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How corporate collaboration drives successful council-led housing delivery

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How corporate collaboration drives successful council-led housing delivery

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Future of London equips placemakers to shape a thriving and equitable city through leadership development, knowledge-sharing and networks. We provide a collaborative space to develop cross-sector partnerships. Our mainly public sector and housing association members connect with our private sector partners, creating an influential professional network. We identify practical solutions to urban problems through research and knowledge-sharing events, while our unique leadership programme develops confident leaders who drive change across London.

Project Team

Visakha Sri Chandrasekera, Maeve Hosea, Kelsey Hoare, Federico Ortiz, Eddie Gibb.

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Executive summary

This research report explores how corporate teams across local authorities contribute to the successful delivery of council-led housing, and what enables, or hinders, that collaboration. Drawing principally on in-depth interviews with senior leaders and practitioners across development, finance, procurement, planning and partner organisations as well as others, it finds that successful delivery depends on the whole council working as an enabling corporate system.

The research identifies that whilst development teams are the organising function, it is a process that relies on multiple functions working together. Development teams depend on finance securing funding; procurement securing compliant and commercially sound routes to market; planning and building control providing advice and regulatory permissions; legal and governance teams supporting contracts and decision making; housing management and asset management providing design and specification input; communications supporting stakeholder engagement and other specialist services ensuring new homes work for residents.

The interviews highlight recurring tensions around Housing Revenue Account (HRA) capacity, procurement timescales, planning compliance, handover, staff turnover and competing service pressures. They also identify practical actions that help address these challenges: clear political and senior leadership commitment, realistic delivery targets, shared data, dedicated contacts or embedded resources, strong programme governance, early problem-solving and structured learning from completed schemes.

The central recommendation is that local authorities should treat council-led development as a whole-council endeavour, ensuring that the structures, resources, capacity and shared commitment needed to support delivery are in place across the organisation. To support this shift, **five enablers** are proposed as the foundations for successful implementation.

1

Council-led housing is a whole-council endeavour. Delivery depends on development, finance, procurement, planning, legal, governance, housing and asset management, communications and other specialist services working as one enabling system.

2

Political and corporate commitment establishes priority. Members and senior leaders need to establish council-led development as a corporate strategic priority that delivers the council's offer to residents to provide secure long-term homes.

3

Clear roles and decision-making support delivery. Teams need shared clarity on responsibilities, process, delegations, risks and governance to work effectively together, solving challenges collaboratively and maximising social impact.

4

Capacity and capability must match the scale of ambition. Councils need to set targets that are supported by the resources, skills and expertise required to deliver them, while fostering collaboration across corporate disciplines to maximise efficiency and share knowledge effectively.

5

Corporate culture needs to underpin collaboration. A collaborative culture encourages teams to see housing delivery as a shared responsibility, engage in early conversations, show curiosity, listen to others and understand competing priorities.

Introduction

Local authorities are under severe pressure to deliver more homes to address the housing crisis, particularly for those on low incomes. At the same time, councils are challenged to meet the urgent need for temporary accommodation whilst facing additional pressures around ageing housing stock, building safety requirements and climate change. Furthermore, national policy is putting renewed emphasis on increasing housing delivery. Against this backdrop, it is vital to understand what councils need internally if they are to deliver homes successfully.

"Development is not something that sits off to the side; it is part of how the whole council delivers for residents."

Senior corporate officer

What organisational culture and working practices enable local authorities to deliver new homes successfully? Council-led housing delivery is not simply a development team challenge, it is a corporate challenge; one of aligning ambition with the right professional expertise, resources and decision-making.

The findings in this report are drawn from a qualitative research process which involved 27 in-depth interviews and peer group discussions, conducted under Chatham House rules. Interviewees included senior leaders and practitioners from councils' development, finance, procurement and planning teams, as well as those from partner organisations. Evidence on housing management, asset management, legal, governance, communications and specialist services was also drawn from other sources, including Future of London's housing programme archive.

Interviews were selected as the primary research method to facilitate an in-depth understanding of how collaboration operates in practice. This approach allowed the research to capture detail on areas including informal working relationships, competing priorities, organisational tensions and practical workarounds.

