

Social housing version 2.0: Why learning from the past will help to innovative new social housing initiatives and regenerate communities



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We believe that everyone deserves a roof over their head. A home that people can value and take pride in. Scalable, high-quality social housing has the potential to achieve this – and much more besides. When local authorities provide more, and better-quality, social housing, they will also be generating stronger communities, improving economic security, and boosting aspiration.

Cast your mind back to the earliest kind of social housing. Back when local authorities took over from philanthropists and built ‘council housing’ to high construction standards. These were bold, well-designed projects that reached across the streets of London, Glasgow and Liverpool. Council homes where people loved to live, and where communities thrived.

Then fast forward through to garden suburbs, and new towns – which continued to instill civic pride among tenants – by creating desirable places for families to grow. But, today, the very idea of building quality, affordable, desirable social housing, to scale, simply doesn't exist. Which means that in 2020 we face a continuing, and gravely serious housing crisis; with a shortfall in supply of more than 300,000 new houses a year, of which an estimated 90,000 are needed as social housing for people to rent.

Adding to this, we're now experiencing a pandemic which brings with it the possibility of a global economic downturn not witnessed for almost a century. It will be imperative to ensure that there is a safety net of truly affordable housing for those currently in need, and additionally those who will struggle as a result of a change in financial circumstances. The inevitable economic consequences of the pandemic is something we must plan for now.

A big problem that calls for big thinking

So – there's the problem. And it's going to take a lot of big thinking and ingenuity to solve it if we're going to act and reverse this trend any time soon. That this is a major challenge

to local authorities can't be overstated enough. In my conversations with local authority chief execs, housing always features in the list of top three things that keep them awake at night. But let's not despair, because I believe hope is on the horizon, and the journey towards social housing 2.0 has begun.

We know that one particular socio-economic group that is hit particularly hard by the shortage of truly affordable, quality rented social housing is key workers. Those vital, nurses, care workers, hospital porters, teaching assistants, firefighters – all those relatively low-paid people whose crucial jobs we rely on to keep the fabric of our public services running. No longer able to live in many of our towns and cities, they've been forced to live further and further away from their place of work. Is the provision of quality social housing able to counter such an issue? Yes, we think it can.

Making desirable places

So – time for some answers. Looking ahead, as a sector we need to make sure that we're producing homes that have genuine value. Home is not just about a physical structure, it's also about community, and the quality of the towns and cities we live in. This is why our vision is about more than components or materials. It's about removing any stigma – real or perceived – about living in social housing. It's about rebuilding communities.

As I mention in the introduction, we have some excellent historic examples of how to do this well, and how to 'place-make' and put civic pride back into our communities. Crucially, this needs to be in those locations where local facilities already exist, and not some empty Valhalla on the outskirts, unsupported by everyday services people need, such as doctors, dentists, shops and good local transport.

At EDAROTH, as with many other newcomers into this space, we're combining innovation with practical solutions to solve the housing crisis, acknowledging that there is no silver bullet. Of course, there are obstacles in our way. This is inevitable. Planning, procurement, and land availability being just a few. However, in my view, brownfield and under-utilised land located within existing communities can, and will, have the means to deliver quality social housing to scale, right where people want to live and work.

Capturing the essence of past principles

This is not about reinventing the wheel. We just need to look back at what has really worked in the past, and capture the essence of those principles and values; such as those that named Goldsmith Street as the 2019 Stirling Prize for Architecture winner. Building on this notion, we can increase volume, so that local authorities create housing provision that is able to reach a broader societal spectrum. This is place-making in physical form; an initiative that puts colour into social housing provision – a good, city central location, friendly car-free streets, places for children to play, gardens – all those factors that combine to support and create a thriving community.

Because once we create quality spaces, and community cohesion, we will remove any underlying or overt stigma about social or council housing. We'll restore pride. And then come other, intangible benefits. Access to influence is one of them; having a mixed community means key workers, young professionals, and people who are still at the top of the list for needing social housing living together. This combination has the power to lift ambitions and aspirations. And, on a more perfunctory level, having a permanent address will mean the ability to open a bank account, get a job, and get broadband for local tenants. If we get this right it will make an exponentially huge difference; it will give something to the soul of tenanted housing, as well as to the functional requirement of a place to live.

This is why we believe that local authorities need to retain ownership of the land and homes to deliver enduring, positive outcomes for their residents. Providing safer, and more economically and physically secure social housing means eradicating short-

term tenancies and building a more stable environment; one that encourages good management of one's own home. And it means adding stability, which evidently supports better educational outcomes for children.

All these factors contribute towards ensuring greater personal safety and security, as well as economic security. We're all too aware of the challenges of the housing crisis. But we believe we're now on the way to finding a lasting, valuable solution. And history has a benevolent, guiding hand on our shoulder.

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