and end-residential markets.

The Letwin Inquiry concluded that developers were not land-banking, but developing at a pace that maintains their prices and profits. Some may struggle to spot the difference.

## While public/private joint ventures may be controversial, they can allow authorities greater influence over the mix and quality of new housing

Letwin did recommend a more strategic role for authorities, assembling land and ensuring developers build what's needed rather than what they want. However, this alone would not tackle inflated land prices, which can increase a hundredfold with planning permission.

'Action is needed on land value capture. The Government needs to reform compensation for compulsory purchase,' says David Rudlin, director at URBED, the urban design practice.

The local plan is the key mechanism that enables authorities to set a strategic framework for housing. But a sizeable minority of authorities still do not have one.

'We have to be proactive about this to have credibility with central government,' argues Mr Bolger.

While authorities are keen to drive up homebuilding, we face the catch-22 of being set housing targets and then punished because developers fail to build out the permissions we give them.

More units are being delivered, but they often remain

unaffordable and, in some parts of the country, authorities need better targeted subsidies to regenerate town centres where the costs of land remediation and assembly stop the market delivering.

Many authorities are tackling the problems of affordability by entering the market with their own housing companies. Many are starting small, but Croydon chief executive Jo Negrini says: 'You have to intervene at scale if you want to make a seismic change in affordability.'

Where authorities do not have the capacity in-house, they are entering into public/private and public/public joint ventures and regional collaborations, often as part of combined authorities.

While public/private joint ventures may be controversial, they can allow authorities greater influence over the mix and quality of new housing. But to hold our own, we need the culture and nous to understand developers' financial models and argue assertively.

This means protecting and enhancing regeneration and planning teams; sharing capacity; and working together.

Nick Walkley, chief executive of Homes England, says the chief executive has to think beyond their local place to the strategy for the wider market and communities across a region. He adds: 'It is their job to broker the partnerships needed and ensure the capacity and capabilities are there to manage the balance of risks.'

Local government needs to campaign assertively, whether on abolishing right to buy; removing punitive planning rules; greater flexibility in plan-making; better targeting of regional investment; or reforming land compensation legislation.

Our experience of tackling the challenges and the promise of what more we can do are the best gifts we can offer to any government determined to fix all the broken housing markets.

*Eric Bohl is director of public services at Activist Group*

# Are LA housing compa

Local authorities are increasingly creating companies to deliver their social housing needs, *The MJ* and Norse recently organised a round table debate with senior housing leads from London local government and other sectors to discuss the barriers to delivering housing delivery through these vehicles. **Michael Burton** reports

Local authorities are becoming increasingly major players in the housing sector again, stimulated by the powers afforded to them by the General Power of Competence from the 2011 Localism Act and furthermore by the recent lifting of the borrowing cap on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Many local authorities have set up local authority housing companies (LAHCs) to deliver housing that the commercial sector is unable or unwilling to provide but few are actually able to do so. There are more than 170 LAHCs across the country, commercial organisations owned wholly or in part by a local authority, able to buy land, build or manage properties outside the HRA and generate an income stream. With large temporary accommodation expenditure, heavily impacting on local authority diminishing revenue budgets, they do enable councils with or without HRA accounts to meet their varied needs.

But are these companies effective vehicles to delivering affordable housing or a means of raising revenue, are they truly commercial entities or a quasi-part of the public sector, and what is their future now the HRA borrowing cap has been lifted? These were questions addressed recently by a round table debate with London council leads on housing organised by Norse, which knows a little about how to make local authority companies work it is a 30-year-old venture wholly owned by Norfolk CC and the largest local authority trading company in the UK.

The round table was chaired by Lord Gary Porter, chair of the Local Government Association (LGA) who opened the debate with: 'If you've got good housing you've got good services because housing is the heart of everything a local authority does and yet it's still a Cinderella service.' He added: 'There are 176 LAHCs across the country and you'll struggle to find two the same. Some are commercial, some set up to avoid loss of



stock due to Right to Buys (RTBs), some to get a slice of the pie the private sector has enjoyed from their land for a long time.'

