



The next phase in the Homes at the Heart campaign – a partnership between the NFA, National Housing Federation, Crisis, CIH and ARCH – launches today under the banner of ‘a stronger economy’.

Maggie Cornall, Director of Operations at NFA member Blackpool Coastal Housing, kicks off our contribution to this first Homes at the Heart week of action. There will be five more across the summer, in the lead up to the autumn Comprehensive Spending Review, urging the government to revitalise the UK economy through a once-in-a-generation investment in social housing.

Here Maggie lays bare the interlinked issues of health and housing, all of which feed into the economy for good or ill, and for all of us. Social housing builders and managers are, she says, uniquely well-placed to deliver the solid foundations of a stronger post-COVID economy.

Maggie Cornall

Director of Operations, Blackpool Coastal Housing

Sign up for help. Turn up for appointments. That’s how traditional employment services work – they don’t come to you. But, for those furthest from the job market, achieving these apparently simple goals can seem as close to hopeless as getting a seat on a space shuttle.

And yet, if we’re serious about building a stronger economy that benefits everyone and levels up access to the job market, we have to be more imaginative and much more proactive about how we deliver employment services. And good quality social housing and housing services offer a key to that door.

I really think that housing providers come at things differently from other service providers. We have, to start with, a unique relationship with our residents. Social housing has come a very long way from the days of the rent collector and every front door the same colour. We’ve long since learned that there’s more to building a community than building a house.

Community hubs and an offering of events, education, financial wellbeing advice and help with training and employment are now routine features of the service landscape in my own organisation’s work, as they are for most other social housing providers. However, because we are so close to our communities, we understand the context and the detail of the challenges our residents face. This means we can target resources far more precisely than traditional training or employment services.

Blackpool, for instance, has some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK. The number of looked-after children here is around twice the national average; and during lockdown the number of people claiming unemployment benefit – a persistent feature of our town’s seasonal economy at the best of times – rose more than 50%. So it’s easy to see how bleak the outlook is for young people leaving care.

The town’s housing staff were the people who realised that few care leavers had the skills to manage their lives. The tenancy failure rate – unpaid rent or poor behaviour, leading to eviction – among Blackpool youngsters discharged from care at 18 into private rented accommodation was 100%. All of them.

That's a lot of wasted potential, and almost certainly foreshadows a huge future drain on health and welfare services. Now our PTP service – Positive Transitions Pathway – is tailored to care-leavers and starts with the premise that no-one can hold down a job unless they have a stable home and robust mental and physical health. These are young people with hugely complex backgrounds who, by definition, have rarely had much experience of stability or good health.

Since its launch, PTP has worked with 51 young people; 24 have begun to make stable homes for themselves with intensive support from our PT officers. Eight more have been 'stepped down' – they're doing well, so our approach is much more light-touch. Ten have 'graduated' from the PTP project and no longer need us. Seven are still in supported accommodation, preparing to move into their first independent homes. Just two have been evicted despite this support – 4% tenancy failure in place of 100%.

This really isn't rocket science. It's just treating people as human beings where other, more traditional approaches can often dehumanise them. At the housing level, we do human.

I also believe this kind of work takes housing back to its core; social housing was born at the end of the First World War out of the urgent need to improve the nation's health and wellbeing for the sake of our economy. Social housing providers are still doing just that through initiatives such as PTP.

Housing and its associated services play a far more significant role in people's health and wellbeing than the NHS does, and much ill health is prevented by good quality, well-managed social housing.

Yet we so often seem to be shouting in the wilderness, though international clinical studies going back to the 1980s show clearly that helping people to find and sustain paid work is more effective at promoting good health than any other form of treatment, psychological or pharmaceutical.

And steady work – and a stronger economy – begins with a stable home.

