

LEVELLING UP CONFERENCE

HOUSING AT THE HEART OF A REBALANCED COUNTRY

POST EVENT SUMMARY

CHAIR'S OPENING ADDRESS

Tracy Harrison, Chief Executive, Northern Housing Consortium

Tracy opened by highlighting the Northern Housing Consortium's core purpose to bring together housing in the North to develop a collaborative northern voice that helps the housing sector across northern regions to create and regenerate sustainable homes, and build resilient, thriving communities.

Today was just about that, and would focus on an issue that puts our communities, and the work we do as housing providers, front and centre.

Tracy felt that the discussion on Levelling Up has been one long debate: we originally questioned what Levelling Up event was; then, following the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper, there were concerns as to whether the ambition shown was matched by the necessary funding and strategy to deliver; finally, with a new Prime Minister taking office soon, the question is whether Levelling Up will even happen at all.

However, while the faces around the cabinet table might change, the issues facing people and places in the North have not.

Regeneration, placemaking, rebalancing, now Levelling Up, and whatever follows – these are the country's collective attempts to address regional and local inequalities; to provide prosperity and opportunity to everyone.

For the NHC and our members, we know that whether it's restoring local pride, raising housing quality across homes and neighbourhoods; and putting residents and communities at the core of our thinking; the housing sector is central to the work taking place to ensure people have a roof over their head, a community to call home, and enough money in their pocket to live a dignified life.

The importance of housing goes much further and connects to important economic and social impacts for residents and communities. These impacts are multi-dimensional, measurable and contribute to the wider ambition to rebalance the country.

Today is about underlining the pivotal role NHC members play in supporting our residents to live well and creating resilient, thriving communities.

The message from our sector remains the same - we stand ready to work with Government to put housing at the heart of a rebalanced county.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Lord Kerlake

We are delighted to be joined by Lord Kerlake who will reflect on the Levelling Up agenda in the context of his extensive career to date addressing local and regional inequality as well as the central contribution quality housing and neighbourhoods can make to both physical regeneration and personal economic wellbeing.

Lord Kerlake began his keynote address by saying that Levelling Up is alive and here to stay but is not the highest priority for Government and the opportunity is there for other political priorities are likely to come to the fore.

Lord Kerlake sees Levelling Up as a combination of both an economic analysis of this country and a political project. Political project came from 2019 election, the sense of left behind places created a political opportunity to penetrate the so-called Red Wall.

He noted that the UK is one of the most regionally imbalanced countries in the world, citing research from the UK2070 Commission, chaired by himself.

This agenda doesn't lend itself to a quick resolution, it is a long-term project through numerous political cycles. The UK2070 report highlighted the need for a long term and broad project, the Levelling Up White Paper said that same.

He also stated that the White Paper was a landmark moment in the agenda, featuring strong analysis on the system failures on why the agenda hasn't moved forward. UK2070 report and the White Paper both talked about the importance of devolution. Kerlake argued that the White Paper was weak on detail, particularly on the role of higher education and also on housing, he felt that there are missing chapters that still need to be written on housing.

A key takeaway Lord Kerlake pointed out on the White Paper was that it was particularly weak on execution – it mainly consisted of fragmented funding and competitive bidding. However, he remarked that we can build on the White Paper to achieve rebalancing, rather than attack it.

Is Levelling Up at risk of falling in prominence? Boris Johnson owned Levelling Up, it was his agenda and with his replacement Lord Kerlake wonders if the agenda will remain. He also noted that Michael Gove is no longer Secretary of State, again someone that brought authority and focus to the Levelling Up missions.

Lord Kerlake reminded everyone of the many issues facing the new leadership, with war in Ukraine, Covid-19, cost of living, backlog in our public services and balance of payments amongst other issues – this will likely consume new leadership and displace priority of Levelling Up.

He pondered whether a new leader would shift focus on retaining the so called Blue Wall, rather than going after the perceived Red Wall. With Labour pulling back 'Red Wall' and Liberal Democrats gaining in the 'Blue Wall', it will become a choice of where to target and this could impact Levelling Up.

Lord Kerslake moved on to asking where housing sits in all of this – he said that housing's '4 S's' issues are currently - Service, Sustainability, Supply and Safety. He declared that “we need to continue to make the argument that housing is essential infrastructure.”

