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Introduction
Jane Dudman



'Housing providers face growing scrutiny'

UK housing associations play a vital role in building and maintaining 2.4m homes, as well as providing a wide range of additional services for their residents.

But as the country's housing crisis intensifies, these providers face growing scrutiny on all sides, with questions about their ability to build enough new homes, about whether they are too commercial, and whether they are tackling residents' concerns.

In this special supplement, we ask how providers of social housing are coping at a time of political and economic uncertainty. Housing association chief executive Barbara Spicer explains the vital local partnerships that help do more than just put a roof over people's heads.

We ask those who live in, work in, study or want to change social housing for their opinions, and hear what it's like to move from being homeless to being in a secure home. We hear what it's like to support young people, and how small community groups are getting big results in housing.

We also look at a scheme to speed up home adaptations, and how beautifully designed council homes can be.

'We ask how providers of social housing are coping at a time of political and economic uncertainty'

Social housing
Crisis builds as government passes the buck

Growing political and financial turmoil leaves social housing providers facing huge challenges

Jane Dudman

Thousands of homeless children are growing up in cheaply converted shipping containers and cramped rooms in former office blocks; 130,000 families in England are being crammed into one-bedroom flats; and social housing residents of a block of flats in east London engulfed

in flames say they are being forced to move back despite safety fears.

These are just a few recent examples of how the UK housing crisis is affecting the country's poorest and most vulnerable citizens. But how much notice is prime minister Boris Johnson taking?

He has made spending pledges for the NHS and police, but there is little to suggest Johnson will address the UK's shortage of truly affordable homes for rent. Housing expert Colin Wiles points out that during Johnson's two terms as London mayor, he redefined the term "affordable" in 2011 to mean rents of up to 80% of market rents - extremely expensive in the capital. "Johnson's philosophy, in a nutshell, is that homeowners mean Tory

▼ Lack of funding has forced many families into unsuitable dwellings, such as converted shipping containers
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY



Comment
Barbara Spicer



'Pooling resources with councils helps turn ideas into reality'

Two things contribute to a person's wellbeing: a real job, with prospects; and a decent home to call your own. So it's worth noting the work housing associations do - not just providing homes, but also supporting employment and skills. The sector spent £70m last year on this.

Housing associations have specialist welfare and income teams to advise people struggling with the rollout of universal credit, for instance - alleviating some of the pressure other public bodies, particularly councils, face.

Similarly, regeneration isn't just about building new, good-quality homes; it must also be about providing transport links, and supporting people into jobs. Toxteth's Welsh Streets, Victorian terraces built for Welsh workers, once faced demolition, and lay empty for years. They are now thriving again as modern, warm family homes, due to a £17.4m programme between Plus Dane, Liverpool city council and Homes England.

The project, which is helping to regenerate a community from the grassroots, employs nine apprentices, most of whom are housing association tenants. This could not have happened without Liverpool city council's tenacity and belief in the partnership.

Local authorities, with their democratic mandate, are the bedrock of our local communities. But the lifeblood has been squeezed out of their resources for community services. Pooling resources, both human and financial, helps turn ideas into reality, for us and for councils.

By working with Liverpool metro mayor Steve Rotheram, for instance, we have been able to tackle one of our country's most recalcitrant issues: homelessness. Liverpool is one of three areas in the UK to pilot

Housing First, the model that provides homeless people with a property first, before working with them to provide support. All our regional housing associations signed up two years ago to work with the Liverpool combined authority and councils to deliver this. We are determined to stop the revolving door that leads to some people passing through our systems again and again. It's been really important to involve people in this who have been homeless themselves.

We also work with local councils to provide homes and support for refugees. So far, commissioned by Halton council, we have helped resettle more than 25 refugee families from war-torn Syria. We ensure they can reach appropriate health, education and employment and training opportunities, and we support them to obtain any welfare or benefits to which they are entitled.

We show families where they can buy food and supplies, provide them with information about transport, arrange meetings at the job centre, and provide support around money and learning to budget. We also make sure they meet up with existing residents in the area. It's all part of supporting local communities.

However, high levels of poverty and low-quality private renting prevail in many of our neighbourhoods, and this needs to be addressed if we are to develop resilient communities. Too many sections of society still stigmatise such communities, rather than support the amazing and creative people who live there. We need a devolved approach to funding and decision-making, where local issues are clearly understood.

