

Royal Institute of British Architects

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Council Housing: council homes investment inquiry

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

RIBA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Council Housing's inquiry into the current and potential need for investment in existing and new council homes. We are pleased that the APPG has decided to investigate this vital issue.

To inform our response, we held a roundtable with RIBA members in September 2023, as well as providing an online form for members to record their responses.

RIBA recommends the Government should:

- Consider how to kickstart meaningful nationwide investment in high-quality, sustainable council housing to meet the challenge of the housing crisis head on.
- Invest in new social housing through grant funding.
- Provide comprehensive resource to local planning authorities (LPAs).
- Introduce a National Retrofit Strategy – a long term policy and investment programme for upgrading the energy efficiency of England's housing stock.
- Require Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) as a condition where public money is spent on housing projects to ensure quality, sustainability and value for money.
- Examine opportunities to create new council housing from smaller sites in areas with existing infrastructure and amenities, and high levels of housing need.

How important is council housing, in addressing local/general housing need?

In recent years, England's housing market has failed to deliver high quality, safe housing at scale. Architects have been mostly sidelined from large scale housing projects and trust in developers is close to rock bottom.

We have been clear that the scale and severity of the housing crisis is stark, and that there is no alternative to building more sustainable, affordable and high-quality homes that will meet the needs of both current and future generations. While we make no apologies for recognising the need to build at pace, it is vital that we do so without sacrificing quality.

Local authorities are well placed to take a different approach, putting quality at the heart of housebuilding and tackling the acute shortage of social housing. Our 2020 report, [Homes for All](#), notes the role of public sector housing delivery in meeting housing need across the country. At the time of writing the report, the retreat of the state from direct responsibility for the delivery of housing had the following consequences: 200,000 homeless people living in temporary accommodation, 1.2 million households on waiting lists for social housing, and for those looking to buy, house prices in England had increased at seven times the rate of family incomes since 1995. These factors explain why there is a cross-party recognition that the housing crisis requires urgent attention.

Further, in this report, we noted:

“There is a strong argument that the problem goes further and that the rules of the current system actively discriminate against the quality, safety and sustainability of new homes. In the rush to make it easier to build, recent governments have agreed to relax quality, safety and sustainability standards under pressure from the housebuilders. The results have been predictable: while profits, bonuses and dividends have risen at the large housebuilding companies, outputs have become less innovative while quality remains poor. 99% of the buyers of new homes reported quality problems in 2018.”

The UK has never met current demand for new homes without significant public sector delivery. There is a clear role for council housing in addressing housing need, but also in addressing the pressing need for new homes to meet acceptable standards of quality. Exemplary council housing includes the [Goldsmith Street](#) scheme in Norwich, which was the recipient of the 2019 RIBA Stirling Prize, awarded to the building(s) that has made the greatest contribution to the evolution of architecture in the past year. The project, for Norwich City Council, is made up of almost 100 highly energy-efficient homes, built to rigorous *Passivhaus* standards. Designed to minimise fuel bills for residents, annual energy costs are estimated to be 70% cheaper than for the average household.

In addition, to meet the standards of quality and sustainability necessary to ensure that our homes stand the test of time while also meeting the changing needs of our population, we must promote a strategic and holistic approach to tackling the housing crisis. This must involve ensuring that we not only build the homes we need, but the infrastructure and amenities to support them.

We must prioritise ensuring that the homes we build as part of local authority housing stock are able to withstand future challenges and must not fall into the trap of sanctioning the building of low-quality stock to meet immediate need. Council housing is a vital part of building a housing landscape which will meaningfully meet both our current challenges but also the needs of future generations.

5. What do you think we need to do to secure a new generation of good-quality council homes?

Making the most of existing stock

We are clear that quality must be at the top of the agenda when considering building new council homes. However, improving the standard of existing council homes is also vital. 80% of buildings that will be in use in 2050 have already been built, so it is imperative that our existing stock is fit for the future.

Social housing is the most energy efficient sector, with more than half of social housing stock already reaching EPC Band C or above. The sector is already outperforming other tenures in terms of energy efficiency, but more needs to be done to improve our council homes. Our 2020 report, [Greener Homes](#), outlined a clear and obvious case for social housing should be leading the way when it comes to decarbonising housing in England: social housing is predominantly Government-funded stock, and social landlords have control over large estates, have access to finance, and take decisions about coordinated stock upgrades that ought to account for longer time-horizons.

One way to ensure high quality in existing stock is retrofitting homes to bring them up to the highest possible standard in terms of quality of life for inhabitants, as well as ensuring maximum energy efficiency. To do this, the Government must introduce a National Retrofit Strategy – a long-term policy and investment programme for upgrading the energy efficiency of England’s housing stock. Such a strategy should require that social landlords produce long-term plans to demonstrate how they will manage their stock in line with the UK’s climate obligations.

