

Keeping social housing on the agenda

“Last September, Communities Secretary Sajid Javid announced plans to publish a Green Paper that would provide a “wide ranging, top-to-bottom” review of the issues facing social housing.

We, too, are keen to see a fundamental rethink of the sector – and have put forward some proposals for the Government to consider for inclusion in the Green Paper.

Key among these are a proper funding base for future provision; more freedoms around Right to Buy; and tackling the negative perception of social housing.

We need to make building more social housing a priority, and put it back on an upward growth trajectory. Between them, councils’ and arms-length management organisations’ (ALMOs) building rates are coming nowhere near to replacing the numbers lost just to Right to Buy – never mind those needed to meet rising demand.

Housing associations are also losing social housing units to the scheme, because many council tenants who have transferred to them have a ‘preserved’ Right to Buy. Yet more units are disappearing because they have been converted to ‘affordable’ rather than ‘social’ rent, or the number of units has fallen when estates have been regenerated.

We should be able to retain all the receipts from Right to Buy sales, and the 30 per cent cap and three-year limit on the use of receipts need to go. The LGA’s own analysis (see first 621) found that councils have only been able to replace around a fifth of homes sold under Right to Buy since 2011/12.

We also need to be able to use other grants and funding flexibly to support housing projects, without restrictions on which pot of money can or cannot be used with another. And, of course, we want more freedom to borrow to invest in social housing. We think where a council has reached its housing borrowing cap and it has the capacity, ability, land and know-how to build more homes, it should have that freedom.

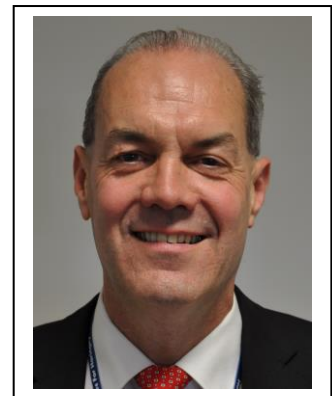
Councils and ALMOs should be helped to continue to deliver on different housing strategies for different areas. Among our members, some have built executive homes to generate income to fund more social housing. Others are building homes for private rent – again, to generate income, but also to plug gaps in the local market; others are buying back Right to Buy properties because sometimes it’s cheaper – and quicker – than building new homes.

Finally, we have long felt that there is too much dreadful media coverage and stereotyping of council and social housing tenants – even before the Grenfell fire threw these issues into stark relief.

Stereotypes of people fiddling benefits, and of drug dealing and out-of-work tenants on run-down estates are unfair to the working families we house.

While we have to be honest about some of the problems we face, it’s safe to say there is also much to be proud of about our social housing estate. There are lots of people in the private rented sector in a much worse position than our tenants, living on six-month tenancies, vulnerable to regular rent rises, and the victims of rogue landlords who fail to maintain properties to a safe standard. The social housing sector overall is a good example of a high-quality rented offer, with some pretty good stock, and security of tenure for tenants.

We think the Government, as part of its work on the Green Paper, needs to be talking to the people on the waiting lists for social housing, who are often stuck in poor quality, private- sector temporary accommodation. I suspect many would be glad of a five-year tenancy.”



Comment piece published in First, the magazine for Local Government (April 2018, Page 23):
<https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/First%20May18%20Web-res%20PDF.pdf>