As a general election looms, I am not hopeful that any change in government will support the vital role of housing associations. But we will still be here, alongside our local authority colleagues, supporting communities.

Barbara Spicer is chief executive of PlusDane housing

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voters and social housing means Labour voters," says Wiles. "Johnson in No 10 signals a gloomy outlook."

The National Housing Federation, which represents housing associations, says England needs about 145,000 new social homes every year, including 90,000 at below-market rent. But in 2018 only 6,000 social rented homes were built, as a result of sharp government cuts to funding for new social housing since 2010.

"We're clearly seeing a push for home ownership," says federation president Kate Henderson. "As a sector, we can support affordable home ownership through shared ownership homes, but we must also make the case for delivering affordable and social rented homes alongside that. We want to build the affordable homes the country needs, but we can't do that without significant government funding."

The government spent £1.27bn on affordable housing in 2018, according to the National Housing Federation. It wants to see that rise to £12.8bn a year for 10 years, so 145,000 more houses can be built every year.

The money is vital, as political and financial uncertainty has scuppered many housing associations' plans to subsidise new social homes by building new houses for sale. Brexit uncertainty has prompted a downturn in the housing market, with London house prices falling at the fastest rate for 10 years.

'We want to build the affordable homes the country needs, but to do that we need government funding'

Kate Henderson
National Housing Federation

In August, the chancellor, Sajid Javid, announced £600m of new infrastructure spending to "unlock" the construction of up to 50,000 homes in London and the south-east. But that is far from pledging direct funding to build homes for social rent. According to a Chartered Institute of Housing survey in August, more British people feel directly threatened by the UK housing crisis (57%) than our exit from the EU (56%).

There is also frustration for those who want to see reforms to the housing sector following the terrible fire in Grenfell Tower in June 2017. "We're now confronted with our fourth housing minister within just over two years," says Edward Daffarn, a leading member of the Grenfell United survivors' group, which is calling for better tenant representation and the creation of a consumer watchdog for those living in social housing. "The frustration of having to start again is beyond measure."

While Daffarn welcomes the commitment by many housing associations to change their relationship with the people they house, he points out that the process can be difficult and time-consuming. "We are sceptical of what housing associations are saying until we have quantifiable means to tell how they are performing. In the meantime, a lot of people contact us - and they are not saying: 'Gosh, my housing association has changed.'"

Henderson says housing associations are committed to making buildings safe, but it is expensive. The federation wants the government to create a special fund, in addition to the existing £400m fund for cladding replacement, to cover further costs such as fire doors.

But it's not all gloom. After years of frustrating restrictions, councils are finally being allowed to build houses themselves, with many already having set up innovative new ways to get more social homes built.

In Barking, for instance, the council has set up its own developer, Be First, which aims to build 50,000 new homes in the borough over the next 20 years. "We don't have to generate the same level of profit as private housebuilders," says Be First's managing director Pat Hayes. "We face huge challenges but also huge opportunities. The council here is really ambitious. It actually wants to do something to try and change the place."

'Too many sections of society still stigmatise our communities, rather than support the amazing and creative people who live there'

Voices of the community

'Social housing is not welfare housing, and people deserve better'

Tenants, activists and academics share their views on the state of social housing and what the future holds

Rachel Williams

Are housing associations straying too far from their historical mission of providing decent, affordable homes? What are the lessons for politicians and providers in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire? Amid an ever-deepening housing crisis, and two years after a tragedy that brought social housing under a sudden and unforgiving spotlight, there are plenty of big questions for the sector. But there are wider issues to consider too, according to those who know it best.

One key message coming from those who live in, work in, study or want to change social housing is that it's about much more than just buildings. From programmes to help tenants find work, to opportunities to get involved with the creative arts, providers can help residents fulfil their potential and live happier, more settled lives. Recent research by the University of Salford's sustainable housing and urban studies unit found that housing associations could support a tenant into employment for as little as £25 to £30 a year, and that many tenants thought housing associations were better placed to do this than other organisations, because of the relationships they already had.

Our interviewees also noted challenges relating to the UK's ageing population and increasing rates of disability. Earlier this year, a report from Habinteg highlighted that there are 13.9 million disabled people in the UK, with an estimated 1.2 million wheelchair users, yet only 7% of housing stock in England has even basic accessibility features. With 28% of the population set to be 65 and over by 2036, new homes are crucial to avoid more older and disabled people going into residential care.