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**'The most successful companies have the freedom to do their own thing. Local authorities should be shareholders, not micro-manage'**

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Setting up an LAHC is a business transformation project requiring a different culture, skills and business acumen. Participants discussed what makes a successful LAHC. There was general agreement that objectives need to be defined first. One participant opened with: 'You need to decide what you want. What is your objective? What are you trying to achieve? Is it about delivering affordable homes, or socio-economic generation or income generation?'

Another participant felt that politicians

and officers alike see housing companies as the vehicles for delivering their differing priorities, adding: 'We have a housing company, 1000 units, mainly infill. But what is its purpose? I've got a housing cabinet member who thinks it's for affordable housing and a finance member who thinks it's for income generation.' Another stressed the importance of good governance, adding: 'You need to know what you want and also get the governance right. It's often quite teccy, Councillors and chief officers get excited but to deliver you have to do the groundwork and get the boring stuff sorted, work out where the money's going etc. The main challenge is delivering the homes, but getting the governance right makes it much easier.'

One participant summed up success as: 'Get the buy-in from councillors, get the legal and finances sorted, get clarity and get sign-off' while another said 'if you set up a housing company you're not going to get 1000 houses built from day one. You need to manage expectations.'

Keeping it simple was also important, one debater saying 'the narrower the

purpose of the company the more successful it will be'. Sometimes councils are too ambitious. Several participants said LAHCs need to be regarded as small businesses. One commented: 'They are expected to deliver like multi-nationals but the reality is they are just start-ups'. Another added: 'We have our own local authority housing company. Our mantra is "keep it simple". It's effectively a start-up. The first few schemes won't necessarily be massively profit-making.'

The membership of company boards needs to be right as politicians are not always best placed to be board directors with LAHCs ending up being micro-managed. One participant said: 'The most successful companies have the freedom to do their own thing. Local authorities should be shareholders, not micro-manage. You need a figurehead for the company and not necessarily a councillor.' Another agreed, saying: 'There's a tension between the council as shareholder and the independent board which if it becomes too independent then the council wants to change it.' A similar point was made by a housing

# panies the way forward?



director who commented: ‘Councillors have got to have trust. They can’t expect decisions to be constantly referred back to them. Risk aversion is an issue. It’s up to officers to be clear to members and manage expectations. Members need to understand what it means to be a shareholder. The right approach is to have members as shareholders but not be on the board.’

## ‘LAHCs are not the same as private companies. Why are we expecting them to fill the gaps that the private sector can’t and yet expect them to behave the same?’

Another issue is whether a LAHC is truly a commercial entity or a branch of the authority. Participants maintained it is a hybrid, one saying: ‘Local authorities aren’t trying to compete with private companies – it’s not what a local authority company is for’ while another

said that ‘developers may want a 20% rate of return but LAHCs don’t need that sort of rate.’ A housing director added: ‘LAHCs are not the same as private companies. Why are we expecting them to fill the gaps that the private sector can’t and yet expect them to behave the same?’

Yet many LAHCs are set up to generate income which can then be ploughed back into affordable housing. One participant said: ‘There are housing targets to meet. I can do that without a housing company but a company generates income’, while another added: ‘If it hadn’t been for the housing company we’d have another 2% on the council tax as our company can cross subsidise other parts of the council’ and a further comment was ‘lots of councils are doing affordable housing but this may not be the driver as many councils are doing it for income generation.’

The LGA conducted a survey which found 94% of councils owning stock intended to use the new borrowing powers to invest in housing. Will this therefore reduce the need for LAHCs?

