

CIH Housing 2022 conference: Housing Minister's speech

Introduction

Thank you very much for that warm introduction, Gaby [Hinsliff] and thank you for inviting me to deliver the conference's keynote speech today.

This morning I've had the pleasure of meeting Gavin and the wider CIH team. It's the first real opportunity I've had as the new Housing Minister to really drill down into the impressive work of the Institute...

...Raising the bar on housing quality, while being that helping hand to the housing sector in these challenging times and supporting the government to add meat to the bones of our mission to level up.

I have to say, in my brief time in post, I have been inspired and impressed – in equal measure – by the commitment and enthusiasm of the people who work not only in organisations like the CIH...

...but across the sector, from our councils and combined authorities to housing associations and charities.

When I arrived at the department – one thing was abundantly clear from the start: we have a huge challenge on our hands – and we will not get to where we need to be on housing without big ideas, big thinking and big policies to match them.

And I can honestly say that – regardless of party, politics or place – everyone I've met has had one thing in common: they are geared up and raring to go...

...Ready to build the new homes and infrastructure we need, to breathe new life into our high streets, our towns and city centres, to turn us into 'a regeneration nation.' Today's announcement by Homes England to help fund the transformation of Middlewood Locks is a brilliant example of this work – thousands of high-quality homes being built on a 25-acre brownfield site just over the way in Salford.

But as you're sat in the room today, you might well ask – what does this all mean for me?

Well, I believe it means delivering on three Ss – supply, safety and standards. And I'll briefly take each in turn...

Supply – the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill

When we're talking about current house-building, the sector has, in many ways, defied all expectations.

Thanks to the steps we took together at the height of the pandemic – including through the Charter for Safe Working – we kept the conveyor belt of house building going...

Over 216,000 new homes were built in 2020/2021...just a small dip on the previous year.

And there is every indication today in 2022 that, even with this challenging economic backdrop, numbers will climb back up in the coming months and years.

So, our ambition now is to do everything we can to scale-up delivery and help the sector – to help you – overcome the barriers from holding you back.

But I should stress that our view is that, when it comes to housing, far too much attention is paid to numbers. As Werner Herzog said, if facts were the most illuminating thing in life, then the New York phone book would be the most interesting book in the world.

We do need to look beyond the numbers and look at where we need houses and whether those houses are of the right quality.

The reforms we've set out in the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#) – introduced to Parliament earlier this month – will help us consider all the parts of our housing market.

Agility

...For starters, the Bill will bring some much-needed agility to our planning system.

Because right now, the speed and the versatility of our planning system do not marry up to what we want to achieve in our housing market.

How can it be that there's such a wealth of innovation going on in the sector...with technology that can produce a house in the same amount of time it would take to watch an episode of Grand Designs...

Yet, it can take the best part of half a decade for a planning application to go from submission to spades hitting the ground...

And it takes an average of seven years for councils to prepare a local plan...

Every single delay has a very real knock-on effect that is felt by people in the industry.

94% of small and medium-sized developers say delays in securing planning permission are a major concern.

So, the case for swifter, slimmer, more locally relevant plans is not just overwhelming, it's an urgent one.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill therefore simplifies the content of local plans and standardises the process for producing them.

Popular consent

With more local plans in place and faster approvals of planning application, we'll reduce speculative development.

However, we also need to build in more popular support for new homes at the beginning of this process too.

Poll after poll consistently shows people are more likely to support new development that's well-designed and in-keeping with the local area.

That's why we want councils and the wider housing sector to adhere to the BIDEN principles of beauty, infrastructure, democracy, environment and neighbourhoods in everything that's built.

Whether it's making use of solar technology and green roofs in new development so that we meet net zero...

...Or really paying attention to the feel, look and character of a neighbourhood when a new development is first planned.

The new design codes we're introducing will help developers focus their efforts on creating homes that achieve this – homes the local community actually want.

Street Votes will also make sure they deliver the homes in the places communities want too, allowing people to have a real say over what's built on their doorstep.

Infrastructure

Of course, there's one final piece of the jigsaw when it comes to unlocking popular consent – and I'm talking about infrastructure.

All of us know that when people see new homes going up in their community, they too often fear the worst – packed train, a bigger queue into the Tesco car park and a longer wait to get a doctor's appointment.

It doesn't have to be that way.

So the proposals we've set out in this Bill will go a long way towards allaying some of those fears by sweeping away the old, complex Section 106 agreements...

...and replacing them with one fairer, simpler Infrastructure Levy; a Levy that is set and raised by the councils themselves.

Some of this revenue can be ploughed straight back into building even more affordable homes.

But mandatory Infrastructure Delivery Strategies will make sure that the rest goes on things like schools, nurseries and GP surgeries so that these vital

local services are not just maintained but improved.

Supply – council housebuilding

Of course this isn't the only way we're helping councils to build the new homes and neighbourhoods communities need.

In addition to our multi-billion-pound Affordable Homes Programme, we've given local authorities a comprehensive range of tools to deliver more social housing.

As you just heard I grew up on a council estate in North Wales – the sense of community there, of neighbours looking out for each other, had a very lasting impact on me. It's one of the reasons why I got into politics.