There was much to celebrate, too, with praise for housing association staff making the effort to get to know residents and for work to ensure LGBT tenants don't feel ignored or isolated. And there was news of activists joining forces with architects to reimagine affordable homes.



Darwin Bernardo
Founder, Nutmeg Community, north London

We work with Barnet council and Barnet Homes to help young people living in social housing, through things like sports programmes and entrepreneurship training. We've even had sports day races between tenants and housing staff. Housing associations need to become more engaged with their residents, from the chief executives - who need to be going out on to the estates - all the way down. They need to do more than just collect rent and only talk to

'If residents are to be active citizens, they need to feel they mean something to their housing provider'

Darwin Bernardo
Nutmeg Community

parents when their kids are in trouble. If residents are going to be active citizens, they need to feel they mean something to their housing provider.

'Some of the large housing associations have acknowledged they must go back to their social purpose'

Tom Murtha
Social Housing Under Threat



Tom Murtha
Former housing association chief executive and founding member of Social Housing Under Threat

There's been a feeling that maybe housing associations have lost their way - that they've grown too big, or too commercial. Some are now changing. Some of the large ones have said very clearly that they need to go back to their social purpose. Some associations have recognised that, yes, they've been developing new homes that, if they can afford it, some people find wonderful to live in, but that they also need to invest in their existing stock. Some are a lot slower to recognise the need to change, and I think that tension and separation is going to grow.



ILLUSTRATION: ADAM HAYES

Clive Betts MP
Chair of the Commons housing select committee

After Grenfell, the most important lesson is that we can no longer treat social housing as poor housing for poor people. That's where we'd got to: it was welfare housing, and people who ended up in it were seen as inadequate, and therefore not deserving of very much. And because people in social housing were poor and struggling, they found it hard to articulate their concerns, so they were completely ignored. Since then we've heard words from ministers, but what we haven't seen is action, backed by money, to improve existing housing and make more available.



'Since Grenfell, we've heard words from ministers, but what we haven't seen is action'

Clive Betts
Commons housing select committee

'For many disabled people, feeling you can do normal things at home also enables you to work'

Delores Taylor
Habinteg tenant



Delores Taylor
Habinteg tenant, Surrey

Habinteg's recent report on the impending accessible homes crisis really saddened me. Living in an inaccessible property impacted my health and my ability to look after my children, who were considered young carers. Now I'm in an accessible home, I can care for myself, which is wonderful for my children - they get to have a childhood. For many disabled people, feeling you can do normal things at home also enables you to work and contribute to society. Just building more homes isn't enough: the lack of accessible homes must be addressed.

Lynsey Sweeney
Managing director, Communities That Work

Social housing is not just bricks and mortar. As a membership body for providers who want to support their tenants into good quality work, we believe you've got to look at the impact of poverty on your community and do something about it. People living in social housing face a greater challenge to get into work, and when they do, they're likely to earn less. But helping people into employment isn't just a cutesy, nice-to-have extra, or part of a board's mission statement; research we commissioned shows there's a bottom-line business case to support your tenants to support their own tenancies.

'Helping people into employment isn't just a cutesy, nice-to-have extra'

Lynsey Sweeney
Communities That Work



'People are calling out for an alternative to the ideology driving Brexit'

Harris Beider
Birmingham City University



Harris Beider
Professor of communities and public policy, Birmingham City University

I think social housing has lost its way: it's going towards a philosophy where the bottom line is everything. People are calling out for an alternative to the ideology driving Brexit and it's beholden on social housing providers to articulate what it is that they're about, and how they can reach out to people who are disadvantaged, or poor, or black, or refugees, and say "we are trying to be a driver for diverse communities, because it's part of our ethos and values". I don't see that in a uniform way within housing organisations. I want to see a more progressive voice.

Anna Lecky
Environmental activist working to build a tiny house community in Belfast

Over the course of 11 months last year, 148 people who were homeless in Northern Ireland died while waiting for social housing. There's a massive need for housing, but the shortage of single-person dwellings is a big problem. Tiny houses - sustainably built homes measuring approximately 35 sq metres, rented at low cost, like those designed here by the Holding Project - could be a solution. Other residents might be trying to get on the property ladder or have children who've left home. We want to prove there is a demand for change, for the chance to live small and live differently.