The MJ/Norse round table participants



Lord Gary Porter	Chair, Local Government Association ( <i>round table chair</i> )
Simon Hersey	Chief operating officer (Norse Consulting / NPS)
Marina Robertson	Senior director (Norse Consulting / NPS)
Shifa Mustafa	Executive director of place, Croydon LBC
Mark Baigent	Director of housing and regeneration, Tower of Hamlets LBC
Matthew Essex	Operational director of regeneration and property, Redbridge LBC
Peter Matthew	Strategic director, housing, planning and communities, Hounslow LBC
Ken Jones	Housing advisor, Local Government Association
Marina Pirotta	Director, Public Select Limited
Nick Powell	Divisional director of housing, Harrow LBC
Mairéad Anne Carroll	Programme director, housing, London First
Stephen Pearson	Partner, Freeths
Jennifer Daothong	Assistant director, housing strategy and development, Waltham Forest LBC

One participant said ‘getting the borrowing cap removed was a game-changer’ while another asked: ‘If we can deliver what we want through the HRA why go to the expense of setting up a company?’ Another comment was ‘LAHCs were set up to get round

HRA rules, make money or because the councils disliked private rented landlords.’

Lord Porter started the debate by saying that housing is still a Cinderella service – but will there ever be a fairytale ending?

# A shared passion for regeneration in Salford

Ten years ago, the English Cities Fund and Salford City Council submitted a planning application to deliver a scheme that would change the skyline of Salford, Greater Manchester and, in doing so, leave a vital legacy for the city. **Phil Mayall** and **Jim Taylor** tell the story of the challenges and triumphs of the partnership

**S**alford in 2009 was a largely industrial area on the other side of the river to its thriving rival Manchester. A very different place to what it is today, unemployment was high, housing was low-rate and much of the land on the banks of the river was derelict or being used as surface car parking, which was proving a drain on the economy.

The council was keen to turn this around: we knew the city had great potential, but we were realistic and knew that we needed a private sector partner to deliver transformational regeneration. Our aim was to boost the economy, create new homes and jobs, while providing a new hub for business and leisure.

The English Cities Fund, a joint venture between Muse Developments, Legal and General and Homes England, signed a

development agreement with Salford City Council to regenerate the Salford Central area.

The wider area was split into two areas, New Bailey and Chapel Street – with the latter focused on residential development.

As the Premier Inn completed at New Bailey in 2014, the first NCP multi-storey car park and then the first office scheme, One New Bailey closely followed. This created 700 new jobs and the council secured a profit rent, making a real win-win situation for all.

New Bailey was fast becoming a magnet for high calibre occupiers. A real milestone for us was when Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer moved its global centre to One New Bailey in a deal which represented the city's largest inward investment letting in over a decade and created hundreds more

jobs in the area.

We then experienced overwhelming success with The Slate Yard – the first institutionally funded, custom-built Build to Rent (BTR) scheme to be delivered in Greater Manchester. This, along with the Freshfields letting, were probably the key points at which New Bailey and Salford really started to turn heads for all the right reasons.

BTR was just about to take off in the city when the first phase of The Slate Yard completed in May 2017. Following its completion, phase two quickly started on site followed by the third building, highlighting the appetite for those wishing to rent in the city.

The Slate Yard provides 424 one, two and three-bedroom homes across three towers, each with a south facing river view. All

residents benefit from communal facilities including lounges, terraces, residents' gym, along with a 24-hour on call site team.

On Chapel Street, following extensive traffic calming and infrastructure improvements, the first residential scheme, Vimto Gardens, broke ground in 2013, which delivered 83 apartments and 14 townhouses.

This proved a real catalyst to the changing landscape on Chapel Street, which has since seen a wider mix of homes developing, including the award-winning Carpino Place, a unique development featuring 22 three and four-bedroom townhouses, and Timekeepers Square, the 36-home Georgian-style townhouses built around the Grade II listed neo-classical Church of St Phillip's.

