

Regenerating Public Housing: Lessons and Best Practice

Pat Hayes

Introduction

Like the former Prime Minister David Cameron I spent part of a misspent youth knocking on doors in malodourous London tower blocks, though I was doing it for the likes of Harriett Harman and Peter Tatchell, being LSE not Oxbridge.

I have since spent most of my working life attempting to improve what Mr Cameron (who will probably go down in history as one of Britain's most disastrous prime ministers) described, using popular parlance, as "sink estates".

Today I will talk about the origins of these problems and how many of us are successfully doing what Mr Cameron claimed in January 2016 we were not doing. Namely transforming places that didn't work into places that do.

Background

Housing supply and the cost of housing has never been far from the top of the list of UK public concerns for most of the last 100 years and indeed the modern middle class seem to discuss house prices almost as much as they do the weather.

The ongoing nature of the problem and the part housing plays in the national economic psyche being, in part, a result of the much urbanised nature of the country and some strange quirks of economic fate.

It is worth, therefore, briefly considering the evolution of our housing stock and the policies that shaped it. In doing this I will focus on the urban rather than rural.

Urban Britain as we now know it largely evolved in the late 19th and early 20th century, the age of Empire as Eric Hobsbawm described it.

During this period there was rapid industrialisation and population growth in urban areas. Towns and cities growing outward rapidly as a plethora of small builders developed the countryside around existing settlements in a largely unplanned manner. Much of this new housing was built for the middle and upper working class to either buy or rent. The bulk of the working class were living in tenement-type accommodation in town centres, of the type classically associated with the East End of London.

The fact that (unlike in many other European countries) the middle class chose, or were able, to live in houses rather than flats has had a profound effect on subsequent public and political thinking. The idea of a sort of pastiche country cottage with a garden in a dense urban setting becoming an accepted and "aspired" to housing type.

In the inter-war years a large proportion of the British population rented their homes from institutional and private landlords, home ownership being still substantially a preserve of the relatively well off. During the 1930s there was large scale development of both housing for sale to people on modest incomes and publically-owned housing for rent at a controlled but effectively market price.

This period of development largely took the form of smallish houses, in many ways representing the lingering influence of the Arts and Crafts movement, which was itself a harking back to a lost ruralism and the influence of those behind what was to become the Town and Country Planning Association. With both the public and private housing being built to provide for the workers in the newly expanding service

and then high tech manufacturing sector. Think of Metro Land and the London County Council's Dagenham as examples of the type.

With the role of the state in both regulating the economy and looking after its citizens exponentially increasing during what should probably be seen as the 1914–1945 war and the implementation post-1945 of the concept of the welfare state which looked after its citizens from cradle to grave, housing became increasingly seen as something government should do more to provide and manage.

The dreadful housing conditions in which most working class people lived pre-1945 and the not inconsiderable, though small by the standards of other combatant countries, loss of stock during the Second World War prompted a new wave of public house building and the development of the concepts of slum clearance and new towns.

This new house building was conducted in a very different way to that before 1939 however as Britain was now a country with a much more sophisticated and proscriptive system for planning development.

This new system introduced the Green Belt which sought to contain any further outward growth of existing urban areas or, as one of its advocates described it, to stop London reaching Guildford.

At the same time modernists like Le Corbusier were developing new concepts for urban design, utilising the opportunities that many of the new methods of construction developed during the wars provided. It was no accident that many members of the rightly esteemed LCC Architects department had served in the Royal Engineers during the war; or that the building companies like Laings that became household names in the 1970s had developed building runways across East Anglia for the US Airforce.

The constraint of cities within their 1939 boundaries, the development of modernist thinking, the desire to replace substandard housing in situ, and the availability of new methods of rapid construction led to the building of large developments of housing owned and managed by local authorities.

This housing was, however, very different from that being built for sale to private buyers as it was nearly all in the form of flats in blocks of varying heights.

