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That’s when it hits home
Change can't come soon enough

After Grenfell, is there an opportunity to fix our broken housing system, asks Dawn Foster

On the morning of 14 June, the images of Grenfell Tower shocked the world. Swiftly, it seemed, the public became aware of hitherto niche aspects of the housing sector, from council outsourcing and external cladding to tenant management organisations. But will the disaster lead to real change in the way residents are treated?

Jenny Osbourne, chief executive of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service, a membership group that brings together tenants, community workers and landlords to get residents' voices heard within housing associations, believes progress is being made. “We’re seeing a shift – the voices of tenants are finally being listened to, particularly in matters of safety and regulation,” she says. “I am hopeful that landlords will reassess their relationships with their tenants and the wider community.”

Gail McAnena is a social housing tenant waiting to hear when her home will be demolished to make way for the HS2 rail line, and what will happen to her family. Communication has been sporadic and the household has no idea how long they’ll stay in their home, where they will be moved to, or what sort of tenancy will be offered. McAnena is understandably sceptical that any lasting change will occur in terms of tenant treatment without the legislation to back it. “To be a social housing tenant today is to feel lucky but vulnerable,” she says. “Fewer and fewer people now have a secure tenancy and the Grenfell tragedy has made us question the safety of those homes we do have; but it has also highlighted how few properties are available.”

McAnena questions how likely tenants are to complain when they know they cannot easily be rehoused. “I hope the conversation that has opened up will not go cold again before any much-needed changes are implemented,” she says.

Camden councillor and Green member of the London Assembly Sian Berry says she’s already seen shifts in decision-making after the disaster, with a ruling by the Information Commissioner making it easier for residents to check fire safety reports in their borough. “It shouldn’t take a disaster to give more power back to residents to manage their homes, but I hope we see dramatic improvements now,” she says.

One of the most horrifying aspects of the disaster was a blog by the tower’s residents’ association: a damning three-year account of warnings over fire safety and problems in the tower. The fire could have been prevented, it seems, if tenants had been listened to.

So, are lessons being learned, or could this happen again? Anna Minton, author of Big Capital, a recent book on the London housing crisis, says: “Right now it does feel like the horror of Grenfell has changed everything, because public opinion will no longer countenance communities being ignored in this way. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally change housing policy. Whether politicians will seize that opportunity remains to be seen.”
Supported living

Based in Blackburn, the In Partnership project offers 17 supported housing places to women with complex needs, such as mental health problems and drug or alcohol addiction. Originally designed for women between the ages of 16-25, it can now take in women up to the age of 65, providing each with a fully furnished one-bedroom flat. Women stay between three months and one year before moving on.

The wide range of services on offer is designed to help the residents get back on their feet, says Martine Whitehead, lead service manager at Great Places Housing Group, which manages the project. They include budgeting, tenancy management, cleaning and cooking.

Residents are also offered specialist support for drug addiction, and there is an on-site therapy room that runs sessions on meditation and beauty therapy. Outdoor activity is encouraged: the women can play sport as well as tend the garden and grow food. Residents are also able to take on volunteering work or receive workplace training skills. The aim, says Whitehead, is to “build people’s self-esteem and confidence” and to foster good mental health.

After 12 months, residents move on to their own accommodation where they continue to receive support for another nine months: 98% manage to make the transition successfully, says Whitehead.

Kim Thomas reports...
Make social housing safe again

Since the Grenfell Tower tragedy in June, housing safety has been a huge concern for both politicians and the general public. The images from Kensington shocked the world, but the huge scale of the problem was revealed by the sheer number of blocks with similar concerns when the government carried out fire safety checks on cladding samples submitted from other tower blocks across England.

After the collapse of the 22-storey Ronan Point block in 1968 due to a gas explosion, new building regulations were brought in to make construction safer in tower blocks. But in August, four blocks in the Ledbury estate in Peckham, south London, were evacuated after Southwark council admitted it could not be sure the buildings – which were built at the same time as Ronan Point – had, in fact, been strengthened.

