

HOUSING **MJ**

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Alliance calls for a greener rethink to planning reforms



Robert Jenrick launches plans to give the public a 'Right to Regenerate' derelict sites

By Laura Sharman and Heather Jameson

The Government has been urged to rethink its 'damaging' reforms to the planning system and put people, climate and nature at its heart by a coalition of 18 organisations.

The coalition of 18 housing, planning, transport, environmental, heritage and public health organisations have produced an alternative 'Vision for planning' in response to the Government's Planning White Paper.

The vision puts forward a number of proposals to ensure the planning system encourages sustainable forms of transport, protects and enhances green spaces, is democratic, and delivers enough affordable and social homes for rent to meet local need.

Tom Platt, director of advocacy and engagement at the Ramblers, said: 'During the pandemic, we've seen just how important planning is. Those fortunate enough to have easy access to a local park or green space, have benefitted physically and mentally.'

'We have a chance now to learn from past mistakes and set a new course for greener, healthier, and more sustainable communities.'

Cllr David Renard, Local Government Association housing spokesperson, said: 'To ensure a successful recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, communities need stability and certainty in planning. This can only be achieved through a locally-led, well-resourced planning system where communities have a proper say over developments in their local area.'

'This means local areas having oversight of issues that matter

to them most such as protecting the environment and ensuring new developments are climate-friendly for current and future generations.'

The call comes as communities secretary Robert Jenrick announced plans which would force councils to sell unused land and assets.

The new 'Right to Regenerate' rules would force councils and other public organisations to sell 'underused' land and buildings to individuals or communities, unless there is a compelling reason not to.

Mr Jenrick said: 'We are cutting through red tape so that communities can make better use of available land and derelict buildings, which means more new homes, businesses and community assets.'

'Millions of people will now be able to buy that empty property, unused garage or parcel of land and turn it into something good for them and their community.'

Under the plans, which are currently out to consultation, public bodies would need to have clear proposals for buildings and land 'in the near future', or they would risk losing it.

The rules would also stretch to social housing and empty council-owned garages.

Chief executive of the National Community Land Trust Network, Tom Chance, said the plans had the potential to turn neglected buildings into 'fantastic community assets'.

'The potential for communities to be given first right of refusal could be a gamechanger.'

Grenfell fire claim opened

Survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire have launched a legal claim worth millions of pounds.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Kensington and Chelsea LBC are among the organisations the lawsuit claimed 'contributed' to the disaster.

A personal injury claim on behalf of Grenfell residents and relatives was lodged at the High Court shortly before Christmas against 22 defendants.

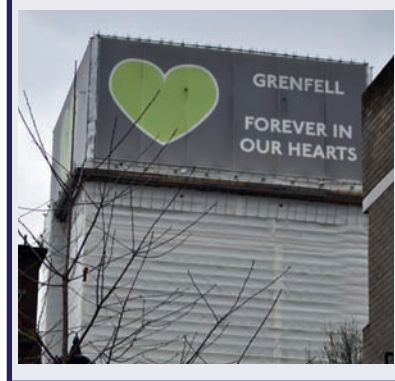
The second part of the public inquiry into the disaster is still ongoing after its restart post-Christmas was delayed by a month due to COVID-19.

A spokesperson for Kensington and Chelsea said: 'The council is participating fully in the Grenfell Tower public inquiry and will continue to do so no matter what the outcome means for us.'

'Our first thoughts and our last thoughts will always be with those who lost their lives, their families, their friends.'

A spokesperson for MHCLG said it would not be appropriate to comment on ongoing legal action.

The fire in June 2017 claimed the lives of 72 people.



Unearthing the success of heat pumps for high rise blocks

By Tim Wood, Head of Sustainability at ENGIE UK



For obvious and pertinent reasons, the safety and efficiency of high rise tower blocks have been under intense scrutiny in recent years.

Poor thermal efficiency led to the installation of cladding to offer warmer and more affordable homes for tenants; but this now poses greater fire risks and so local authorities, housing associations or registered providers have had to look at alternative methods that don't break the bank, call for mass regeneration or disrupt the lives of tenants.

Sunderland based housing association, Gentoo Group, is one of our longstanding partners and it has a bold environmental agenda which centres on making zero carbon happen, improving tenant welfare and reducing fuel poverty in the process. We have worked with Gentoo on several

renewable regeneration projects over the years and were delighted to be appointed to lead their Core 364 project in Sunderland.

This innovative £9m venture tasked us with installing lifesaving sprinklers and Ground Source Heat Pumps (GSHP) for the benefit of 364 flats across seven high rise tower blocks in the north of Sunderland; in what we believe is the largest gas replacement in high-rise tower blocks across the UK.