Public ownership of housing in many of the traditionally poorest parts of the country reached levels not far off that of the planned economies of Eastern Europe. More than 60% of housing in the London Boroughs of Southwark and Tower Hamlets being Council owned by the end of the 1970s.

At the same time, the rush for home ownership grew so extensively in the 1960s that we saw an almost total decline of the private rented sector. Leading a German commentator to rightly joke "you English are mad; you buy your homes and rent your televisions".

Thatcher, in her desire to reverse the post-war consensus around the role of the state, set her face firmly against publically owned housing and in favour of home ownership in the same way she supported the car over the train, in the probably correct belief that people tend to sympathise more with the state and support extending its role if it houses and transports them.

So what is the relevance of all this to the topic of estate regeneration in 2016?

Though it has only just returned to its 1939 population, London has had a housing supply problem since the start of the 20th Century, if not before. In the 1960s and 1970s part of the response of both Labour and Conservative Governments was the construction of large developments of generally high-rise public housing to designs more or less influenced by the principals of Le Corbusier and his followers.

At the time this housing, which was vastly superior in terms of interior facilities and external amenity space to the cramped terraced housing and tenements it replaced, was popular and appeared successful.

Unfortunately, due to a combination of unforeseeable factors, by the early 1980s these developments, which had acquired the name "estates", had become disaster areas, in some cases literally as well as figuratively, think Ronan Point and Broadwater Farm.

In concept, there was in fact nothing much wrong with the new estates though one of their weaknesses was they weren't, as they were often portrayed, high-density, actually making fairly poor use of their total footprint as a result of a desire to create a park land type setting of communal space.

They were, however, often built quickly using new methods of construction, which were at based untried and to designs that were always going to be costly to maintain and manage.

They were also conceived at a time when Britain was still an industrial economy with a large, generally reasonably well paid, manual workforce. Most post-war public housing was occupied by people in work usually in fairly stable family conditions living in cohesive communities.

Unfortunately, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, Britain was rapidly deindustrialising and undergoing a profound social change which most acutely affected the type of people accommodated in publicly-owned housing.

At the same time, well-meaning changes in housing legislation meant that the responsibility of local authorities to house people in greatest need were exponentially increased, at a time when the construction of new public housing effectively ceased.

The net result of this being that estates which had been built for working people housed on the basis that they could pay the rent and requiring high levels of ongoing investment and intensive management, were progressively occupied by people in increasingly distressed economic circumstances with far greater numbers of children and young adults than originally envisaged, at a time when spending by local authorities was being drastically curtailed by rate capping and other measures.

Local Government at the time was also inefficient as well as demoralised and generally failed to manage and maintain its housing assets to the standard required, often adopting an unfortunate mix of paternalism and neglect.

The legacy of this was that, within 10 years of much of the housing being built, the Council estate had become a byword for deprivation, crime, and definitely not somewhere anyone who could avoid it would want to live.

The term “high rise” or “high density” estate becoming popular parlance for a failed form of housing.

As a result people like me have effectively spent our entire working lives redeveloping housing estates which are considerably younger than we are.

But why has this model failed if indeed it really has?

Social conservatives like Prince Charles and probably most of the 39% who voted to leave the EU blame the failure of the eponymous housing estate on its built form.

To them, tall buildings and flats are foreign to the British way of thinking and represent the unwelcome modernism of the 1960s. Architects are easy targets for blame. Lynsey Hanley in her excellent book “Estates” says there “is one phrase that is larded with even more negative meaning than Council Estate and that is Tower Block” and this is definitely true for much of so called Middle England.

The reality was that, in many cases, like the Alton Estate in Roehampton, the design was good and in most it was not the fundamental problem. Yes, to many people the blocks of say the Pepys estate in Deptford are ugly, but internally the flats were spacious with stunning views. It is also unfair to say, as the rather eccentric Nicholas Boys Smith (one of Mr Cameron’s advisers) does, that they designed in crime; the 1930s cottage estates with their “banjo” cul de sacs being much worse for that.