'The shortage of single-person dwellings is a big problem'

Anna Lecky
Environmental activist



'The first time they gave me a colour it was like they gave me magic'

Nazzi Raha
Artist

Nazzi Raha
Artist, north-west London

I worked as a phlebotomist in the UK for many years, but became homeless in 2016. After a year in a hostel with no support, I moved to One Housing's Arlington hostel in Camden and joined the art programme. It just opened the door for me: the first time they gave me a colour it was like they gave me magic. Art makes me calm, and it built up my confidence - I just forget every pain in my life. I live independently now but still use the studio and workshops at Arlington. It's so important these kinds of things are provided.

Anne Power
Professor of social policy, London School of Economics

We're losing a lot of social housing because of demolition and rebuilding. But there are a few cases where a housing association has taken control and replaced blocks one by one, allowing tenants to move across without breaking up communities. This requires careful, on-site housing management. Computer-based systems have their place, but they cannot run community services, or keep the grounds clean and safe. You need people on the ground and hands-on management. It means you can keep arrears in check, you can support people into work, you can help vulnerable people. Our research has



'For every £1 invested in careful renewal, about £12 of social value is generated'

Anne Power
London School of Economics

shown that for every £1 invested in that kind of renewal, about £12 of social value is generated by reinforcing social links, maintaining neighbourhood conditions, and support community infrastructure.

Luchia Fitzgerald
LGBT rights activist and resident, Irwell Valley Homes, Greater Manchester

Housing associations need to be ready for an increase in the number of elderly LGBT tenants. Some are moving into accommodation and having to go back in the closet at the end of their lives because other residents don't accept them. That's absolutely heartbreaking. They also need to think about younger LGBT people - there's a serious problem with them becoming homeless and invisible. At Irwell Valley we're trying to create safe spaces for both groups, and we're training people up to spot the depression and isolation they can suffer. But a lot of housing associations really need to step up and recognise these issues.

'Some elderly LGBT tenants are going back in the closet because other residents don't accept them'

Luchia Fitzgerald
LGBT rights activist



Homelessness

Rough estimates fail to tell full story

Conflicting data on rough sleeping and homelessness hampers understanding of the problem, and breeds a lack of action

Patrick Greenfield

The August eviction of 10 rough sleepers from an underpass leading to the Houses of Parliament brought the homelessness crisis to the very door of MPs.

But UK politicians and policymakers lack high-quality, independent data to tackle the problem. Who counts as homeless, how much help they require, and the factors driving the surge in people with nowhere to live have become intensely political issues.

Support varies from council to council: some take very harsh views on who “deserves” help and who does not. A 2018 Guardian investigation revealed that in the past four years councils had given thousands of rough sleepers and homeless people one-way tickets on trains, buses and aeroplanes - sometimes to leave not just the area, but the country.

There are now 84,740 households, including 126,020 children, living in temporary accommodation - the highest level in more than a decade - while the children’s commissioner calculates there are 92,000 homeless young people in families who sofa-surfed with friends or relatives. But charity Shelter believes the true extent of the problem is much worse, driven by spiralling rents, austerity and a lack of social housing.

There are also issues when trying to calculate the number of people sleeping rough, the most visible but least common form of homelessness. The official figures



showed a fall in rough sleeping last year for the first time since 2010, but highly controversial changes to the way councils record the figures prompted the UK statistics regulator to warn that the 2018 rough sleeper count should not be trusted. The government defended its rough sleeping initiative but has acknowledged the possibility of bias in the official data.

Even without definitive statistics, there is evidence that rough sleeping continues to rise. The “official” figures - a snapshot of everyone about to bed down or already bedded down on the street, in doorways, parks, tents and sheds - but not hostels or shelters - on a single night in autumn, suggest 4,677 rough sleepers. However, homeless charity Crisis estimates that 24,000 people

The ‘official’ figures suggest 4,677 rough sleepers in Britain; Crisis estimates the figure to be 24,000

were rough sleeping in Britain last year, and figures published annually by the Greater London Authority suggest 8,855 people bedding down on the capital’s streets. This is an 18% year-on-year rise, and more than double the number recorded in 2009-10, when 3,673 people were identified as rough sleeping in the city.

In June, an investigation into tent cities in the UK by the Guardian found that street homelessness was becoming more established, with a growing number of people creating small encampments. Reports to councils about homeless encampments increased from 277 in 2014 to 1,241 in 2018, and councils cleared more than 200 camps last year. Tent cities, whose inhabitants often refuse help from the state and live together for safety, could become a normal part of life in the UK, as they are in Los Angeles and other US cities, if sustained, well-funded help is not forthcoming.