A demand for safer homes may soon force the hand of regulators

Architect Douglas Murphy says outsourcing and complex supply chains make safety difficult to delegate. “In just a couple of generations the construction industry has become far more complex, with a far greater number of different components inside our buildings, all made by different contractors and suppliers,” he says.

Murphy says this has made it harder for anyone to look after the quality of any housing project as a whole: “Contracts that favour immediate ‘value for money’ over anything else mean that quality can be extremely low once the initial shine wears off.”

For years, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) has called for better guidance on fire safety – echoing Murphy’s concerns about the loss of a lead architect to supervise projects from start to finish. In particular, the RIBA warns that when buildings are being renovated, separate fire-proof compartments must be maintained. This was a huge problem at Grenfell.

Architects know how to prevent fires spreading, but need regulations to force developers to implement safety mechanisms, rather than attempting to winnow down the project costs. It’s not all bad news, of course. Many architectural firms are able to focus on quality and safety when designing small social housing projects, rather than bolting on a few affordable homes in a profit-making luxury block.

But older blocks are too often forgotten, despite being architecturally sound. Kate Hardy, an academic and member of Greater Manchester Housing Action, believes postwar brutalist buildings, which often contained sturdy, warm, sound-resistant flats, have been so denigrated that many people simply want them removed from sight.

“They’ve been marked with architectural stigma,” she says. “So instead we see cheap-looking plastic populating the skyline in our towns and cities.”
Time to tackle the funding gap

The economic case for investment in social housing has reached a critical juncture. Mark Hillsdon reports

His June, analysis of official statistics revealed that over the past seven years, there has been a phenomenal 97% drop in the number of government-funded socially-rented homes being built in England each year.

Austerity measures have seen direct central government support for all public bodies fall, but since 2010 the money housing associations receive from the government for each new home has dwindled from about 50% to closer to 20%, according to Adam Morton, a policy lean leader at the National Housing Federation.

“As the level of public subsidy has fallen, so the level of private finance has gone up,” he says.

At the same time, an overall tightening of the money markets after 2008 has made it harder for housing associations to get the long-term funding deals from banks that they need. Their response has been to look at other ways to raise finance, including issuing bonds on the capital market.

In effect, says Morton, housing associations are acting like pension or hedge funds, by selling long-term debt to investors that they repay over time.

They also raise money by building a percentage of their homes for sale or shared ownership, explains Terrie Alafat, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing. They use the sale of properties to build, but also to keep rents down on social housing.

“There’s a housing crisis and an overwhelming need for affordable housing and it’s critical that people are able to live in a home that they can afford,” says Morton, who believes the government’s decision not to invest in social housing is ultimately short-sighted. Morton argues that there is a huge net economic benefit from the government investing in new affordable housing. A 2014 study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research shows that for every pound invested in affordable house building, a further £1.42 is generated in the wider economy.

More social housing can also bring direct benefits to the Treasury. The higher the government’s capital subsidy to support social housing, the lower the annual housing benefit bill, which currently hovers around the £25bn mark. If more people are able to rent social housing at lower rents, fewer people have to move into the private sector, where rents are higher.

Morton thinks the recent housing white paper suggests the government may finally have recognised that the only way to increase housing supply overall is to build a range of tenures that meet a range of housing needs.

Alafat agrees and says that Homes England, which from September replaces the former Homes and Communities Agency as regulator of the housing sector, is looking at new approaches in terms of land acquisition and working with local areas to deliver more social housing.

But Alafat questions whether the government has the balance right when it comes to spending the £53bn it has earmarked for all its housing projects up to 2021. “Of that funding, just £8bn will directly fund affordable housing,” she points out, adding: “It’s a matter of spending more strategically.”

“It’s actually recognising that if you can get the right mix of housing, at the right levels of affordability, then it makes economic sense to invest in social housing.”