It is also hard to argue that British people can’t live in flats: the Barbican, Dolphin Square, and numerous less costly and smaller developments show that flats can be popular and work well at height and with considerable density.

Others claim that the failure of the “estates “ was nothing to do with the built form at all and due to the fact that housing allocation policies concentrated deprived people generally with considerable numbers of children into a relatively confined space creating in effect ghettos of deprivation which conditioned certain forms of social or more specifically anti-social behaviour.

There is a degree of truth in this but commentators like Dave Hill rightly question the contention that people are influenced to conform or aspire to great economic attainment by looking at their more affluent neighbours. Indeed they argue the opposite may be the case.

It is also very possible to argue that the large scale estates failed because their landlords i.e. local Councils failed to manage and maintain them properly.

A high-rise block becomes rapidly very hard to live in if the lift is broken and expanses of grass quickly cease to become an amenity if not kept free from dog faeces and litter.

The reality is that the 1970s estates suffered from a fatal triumvirate of problems. First, designs that required very intensive and ongoing management and maintenance, particularly when exposed to the “heavy use” that a socially excluded and disproportionately teenage population gave it. Second, designs that were not well suited to situations where people did not behave in a collective and consistently public-spirited manner and, third, a landlord who neither had the resources or the will to manage and maintain the stock in the way it needed. Anyone who worked in a local authority in the 1970s or 80s will remember how hard it was to get anyone to actually do the job they were supposed to do, so inverted had the culture become towards the organisation existing for the benefit of its employees and that being a social good in itself.

Two different views of the Solution

Conservative thinkers with their tendency to focus on so-called modern architecture as the root of the estates problem tend to contend that everything will be ok if we knock all the 1960s and 1970s estates down and replace them with terraced housing.

This ignores two important points: first, that in most cases it is physically impossible within the land take of existing estates to reprovide even the same number of homes in a so-called traditional format. Secondly the reason that the very estates they so hate were so popular when they were built (and remain so with many older residents), is that they replaced conventional terraced housing. In this context it is worth remembering that in my lifetime the now chic streets of Notting Hill were slums that people wanted demolished

Those from the left tend to take a different view, tending to oppose demolition and redevelopment and instead wanting refurbishment and investment along the lines of John Prescott’s Decent Homes Programme.

This position is driven from a desire to retain the place and the people, as they are, understandable on one level in that the places are generally never as bad as outsiders think and most if not all estates have a sense of community and identity. There is, however, the reverse of the right wing desire to expunge physical symbols of state-lead welfarism: an equally misguided desire to retain them for the same reason, however bad the actual buildings are and however much the residents actually want something better.

It is worth looking in more detail at the opposition to redevelopment, as in many places it comes from two distinct though often complementary positions.

The first focuses on design and rightly draws attention to the fact that many estates like Robin Hood Gardens in Tower Hamlets and Central Hill in Lambeth are architectural very interesting and incorporate lots of innovative design and other features.

The second focuses on a desire to protect the existing predominantly working class communities from what is seen as a form of social cleansing, involving their replacement with more affluent residents.

The first strand is personified in London by Architects for Social Housing (“ASH”) who have and continue to campaign against estate regeneration by offering mixed in-fill and retention schemes which add some additional housing but retain the essential design and layout of the existing estate and enable residents to stay in their existing housing.

The second strand can either be led by activists, existing residents or a mixture of the two who are generally keen, for either political or practical reasons, to retain the status quo. This can be driven by a totally understandable desire not to have to suffer the disruption of both moving home and/or living on a building site for many years. It can, however, be motivated by an objection to the nature of what may replace the existing estate and particularly the involvement of private developers in this process.

The latter is a by-product of the financial models which now support most major estate regeneration schemes, something I will return to.

So What Is The Solution?

Often trapped between strongly held but simplistic views from left and right, most local authorities are left to try and navigate an always difficult middle course which combines practicality with pragmatism in an attempt to deliver comprehensive regeneration of run down estates.