Council-led housing delivery depends on cross-functional working: not only having the right skills inside the council but creating ways to work together effectively. The sections that follow examine the corporate teams involved, show what collaboration looks like in practice, explore common barriers and delivery risks, and identify examples of effective practice. They also set out the conditions that enable stronger corporate working and translate the findings into practical recommendations.



Highgate Newtown, 41 affordable homes and a new community centre, for Camden. © Camden Council

Key corporate teams

Council-led housing delivery depends on a network of corporate teams. The development team may manage the programme, but delivery requires finance, procurement, planning, legal, housing management, asset management, communications, governance and specialists in urban design, neighbourhood planning and, importantly, building safety, throughout the life of a scheme. The range and complexity of teams involved will depend on the nature of the development. Mixed-use schemes require property and commercial management to be involved too.

Interviewees described development teams as the central organising function for council-led housing programmes. In larger authorities, these teams may include specialist programme management, aftercare, sales and latent defects teams, and may embed staff within other corporate teams. Their role is to hold together the delivery programme, manage projects through feasibility, approvals, procurement, construction and handover, and broker input from the wider council.

Alongside development, housing management and asset management act as crucial client teams, contributing operational and asset-related expertise to inform decisions and ensure that new homes are fit for purpose over the long term. Housing management brings knowledge of allocations, tenancy and leasehold management, resident experience and specialist housing needs. Asset management brings expertise in long-term capital works, building safety, mechanical and electrical systems, maintenance liabilities and stock condition objectives. Their early involvement is particularly important as new homes become more technically complex, with features such as air source heat pumps, solar panels, blue and green roofs and other systems that must be maintainable over the long term.

Other corporate teams play distinct but interdependent roles. Finance tests Housing Revenue Account (HRA) capacity, secures loans, measures business plan impacts and sets limits to the council's overall risk exposure. Procurement supports compliant and commercially effective routes to market, while seeking an appropriate balance between price, quality, social value and deliverability. Planning and building control perform regulatory roles and must treat council-led schemes with the same rigour as any other application, while also engaging proactively, where appropriate, through pre-application advice, planning performance agreements and pipeline awareness. Legal, governance and democratic services support decision-making, delegations, contracts and routes to committee. Communications teams help build and sustain support with residents, members and the wider public. Regeneration, corporate strategy, property, commercial, social care, highways, refuse and specialist service teams may also play a central role, especially where schemes include mixed uses, specialist accommodation, public realm or wider neighbourhood change.

Taken together, these teams form a corporate delivery ecosystem. This breadth of responsibility is a key strength, allowing councils to align housing delivery with homelessness prevention, social care, placemaking, asset stewardship and wider community outcomes. It can also create complexity: schemes are rarely only about housing, and the number of internal stakeholders means collaboration has to be actively managed.



Corporate teams delivering council housing. Interpretation by Future of London.

How teams collaborate in practice

In this report, collaboration goes beyond consultation. It means sharing specialist knowledge, jointly identifying risk, providing cross team assurance, collectively solving problems and shaping decisions before they become fixed. In a council context, this might mean finance testing scheme assumptions before a business case is finalised, procurement advising on market capacity before a tender route is chosen, or asset management shaping specifications so that homes can be maintained effectively once occupied.

Much of this collaboration happens through governance. Councils use delivery boards, programme boards and gateway processes to test whether schemes are ready to move forward and to make risks visible to senior officers and members. The names of these structures vary between authorities, but their purpose is similar: to be mutually accountable for risks, provide assurance and give teams a place to resolve issues before they delay delivery.

Importantly, collaboration also involves the sharing of specialist knowledge. This may include finance input on hurdle rates, cash flow and HRA business plan impacts; procurement input on routes to market, social value and risk allocation; planning input on policy compliance and programme timing; and housing and asset management input on resident experience, long-term management, maintenance and handover. A specialist scheme will also need specification input from social services, and regeneration schemes, need professional support with communications.

These activities are supported by practical mechanisms of collaboration. Examples include monthly meetings between development and housing management, regular planning meetings to discuss the programme pipeline and policy changes, procurement overview meetings to anticipate upcoming tenders and timelines, and finance reviews of programme viability and cash flow. In some cases, service level agreements or paid-for arrangements such as programme-wide planning performance agreements create dedicated capacity and clearer expectations.

