

“What does high-quality housing mean? And what changes should we make?”

Stephen Wasserman, founder and chief executive, National Housing Group



The decline in the availability of affordable homes has always been a major contributory factor to homelessness. As such, there has been a focus on building more ‘affordable’ housing, but providers of private rented accommodation are not held accountable for the quality of their properties. According to research published by the Greater London Authority, the condition of housing in the private rented sector is worse than in other sectors, with the poorer conditions concentrated at the lower-cost end of the market, making these ‘affordable’ homes unsuitable.

While we should not take our feet off the pedal when it comes to building affordable housing, we need to make sure we deliver high-quality homes that are appropriate for residents. If tenants are comfortable in their homes, they are more likely to live there for longer. If they remain in the properties for longer, they have a better chance of successfully engaging back into society.

But what does high-quality housing mean? And what changes should we make?

- Properties should consist of self-contained units with communal areas where possible. This gives tenants their own space that they can be proud of. Communal areas provide a space for social interaction.
- Property rents should be linked to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates; as the rates go down, the rent goes down, and vice versa. This takes financial pressure off charities and housing associations.
- Homes should be designed to mitigate any risk of fuel poverty and should be genuinely affordable to live in. Durable and energy-efficient appliances can support this and properties that are suitable for solar energy should consider installing solar panels.
- Connectivity to the world is paramount, and a simple but effective addition to properties is internet access. An internet connection allows tenants to access ongoing support, education and training programmes, job applications, and health facilities, for example.

Of course, these are not the only solutions, but they can certainly alleviate some of the pressures councils are facing. By providing high-quality housing at affordable LHA rates, we can help social landlords discharge their homelessness duty and contribute towards ending homelessness.

The right kind of support

Supported housing needs to be high quality to provide a safe space. Gill Arukpe explains what Social Interest Group is doing



Gill Arukpe is chief executive of housing provider Social Interest Group. She has previously worked in senior roles at charities Turning Point and Shelter.

I have worked in supported housing for more than 40 years, including as a frontline worker at Women’s Aid, housing women and children who were fleeing violent and controlling relationships. Sometimes three or four families would be sharing a three-bedroom house in a residential street.

In the 1990s, I managed Arlington House in London, the UK’s largest hostel for homeless people. It was built in 1905 by the philanthropist Lord Rowton, and at that time it housed up to 1,000 homeless men a night.

When I was responsible for Arlington House, it accommodated 400 men who had been homeless and had mental health and substance misuse issues. Now One Housing Group owns and runs it, and it has 95 self-contained units for homeless people. Supported housing was, and still is, needed for the most vulnerable people. We need to continue providing it – and to do so even better.

Over the past 10 to 20 years, the supported housing field has changed hugely. Most supported housing schemes for adults with social care and health issues (not older people’s care homes) run in much smaller buildings now, which is positive. They contain fewer than 20 units on average, with many in standard six or seven-bedroom houses.

The split of social and healthcare functions from housing management is essential. The two have links, but can still be provided if they remain separately funded. Are they funded enough to provide all that is needed? No, they are not, and there has been a sad race to the bottom within the sector as commissioning has driven the price down for providing.

Could the funding structure be better? Yes, of course it could, if the regulations set by central government on the use of budgets could change, and if local authorities



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Arlington House in London is the UK’s largest hostel for homeless people

with the most significant social needs were supported and appropriately funded, it would make a huge difference. People are being discharged from psychiatric hospitals much sooner than they were 10 years ago, and many still have not stabilised their mental health and addiction issues. In turn, the staff skill set and training required to ensure safe working services need adequate resourcing.

Quality is key

At my organisation, Social Interest Group, we provide housing and accommodation services for adults who have had a long-term enduring mental illness and often have co-morbidity with addiction or a personality disorder. We also support people who have been in the criminal justice system and have mental health issues or substance misuse issues.

It is essential to our residents and to us that we provide trauma-informed accommodation and use psychologically informed environments. It is vital that our residents feel valued and that the look and upkeep of the accommodation is of high specification – this is essential in aiding residents’ recovery and rehabilitation or resettlement.

In my experience, if you offer poor-quality accommodation, no matter how good the support is, residents will find it difficult to trust and engage with you. Their moods are affected, and the level of aggression in the property can rise quickly.

Providing spacious rooms with en-suite facilities so

residents do not have to share is essential. Many of our residents have had to share facilities for years. Often, they have experienced trauma and have had poor experiences when accessing support in the past.