In Ealing, we have probably been as successful as anyone in getting major estate redevelopment schemes off the ground and this seems to be a mixture of good luck and good judgement.

The former in that we don't have many (if any) estates of any particular architectural merit, most not having been built to a consistent modernist design. The second that, being in outer London, we have not attracted the media attention or the interest of activist groups.

In terms of good judgment, our success I think that we have adhered to a number of basic principles.

The two key design principles in my view are to recreate a proper street pattern which is easily navigable and ensures that any public open space is tightly bounded and over looked. If these principles are adhered to, different buildings of different heights and designs can be utilised to both make best use of the site and tie the area into the surrounding urban fabric.

This later point is critical because the significant design failure of some municipal estates and one that the former Prime Minister and Michael Heseltine's panel rightly picked up on, is their isolation from the surrounding communities, and this was often a case of a physical boundary creating a social one.

To this end, restoring or linking the replacement development back into the surrounding area is key, lower rise development around the edge of the redevelopment being a way to do this.

The two key social fundamentals that must always be maintained are that the existing volume of subsidised publically-owned housing should be retained, and all existing residents, be they tenants or leaseholders, should be able to remain on or return to the new development, in accommodation at a similar cost to that which they had previously.

Just as design should rejoin the area to the surrounding community, the new tenure type and mix should similarly be more reflective of the wider area if only to ensure the whole place is not owned and managed by a single public sector body.

For this reason, new developments in my view need to always provide a mix of housing types, ranging from outright sale, through shared ownership, market rent and discounted market rent, through to a traditional Council rent.

One of the points I think Michael Heseltine's panel are in danger of missing is the opportunity to have a mixture of rental prices within estate redevelopments, rather than simply having private sale and so called social housing rent properties.

When to do it up, when to knock it down?

In London there are two principal drivers for redeveloping large Council estates.

First, to address the concern of residents and politicians that these places are not fit for purpose and often to deal with other ancillary issues particularly crime.

Secondly, to increase housing supply, most of this type of estate (we have one notable exception) having the potential to be redeveloped with at least twice as many residential units in a more conventional format.

Outside London the former is generally more important, though increasing new supply is not an insignificant issue.

Architects for Social Housing who exist at the other end of the spectrum from Prince Charles and Create Streets quite rightly point out that many so-called problem estates are actually architecturally very good

and could work very well if comprehensively refurbished. This is certainly the case in respect of many and in Ealing we are retaining much of the Copley Close Estate.

Andrew Adonis in his report for the Institute of Public Policy Research perhaps unhelpfully suggested that most of London's 3,500 or so Council-owned housing estates should be classified as Brownfield Land. A phrase that in popular, if not technical, planning language implies a derelict and probably contaminated site.

This was going too far and was an unnecessarily controversial proposal, however one of the toughest challenges for Councils is whether to demolish or do up an estate.

One of the problems for a local authority being that this debate has become so politicised and polarised as discussed earlier.

Key factors are how much do you want to change the place and its demographic? How much do you want to increase the volume of housing? And what are the physical constraints?

In Ealing, we have never wanted to reduce the amount of subsidised "social" housing in an area, though we always want to increase housing supply if at all possible.

In some other boroughs, this has not been the case as there have been other wider considerations about achieving a total change in the nature of a place, Elephant and Castle and the Heygate estate possibly being the best example of this.

Our choices are therefore driven by issues of physical practicality, financial viability, and the views of residents and the wider community. Eight years ago we undertook a study of all our estates which comprised flats rather than conventional houses. This involved looking at physical and social conditions including things like crime levels and talking extensively to residents. From this we developed a prioritised list of estates which were to form our regeneration programme.

The massive South Acton estate, best known for its role playing Peckham in the TV series *Only Fools and Horses*, was first on that list, partly because it was extremely unpopular as a place to live but also because it had the greatest potential to redevelop with good transport links, proximity to Chiswick and plenty of space. The opportunity existing to double the number of dwellings and replace the existing Council Housing, using the surplus generated from the provision of units for sale.