Thames Valley Housing

“Development will increase as more money for housing is made available”

In Surrey it has teamed up with a local NHS Trust to develop 76 single-occupancy rooms and 10 one bedroom flats for key workers at Frimley Park hospital, available at 80% of the market rent. The homes have been subsidised (22%) by the proceeds from a further 34 properties built for private sale on site.

TVH is also pioneering Fizzy Living, a new private rental arm that offers young professionals an alternative to private renting. The housing, which has a mix of sizes and features, is charged at a market rent, with the profits channelled back into more social housing.

TVH’s group finance director Rita Akushie explains that housing associations have been quick to adapt to the straitened financial times, but would still welcome the return of substantial government grants.

“There is such a shortage of housing that I don’t think higher grant levels would mean that housing associations would suddenly withdraw from the private market,” she says. “Instead I think the overall pace of development would increase, as the money made available for housing grows.” MH

High private rents have driven up housing benefit costs Getty

Homes have been subsidised through the market

Thames Valley Housing (TVH) has diversified in order to subsidise new homes at affordable rents.

“A Thames Valley Housing Fizzy Living space
Life without a place to call home

Official homelessness figures may not be capturing the extent of the crisis – particularly among single mothers and young people, says Poppy Noor

There were 59,260 people accepted as statutorily homeless in 2016. Despite this being less than half of the 2003 peak of 135,000, it represents a 48% increase since 2009. But the impact has by no means fallen evenly.

The statutory definition of homelessness is just one of a number of categories of homelessness, taking into account only individuals or families who local authorities are obliged to assist. Figures released for 2016/17 by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) show that the largest proportion of people affected by statutory homelessness are single mothers – 47% of the overall figure, despite making up only 9.2% of households.

Research by single parent charity Gingerbread shows that a third of single households have been affected adversely by welfare reform, while 39% are in low-paid work. Research officer Sumi Rabindrakumar says being in a precarious financial situation leaves single mothers vulnerable to rent arrears and eviction. “We’ve seen parents who’ve had to leave work because they can’t afford childcare costs,” she says.

But Rabindrakumar believes that the problem might be even worse than indicated by the official figures.

Pressure on budgets is making councils increasingly reluctant to rehouse single mothers and authorities are applying ever-stricter criteria. “We’ve had a woman who was a victim of domestic violence and was told she’d made herself homeless,” she says.

Another group disproportionately vulnerable to homelessness is young people aged 16-24, who represent more than a fifth (22%) of the overall figure for statutory homelessness. Balbir Chatrik, director of policy at charity Centrepoint, believes that number should be treated with caution. Centrepoint recently used the Freedom of Information Act to find out the number of young people approaching councils about homelessness, and it was 150,000 – far higher than the recorded statistic.

“So what’s happening to those who are being turned away?” she asks.

In the past year, 71% of appeals against homelessness decisions have been successful, suggesting that some councils are turning away many people who are, in fact, eligible to be rehoused. The statistics also show that black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups now account for 34% of all statutorily homeless people, despite making up only 11% of the UK population.

Research by Suzanne Fitzpatrick, professor of housing and social policy at Heriot-Watt University, suggests there is one factor above all that underlies most of these issues: poverty. In particular, whether a person has experienced poverty as a child is a key factor in future homelessness. “The idea that everyone is two pay cheques away from poverty is a complete myth,” she says. Fitzpatrick’s research clearly shows that young, single mothers are particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. “Some groups are more vulnerable than others,” she says.

Of the top 10 worst areas for homelessness, only one is outside of the south-east of England: Birmingham, where the rate of homelessness has increased by 2,000% since 2009/10 – up from 157 cases then to 3,479 last year.

One charity trying to tackle this rise is the Sifa Fireside project. It hosts advisers from Shelter and also provides free legal advice through a partnership with the Central England Law Centre. Michael Bates, manager of the Birmingham Community Law Centre, says £350m was cut from legal aid in 2013, almost completely eradicating free advice in areas such as welfare and housing. But the centre’s presence as part of the project means this help is still available – and is still vital, according to Lynn Evans, from Sifa Fireside. She points to a recent case where people were wrongly advised that they did not qualify for benefits.

