



A new generation of council housing

APSE's latest research for Unison shows local authorities are responding well to opportunities to build new homes and the appetite exists to deliver a whole 'new generation' of sustainable council housing. Nicola Carroll was at the House of Commons for its launch

Councils have been given a chance to show that they can build much-needed affordable homes for the first time in decades - and APSE's new research for Unison shows they are rising to the challenge.

UNISON commissioned APSE to look at how councils are responding to a recent willingness on the part of central government to dismantle barriers that have prevented authorities building and funding construction programmes. The research report 'A New Generation of Council Housing: An Analysis of Need, Opportunity, Vision and Skills' was launched at the House of Commons on 11th November at a meeting attended by housing minister John Healey.

Research and detailed case studies among 50 councils and stakeholders found that local government is responding well to

the changing agenda. It shows how 'trailblazers' have been pushing to build for a number of years and 49 authorities that have won Homes and Communities Agency Local Authority New Build (LANB) programme bids in England, along with 14 in Scotland, are already engaged in the first phase of developing new homes.

Both UNISON and APSE regard the few thousand new properties this is delivering as just a start however. UNISON is calling for one million affordable homes to be constructed during the lifetime of the next Parliament and general secretary Dave Prentis sees housing as a vital part of its 'A Million Voices Campaign.' The APSE report shows that with the political will, council housing can deliver a significant number of the homes we need,' he commented.

APSE's chief executive, Paul O'Brien, praised progress made by John Healey in less than a year as housing minister. He said: 'With almost two million people on council house waiting lists and many more living in overcrowded conditions, ministers have once again turned to local government to deliver a new generation of council housing in order to meet this need... Any decent size new build programme can provide a huge boost to local economies in difficult times.'

The research identifies environmental considerations around carbon reduction, sustainable construction and energy use as significant issues in new build. It also shows the importance of political and strategic vision, clear leadership and a positive culture within the local authority and identifies a need for further support for councils wishing to build.

Skills and capacity do not appear to be an overwhelming blockage to local councils building housing directly again in significant numbers. Whilst not every authority maintains significant capacity, the vast majority believed that this would grow and expand as house building programmes progressed.

Speaking at the House of Commons launch, housing minister John Healey welcomed the report and said: 'We have taken first steps with LANB funding, but these are just first steps.'

The minister added: 'The extent of the appetite for building has surprised us. Councils are coming forward with good quality schemes, good value for money and land. He said investment in housing is 'good investment to be making' and stressed the importance of ensuring apprenticeships are part of all newbuild schemes. Decisions on which authorities would receive funding in the second round LANB bidding process were imminent, he said.

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Nicola Carroll is a consultant to APSE and one of the authors of A New Generation of Council Housing: An Analysis of Need, Opportunity, Vision and Skills, produced by APSE for UNISON.



Nicola Carroll

A new generation of council housing recommends:

1. The government should place a duty on councils to provide homes locally, in partnership with RSLs and other bodies as appropriate.
2. Remaining legal and financial barriers to council house building should be tackled.
3. Government policy should put local authorities back into position as significant housing providers.
4. Councils need clear guidance and support in developing their house-building capacity.
5. A sustainable long-term approach to a new generation of council housing is required, rather than a 'quick fix' approach.
6. The economic benefits of a new generation of council housing should be fully explored.

Editorial comment: Paul O'Brien, APSE Chief Executive and co-author of 'A new generation of council housing'

The origins of social housing provide a rich source of commentary on public policy. Regardless of party political allegiance there has always been strong support for councils meeting social housing need. It was one of the most fundamental areas of public policy and gained momentum, in the post war years, as councils met local need in building 'homes for heroes'. It was, rightly in my view, an electoral battleground between candidates vying for who could build the most homes, clearing the slums and placing families in much needed decent homes.

Fast forward to the 1980's and council housing had steeply declined in popularity. The aspirations of a home owning nation meant that 'Right to Buy' was a hugely popular move, and whilst it was a success story in doing what it said on the tin, in giving thousands of people the keys to their own home, who might not otherwise have achieved home ownership, some fundamental mistakes were made.

New homes were not built to replace the stock that was sold off. Housing finance rules created a stranglehold on investment both in the standard of homes and acted as a barrier to building

new homes. Demolition, following stock transfer, depleted the social housing stock further during the 1980's and 1990's and on into the new century. Successive governments failing to see the devastation caused through a £22 billion backlog of repairs. With the house price boom waiting list became even more desperate as families were priced out of areas. Now with the recession those with unaffordable mortgages are placing even greater demands on councils.

The time for talking has I believe now past. A new radical approach to allow council to build homes will kick start local economies, provide jobs, skills and training to the young and long term unemployed and could create some of the greenest homes this country has ever seen.

New commitments to bring forward investment and allow house building programmes to begin are welcome but councils will need to rise to the challenge, driving forward the programme. Elected members should be asking 'What is my council doing to build new homes' and with political will we can begin to deliver a new generation of council homes.