Uniquely, the partnership used the

# Making modular work in

Birmingham City Council completes its first modular home this month. **Cllr Sharon Thompson** describes how the carefully planned and considered implementation of modern methods of construction represents a better use of valuable land assets, and is the 'real game changer' that can help address the housing shortage

**W**hen the Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap was lifted last year, it was hailed by many as the silver bullet that will kick start unprecedented and wide-scale local authority housebuilding across the country that hasn't been seen since the introduction of the 1919 Addison Act.

However, the pressures of the national housing shortage have had a dramatic impact on Birmingham and the city, like many across the UK, is now in the grip of a homelessness crisis.

Birmingham is already the largest local authority in the country, and with its population set to grow by a further 10% over the next 15 years, the challenge the council faces is vast. By 2031, it needs to build 89,000 additional properties. However; the solution isn't as simple as just borrowing more money to build more.

So, how can embracing new modern methods of construction (MMC) help?

Birmingham is a busy, urban city with a limited amount of land that can be used for development. Of the 89,000 homes needed, there's space for just 51,100 homes and to achieve its target, the difference will have to be met by working closely with

neighbouring local authorities and thinking outside of the box in terms of sweating the assets we have.

The approach taken by the council's housebuilding arm Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust (BMHT), when it comes to MMC, has been a considered one and the introduction of this type of construction has been carefully planned to be phased alongside its traditional construction programme.

This month, the council will complete its first modular home. This is a significant milestone for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it provides a case study to ensure the new BMHT Modular brand reaches the high standards expected from it. Birmingham has a long and interesting history of embracing MMC and a lot to live up to in terms of quality, design and sustainable credentials.

In the south of Birmingham, the popular Wake Green Road prefabs built in the 1940s are still used and widely celebrated as an example of much-loved, yet thoughtfully-designed, housing that was produced quickly at the time of a national housing crisis.

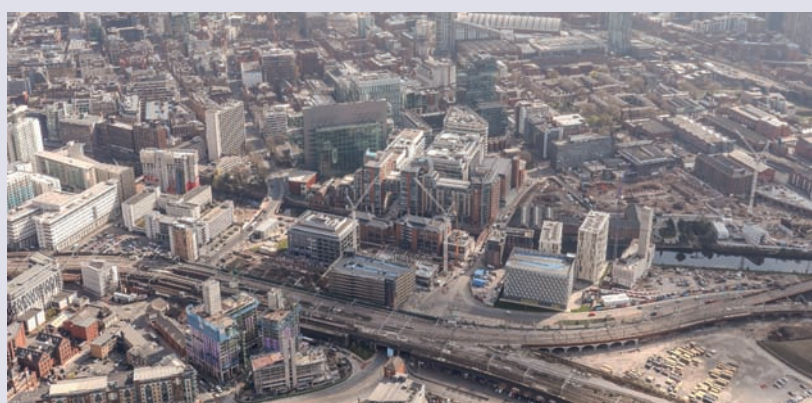
To ensure all of these factors are considered, BMHT has continued its



close ties to acclaimed designer, Wayne Hemmingsway MBE, who has been a critical friend to the project. These discussions have been vital in furthering the ambition that good design, health and wellbeing are central to the BMHT Modular programme so that they are sustainable and attractive to their occupants, something rarely seen from

large-scale developers.

Most importantly, this innovative way of providing modular housing represents a better use of valuable land assets. The BMHT Modular housing programme will unlock land that would have previously been unusable for traditional construction and standard house types associated with private house-builders.



success of New Bailey to cross-subsidise residential developments, reducing viability challenges, creating an opportunity to create a variety of high-quality homes.

Ten years since the planning application was ed for the Salford Central scheme, we have come a long way

We currently have four developments progressing on site; the second office scheme, Two New Bailey Square, a smaller office build, Riverside House, the third Slate Yard residential tower and our third large-scale office development Three New Bailey, which has been fully let to HM

Revenue and Customs (HMRC), with more residential developments in the pipeline.