At a smaller scale, Allen Court, a sister block to the ill-fated Rowan Point in Newham, was second on the list largely because its residents were still allowed to use gas thirty years after the fatal explosion in East London.

Interestingly, two estates which superficially one would expect to be in the programme were left of the initial list of nine, Golf Links in Southall where, despite poor condition and social problems, residents didn't want redevelopment choosing a more partial scheme which we agreed had merit; and Steyne Gardens, where the two biggest tower blocks in the borough remain popular and in very good condition. Their design has stood the test of time extremely successfully, making good use of their town centre location.

These examples illustrate the complex and multi faceted nature of the choices to be made.

What Gets in the Way: Planning and the Law

Perhaps fortunately, given the nature of this event and my desire to escape unscathed, it is on the question of the barriers to successful estate regeneration that I part company from the former prime minister.

Though generally the planning process and the use made of it by opponents of residential development does not help the construction of new housing, I have never encountered significant problems with estate regeneration schemes. This may be due to location and getting design issues right early on but there is nothing in the legislation or custom and practice which particularly mitigates against such proposals.

Yes, in certain places the planning committee has been used as a venue to play out some of the arguments discussed earlier around demolition versus refurbishment but most of the issues raised in this type of debate are not strictly planning matters and can and should be set to one side.

I accept that in Ealing we make life easier for ourselves in that I am responsible for both the housing and planning functions so ultimately we cannot take a conflicting position unless I argue with myself and a dedicated planner is attached to the housing regeneration team to ensure that nothing is brought forward that isn't policy compliant or which will cause difficulty in respect of urban design, tenure mix etc.

In terms of other aspects of the law, compulsory purchase is by far the biggest issue. A possibly unforeseen consequence of successive Conservative Governments Right To Buy ("RTB") policy being that all regeneration schemes are burdened with the cost of buying back leases sold under RTB. In London this cost can be crippling to the financial viability of schemes with even the smallest flat in a crumbling block being worth £250k: to buy back 20 on an estate consumes £5m. With 50% of former RTB properties no longer owned by their occupier and most of these rented out as investments, authorities have a significant problem recovering the property. An owner occupier can be tempted out with the offer of an alternative street property in another location of their choice or a replacement property in the new development, however an absentee landlord is quite happy to attempt to ransom the best deal they can get and use the full legal process to prolong the delay and encourage the authority to make them a more lucrative offer.

In this context and when dealing with leaseholders like the clown (he was actually a clown) in Deptford who opposed redevelopment and refused to move even when he was the last resident left in an abandoned tower block with all its communal services disconnected, the CPO process is cumbersome and requires great attention to detail by the authority.

We have never had a significant problem due to having an experienced staff team who know the rules but we do have to build in considerable time into all our schemes to allow for the CPO process and have also spent considerable sums of money to persuade the recalcitrant or greedy to give us vacant possession.

The rules on designating an estate as a regeneration scheme and hence stopping further RTB exacerbate these problems as considerable notice is in reality given during which time properties can be bought up, sometimes one suspects, by third parties.

It is in practice not easy to see how the process could be significantly improved without making it possibly too easy for governmental bodies to take private assets but there should be greater freedom given to local authorities to curtail RTB sales in advance of decisions on redevelopment given it is such a significant time and cost factor

So what are we are working with?

I will use Ealing as an example as is fairly typical of the situation in most large metropolitan boroughs.

In Ealing we have just over 16,000 Council-owned homes, though with a further 4,000 properties where the lease has been sold as a result of the infamous Right to Buy mixed in with them.

Just fewer than 10,000 of these properties are in estates comprising blocks of flats built in the 1960s and 70s.

The rest are individual street properties of a mixture of styles and ages and 1930s or 1950s two-storey housing laid out in the fairly conventional street pattern of the London County Council cottage estate.

