

The Colin Wiles blog

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Greener homes

In my [blog](#) about the Conservative Party conference I mentioned that the government has introduced a consultation on a Future Homes Standard, in response to the challenge of climate change.

The consultation can be found [here](#), and every housing provider should respond. Unlike some consultations, this one's important.

To recap, the UK has set a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, the first country to do so. This was a recommendation from the Committee on Climate Change, chaired by Lord Deben (he was the keynote speaker at HQN's annual conference in July, [here's a video](#)).

UK homes account for 20% of emissions so there's a lot to do. Gas boilers will be banned from new homes by 2025 and developments will be off the gas grid. After 2050, new homes will need to have close to Passivhaus levels of insulation, with triple glazing and restricted ventilation.

Heating and hot water will be provided by green technologies: solar, water, ground or air source heat pumps. There'll also be a return to district heating schemes, especially in high-density areas. The forecast is that district heat networks will cover almost one fifth of new homes by 2050. In my experience, that'll bring its own challenges!

The government's proposing a stepping stone approach towards the 2050 target. The Future Homes Standard itself will be published in 2025, and homes built between 2025 and 2050 should produce 75-80% less carbon than current new homes. But homes built between now and 2025 should also reduce their carbon emissions.

The government's consulting on whether this should be by 20% or 31%; they favour the higher figure.

One of the questions in the consultation is whether new homes should have a "householder affordability standard" as part of the metrics for new homes. This is designed to prevent developers providing expensive-to-use direct electric heating. Such an approach is critical in reducing fuel poverty and helping residents to live comfortably, so it should be fully supported. At Goldsmith Street, winner of this year's RIBA Stirling Prize, it was reported that residents had seen huge reductions in their in-use costs.

The consultation is seeking views on changes to Parts F (ventilation) and L (conservation of fuel and power) of the Building Regulations and how the industry can respond to this. Many of the questions are technical and you'll need to make sure that your development directors and technical staff are scrutinising the details and responding accordingly.

But this has to be led from the top. Frankly, the social housing sector should be leading the way on climate change, and not passively waiting to be told what to do. This means thinking carefully not only about new homes but how to retrofit the existing stock. Sadly, as HQN has made clear, the sector is dragging its feet and failing to address this very serious issue. Our recent survey of member organisations found that almost three quarters felt that their organisation was not doing enough to cut emissions and only half had a proper climate change strategy. Four in ten had no targets for future carbon emissions. That's rather shameful.

Whatever you think of the Extinction Rebellion protests (and, personally, I deplore their doomsday nihilism, their anti-growth message, and some of their tactics – Canning Town was a particular faux pas) they have at least raised the issue in the public imagination and hopefully made us understand that everyone must change: governments, corporations and individuals. Business as usual is not an option.

Sadly, this message appears not to have penetrated to the leadership of the housing association sector, where business as usual appears to be very much the order of the day. As evidence, I refer to the [latest survey](#) of CEO salaries by Inside Housing.

This year, it's shocking to see that so many chiefs are being paid gigantic car allowances. 41 out of 156 receive £10,000 or more every year in car payments. How can this possibly be justified? If the CEO of a not-for profit business is driving around in a huge car what kind of message do you think that sends to staff and residents?

This has to change, and it has to start at the top. So, if you're reading this and your organisation has yet to put in place a robust and realistic climate change strategy, then push for it to happen. For a start, that means getting CEOs out of petrol and diesel cars and into cleaner methods of transport.

We need some leadership at this critical time.

About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