The phrase public private partnerships trips off the tongue these days, but they're not always successful. We believe Salford is a true example of a partnership between local authority and private developer. We respect one another and have a shared passion for delivering regeneration that works.

*Phil Mayall is regional director of the English Cities Fund and Jim Taylor is chief executive of Salford City Council*

# Birmingham



The council has provided a prototype home to show the benefits of this new thinking. It will occupy land left over after development in a discrete part of a small housing development of mixed ages and styles. Using modular construction, this small area of land can be unlocked and used to place a two-bedroom MMC house. A key priority of the council is to

prevent homelessness. With almost 13,000 on its housing waiting list and 2,900 in temporary accommodation, it's imperative solutions to the crisis are found. This modular home has taken just eight weeks to manufacture and will be installed within three hours, including all of its utilities.

The development represents a real game changer. If the council can combine high-quality housing that is quick to construct, in local communities where it is needed, alongside homeless prevention efforts, then the burden on temporary accommodation can finally begin to be relieved.

This is not a simple task, though, and needs consideration of where there is greatest need. For Birmingham, the next phase of modular houses has already gained planning approval with 54 houses due to begin construction soon.

For Birmingham's immediate future, modular will never replace traditional housing. However, it provides another dimension that can help with addressing the housing shortage particularly when faced with tight and difficult sites.

Local authorities will have to come together with government to tackle the housing crisis. However, if urban local authorities have a mechanism to make better use of the land available, it will inevitably begin to reduce the time spent by citizens on housing waiting lists.

*Cllr Sharon Thompson is cabinet member for homes and neighbourhoods at Birmingham City Council*

## Talk of the town



**Raj Chand** says transparency and consistency were the most crucial elements of the planning and communication strategy for Rugby BC, who embarked on a scheme to redevelop two sites with high-rise buildings and create new social housing

Rugby has a growing economy and population, together with a buoyant private rented sector – factors that mean demand for homes increasingly outstrips supply. We're the largest social landlord in the borough, managing nearly 3,800 homes.

High-rise flats at Biart Place and Rounds Gardens – built in the 1960s – accounted for more than 350 units of the council's housing stock in 2016, when we commissioned extensive survey works in order to understand the lifespan of the blocks and future investment requirements.

Initial findings from the surveys led to more detailed investigations being carried out – the results of which revealed issues with concrete degradation and fire compartmentalisation.

Faced with the only viable option of demolishing the blocks and redeveloping the sites, we were presented with both an enormous challenge and a fantastic opportunity. The challenge was decanting tenants at both Biart Place and Rounds Gardens, at a time when demand on our housing stock was high. The opportunity – to redevelop both sites and create new social housing fit for the future.

The council agreed at a meeting in April 2018 to decant both blocks at Biart Place, with a target date of full decant set for the end of March this year.

Long before the meeting, we had identified the need to keep our tenants at the front and centre of our planning and communication strategies.

While our work often necessitates thinking in terms of housing stock, units and assets, it's important to never lose sight of the fact we're talking about our tenants' homes, lives and families.

Transparency and consistency were vital in order to make sure tenants were both informed and reassured about the council's plans. Our communication strategy was put to the test before the decision to decant had been taken.

The need to change the evacuation procedure from 'stay put' to 'evacuate upon instruction' required staff to visit each household to explain the reasoning

behind the change and check whether health reasons required a tenant to have a bespoke evacuation plan.

Before the council meeting, all tenants were written to individually, explaining the findings of the survey work and the need to either refurbish the blocks or regenerate the site.

Access to the full report being considered at the meeting was also provided and the council set up a tenant helpline to answer questions and explain the compensation packages we were offering.

With the decision of the council, our work to source new, suitable homes for 90 households at Biart Place started in earnest. A small number of tenants were looking to make the move into the private rented sector, so were eligible for an enhanced compensation package.

Several flats were being used as temporary accommodation, so we invested in properties to operate as houses in multiple occupations (HMOs). We also expanded our successful private sector leasing scheme, where we lease properties from private landlords.