The flatted stock is generally internally well appointed though often suffers from problems of condensation, noise transmission, and is inefficient to heat. The low-rise houses are more cramped and less well designed though are more popular as they have private external space and are of conventional construction with fewer other problems.

The main reason the flatted accommodation is unpopular and perceived as a problem is, however, the nature of the places in which they sit and form a part.

These areas are generally hard to navigate due to the lack of a understandable street pattern, having too much public open space which provides opportunity for anti-social behaviour or worse and lacking a feeling of community, due to the block layout and lack of private open space.

How is it paid for?

Under the Labour Governments of the early 21st century there was significant grant funding available to deliver affordable housing and this could and was used to meet redevelopment costs. Subsequent Con/Dem and Conservative Governments have reduced this significantly and there is now very little available.

This means that schemes have to be funded from receipts or within borrowing, the level of which is itself capped at an artificially low level. We are only allowed to have a housing debt of £55million at any given time despite the asset value of our stock being many hundreds of millions.

As a consequence almost all estate redevelopment schemes have to be largely self-funding. This means they are based on the assumption that the redevelopment and replacement of the existing municipal housing, often known as social housing (a particularly ghastly term) or affordable housing will be funded by the sale of some of the replacement properties on the open market.

Most schemes involving the demolition of what is there at the moment and its replacement with a larger quantum of housing will include a significant amount of housing for sale at full market value. Build to rent is now entering this equation.

The standard delivery model for most Council-led estate redevelopment is for the Local Authority to select a development partner and in effect sell the estate to them under the terms of a development agreement.

Generally the development partners usually but not always being a consortium of a developer/ house builder and a housing association.

Ealing is relatively unusual in that we are redeveloping two estates ourselves with the Council holding the lead developer role and retaining ownership at the end of the process. Though we are using the conventional model elsewhere.

It is this involvement of private sector developers in estate regeneration which has led to the greatest resistance and challenge to the whole concept.

The resistance is fuelled by the often fairly toe-curling marketing material the major developers and house builders disseminate in London in particular and the eye watering salaries many of their senior people are known to earn.

It is very easy to characterise estate regeneration as social cleansing when the private housing being built in often the best located part is so clearly aimed at people whose lifestyle and income are very different from the existing residents.

How do we decide when and how to redevelop?

In terms of approaching redevelopment our key proviso has always been that we won't do what residents don't want us to do.

This means that our estate regeneration programme has always been based on looking at the physical and social condition of an estate; the options for and financial viability of redevelopment; and the view of the tenants.

There has to be a degree of pragmatism balancing need, opportunity and delivery. In my view, the reason we have been successful is that we have always balanced the various factors and never embarked on schemes which were not physically or financially viable and supported by residents.

However in some cases we have taken a calculated risk on both viability and resident support improving as a programme gets out of the ground.

This approach does, however, mean that we haven't brought forward schemes on two estates which merit redevelopment in physical terms but where the land value and particularly the open market value for housing for sale make the funding gap too large. It also means we are bringing another scheme forward on a slow, block-by-block basis as resident support grows.

Challenges and Pitfalls

I have already talked about the financial challenge and the need for schemes to generally be self-funding but there are other possibly more difficult challenges to meet.

Estate redevelopment has a significant public relations problem linked in part to its funding model, the origins of the problems of large estates themselves, and mistakes which local authorities have made.

Traditionally large Council estates, to use their popular descriptor, have been effectively mono tenure with everyone renting at a subsidised level and since the 1980s between on average 65–85 % of residents being in receipt of benefits with the majority unemployed or not officially employed.

One of the generally ascribed to principles of estate redevelopment being that places work better when, like the typical London street, they are occupied by a mix of people of different income levels living in housing of different tenure types.

Consequently, both for financial and social reasons most estate redevelopment schemes look to dilute the concentration of subsidised rented housing and bring in housing for purchase and lately housing for rent at market or close to market price.

As a result and particularly in higher-value areas where it is easier to make redevelopment work, schemes can be easily presented as gentrification and more hyperbolically as social cleansing.