Lord Kerslake gave a rallying call to all those who work in communities, transport, health, retrofit, housing and on the green agenda – that they need to have common cause and work together rather than working in silos as all these issues intersect and need to be linked.

He also referenced Labour's £28 billion a year commitment to green capital investment, announced by Rachel Reeves last year – and questioned whether it can be used as a Levelling Up commitment.

In his closing remarks, Lord Kerslake maintained that Levelling Up is alive and well but may need to rest for a while due to competing priorities for the new leadership but does hope it will be resurrected by the new leader. He laid out the key components required to continue the Levelling Up agenda and ensure it is achieved – building a strong evidence base of good practice, establishing and understanding common cause, working with the opposition to push the agenda, and building stories. Lord Kerslake also asserted the need for flexibility of funding if there is not a great amount to give to devolved administrations and said this is something that Andy Burnham has been calling for.

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF LEVELLING UP

Levelling Up is the Government's defining mission to ensure people can 'stay local, go far'; taking the “radical steps needed to make us more prosperous and more united by tackling the regional and local inequalities that unfairly hold back communities”.

Our morning speakers will take on this renewed attempt to rebalance the country, outlining the core issues and the central role we as the housing sector have to play.

- *Ian Ankers, Executive Director Business Development, Bolton at Home*
- *Charlotte Carpenter, Executive Director of Growth and Business Development, Karbon Homes*
- *Naz Parkar, Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods, Kirklees Metropolitan Council*

THE STARTING POINT: A VIEW FROM BOLTON

Ian Ankers, Executive Director Business Development, Bolton at Home

Ian began by stating some of the main components related to the rebalancing agenda - complication and challenge, the resource gap, and opportunities.

Ian displayed a map of Greater Manchester showing unemployment, and explained the correlation between boroughs with highest unemployment also linking to poor health, poor housing and high Covid-19 excess death figures.

He also highlighted the complication within an intra-regional perspective – there are often differences in figures within a region, e.g. South Manchester shows more positive statistics on unemployment and health than North Manchester.

Ian argued that decisions have to be made about where specifically to target, saying that funding can't just be given to Bolton for example, where the east and west are divided in terms of deprivation and unemployment. The west has much more economic activity and is able to access housing and labour markets in Manchester and Salford, whereas as the east is becoming increasingly isolated. It needs to be more targeted within the area. Ian cited a massive increase in worse-off areas with health and unemployment and the correlation the data shows.

Ian then went on to mention the resource gap in places such as Bolton, and confirmed the need for devolution to provide support and funding to targeted programs. He noted the importance of community investment in helping to bridge the resource gap, and detailed Bolton at Home's 'Greenworks' project. One of the Greenworks projects' aims is to bridge the gap between east and west Bolton. It will provide skills training for retrofitting homes, giving people the chance to learn how to improve homes with low carbon technology. The project will also provide carbon reduction education to raise awareness of climate issues and understanding of why we need to retrofit homes. The training will also help to improve employment outcomes in the area and help residents gain essential skills that will improve the region through various factors such as employment, education, cost of living and housing quality. This project will help to bridge the resource gap and also highlights the opportunities available at present for residents to upskill and improve outcomes for their area.

LIVEABILITY: WHAT MAKES A PLACE WORTH LIVING IN?

Charlotte Carpenter, Executive Director of Growth and Business Development, Karbon Homes

Charlotte began by detailing 'liveability' and the factors that determine it - cost of living, health and wellbeing, transport, housing, salaries, crime, life expectancy, government spending etc.

Charlotte declared that we need to create genuinely liveable places to support communities to create a place they want to live in. She explained that levelling-up is all about key figures such as healthy life expectancy. Detailing figures within Newcastle, between Byker and Jesmond, she highlighted the large difference in healthy life expectancy between these two areas that are so close on a map.

She also asserted the importance of Levelling Up moving beyond rhetoric and supporting more liveable and better places. Charlotte noted that the opposition and current government both have a broad definition of Levelling Up agenda and what to work on. However, she

remarked that it is important to see beyond rhetoric of 'jobs, jobs, jobs' and major projects, saying we need to ensure political rhetoric actual has meaning in people's lives.