Housing First - a much-lauded system now being trialled by some UK authorities - provides stable accommodation alongside health and wellbeing support. But most homeless people are not living on the streets with addiction problems; they just struggle to afford to live.

Without better information about homelessness, it’s hard to see how the issue can be tackled. And not all data is being used to positive ends: the Home Office is seeking access to data about rough sleepers in London to inform immigration decisions.

PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY

Timeline

Falling supply and rising demand: the story of social housing

- 1869-1914** **First council housing in Europe** is built in Liverpool in 1869. Between 1890 and 1914, 24,000 council homes are built in Britain.
- 1918-1939** **British councils build 1.1m homes**, spurred by the Housing and Town Planning Act. Passed in July 1919, the Act requires all British local authorities by force of law to meet local housing need.
- 1945-1951** **Clement Attlee’s** post-war Labour government oversees a housing boom. More than 1m homes are built; 80% are council houses.



- 50s & 60s** **Private builders** produce between 150,000 and 200,000 homes a year. New housing built by councils brings the total up to a peak in the late 1960s of more than 400,000 new homes a year.

- 1970s** **Council tenants** are given the right to buy their houses. The number of council homes sold in England rises from 7,000 in 1970 to nearly 46,000 in 1972.

- 1971-1980** **Almost 2.7m new homes** are built in England and Wales, of which 1.2m are social housing. Councils build just over 1m homes while housing associations build 148,000 new homes.

- 1980** **Margaret Thatcher’s Housing Act** sparks a huge rise in council homes sold off under right to buy. More than 150,000 council houses are sold off in 1980-81 alone.



- 1981-1990** **Almost 1.9m new homes** are built in England and Wales, but only 394,000 are social housing. Councils build 261,000 new homes; housing associations build 252,000 homes.

- 1991-2000** **Just over 1.5m new homes** are built in England and Wales, of which 270,000 are social housing. Councils build 18,000 homes, while housing associations build 252,000 new homes.

- 2001-2010** **Just under 1.5m new homes** are built in England and Wales - only 208,000 are social housing. Councils build just 4,000 new homes in this decade, while housing associations build 204,000.

- 2010** **New house building in England falls to 112,000 homes**, the lowest level witnessed since the 1920s.

- 2014-2017** **Despite calculations that England needs 170,000 new private sector and 75,000 new social sector houses each year**, in 2017 only 184,000 new homes are built.

- 2017-2018** **In England, 4m households live in the social rented sector** (17% of all households). Most - 2.4m - rent from housing associations; 1.6m rent from local authorities.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAM TURNER FOR THE GUARDIAN, GETTY

► **Dorota Skrzek: ‘I used to be scared of people and struggled with depression, but this has made me a stronger person.’**

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOANNE CRAWFORD



Experience

‘I did lots of painting and fixed up the kitchen. This house is my castle, my own refuge’

A scheme offering dilapidated houses to homeless people, on condition they renovate, gave Dorota Skrzek the stability she craved

Alice Grahame

When Dorota Skrzek became homeless because of an abusive partner, she and her two-year-old son had to leave everything behind to move into a women’s refuge, in a town they didn’t know. “We had only our clothes. It was a very difficult time,” she says. At the refuge, Skrzek had the chance to move to a small terraced

house. It was just the right size for her and her toddler and the rent was low.

But there was a catch. The house had been unoccupied for some time and was in a state of complete disrepair, with a boarded-up front door and windows, crumbling plaster and peeling paint and wallpaper. To qualify as a tenant Skrzek had to commit to taking a hands-on role in making the property liveable.

The project was part of a scheme by Leeds-based charity Canopy Housing, which offers self-help homes, a type of community-led housing where homeless people do up dilapidated properties. Empty homes get used, and vulnerable people learn new skills and get a home.

Despite having no experience in even basic DIY, Skrzek was up for the challenge. “It was hard. But I was given training from one of Canopy’s volunteer instructors, which gave

me the confidence I needed,” she says. “I did lots of painting, which I enjoyed, and fixed up the kitchen.”

Along with other volunteers, Skrzek worked for about three months, from 9 to 4, two days a week, renovating not just her own, but other dilapidated houses. Unlike most private rented and council tenants, she could choose the finish she wanted for her new home. “I chose green for the living room, and my bedroom is blue. I was allowed to do it exactly as I wanted.”