This would have immediate benefits for residents alongside longer-term positive environmental impacts. Energy efficiency improvements reduce household energy bills, create jobs, support local economies, and help tackle fuel poverty. In 2022 the National Housing Federation revealed that upgrading the remaining social rent homes to EPC band A, B, or C could save residents more than £700m a year in heating costs, equating to an average saving of £567 per household per year.

Investing in energy efficiency can also improve health benefits for occupants, resulting in cost savings for the NHS. Health conditions made worse by poor quality housing cost the NHS between £1.4 and £2 billion each year. The Building Research Establishment (BRE) has estimated that the total cost to society of poor housing in England alone, which includes the direct costs to the NHS, loss of earning potential and educational opportunities, is £18.6 billion annually.

Towards new council housing stock

Quality is also crucial in the context of good design. A revival of public sector-led housebuilding is an opportunity to re-centre the importance of architects in designing and building homes and places, while also aiding investment in housing and helping to kickstart the construction sector.

At present, Treasury rules make it challenging for public sector bodies to dispose of land for anything other than “best consideration”. This drives up land prices and leaves little room for investment in social housing or, in many cases, even the most basic design, safety and sustainability features.

To remedy the existing issues around quality of new homes, there is a clear role for architects when looking to invest in building new council housing stock. This would ensure that the stock is high-quality and will stand the test of time, while also making the most of design expertise and innovation. Ensuring new council homes are low energy and contribute to net zero is an integral consideration, with long-lasting economic benefits for inhabitants.

In terms of council homes and placemaking, some RIBA members felt that too often, emphasis was on making new communities and looking to invest solely in large-scale housing projects to the detriment of smaller sites and opportunities for urban redevelopment, such as on infill sites. Some members relayed that while macro-level housebuilding is clearly necessary, a myopic focus that does not take into account smaller sites can lead to homes being built in areas of lower demand, or where amenities and infrastructure are not available to support growth. Alongside looking at larger sites, opportunities to explore smaller sites, such as infill sites, in existing communities with high levels of housing need should be encouraged, contributing to net council housing gain in areas where it is needed most.

Local authorities who are building social housing must ensure every pound spent provides value for money. This means that local authorities need to understand if they are getting what they have paid for in terms of quality and sustainability. To achieve this, we recommend that the Government takes steps to require Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE) as a condition where public money is spent on housing projects. POE is the process of obtaining feedback on a building’s performance in use after it has been built and occupied, allowing information to be collected on building and energy use and user satisfaction.

POE provides invaluable feedback and lessons learnt that all involved can take forward into their organisations and to their next projects. This ‘closes the loop’ that feeds back to the beginning of a project; by using POE outputs to inform new projects, new processes, new systems and new designs, you achieve better buildings. Without objective review, analysis and comparison between predicted and actual building performance, future improvements in building design, construction and operability may not occur.

There is also a need to focus on the value outcomes a project can deliver, not just the cost of construction. Continuous improvement can help reduce the cost of future projects and can help improve other value outcomes. POE is the key tool to assess whether a project has delivered its proposed value, both in financial and social outcomes.

We have previously recommended that POE is mandated on all appropriate projects delivered by locally controlled or owned registered social landlords, and this remains a key recommendation as a wider push towards a more sustainable and energy efficient social housing sector.

Necessary investment

There is also a clear argument for investment in LPAs to ensure we have the capacity to build the stock we need. As we have continuously raised, local authority spending power has fallen by 16% between 2010 and 2020ⁱ, having a clear knock-on impact on the ability of local authorities to deliver core services.

Planning services experienced a more severe cut than many other local authority services – evidence suggests that councils across England disproportionately cut ‘housing, cultural and planning services’ⁱⁱ in comparison to cuts to other departments. As such, providing additional resource is clearly an overarching priority for planning departments to have adequate capacity to design, invest in and facilitate the building of high-quality council homes.

As outlined in our Homes for All report, the lack of skills and capacity within LPAs has had a role in slowing down the development management process, but equally important is the effect that this is having on the ability of local authorities to build their own housing as well. Feedback from those working within council housing delivery teams consistently focused on the need to establish a strong team with a diverse range of skills and a clear understanding of the council’s desired outcomes.

More broadly, a new generation of high-quality council housing will not be possible without a comprehensive national plan for investment. It was raised during member engagement that this is particularly true given the current economic climate, with local authorities experiencing, in some cases, high levels of financial stress. Government funding for building affordable housing drastically decreased over the decade up to 2020, and members were clear that this trend must be systematically reversed to secure the high-quality, sustainable council homes we need. We have long recommended that one way to do this should be investing in new social housing through grant funding. We are currently undertaking research into the opportunities and barriers with regards to financing new social housing, and would be pleased to share our findings in due course.

ⁱ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/local-government-funding-england>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/neighbourhood-services-under-strain.pdf>