

“viewpoint” letters



Everybody knows housing is fundamental to all aspects of the lives of individuals, families and communities. But how do we demonstrate the benefits of affordable housing in meeting wider social, environmental and economic goals?

New research published by the Association for Retained Council Housing (ARCH) in partnership with the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) aims to do just that.

Under One Roof: The holistic benefits of retained council housing shows how councils that own and manage properties are delivering value to local communities in addition to their housing role.

The research found that tackling anti-social behaviour is the area where ownership and management of housing has greatest impact, followed by; community cohesion, efficiency and value for money, community engagement, health and well-being, environmental challenges, regeneration and neighbourhood renewal.

As one tenant interviewed during the research commented: 'If any of us have problems, they point us in the right direction and the help is all under one roof.'

The research shows owning and managing stock helps councils' strategic housing role. Involvement of council tenants in decisions about their homes is also a catalyst for involvement in improving other local services.

Case studies in *Under One Roof* show what is being achieved. West Lancashire - where an 11% drop in crime has been recorded due to the housing department funding a member of staff in a multi-disciplinary team - and Carmarthenshire - where health improvements are being delivered due to a holistic housing standard - are among the many examples from across the UK.

We at ARCH have campaigned for a level playing field for retained council housing and hope that this will be provided in the next Parliament so that these wider benefits can be maximised.

John Bibby is secretary of ARCH and director of housing and community services at Lincoln City Council.

The ALMO structure has vital role to play in helping to meet Decent Homes standard

I read with interest LGN's recent article *Decent Homes programme delayed and over budget* (February issue).

I would agree with Alison Inman, chair of the NFA that the Government must commit funding to finish the Decent Homes programme. It is important that we remember that despite some set-backs a huge amount has been achieved.

By the end of 2010, 92% of the government's housing stock will be up to the 'decent homes' standard. Moreover these public sector frameworks created by the ALMOs have transformed the delivery of local authority refurbishment programmes. The vast majority of ALMOs have utilised innovative procurement methods and use of partnering agreements to create significant public sector efficiencies as well as effectively manage a housing stock of approximately one million homes across the country.

Yes, action is required and the few poor performing ALMOs must transform themselves and learn from both their peers and their framework construction partners. But whoever is in power come the summer, we can be certain that they will be looking to drive efficiencies throughout the public sector.

Here, the ALMO structure and their links with construction partners will have a vital

role to play in not only maximising value for money but in delivering the highest quality of work to the nation's housing stock. Should we not therefore look to learn lessons from the success, remembering that this is a process of constant evaluation?

Ken Morgan is head of the public sector regeneration team at John Rowan & Partners.

Plans to dismantle the current system is 'potentially a quantum leap forward'

We welcome the government's announcement that local authorities will be free to fund and run their council housing, without the constraints of the national subsidy system.

It is potentially a quantum leap forward and we look forward to seeing more detail.

What this move will mean is greater local accountability over how councils spend rental income. This will translate into the ability to plan more effectively for the long term, making service and investment decisions which fit the needs and aspirations of our tenants.

This is potentially a watershed in housing policy and we need to embrace it, and to encourage all other local authorities to join us. The aspiration is to improve the quality and quantity of council housing across the country and to allow local authorities and tenants to take closer control in getting there.

Sir Robin Wales is the Mayor of Newham.

Not in my back garden...

Do you remember those days when planning departments struggled to deal with all their applications and the fees kept budgets out of the red? At that time in Tandridge there was frenetic activity by developers to identify potential housing sites on residential garden land, fuelled by cheap finance and an apparently insatiable demand for new homes.

When you provide planning services in a district which is over 90% Green Belt, building on garden land isn't always bad. In fact, it's how we achieve much of our regional housing allocation.

We are one of only seven councils who said garden development was a problem, identified in the research as having a special policy. In Tandridge, because it was such an issue, we took pre-emptive action to get our core strategy prepared and adopted swiftly. Through consultation, we confirmed protection of our Green Belt and intensification of development in our two small towns and various villages were the main issues.

We think our housing supply policy is unique. Because we have a low housing allocation, we do not want to run out of housing land in our highly constrained situation. As long as certain circumstances apply we can refuse permission for housing on garden land. This keeps the supply flowing in the future and avoids the need to take Green Belt land in the long-term.

But don't get the wrong idea about our attitude to new housing. We are here to facilitate new development. We encourage speculative schemes to go to nearby areas of greater activity, where there are more sustainable locations and where regeneration is required.

Within our area, our objective for affordable housing completions is realistic, with 49 new units built against a target of 50 for 2008/2009.

There's not so much pressure now, but our planning work has put us in good stead to ensure we will do our bit to meet housing needs, as well as achieving good schemes as and when things pick up and the onslaught starts again.

Bob Evans is director of planning at Tandridge District Council.