Charlotte queried where does housing come into Levelling Up – noting that housing providers are anchor institutions that play a central role in communities and are uniquely placed to forward the rebalancing agenda. She also asserted the importance of strengthening the foundational economy, strengthening residual income and increasing spending power. She noted that in Karbon's new spending strategy there is a deliberate approach to improving the foundational economy.

She then went on to illustrate the positive work achieved through Karbon's Stanley Skills Hub project. Stanley is an ex-mining town and Karbon own a quarter of every house in the area. It ranks in the bottom 20 percentile of the Index Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The Stanley project has provided somewhere for the community to come and develop skills and get advice on wellbeing and employment. Karbon have developed a presence on the high street for residents to come and get involved. Using the UK Community Renewal Fund, Karbon have been able to offer new start placements, providing paid work experience for people to upskill and improve confidence to get into long term employment. Charlotte highlighted the success of this project as many of the placements have ended early as people have found long term employment elsewhere.

Finally, she explained the issues with unemployment in the North East due to many jobs being inaccessible by public transport and many people not owning a car to travel to the job. It is also more difficult for older job seekers and the disabled as accessibility is often poor. With this being the case, Charlotte called for anchor institutions, such as Housing Associations and Local Authorities, to think big and use the big role they play in left behind places to work together to improve outcomes.

TACKLING INEQUALITY: HOUSING AS THE LYNCHPIN BETWEEN COST OF LIVING, CLIMATE, AND HEALTH

Naz Parkar, Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods, Kirklees Metropolitan Council

Naz began by stating that 55% of properties in Kirklees are band C EPC, and asked if C is ambitious enough? He moved on to discuss biggest concerns facing Kirklees residents, noting that 1/5 homes don't meet decency standard and that two thirds of Kirklees Homes and Neighbourhoods' tenants claim means tested benefits. Naz explained that this highlights that decarbonisation is not residents' biggest concern, cost of living is huge and further uplifts to come. He said that the stark reality is people aren't going to be able to heat and eat, it will become a choice.

He detailed some of the action taken in Kirklees – understanding needs of tenants (big conversation project), place-based engagement sessions, partnered with Huddersfield University to understand what tenants value most about their homes. Small pilot on retrofit in 8 homes – to be expanded once findings clear. A 125-unit low carbon housing development, 20 homes to be Passivhaus standard.

Naz declared that it is important we “don’t underestimate the role of retrofit coordinators”.

He also noted that cars dominate estates and said we need to look at how we want to live in the future, not just through low carbon housing schemes, but also digitisation and less cars.

None of this is possible without national government – offering policy certainty, appropriate funding programmes that recognise true costs. The planning system and planning policy also needs to shift, Naz argued.

However, he said that locally this shouldn’t stop us, we can get on with retrofit strategy, climate energy action plan, need for regional collaboration and produce compelling offer to engage government, supply chain, financial bodies and our communities.

LEVELLING UP: THE INSIDE HOUSING DEBATE

Chair: *Martin Hilditch, Editor, Inside Housing*

- *Brian Robson, Executive Director Policy and Public Affairs, Northern Housing Consortium*
- *Charlotte Carpenter, Executive Director of Growth and Business Development, Karbon Homes*
- *Ian Ankers, Executive Director Business Development, Bolton at Home*
- *Naz Parkar, Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods, Kirklees Metropolitan Council*

Martin opened by asking panellists whether Levelling Up would wither now Boris Johnson was soon to be no longer Prime Minister? Was this another Big Society?

Brian declared that big society was developed to give cover to austerity, and that Levelling Up is a newish brand for a very old issue. The panel queried whether DLUHC will be renamed with new leadership in September and if the government stick with the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill?

Brian also stated that what is missing most in the Bill is delivery mechanisms – no new decent homes standards, reducing carbon emissions. He agreed with Lord Kerslake that there is a big question mark over deliverability.