Her son, now six, has a green bedroom and space for his toys. “It was a bit hard on him while I worked on the house, but when he got his new bedroom he was in heaven,” she says. “He says he wants to stay forever. To me, it is my castle, my own refuge.”

Four years on from the refurb, Skrzek is still feeling the benefits. “I got more confident. Now, if something breaks I will try to fix it myself,” she says. “It has been good for my mental health, too. I used to be scared of people and struggled with depression, but this has made me a stronger person and I am part of a community of volunteers and residents. I really wish everyone who has experienced domestic violence could have this opportunity.”

Connect with home

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Home refits

Wales leads the way on rapid response home adaptations

Fewer falls at home means reduced hospital admissions, but demand for 'care repairs' is overwhelming councils

David Brindle

After a bad fall at home, Linda Jones spent three weeks in hospital. Fearing she might fall again, the discharge coordinator at the Royal Gwent hospital in Newport arranged for an assessment of her house. Within 48 hours she had a handrail in the hallway and grab rails in the downstairs toilet.

While there is nothing odd in

making minor home adaptations to prevent falls - the single biggest cause of hospital admissions of older people - the speed of this intervention is unusual. All too often, applications for even the simplest practical aids are held up for months in the mistaken belief they require approval by an occupational therapist.

A survey last year by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found the average wait for an adaptation was 22 weeks - eight weeks for a decision, then 14 for installation - with some local councils taking more than a year.

New guidance aims to tackle the problem. Adaptations Without Delay, commissioned by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) and drawn up by the Housing Learning and Improvement Network, sets out a decision-making framework to grade

▼ The average wait for a home adaptation is 22 weeks

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY



different types of adaptations and advise when they can be authorised and installed without going through the full process.

"Adaptations play a crucial role in prevention and need to be delivered in a timely manner," says Karin Bishop, RCOT director of professional operations. "We need a radically different approach to address the delays."

The guidance praises the approach of Care & Repair Cymru, which supports 13 Welsh care and repair agencies that carry out adaptations and operate a rapid-response service authorised to undertake minor works costing up to £350 and grant-funded without a means test.

Many local authorities simply don't have the capacity to get through waiting lists'

Rachel Docking
Centre for Ageing Better

Jones, 67, who has diabetes and high blood pressure, was helped by Care & Repair Monmouthshire & Torfaen. A caseworker from the agency visited her Cwmbran home and a technician, trained like the caseworker as a trusted assessor,

fitted the rails two days later. "It was fantastic, done ever so quickly," says Stacey Jones, Linda's daughter.

The caseworker discussed further, more complex potential changes, including a level-access shower, stairlift and improved front access to the house. As these fell outside the rapid response remit, a referral was made for an occupational therapy assessment, as well as for a check on benefits the Joneses were entitled to and on eligibility for alarm and telecare services. They waited two months for that assessment.

This shows both the benefit of the RCOT guidance - removing barriers to immediate, straightforward adaptations - and the need to improve the responsiveness of the system when issues are more complex.

More money is available for adaptations than ever before. With ministers now recognising their value in helping keep older and disabled people out of hospital and residential care, funding for disabled facilities grants, which pay for adaptations, has risen by 8% in England in 2019-20, to £505m. The aim is to make 85,000 grants this year, more than twice the number five years ago.

But this increase in capital funding has not been matched by more resources to enable councils to process grants. As Rachael Docking, senior programme manager at the Centre for Ageing Better, says: "Many local authorities simply don't have the capacity to deliver home adaptations quickly."

▼ Susie Pasotti works with young people in rural Gloucestershire

PHOTOGRAPH: JODY DAUNTON



Comment
Angus Ritchie



'Small-scale campaigns are reweaving the bonds of trust between different communities'

A new front door for a block of flats in which residents have felt unsafe, or better lighting in a local park: these may be small improvements, but when local people come together to fight for them, they discover their collective power and learn the habits of effective public action.

With its patient process of bringing people together, this kind of community organising has much to offer housing associations. Small-scale local campaigns are reweaving the bonds of trust between neighbours from different social and ethnic groups in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in the UK and the US. Organisations like Citizens UK and Industrial Areas Foundation work in places where local people already get together, such as churches and tenants associations, schools and mosques, to identify issues of common concern and grassroots leaders willing to act together for change.

Seemingly modest successes are helping build alliances to gain increasing amounts of affordable housing, often in community-led developments, such as the 10 new sites released by the mayor of London last year for development by small homebuilders.

