

A call to action

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Surveyors can bring their experience in social housing to bear in helping to respond to the current crisis

During the Second World War, around 50% of the housing in Silvertown in London's Docklands area was destroyed by bombing. The local authority housebuilding initiatives of the 1950s and 1960s were intended to replace this at rents affordable to the displaced inner-city residents, and there was cross-party agreement on the need for public funding to meet these costs.

Subsequently, social housing has been a means of supporting those on lower incomes by subsidising rents. Many argue that the current low level of new provision in this regard props up what is no more than an emergency service for those who are desperately in need of accommodation.

Today, social housing involves many complex issues that can never be eliminated unless we build more homes. We can assume the current low level of constructing new social housing, mainly by housing associations, will continue for at least 3 more years. The recent deal by the government's national housing agency [Homes England](#), which gave ?590m to 8 such associations, is therefore welcome. [Hyde Housing](#) alone will be able to build 1,623 more homes, with around half of these available for social rent; local authorities will still act as statutory housing authorities and provide emergency accommodation.

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In 1967, with a lawyer, a chartered accountant, 4 chartered surveyors, a chartered engineer and an architect, I set up Hyde Housing Association, with the aim of converting 2 houses a year into 4 flats. Fifty years later, the Hyde Group manages 50,000 dwellings. While I am no longer involved, the association continues to provide safe and secure accommodation for those in need and aims to build new homes for those left behind by the housing market.

Surveying professionals can ensure that the country is ready to build more houses, and that maintenance practices and repair methodologies are fit for purpose. This means continuing to assess the condition of existing buildings and using that experience to inform the creation of new housing and the refurbishment and improvement of current stock. While awaiting the outcome of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, we can use our knowledge of building failures to take the right approach to future renovations. Chartered surveyors and associated professions need to work together to sort out the technical and organisational issues.

Cost constraints endured by those in producing buildings for central and local governments

inevitably lead to poor standards of construction. Ironically, construction methods developed for the public sector have since been adopted by the private sector. But with few exceptions, only housing associations and government have the financial resources to rectify any defects. The freeholds of many private high-rise blocks are held by companies, their shares in turn held by the leaseholders of the apartments who sometimes, even collectively, struggle to raise funds for an expensive services upgrade or recladding.

In a market where the lowest initial cost and the highest selling price are usually the motivating factors, long-term running costs are often overlooked. Sadly, many local authorities and housing associations have also adopted this practice.

Many residential and building surveyors will know of cases where a suitable remedy to a defect has been identified, tenders obtained, and work started. But additional faults are then found that increase repair costs. Surveyors' skills may be employed to prevent this, but without extensive and destructive investigation neither the defect nor the appropriate repair can be fully assessed, and the owner is always at risk.

In one case, the initial tender was estimated at £3m; once work began, costs escalated to £8m. The owner, an established housing association, had enough finance to meet the additional cost, but had these funds been invested at the outset a better form of construction could have been chosen, possibly significantly reducing lifetime costs for the project. In an estate of, say, 60 dwellings, escalating costs would raise the contribution from each lessee from £50,000 to £133,000, thus dealing a death blow to the viability of a repair.

Senior surveying professionals have worldwide knowledge of many different sectors of property and construction. We need to see more such people serve in the social housing sector, which would benefit from their detailed understanding of the property market, building construction and methods of procurement. There is no reason why our experience of the remedies for building failures such as Grenfell cannot be used to find the right means of renovating the tower blocks that need it. We should be prepared to take the initiative with all involved and try to find creative solutions.

Besides choosing appropriate technology, we need to understand residents' needs and interests. I have long been a fan of carrying out work with occupiers in place as this helps maintain and grow communities with an interest in their homes. I have welcomed tenants' scrutiny of proposals to improve their homes and worked with them to reduce disruption. Similarly, I have been dismayed when my clients insisted on a high level of improvement that meant moving tenants to other estates.

An approach now thought to be unsustainable was used in the late 1960s. The head of Liverpool City Council's Public Health Department boasted that he had resolved the problem of slums in the city by demolishing all such properties, creating acres of vacant land divided only by the original road pattern. Later we moved to a more proactive approach. The Greater London Council offered housing associations 100% loans over 30 years for the refurbishment and conversion of larger houses into flats. This achieved slower and more sustainable regeneration of inner-London neighbourhoods, with less disruption to community cohesion.

Because of our profession's experience in resolving problems in social housing, it is time we had greater influence in its design and specification. To do this, we must have an in-depth understanding of the market, talk to owners and occupiers and establish the identity and nature of the client. Those providing the service must be trained to meet their different needs.

Although no end to the housing deficit is in sight, the onus is on our profession to make an important contribution to improve the safety, enjoyment and satisfaction of people living in this sector.

Social housing: London figures

- 801,190 social homes in London in 2017.
- 23% of housing stock in capital comprises social housing.
- 407,230 social homes are housing association properties.
- 393,960 social housing units are local authority.
- 98,488 homes are managed by arm's-length organisations for boroughs.

Ted Watts FRICS CIHM, RICS President 1992, chairs residential developer Cedar Rydal

Further information

- Related competencies include: [Housing strategy and provision](#) , [Planning and development management](#)
- This feature is taken from the [RICS Property Journal](#) (January/February 2019)
- Related categories: [Dealing with problems](#) , [Town planning](#)