



#HomesAtTheHeart Blog

My career in housing started in 1988 when I landed a temporary job as a waiting list clerk at Northampton Borough Council. I would never have believed that 32 years later, I would be leading the housing service through a global pandemic at a time when the UK was already facing a housing crisis.

My team manages a housing register of nearly 4,000 households in need of a home that meets their needs. I think back to the early days when the housing register was literally a waiting list. If you could demonstrate housing need, you could wait your turn and be rewarded with a council home. Homeless cases were few and far between, but those who did need temporary accommodation were usually moved into their own home within a couple of weeks. This scenario is unimaginable for allocations officers in 2020, who deliver bad news daily and do their best to manage the expectations of applicants waiting for a home. The numbers speak for themselves. We need more homes.

In 2015, the council set up NPH, an arms-length management organisation to look after its housing stock of over 11,000 homes and crucially, to meet the challenge of building 1,000 new homes by 2028. Just in the last few months, our newly published development strategy sets out our ambitions to do better than that, with a target of 3,000 homes by 2030. Good design, quality building and sustainability will be the hallmark of every home we build.

At this moment, 150 new-build homes have been completed and handed over, and 150 more are underway. Another 240 homes have planning consent and incredibly, we managed to keep building despite the challenges we faced during the pandemic. 160 more homes are in the planning system, and more than 400 are at feasibility or pre-planning stage. If all these are completed, the original target will be met, but we won't stop there.

We need to be innovative, especially when it comes to finding places to build. Largely disused council-owned garages have made way for small clusters of new homes; we've made use of small brownfield sites and we've reconfigured existing developments to make space for more homes. We've even added floors and remodelled existing blocks to increase supply during regeneration schemes.

Most recently, we've been given approval for three high-quality larger developments to turn former office blocks into affordable apartments. The Clock House will be allocated to key workers, including retail and leisure workers, who live within walking distance to the town centre. We love our town and we hope that by providing secure, attractive homes for those who keep Northampton safe, healthy and vibrant; NPH will have a positive impact on the town centre economy.

It's an exciting time for us at NPH, this is the biggest council house building programme in decades. I've heard first-hand from residents who have moved into our newest homes, what this means to

them. But it's not just about construction, I work closely with the development team to make sure that we are building sustainable communities and that we learn from mistakes of the past.

Take Centenary House for example, this was a complete overhaul of a single-persons' accommodation block that was plagued with anti-social behaviour. We knew that we had a chance to do something different and worked hard to make that happen. We made use of a local lettings plan to make sure that we got the allocations right and we invested in a training programme for residents to prepare them for their tenancy and everything they needed to live together peacefully. Centenary House is now a thriving community for families with plenty of green space to play, grow food and socialise.

The fact that housing demand has exceeded supply for many years has driven the need for the sustainability model of housing management we've developed. We have an intervention and support service at NPH that seeks to identify potential tenancy issues at the earliest stage. Officers in my team are specially trained to deal with mental health problems, domestic abuse, substance abuse and ASB. By working with tenants in this way, we've reduced evictions by over 60% and provided support to individuals experiencing their toughest times.

In summary – we undoubtedly need new homes across the UK. We also need to make sure that housing management professionals are listened to as part of the process. The knowledge, experience and skills acquired during a career in housing can support the development process to create strong, long-lasting positive communities, whilst supporting our most vulnerable to live independently in homes that work for them.

Whilst we're unlikely to return to the position I described in 1988, I would love to see a significant investment in social housing that allows us to provide homes for the next generation; give them a place to call their own while they build their careers, start a family or simply find their way in life.

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