By degassing the seven blocks, we would renew the heating and hot water supply to all seven tower blocks, removing aged and inefficient gas heating and hot water systems from each dwelling. This would introduce high efficiency and cost-effective heating to every dwelling via Kensa Ground Source Heat Pumps; uniquely heating both their home and water with

renewable heat from the Earth's core.

Each Kensa 'Shoebbox' heat pump – one per flat – is connected to a fifth generation district heating system

of difficult circumstances for all parties, we are due to complete the works this month.

Diane Carney, Director of Property

Core 364 provides an innovative, energy efficient solution to providing renewable heat and hot water that will improve the lives of our tenants and the overall safety of the seven tower blocks

consisting of ambient shared ground loop arrays. Each heat pump serves a new, low temperature radiator-based central heating system and hot water cylinder, while modern but conventional central heating controls operate the system, minimising any disruption, change or resident concerns in regard to its ongoing operation.

The GSHP installation was hugely supported by residents, with improvements to welfare and reduced energy bills. The project also received £4.5m funding from The Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive as it will provide savings of more than 2.6m tonnes of CO2 over 20 years – contributing to Sunderland's net zero carbon ambitions.

We kickstarted the project at the end of 2019, but the impending pandemic in March 2020 naturally delayed progress. Thankfully, as restrictions eased, we were able to safely commence work on the project over the summer and in spite

of renewable heat and hot water that will improve the lives of our tenants and the overall safety of the seven tower blocks. The project also supports our work to alleviate fuel poverty across our tenants, with the project expected to deliver real savings on fuel bills as a result of the renewable technology involved.'

In a time of great uncertainty, it is fantastic to be in a position to not only deliver for our client and improve the lives of tenants; but support them in taking major strides on the road to decarbonisation.



For further information on ENGIE, visit www.engie.co.uk



When it comes to brownfield sites to build new homes on, there is no shortage of them, says **Dr Malcolm Hockaday**. But the data on where to find them is, at best, patchy and needs to be updated

The Government has made much of its desire to build hundreds of thousands of homes a year by the middle of this decade. A key part of this drive has involved building on brownfield land.

While these sites are often complex to develop, they have the distinct advantage of not being ‘greenfield’ – the development that can cause so much local controversy.

So, when the Government established the Brownfield Land Register (BLR) in 2016, this seemed like a good idea. The aim at the time was to provide developers like ourselves with up-to-date and publicly available information on all brownfield sites, both publicly and privately owned, across the country, thereby speeding up the identification of land that could be suitable for the development of new homes and communities.

However, nearly five years on since the Government first launched the BLR, it is still not optimised to identify sites for development in the way we would like due to a lack of accurate or reliable data.

With this in mind, we commissioned an independent investigation into BLRs to assess the situation and recommend how the system could be improved.

Many councils see timely reporting as a bureaucratic obligation or a tick-box exercise

Our study examined six areas – Greater London, Greater Manchester, Cambridge, Oxford, Birmingham and East Berkshire – where we found 348,000 new homes could be built on brownfield land, amounting to almost 29% of the overall expected housing need arising in these areas by 2030.

Yet even these figures are likely to underestimate the opportunity by a considerable margin, because accurate data is simply unavailable.

Speaking to local authority planning departments, local government umbrella organisations and special interest groups, we found data is often inconsistent, inaccurate and ill-maintained. This makes it harder to know where we can build and the difference we can make.

For starters, councils can differ in their definition of ‘brownfield’ or ‘vacant’ land, using divergent assessments to assign sites to the register. Oldham MBC, for example, said brownfield sites with green verges were excluded from the BLR, as they are considered greenfield in part.

Local authorities are often insufficiently briefed about the importance of robust data and the benefits it can bring about. Many councils see timely reporting as a bureaucratic obligation or a tick-box

Making the best of brownfield



exercise. They also lack the skills to upload and use the data effectively. And BLR data is rarely publicised widely enough to drive an increase in housing development.

These factors have created a serious gap in understanding how much brownfield land is available for redevelopment, and what it can be used for.

The reality, as we all know, is that

council planning departments are enormously stretched after years of cutbacks. A lack of capacity and resources has meant maintenance of the BLR has become more an administrative burden than a vital tool in facilitating the development of much-needed new homes.

But this can be fixed. We believe that by working with the public sector we can enhance its capabilities to deliver the schemes everyone wants to see.

With the Planning White Paper undergoing consultation, we have an ideal opportunity to modernise the planning system, transforming its use of data.

Access to accurate and timely data would highlight the availability of land and its capacity for development.

The reality, as we all know, is that council planning departments are enormously stretched after years of cutbacks

Data needs to be managed properly. That means we need to invest in it. Local authorities cannot be expected to supply the data we need without adequate support and guidance.