Social Interest Group has a property strategy that we hope to realise over the next three years – that is, to install en-suite facilities in all our accommodation where it is lacking today.

Very recently, National Housing Group approached me and told me about its vision: to provide supported housing that is fit for purpose. Refreshingly, they asked for our input while they got the building ready before completion. I have visited a property they are working on now.

They have thought carefully about residents’ privacy, mental wellness, and the light in communal areas – while also recognising the need to keep everyone safe and involved. They are not insisting that all rooms are for rental income. They’ve even thought about the environmental impact and the cost of running a supported house. We also have a classroom area to offer education and skill development learning to residents.

I’m looking forward to entering a partnership with National Housing Group soon. Their staff are not only property experts but they have also employed people who have previously worked in the sector and understand our needs as providers, and residents’ needs as recipients of support. Look out for our announcement of the opening of our first partnership house. ▶

“Providing spacious rooms with en-suite facilities so residents do not have to share is essential”

‘It’s fantastic for me here. I can’t complain’

Freight House in London looks like an unprepossessing office building, because that is what it used to be. National Housing Group has converted it into 21 bedsits, most of which are now occupied by formerly homeless men. Two residents share their experiences

Ricardo*

Ricardo was one of the first occupants to move in when Freight House opened in its new guise in February this year. He had been homeless for two years previously, and for most of that time, he was either sleeping on his mum’s sofa or moving between friends’ houses. Before that, Ricardo – who is in his late 40s – had been renting his own place, until a bout of ill health forced him to give it up.

Ricardo’s room is on the ground floor. It is spacious and bright, with a large window and an en-suite bathroom. Ricardo’s first impression, he says, was that “it was like a mansion”.

“I got lucky,” he says. “It was a case of mistaken identity.” Two years ago, shortly after he became homeless, Ricardo received a phone call from a woman working for a homelessness charity. He was delighted – until it turned out she had made a mistake. “We had a small but heated argument when we realised she had rung the wrong person,” he says with a rueful smile. One year after that, however, Ricardo was rung again by the same person. This time, however, the woman said she might be able to help after all – which is how he ended up living in Freight House. Ricardo says that when he moved in, he rang her in tears to say thank you.

“When I first came here, everything was spotless,” he says. “That was in February. I was first here, so I got the biggest bedroom. It was a nice big room. It’s quiet.”

“I was real grateful for this, you understand – real grateful,” he says. “It’s home.”

When he was first made homeless, Ricardo spent time in a hostel. “I was finding that hard, so I gave up and resigned myself to my mum’s sofa. But this is home.”

Keith*

Keith’s story is a reminder that with a bit of bad luck, homelessness can befall even successful professionals. He enjoyed a career as a professional musician, appearing on *Top of the Pops* once upon a time.

He is also a locum lawyer, and for the past few decades, Keith has worked in local authorities’ housing departments.

“Everything happened at the same time, at a bad time,” he says. “I got dealt some bad cards. But sometimes you have to get to the bottom to start building and reflecting on yourself.”

The pandemic took hold just as both the lease on his rented flat and the contract he was working were coming to an end. COVID-19 made it impossible to find another. “The market was closed,” he says. With no income, and no jobs to apply for, Keith became homeless.

His local council put him up in a hotel initially, but when that came to an end, Keith found himself in a unit for homeless men in Harlesden. “I was smelling weed everywhere. That wasn’t good for me. The police were raiding the place weekly. One, two, three o’clock in the morning. I really [didn’t] want to be [there].”

Keith was able to terminate his lease due to these exceptional circumstances, and soon afterwards, London-based charity Single Homeless Project found Keith a room in Freight House.

“Please do not take me from the frying pan into the fire,” he remembers thinking – but that is not what happened. “This is bright, this is clean. It’s fantastic for me here, I can’t complain.”

Keith says the move has helped him get his life back on track, both professionally and socially. “I’ve got a lot of pride, and where I was before, I couldn’t tell any of my friends I was there,” he says. “I’ve got a lady friend, and I couldn’t let her come and visit me there. No way! But here? She can visit now. She’s happy. I’m blessed.”

He also has two job interviews lined up at nearby councils. One is even within walking distance. A decent room in a decent neighbourhood will make it easier for Keith to work; he is a litigator, which means travelling to courts around London to represent his local authority clients. “I’m optimistic now,” he says. “Things are looking better.”●

*Names have been changed

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