I'm proud to be part of a government that is making it easier for local authorities to build more council homes.

We abolished the HRA borrowing cap and we've given councils more flexibility over how they spend Right to Buy receipts.

Of course, the Right to Buy scheme – recently extended in the PM's speech – also helps to replenish our social housing stock while giving 2.5 million tenants the chance to realise their own dreams of homeownership.

That's because, as part of that announcement, we've made a clear commitment – carved in stone – to build a new social home for every one that is sold.

Finally, I should say that in the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) we promised to review how we support councils to build more affordable housing in greater numbers. And we'll be saying a lot more on this very soon.

Standards – the Private Rented Sector

Now, at over 300 pages long I'll forgive you if you haven't read that White Paper cover to cover.

But the eagle-eyed among you may well have spotted that one of its 12 national missions was to halve the number of poor-quality homes by 2030.

The mission commits us to levelling up standards and quality across the board in all sectors, especially in places with a disproportionate number of poor-quality homes like the West Midlands and the North West.

Earlier this month, we took a big step towards making that happen with the publication of our [fairer private rented sector](#) White Paper.

It underlines our commitment, through the Renters Reform Bill, to ensure all private landlords follow a legally binding standard on decency.

The Bill also fulfils our manifesto commitment to replace Section 21 'no fault' eviction notices with a modern tenancy system to give renters true

peace of mind.

And all of these changes will be backed by a powerful new ombudsman so that disputes between tenants and landlords can be settled quickly and cheaply, without having to go to court.

This new deal for renters includes a host of additional reforms to empower tenants so they can make raise concerns and challenge unfair rent hikes without fear of repercussion...

Social Sector

This is something we want to mirror in social housing too, especially for tenants in the social rented sector.

And I know this is a cause The Chartered Institute of Housing has been championing for some time.

I'm also aware that you will soon be convening an independent panel along with the National Housing Federation and Shelter to address some of the long-standing issues facing this sector.

I'm hugely grateful to everyone getting this vital project off the ground and I'm looking forward to seeing your recommendations.

For our part, we've driven through a series of reforms through the [Charter for Social Housing Residents](#).

This introduces, for the first time, proactive consumer regulation with regular inspections of the largest landlords.

Through the Social Housing Regulation Bill we're also shifting meaningful power into the hands of tenants so they can really hold their landlords to account.

If theirs is one of the largest housing providers, those landlords will have to give iron clad assurances that standards are being upheld through a new inspection regime.

Meanwhile, the new Housing Ombudsman Service is going to be stepping up efforts to make sure tenants know their rights and, more importantly, know how to exercise them.

That's how we're levelling up standards throughout the sector, giving a megaphone to tenants so their voices are heard loud and clear not only by this government, but by future governments of all political stripes.

Safety

It's also right that we're pressing ahead with the vital reforms this month on safety – which marks the fifth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower Fire.

It should never have taken a national tragedy and the death of 72 people for us to have woken up to just how broken the building safety regime was in this country...

...Years in which people had to put up with poor quality housing which they knew was unsafe – their complaints falling on deaf ears.

We can never get those lives back, but what we can do is do the right thing by the victims of that tragedy by fixing our building safety system for good.

As many of you will know, our Building Safety Bill has set us on that path...

...with a tougher new regulator and an even tougher regulatory regime to match it...

...with an 'Accountable Person' appointed and held responsible for a building's safety and the residents who live in it.

...with robust protections for leaseholders so that they are no longer hit with bills they can ill-afford for problems for which they should never have been held responsible.

Many of these protections actually came into force yesterday. Combined with our common-sense changes to assessments, they will restore proportionality, confidence and stability back to this vital part of the housing market.

Through our Building Safety Pledge, we're also making sure that industry steps up to the plate and pays to fix the problems they created.

I'm pleased that over 45 developers have signed that pledge and committed to fix the unsafe buildings they developed over the last 30 years.

Our ambition now is to turn those pledges into legally binding contracts so there's no doubt, no wriggle-room and no delay in making sure that every building in this country is made safe.

Conclusion

I want to finish with a quick story, if I may.

Four decades ago, social scientists conducted an experiment with the lifts in a Canadian university.

They added a 16-second delay before the doors closed to see if more people would use the stairs. They did. No surprise there.

But what was particularly interesting was that when the lifts returned to normal many people continued to use the stairs, cutting energy costs and raising students' fitness levels.

Now, I'm not claiming that the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill is a social sciences experiment...but I do believe that we can replicate the principle behind this...

...from incentivising the right behaviours by private landlords and developers in the construction sector, to creating market conditions that boost the supply of housing in the places and the communities that need it most.

And when I think about what we want to achieve I often ponder what we've already achieved in the last few years.

Whether it's the supply of new houses, their standards or their safety, I have no doubt that much of the progress we've made in recent years, in spite of the pandemic, is owed to the hard work and the efforts of the people we have in the room today.

We need fantastic partners like the Chartered Institute of Housing to continue holding us to account, so our reforms actually work on the ground and deliver the kind of transformative changes we all want to see.

In the words of the great social activist and campaigner, Helen Keller, 'Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.'

Thank you and I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference – and I look forward to working with you in the months to come.