Ian said that the infrastructure levy aspect of the Bill is weak and undefined and that tensions are about to be created on this and any alternatives. He also noted that housing is very varied in terms of quality and decarbonising potential, there is not a uniform approach to this,

Naz Parkar cited capacity as a major issue in Local Authorities which is not going to get better – austerity hit very hard, many areas have struggled in recruitment market to rebuild capacity and salaries aren’t competitive enough. He urged housing providers to share knowledge and queried whether Housing Associations could offer to produce housing strategies alongside Local Authorities. Local Government would welcome this as a response to concerns over capacity and in-house skill issues

Naz also stated that devolved administrations having control over funding pots is key and also suggested that devolution will have to soon to be something that provides resource as well as powers.

Charlotte highlighted that housing tends not to feature in debates on economic development, housing is rarely embraced as a driver of the economy. We need to put housing's role in rebuilding economies at the centre of the agenda, in a proactive way.

Naz discussed rent payments and asked are we going to find a solution on this, or wait until there's a standoff? He said that if housing providers go for double digit rent settlement, we're part of problem not solution.

AFTERNOON WORKSHOPS

Whether it's restoring local pride and empowering communities, regenerating places, or supporting a strong labour market, housing providers can work with Government to make rebalancing a reality for people and places across the North.

These afternoon workshops have been designed to bring attendees into the heart of the discussion on how we ensure housing's vital contribution is recognised and valued; and what the sector needs to go further.

PAY, JOBS, AND LIVING STANDARDS – HOUSING PROVIDERS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Chair: *Andrew Sugden, Assistant Director, Strategic Planning & Insight, Karbon Homes*

- *Cedric Boston, CEO, Unity Housing Association*
- *Stuart Clarke, Senior Manager - Employability, Your Homes Newcastle*
- *Naomi Clayton, Deputy Director, Learning and Work Institute*
- *Karel Williams, Emeritus Professor, The University of Manchester*

Key Points:

- Employment, training, and skills central to this agenda.
- Housing sector already playing a key role, building on its strengths key:
 - Can reach those furthest away from mainstream services.
 - Person-centred approach to employability.
 - Strong partnership working, focussed on local needs.
 - Adaptable to people's needs.
- Moving people into work isn't 'job done', ongoing support may be needed for employment to be sustainable.
- People increasingly entrepreneurial, organisations can help people in setting up their own businesses.
- Existing funding streams need improving – certain communities need support beyond certain target groups, need to be open to reduce under-employment. Flexibility needs to be a priority to help those based on their own needs.

- Rise in economically inactive people is an issue; rise in long-term sickness, mental health issues, and earlier retirement.
- Cost of living and prevalence of low-pay, low-hours jobs making matters worse.
- Housing sector needs to carve out the space to innovate; bringing people closer to the labour market and supporting people to advance once in work.
- Argument that work, skills, and health are all connected needs to be stressed.
- Mobility also a concern; poor public transport, low income households may only have one car thus one person who can travel.
- Considerations for the sector:
 - Strengthen employability as a core service, not a nice-to-have.
 - Work on upskilling, breaking cycle of low-pay / low-hours work.
 - How can sector ease cost of living – Childcare? Transport? Affordable warmth?

LOCAL PRIDE & BELONGING – REGENERATING NEIGHBOURHOOD TO RESTORE COMMUNITY VIBRANCY

Chair: *Ian Ankers, Executive Director Business Development, Bolton at Home*

- *Tom Bridges, Leeds Office Leader, Director Cities Advisory, ARUP*
- *Charlie Norman, Group Chief Executive, MSV Housing Group*

Key Points:

- The need for evidence is critical, certainly a role for partnership working to include academia.
- Community engagement must run through everything.
- The sector rightly places value on collaboration, pooling risk and reward across the public-private-civic sectors contributes to long-term success.
- We require a shift in emphasis to the long-term, place-based work as opposed to short-term project-led working.
- Net Zero is an opportunity to fuse multiple priorities; Net Zero through regeneration / regeneration through Net Zero a real opportunity to drive innovation. An opportunity to go beyond the physical and natural environment to develop skills and strong labour markets in-place.
- Multifaceted issues need tracking – community safety, property condition, pride in place. How can localism help us hand over power where appropriate?
- Places that work for everyone removes stigma.
- The sector should think creatively to redefine regeneration and what our own mission in our areas is. What are we truly the delivery agents of?
- Can't get complacent on partnership working – keep thinking about how we bring stakeholders together, more joint commissioning is a good thing.
- This should be intellectually stimulating work; be inspired by the thinking of others:
 - [Resolution Foundation - Stagnation Nation?: The Economy 2030 Inquiry conference](#)
 - [The Good Ancestor: How to think Long Term in a Short-Term World](#)