But the vast majority of tenants wanted similar social housing accommodation. Our great relationship with our registered provider partners meant we were able to source many homes in the social housing sector.

Together with our own acquisitions and voids in our housing stock, we successfully completed the decant of Biart Place three months ahead of our target date and have now commissioned a design brief for the redevelopment of the site.

Work on decanting Rounds Gardens has now started and, while this is an even bigger challenge, we're confident we have tried and tested strategies in place to make it a success.

If asked the question 'what was the most important factor of this process I needed to ensure we got right?', my answer would definitely be 'communication, communication, communication'.

*Raj Chand is Rugby BC's head of communities and homes*

# Merging the best of both sectors to create new garden communities



The Otterpool Park JV aims to deliver 200,000 properties by 2050

Andy Jarrett explains how joint ventures (JV) and garden towns – including the Otterpool Park joint venture+ between Folkestone and Hythe DC and Cozumel Estates, for up to 10,000 homes – will help the Government achieve its housing target

With tough Government targets for housing to be met, it is increasingly falling to councils and developers to think about innovative and creative ways to work together to get more homes built. We know that, when done correctly, a joint venture (JV) can help regenerate and develop parts of a community that have traditionally been hard to reach, or create completely new communities.

Undoubtedly, the most successful JVs are the ones that bring together the best of the private and public sectors, sharing expertise and complementing each other. JVs can't just rely on contractual and financial agreements alone; effective communication and shared objectives must underpin any future strategy.

This was the blueprint for the proposed

garden town at Otterpool Park, just outside Folkestone, at the foot of the North Downs and on the site around a local, disused racecourse.

Otterpool Park is a joint venture between Folkestone and Hythe DC and Cozumel Estates, whose joint strategic goal is to create a new garden town for up to 10,000 homes, which has half of the land designated as green space.

With more than 900 hectares of open space, the aim is not for just another commuter town. Far from it – this development will be the incubator of economic vibrancy right at the heart of Kent. Moreover, this economic model has cultural and creative interests at its core, reflecting the area's natural character and heritage.

Now in planning, the proposed

development is part of the Government's garden communities programme, which aims to deliver 200,000 properties by 2050. Otterpool Park's garden town status means it will be characterised by its high-quality housing, integrated with large amounts of green space, community facilities and a distinct creative identity.

But it can't just be about beautiful places to live. We are aiming for this garden town to create 8,000 jobs, with more than 75% of those created for existing local residents. Furthermore, we have to be realists when planning new places for people to live in. The way people live and work is changing. Employees want a better work-life balance with the option to both work and play at home. Our vision is to be the exemplar, offering a new garden town that links connectivity to green

spaces, homes and flexible working.

We are just one of 21 proposed garden towns and there may be others in the pipeline as well. The Government has been clear that garden towns are an important tool in their strategy for solving the UK housing crisis. The recent injection of £9m for the proposed 21 new garden towns and villages from the Ministry for Homes, Communities and Local Government and Homes England is a timely reminder of this commitment, and it was pleasing to see that Otterpool Park received the largest sum of this funding.

In many respects, our JV is the essence of the current debate on place-making and beauty raging in policy circles. True place-making is really about asking fundamental questions about what sort of community we want to live in, how we want it to look and feel and what public and private services and infrastructure are required for it to succeed.

It is why the Government recently launched the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission, as it recognised the need for ideas on how the planning system could encourage and incentivise a greater emphasis on design, style and community consent when planning a development.

There is also recognition we cannot do all of this alone – we need the best of the public and private sector combined in order to deliver the right environment for future generations.

Public-private partnerships are not without criticism, but there is no doubt the expertise and insight gained through our project will benefit communities. We welcome further policy discussions on how collaborative approaches can help planning applications move at pace and unlock the very best external counsel and expertise. And we stand ready to deliver the homes and communities people will want to live in for years to come. These are challenging, but exciting, times.

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