Therefore we are recommending the establishment of a ‘digital task force’, with members drawn from local government, development firms and PropTech companies, which would work together to assess how best we can create a better data-led planning system through the application of information technology and platform economics to real estate markets

There also needs to be sufficient funding so every planning department can employ a dedicated ‘data specialist’. And the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government should feature a minister with specific responsibility for data-driven planning.

Data reporting should be standardised across the UK, with local authorities trained in the skills necessary to work effectively in the digital world.

All this will require time, commitment and money. But the effort will help transform our outmoded planning system. After all, the UK does not lack brownfield land. But the understanding of that land is inadequate.

Better knowledge of land availability and more effective dissemination of that information could – and should – lead to positive outcomes, ensuring that the public and private sectors work together in true partnership to deliver the jobs, homes and the economic recovery that we need.

Dr Malcolm Hockaday is planning director at U+I

Winning on social housing in Hull

ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS 2020

WINNER

The combination of austerity and welfare reform led Hull City Council to rethink its support for its social housing tenants. The end result has been an award winning service. *The MJ* reports.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic hit, councils faced a rising tide of residents in need of support due to welfare reform.

Hull City Council, winner of *The MJ Awards*’ Best Social Housing Initiative title, has the fourth most deprived population in the UK, with two-thirds of its 23,500 tenants receiving support to pay the rent.

Welfare reform – including the roll out of Universal Credit – meant the council had to alter its offer to tenants in a bid to prevent homelessness and to maintain a viable housing service, as well as tackling rising levels of debt and associated mental health issues.

Hull set about launching a range of initiatives across its housing and benefits services in order to protect its tenants and its housing services, and to support staff on the frontline.

These included:

- A pilot scheme to co-locate a housing officer within the welfare rights team back in 2015 proved successful and led in turn to a six-strong Tenancy Sustainment Team which was set up in 2017.
 - In 2018, a seven-strong Universal Credit team was set up to work with council tenants and support staff to navigate the new system, with staff co-located at the local Job Centre Plus.
 - A cross-agency group was set up to manage communication for residents and staff.
 - The establishment of a training programme for frontline staff to manage the transition to Universal Credit.
 - A mental health social worker, funded by the housing service but managed by the Humber NHS Trust, available to take referrals from frontline housing staff. After a success trial there is now an expanded team with commitment to cross agency funding.
- As part of its strategy to manage income



A recently delivered Hull City Council social housing project

and make the housing service more efficient, Hull launched a programme to slow over turnover of properties, to stabilise the rate of evictions and cut arrears.

welfare reform and beyond, and there have been excellent examples of joined up working in action.

One staff member said: ‘I feel the service

What started out as a way to see tenants through the impact of welfare reform has now become part of the council’s structure

While other councils saw rising evictions, the council has seen a downward trend since 2015. In 2018/19, just 0.28% of tenancies ended in eviction and the figures are holding steady despite the shift to Universal Credit.

Tenancy churn is also slowing with a cut in vacant properties from 2.4% to 2% in two years. The council achieved its best ever rent collection performance by December 2019. Given Shelter’s estimated cost of evictions, and the fact it has cut eviction rates by half since 2015-16, the council has estimated it is saving more than £450,000 per annum – as well as keeping people in their homes. It has also generated more than £1,100,000 on behalf of tenants in unclaimed benefits and grants.

Staff have been ‘overwhelmingly positive’ about the programme of training to help support the welfare of tenants through

has been invaluable from our area’s point of view with several cases being referred and we are identifying more and more cases of people having underlying mental health issues impacting on them sustaining their tenancy.’

Announcing Hull as the winner of the Best Social Housing Initiative at *The MJ Awards* 2020, awards judge and chief executive of the Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association Ruth Davison said: ‘Myself and fellow judges were hugely impressed by the work going on in this area, with a wide range of initiatives, many that are able to be scaled-up and shared across the sector.’

She said the measures put in place by the council ‘concentrate on people, and the lives people live in their homes and their communities’.

Ms Davison added: ‘Our winner has worked so hard in its community to avoid

evictions, to help people sustain tenancies, has worked innovatively to bring teams together from across the local authority, improved people’s lives and has also saved some money for the council itself in doing this.’

While some of the initiatives came from other organisations, Hull has brought them together to create a service that is designed specifically for the unique circumstances of its local residents. In its submission to *The MJ Awards*, the council said: ‘We have identified opportunities to pool resources to expand our service offer in recognition that sustainment activity is essential, whereas the trend elsewhere is one of cutting back tenancy support.’

What started out as a way to see tenants through the impact of welfare reform has now become part of the council’s structure. Social workers and support workers are now on hand to help rough sleepers and those in hostels, to work with tenants who are struggling and the council now aims to build an integrated, cross tenure housing and mental health response team.

Do you have a ground-breaking social housing initiative? Is your council excelling in other areas? *The MJ Achievement Awards 2021* are now open. For details, go to awards.themj.co.uk