We have always tried to avoid this by ensuring that we always reprovide the same quantum of subsidised housing either owned and managed by ourselves or by a housing association. We have also always offered those existing residents that want to remain on what was the estate the right to do so even if they may have to temporally move during construction.

Leaseholders, i.e. those who have bought flats through Right To Buy are a major complication to redevelopment in that they have to be bought out at market value, which is always the most significant financial drain on a scheme. We always ensure that they are able to buy either a replacement property in the new place or a replacement street property elsewhere. In the case of the former the value difference between the old and the new property requiring us to ensure a shared equity option or deferred purchase option is available.

It is, however, worth noting that around 50% of RTB properties are no longer owner-occupied but is owned by both landlords amateur and professional who pose a different negotiating challenge as they are often willing to use their ability to delay demolition to ransom the local authority or their developer.

The issue of public relations and perception is a main reason why we have always adopted a very cautious and comprehensive approach to resident engagement and consultation.

Many authorities have come to grief by basing consultation on existing tenant and resident groups. These by their very nature tend to attract a mixture of older residents and people who, for want of a better description, could be described as activists. Both have time and like attending conventional public meetings and have a tendency to drown out the views of other residents. They also tend either to be resistant to change or have an ideological agenda which mitigates towards wanting to oppose change.

For this reason we like to undertake lots of one to one conversations with tenants and leaseholders and to use text, phone and social media both to consult and to communicate general updates and information.

We are also careful to set up individual resident steering groups for each project and to provide these with professional support and develop in such a way as they become part of the Council team.

These steering groups are directly involved in developer and design selection though through managed processes to ensure we comply with procurement law for example.

This takes me on to another problem area; perception and expectation.

Many residents of traditional large Council estates have an understandably low expectation of the Council to deliver services yet alone major redevelopment and most have been given promises that have not been met either about maintenance works, the possibility of a move or the redevelopment of where they live; and there is usually substantial and understandable cynicism about whether anything will ever happen. This combines with the fact that most redevelopments will take many years (our South Acton Programme, though ahead of schedule, will take 15 years).

Making it happen on the ground.

For London Boroughs there are significant physical problems with estate regeneration.

There is usually limited land other than the actual development sites and with current housing pressures (our waiting list is bigger than our total stock) there is nowhere to decant residents to while an estate is being redeveloped.

This means everything has to be done within the “red line” of the scheme which means a self-contained decant, i.e. you have to design the replacement scheme so you build a first block on open space or car park then can move people from the first block to be demolished into that and so on and so on. This creates design, phasing and management issues and is one of our biggest challenges. It also makes programmes very vulnerable to delays caused gaining vacant possession of individual flats from particularly lease holders who force us to use Compulsory Purchase Powers.

For this reason, we the Council always do the decanting and any CPO work and transfer buildings to the developer (when it’s not us) as vacant possessions. This being legally simpler and enabling us to control one of the key variables.

To speed up the planning process we also have a dedicated planning officer funded from housing budgets who just deals with the major estate redevelopment schemes. This enables them to gain expertise and be a permanently available resource to assist and guide the various design teams.

What does the future hold?

It remains to be seen whether Theresa May’s government, faced as it is with avoiding potential economic disaster as a result of leaving or attempting to leave the EU (and with the sheer volume of Governmental resource this will consume), will be as interested as its predecessor with housing policy.

This may not be a bad thing as generally in this field Government interventions, even when well intentioned, tend to be unhelpful, but it does raise some significant issues.

First, it is highly unlikely that any additional funding will be made available to build new affordable housing and efforts to reduce the benefit bill through enforced rent reduction and sales levies are likely to continue.

At the same time, enthusiasm for the previous Government’s approach to devolution appears to be waning, which is likely to mean that there will be no new freedoms around borrowing or on the application of RTB receipts to build replacement homes. This means there will be less scope for boroughs to cash flow big regeneration programmes.