

Only taking politics out of Grenfell will solve the housing crisis

Residents must be at the heart of the regeneration process not an afterthought says Susan Emmett

The blaze that destroyed Grenfell Tower has been extinguished but the anger and sense of injustice felt by its residents, neighbours and communities across the country burns on.

The criminal investigation into the specifics that led to the tragic deaths of at least 79 people has started. A public inquiry has been announced although we have yet to hear what the terms of reference of the inquiry.

It's clear that the inquiry must be swift, Grenfell residents thoroughly consulted and that it should extend beyond the boundaries of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to include other boroughs such as Camden that used similar flammable materials on their buildings. The findings must result in permanent changes.

None of this will be easy but we must do more. There are wider issues that neither the criminal investigation nor the public inquiry will address. We owe it to all those living in inadequate homes to go further.

The great wave of house building in the 60s and 70s, delivered a quantum of new homes not seen since, particularly of social housing. But half a century later we have another housing crisis. Today, we face the dual challenge of addressing the consequences of ageing council housing stock and the need to boost massively the number of new homes of all types.

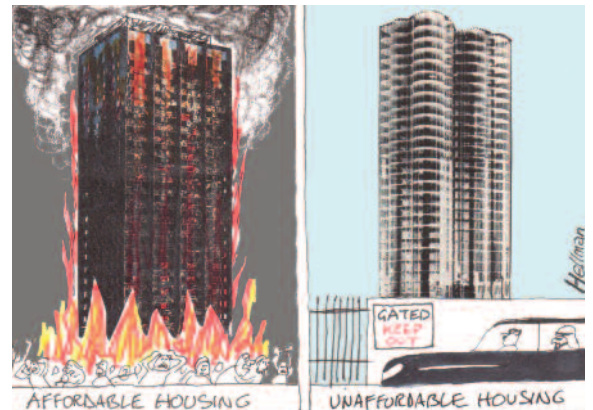
Decades of insufficient housebuilding have left us with an undersupply of housing. We should be delivering about 250,000 new homes a year to meet housing need yet, the latest data shows, we are reaching annual numbers just under 190,000.

About 85 per cent of new homes are delivered by the private sector. This is in stark contrast to the 1960s when homebuilding reached heights of around 300,000 a year with almost half coming from the public sector.

Theresa May has recently acknowledged that we need more council housing. This is not a knee-jerk reaction to Grenfell but the clearest confirmation of work that had already been going on behind the scenes.

Under Gavin Barwell, the previous housing minister, we saw a shift away from the housing policies of Cameron, Brown and Blair, which focused strongly on homeownership, to a much broader approach. While supporting homeownership, we now have policies that embrace homes of all tenures delivered by a wider range of developer.

Indeed, the quietly revolutionary Housing White Paper which was launched in February, seeks to empower local authorities not only to challenge private developers more robustly but also to build housing of their own.



Regeneration is a complex process that requires a long-term strategy, careful planning and sincere negotiation away from the heat of politics. Hellman cartoon is from *AJ* of 22nd June 2017

With local authorities contributing around one per cent of all new housing and many lacking the relevant development skills, there's much work to be done. But we also have an opportunity to think about housing differently.

Against the febrile backdrop of the Grenfell tragedy, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, has signalled the need for further urban and estate regeneration in the capital. He is right to prompt councils to look beyond refurbishing old council stock and seek fundamental change to bring forward a bigger number of higher quality homes and better places.

Rethinking land use around big estates to include traditional street patterns, mid-rise buildings, mansion blocks, terraced housing and well-designed public space with greenery not only contributes to higher densities that big cities need but neighbourhoods communities want.

But with any urban regeneration project, sensitivity is needed. Residents must be at the heart of the process not an afterthought. The post-regeneration offering must be an improvement on the current accommodation with the right of return to better homes embedded in the process.

We need to look at how we enshrine protections in law to reassure communities whilst being flexible enough not to stymie development. Funding arrangements need to be looked at to accelerate construction, minimise disruption and ideally allow residents to move just once.

This is a complex process that requires a long-term strategy, careful planning and sincere negotiation away from the heat of politics. It is only by looking beyond partisanship and adopting a pragmatic and practical approach, that we will deliver lasting solutions to the housing crisis. ■

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