Instead of seeing one another as rivals for a declining stock of affordable housing, local people organise themselves as a community to challenge that decline. Housing associations can find a powerful ally in these grassroots coalitions, to help them build trust between neighbours at a time of anger and division, and secure more of the affordable homes that are needed so urgently.

As I describe in my new book, this new kind of inclusive populism can form part of the challenge to the rise of divisive populism on both sides of the Atlantic.

The cost of housing is one cause of popular frustration, with the allocation of scarce housing a particular source of conflict. Hate crime is on the rise in many areas as populist rhetoric pits people against one another in the fight for affordable homes, and housing associations are often on the frontline of such tension.

The only antidote, as Pope Francis has argued, is a more authentic version of populism in which people themselves are the protagonists, with leaders truly concerned about building people's own capabilities, rather than looking for results that might yield quick, short-term political gains, but that do not enhance the full nature of human potential.

Angus Ritchie is director of the Centre for Theology and Community and assistant priest at St George-in-the-East. Inclusive populism: creating citizens in the global age is published on 30 September.



► Housing associations and community coalitions have come together to get affordable housing built
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY

Experience

'Anyone who's looked at the bus timetable knows you can't make a 9.30am appointment'

Neighbourhood officer Susie Pasotti explains the unique challenges of supporting young adults in rural areas

Tim Clark

If they miss one bus, it's back to square one," says Susie Pasotti. A neighbourhood officer for housing association Rooftop, Pasotti has spent four years supporting young adults with accommodation, benefits, and other services.

Travel options - or the lack of them - in the Forest of Dean, part of rural Gloucestershire, have a big effect on young adults seeking help. "If they're given an appointment at 9.30am, anyone who has actually looked at the bus timetables knows they won't get there on time," she points out.

The small town of Cinderford, like many rural towns, lacks services for young adults. They have to travel 18 miles to Gloucester to attend assessments with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), probation appointments or college.

are experiencing issues such as depression and anxiety, yet there is less money and fewer resources to support them, she says. The result? "There's a lot more cannabis use, and self-medicating."

The challenges don't stop when young people find work. Many struggle to manage a budget, often falling into arrears. As soon as they get a job, they have to pay up to £60 a week more in top-up rent, as well as council tax and other bills. "It's a real eye-opener," says Pasotti. Fines and arrears quickly build up if young people don't pay their bills on time.

It all makes Pasotti's job harder. "We don't want a whole raft of people thinking it's going to be easier if they stay on benefits, because as soon as they work, they can't afford the rent," she comments. "That's not good for your mental health. Day in day out, it limits confidence."

Despite the challenges, job satisfaction comes from the small measures that can have a big impact on people's lives: "What seems like a little achievement, such as someone calling the DWP themselves to sort out an issue on their own, is a big deal," says Pasotti.

"It's rewarding when people who have been very challenging with you, which at times they can be, feel safe enough with you to say: 'Sorry about that'. I know it's taken a lot for them to say that."

Pasotti recalls one young woman who was "petrified" before a job interview. "I had just seen a Ted Talk on power moves [exercises athletes do prior to racing]. I coached her. She got the job. I was so psyched - it was incredibly satisfying."

'We don't want a whole raft of people thinking it's going to be easier if they stay on benefits'

Susie Pasotti
Rooftop

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Architecture Councils invest in quality design for future savings

Well-designed community spaces foster healthier lives for residents - leading to smaller bills for councils

Emma Sheppard

Their new houses may have won national media praise, been lauded by industry experts and even made the shortlist of the Royal Institute of British Architects' (Riba) Stirling Prize. But for Norwich council, it's the reaction from the residents on Goldsmith Street that has marked its 100 newly built homes as a success. "I was overwhelmed when I was told the property was mine. I simply couldn't believe my luck," says one resident. "Since moving and settling in, my life is barely recognisable. It feels like the fresh start and new beginning that I needed."

With intelligently designed streets, and patches of grass for children to play on, this energy-efficient development in Norwich - rented out by the council with secure tenancies at fixed rents - exemplifies the smart, environmentally friendly and beautifully designed homes now being built in greater numbers by local authorities.

A combination of events, including the lifting of financial restrictions in 2018, has led to a resurgence of council house-building unheard of since the 1980s.

