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Opinion

insidehousing

A new consensus is needed if we are to win more homes

In the days when social housing wasn't seen as a sector of last resort, Clement Attlee and Harold Macmillan competed over the number of council homes their governments could build. Mr Attlee's government managed to deliver a million. Mr Macmillan presided over the highest annual council house building figure ever.

Could we ever see such a consensus again? Housing minister Yvette Cooper suggested this week that we should, if we are ever to get anywhere near building the number of new homes we so evidently need. But getting that agreement across party lines will be another story.

The shortage of housing is not at issue. Politicians from all parties are faced with desperate constituents priced out of homeownership and on long waiting lists for social housing. But, while Conservative housing spokesman Michael Gove might talk about building new homes on surplus agricultural land, Tory politicians at the grassroots

are much less willing. So we end up with the local and regional wrangles over new homes that are now a feature of so many areas with acute housing shortages. If this deadlock is ever to be broken, we will need politicians ready to face short-term unpopularity for the sake of long-term housing stability.

● This week *Inside Housing* features efforts to encourage more housing associations to house refugees arriving in the UK on the Gateway programme. The programme is an international resettlement initiative helping some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. Yet still only a handful of landlords in a few local authority areas have signed up. Over the next few months, *Inside Housing* will be trying to get more of them involved. It is not an undertaking associations can enter into lightly. But it is a vital project which, if associations are true to their purpose, is one they need to take up.

Comment Decent homes must be in decent neighbourhoods Within a better context

Mark Bramah

The housing sector is finally getting the political profile it deserves. The comprehensive spending review looks likely to provide much-needed funds for affordable new homes. And for the first time in living memory there is healthy discussion of the role of local authorities in house building. Debates about the fourth option have reached a stalemate. The Cave and Hills reviews are welcome but amount, in reality, to increasing our understanding of the problem, not proposing solutions.

So what's next?

The Association for Public Service Excellence had the opportunity to take a fresh look at the future of housing when producing a paper for the Labour Party's sustainable communities policy forum. The arguments we developed have crystallised into the concept of a decent neighbourhoods standard.

While decent homes has made progress in tackling the £19 billion housing repairs backlog, the decent neighbourhoods standard broadens this to establish standards for wider neighbourhood matters. These include energy efficiency, lighting, quality of communal and play

areas and reducing litter and graffiti.

The decent neighbourhoods standard we have formulated would strengthen the sector by explicitly linking the contribution of housing to wider regeneration outcomes and policy aims, such as community cohesion, crime and disorder reduction, community empowerment and sustainable construction.

The performance model we suggest for the standard would mean a focus on outcomes rather than inspections. It would work by agreeing targets locally between government offices, local authorities and local strategic partnerships for a range of standards to be met by 2020. This gels with the new comprehensive area assessment framework, the local area agreements approach of working in partnership to meet mutually agreed, themed outcomes and the local government white paper's emphasis on neighbourhood governance.

The standard would then link funding to driving through continuous performance improvement regardless of who owns and manages the stock. This would be a bold step to reform the current incomprehensible and inequitable housing finance regime. But such a step is necessary.

Not all social housing providers will meet the 2010 deadline. The reality that those 99 councils which have retained housing stock do not have the same access to funds as arm's-length management organisations and large scale voluntary transfers must be also faced – especially following numerous no to transfer votes.

Linking resource and investment decisions to clear performance criteria based on wider social and environmental objectives offers a chance to allocate housing and regeneration budgets holistically. There are already moves in a more holistic direction with the single pot pooling regeneration funding streams and Communities England being established. Combining housing and regeneration funding would cut duplication, boost efficiency and bring partners together at an earlier stage.

We are not suggesting this radical new approach is introduced overnight. But the decent neighbourhoods standard would provide a long overdue lever for embedding housing in its rightful place at the centre of neighbourhood regeneration and sustainable communities.

● **Mark Bramah is assistant chief executive at the Association for Public Service Excellence**