“Since our intervention, the DWP has issued guidance to all jobcentres in Birmingham to ensure this doesn’t happen again,” Evans says.
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of the ways they can help support someone, and when a tenant needs help to access specialised services.

“Some people get mired in taking on everything and it will stop a case from progressing,” he says. A clear head, resilience and pragmatism are essential — and so is the ability to be able to help build self-confidence in others.

Tenant support helps to mitigate a lot of the problems that lead to rent arrears

When recruiting frontline staff, Alison Henderson, director of HR at the Peabody Group, says the organisation wants kind, tolerant, solution-focused people who are confident in dealing with the public and a wide range of different individuals — some of whom will be experiencing extremely challenging circumstances.

Peabody has a large volunteering programme, which attracts residents to get back into work and improve their workplace skills. Many of them then successfully apply for paid positions, according to Henderson.

Providing even simple support to residents can go a long way. Wicks recently discovered a new tenant’s pension had been incorrectly assessed for seven years, and helped him to get a significant reimbursement. “He is now debt-free for the first time in years.”

Yvonne Arrowsmith
‘It’s always important to remember our social purpose’

Yvonne Arrowsmith says being a cardiac nurse for the NHS set her up well for her current role as the chief executive of East Thames housing association.

“Nursing is all about listening and working out what people want that perhaps they aren’t telling you,” she says. “Housing certainly has its fair share of jargon and when I first joined the sector sometimes I didn’t know what people were talking about; but that’s the stuff you can learn.”

Having moved into housing when long-stay hospitals for people with mental health issues were being closed down and their residents re-homed by housing associations, Arrowsmith has found great use for the skills she brought from her previous role.

Like nursing, social housing is a demanding environment, she says, and one that is having to adapt in order to provide for growing numbers of older and more vulnerable people.

“It’s always important to remember our social purpose, but we’ve had to diversify and become much more commercially driven and respond to pressures from government,” she says.

Knowing your own worth and not being intimidated is a particular asset for women in an industry that is still hugely male-dominated, says Arrowsmith, who admits that at times in the past she was underestimated and patronised, until people came to realise she could hold her own.

As part of her own career development, Arrowsmith has always used a personal coach — someone impartial, with no involvement in the industry. She now does coaching of her own and tells people to think back to their old bosses, both those they’ve admired and those they haven’t.

For Arrowsmith, her most inspiring leader was a ward sister. “She was always very professional, very open and honest, and she wasn’t afraid to get stuck in — she’d help to make up the beds and use it as a chance to talk to people and find out what’s really going on.”

When only cross-party cooperation will do

Sir Michael Lyons

This year’s general election saw a bidding war between the major parties to establish who could promise the most new homes for the next five years. Theresa May won that battle, with the pledge of 1.5m more homes by 2022, but both parties promised levels of housebuilding that have not been seen since the 1970s. Is this likely or even possible?

Last year, just 164,000 homes were built in England. That’s an improvement on recent years, but is still below the pre-recession peak of 200,000 and no one seriously believes that we are in sight of reaching the more than 240,000 new homes we need every year to constrain rising rents and house prices.

But housing is a fitting cornerstone for the country’s new industrial strategy, given that it is an almost exclusively domestic industry, in which the income and jobs created will be here in the UK.

Back in February, the government white paper took an important step forward by acknowledging that we have a broken housing market. It linked the building of more new homes to the mantra of an economy that works for everyone. It also marked a clear willingness to step back from a previous narrow focus on home ownership, to a broader view of housing needs.

The government now needs to take a further step by accepting that just like infrastructure investment, increasing housing supply needs a cross-party commitment that extends beyond the life of one parliament.

Other parties should be willing to agree to such a move, given the common recognition of the scale of the crisis and its impact on other national priorities, including improving educational standards, reducing pressure on the NHS, and increasing national productivity. We need a common effort to tackle this crisis.

Sir Michael Lyons is chairman of the English Cities Fund, SQW Ltd and Chair of the Lyons Housing Commission