That's particularly true in London, where 17 boroughs - more than half - have set up their own local development companies. Architects see it as a real opportunity to create homes tailored to local residents. "Because [councils] have a concern for long-term stewardship, which the housebuilders don't, and because they have political aspirations to make sustainable neighbourhoods, they are ratcheting up quality at an astonishing pace," says Riba president Ben Derbyshire. That hasn't always been guaranteed in the private sector - a 2018 report found only one in 10 respondents felt new homes are built with good design, style and modern living requirements in mind.

Riba's own research on the characteristics of places where people want to live includes case studies of mixed tenures, from Cambridge, York, Salford and Essex,

among others. Good design is key - a plan for the right housing in the right place, with good access to local services; a variety of housing types to create an integrated, diverse community; a design that creates a sense of ownership and belonging; and qualities that make residents feel at home, such as effective noise insulation, good levels of natural light and room proportions, access to green space, and efficient use of fuel.

It's a wishlist many would say costs money. In the face of slashed budgets - the Local Government Association estimates that between 2010 and 2016 councils lost 60p out of every £1 they received from central government - it's one local authorities may struggle to prioritise. But Flora Samuel, professor of architecture in the built environment at the University of Reading, says good design doesn't have to be expensive. In fact, she argues that well-built homes can save resources, by ensuring people live healthily and well. "There is a lot of consensus that [good design has] environmental value, social value and economic value," she says.

In Hackney, the award-winning renovation of the King's Crescent estate was led by the council's in-house architect, Ken Rorrison. Three new towers were built and existing properties were upgraded: ground-floor garages and winter gardens were converted into new flats. Underpasses where residents felt unsafe were eliminated, and three new courtyards for communal use were built. Making all homes the same, whether they are social or private housing, has also been important, says Rorrison, even down to using the same materials. This has not always been a given; until recently, social tenants could be forced to use separate entrances, and their children could be excluded from communal play areas, although the Greater London Authority has now banned this practice.

"Everybody benefits from decent space standards, good

'Councils aspiring to make sustainable neighbourhoods are ratcheting up housing quality at an astonishing pace'

Ben Derbyshire
Riba



▲ King's Crescent in Hackney (above) and Goldsmith Street in Norwich (all other pictures) have won awards for their architecture

PHOTOGRAPHS: TIM CROCKER (TOP AND RIGHT), KARAKUSEVIC CARSON ARCHITECTS (BOTTOM LEFT)

ceiling heights, high levels of daylight, usable public spaces, and that balance of privacy and communality," says Rorrison. "That's universal and isn't about whether someone's a social tenant or private tenant."

Abigail Batchelor, an associate at architects Karakusevic Carson, says she starts every new project by taking a walking tour with locals. She finds people love older social homes. "They're very bright, they've got good balconies, they're really well lit and they have generous space."

The issues residents raise with her are more often about the journey from the street to their front door, with routes that don't support safe walking and cycling, unwelcoming communal spaces, and landscaping that doesn't prioritise health and wellbeing. By learning from the mistakes of the past, she adds, good design can help create good communities for years to come.

Purging the packaging Can construction go plastic-free?

The construction industry uses 23% of all the plastic produced in the country, and generates an estimated 50,000 tonnes of plastic packaging waste every year - three times more than all UK households combined. One housing association now hopes to be the first in the UK to build virtually plastic-free homes. But the project will add an estimated £23,000 - a 26% increase - to each of the 12 one-bedroom apartments it plans to build next January.

Plastic will be removed from every aspect of the build, with alternatives found for plumbing, kitchen and bathroom fittings, window and door frames, and doorbells. West Midlands-based Accord is still looking for a plastic-free alternative to electrical wiring.

The Federation of Master Builders recognises the need to reduce the use of plastic and says members have expressed particular concern about single-use plastic. "For every house built, construction SMEs generate as much as two skipfuls of waste, most of which is plastic and polystyrene packaging," says spokeswoman Sarah McMonagle. "Suppliers and manufacturers need to find other ways to get materials to site safely and in good condition - however, building with less plastic will come at a price."

Accord has received some funding from a European project to increase the recycling of building materials. "We are pushing the boundaries as far as we can possibly go, and then we'll see where we can include [plastic-free components] in our standard specification," says Carl Taylor, an assistant director at the association, which aims to reduce the amount of plastic it uses by 50% in four years.

Dominic Burbridge, associate director of The Carbon Trust, says the news is promising. "It is great to see the sector innovating to lower its environmental impacts by considering resource use, waste minimisation and end of life treatment." **ES**

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