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES – WORKING WITH CITIZENS TO IMPROVE LOCAL AGENCY

Chair: *Naz Parkar, Director of Homes and Neighbourhoods, Kirklees Metropolitan Council*

- *Jessie Joe Jacobs, Coordinator of the Democracy Network, Involve*
- *Andrew Wilson, Co-Directors, Same Skies Think Tank*
- *Claude Hendrickson, Campaigns, We're Right Here: The Campaign for Community Power*

Key Points:

- Austerity and the pandemic have increased demand on services, and following the pandemic, a desire to see action.
- Organisations are working in innovative ways to include local people in decision making, including the development of Citizen Engagement Frameworks and Place Standards.
- The aim is clear: to identify what are a place's needs, wants, and ambitions; "What is good about your place? And what needs improving?"
- An emerging theme is the focus on identity and belonging.
- Crime and ASB can seriously undermine a place. Partnership working is essential to tackle this.
- Tenant involvement in an area can create social sustainability, removing issues like ASB rather than delaying their impact.
- This is resource intensive work.
- Citizens are political beings without needing to follow party politics, and are capable about thinking about their own manifestos for their areas.
- As with Levelling Up, we must ensure that our work doesn't become something that is 'done to people'.
- Housing and planning are core concerns for people. Good quality, affordable, tenure-secure housing is known as something that can have a positive impact on a person's life.
- The question is how this housing offer can be democratised and brought to as many people as possible; community land trusts and community-led housing can be one part of this solution.
- Inequality requires a holistic response. Many areas of innovation offer lessons to be applied: Poverty Truth Commissions have highlighted poverty as a multifaceted wellbeing issue requiring an empathetic response e.g. early intervention and support is a more viable way of sustaining tenancies than the threat of eviction; nurturing community organising can be a way of identifying what really matters to people, as well as encouraging those with direct experiences to speak about unintended consequences of policy decisions; participatory budgeting creates understanding and support through ownership of decision-making.

WHAT NEXT FOR PLACE & PLACEMAKING

George Payiatis, Senior Urban Designer, Create Streets

The Levelling Up agenda has made explicit the connection between the quality of place and how residents 'feel' about their area, with planning reforms looking to instil beauty into developments, and a new Office for Place prioritising sustainable design.

In our final plenary, George will discuss the influential work of Create Streets, their approach to design and how this has shaped Government thinking on the future of place and placemaking.

George began by highlighting the importance of how residents feel about their area, he noted that everyone knows what a nice street looks like, it does not require a professional but professionals simply know how to use Computer Aided Design etc.

He explained that Create Streets are pushing back on reliance of parking and roads – existing planning guidance is all about parking/roads but trying to move away from that.

Create Streets are not against cars completely, but George argued we have to be more sensible with how we design our estates and streets around walking/cars. He questioned does every household need two cars and two parking spaces? He noted that you can have parking in the streetscape that is overlooked and blends in, meaning it isn't a 'concrete nightmare'.

George also explained the importance placed on vernacular design, saying that if development is within a historic setting, it is important to not replicate but keep in line with the vernacular, whilst having variety – variety often leads to attractive streets.

George went on to highlight why design and placemaking matter for the resident, saying that health, wellbeing and carbon neutrality makes a big difference to placemaking. Environment, health, diet, beauty of surrounding area impact our lives greatly so vital we get placemaking right for residential areas.

He also stated the importance of social interactions in communities and providing spaces that help to create cohesion where communities can connect. People are more likely to connect on street with less cars and smaller roads, providing easier access to each other and walkable neighbourhoods – front gardens also support cohesion and sense of community. George also highlighted the negative impact of segregating social housing within estates, social housing should be integrated to not cause separation and discourage pride of place. He also noted that Create Streets' plan for the future could be to provide one car parking space per household, with the hope that in future households will move towards one car.