Several contributors emphasised that collaboration is most valuable when it brings difficult issues into the open before they become delivery challenges. While some tension between the different roles and priorities of corporate teams is inevitable, effective collaboration helps teams identify and resolve constraints early. The mechanisms to support this include co-ordination from programme management offices, dedicated finance officers and procurement specialists, named planning contacts and senior sounding boards.



Topping out at Leyes Road, bringing together council, developer, contractor and project teams to celebrate a key milestone in delivering 116 new affordable Passivhaus homes for Newham. © Ken Frakes / Bugler Developments

The type of collaboration needed over the life of a scheme will change. Early business case development may depend heavily on finance, planning and procurement; design and specification on asset, housing and specialist client input; construction on compliance and commercial management; and completion on the careful handover into housing management, asset management and aftercare. While certain collaborations are essential at particular stages of development, the most effective approach will depend on the specific characteristics and requirements of each scheme.

"Honesty and trust is very important… we all want the same things, which is the best outcome for our communities."

Senior development officer

Where collaboration gets difficult

The research found a set of recurring tensions between corporate teams as they navigate the development process. These include tensions around financial capacity, procurement timescales, compliance with planning policy, handover into housing and asset management, as well as challenges caused by staff turnover, risk exposure and competing service pressures.

Internal financial capacity and maintaining the Housing Revenue Account's resilience were especially prominent. Specialist financial expertise from within the council is required to determine the impacts of developments on the Housing Revenue Account business plan; to test the effect of schemes on borrowing, revenue and long-term asset performance. However, several interviewees described their HRAs as finely balanced and sensitive to shocks. Finance teams were clear that councils no longer have the same financial capacity to deliver everything they were previously able to. This creates a cautious risk environment in which development risk can be difficult to reconcile with financial constraints.

Procurement emerged as another area where tensions can be high. Development teams may experience procurement timescales as slow or inflexible, creating challenges to meeting critical grant funding milestones such as start on site. They also find that strong working relationships with particular contractors must be put aside as each new procurement must be run competitively to ensure the market is not fettered.

Procurement teams, in turn, often comment that they get insufficient notice, information and resource to design compliant routes to market, test commercial models and manage risk. In a volatile market, lowest price may also indicate insufficient understanding of the proposal's risk profile. Interviewees noted that procurement, which is intrinsic to the development process, is sometimes perceived as a governance step rather than a commercial enabler, even though better information-sharing and earlier engagement can improve value for money, social value, environmental performance and risk allocation.

Planning creates a further set of complexities. Planning teams have a quasi-judicial role and must assess council-led schemes as they would any other applicant. This can be challenging where council-led housing is a political priority, where delivery is linked to funding milestones, or where schemes require difficult trade-offs around density, height, tenure mix, design quality and policy compliance. Interviewees noted that council teams, who like all applicants need to make optimal use of their sites, cannot use the appeal route in the same way a private developer would, as councils cannot appeal against their own decisions. This influences how policy compliance, viability and delivery objectives are approached from the outset and generally leads to a low-risk approach.

Councils must also navigate their long-term relationships with local communities. Interviewees suggested this may make them more responsive to local concerns when shaping development proposals.

> "Political leaders decide our priorities and when council house building is one of those priorities and you don't have the money to deliver, the organisation is in a difficult space."
>
> **Senior finance officer**

There are also practical organisational challenges. Staff turnover can weaken relationships, reduce corporate memory, and erode knowledge and expertise from the organisation. In addition, new delivery models and partnership arrangements can fall between established legal, governance and commercial processes. Tensions can also emerge in the handover from development and construction into housing and asset management, falling short at multiple points with significant short and long-term consequences.

Common concerns on handover included the quality of as-built information, warranties, planned preventative maintenance schedules and defects management. Alongside these issues, it can be a particular challenge for asset management and housing management teams to engage in new build while also carrying responsibility for a much larger existing portfolio of stock.

The consequences of these tensions can be significant. Schemes may take longer to progress, assumptions may be revisited late in the process, costs can increase and relationships can become strained. However, the interviews also suggest that tension that relates to competing priorities is not always negative. When it is handled early and constructively, it can help councils make better decisions, test risk more honestly and design schemes that are more deliverable over the long term.

What good collaboration looks like

Effective collaboration appears strongest where teams are treated as active project partners rather than just consultees. Interviewees described collaborative project teams as ones that bring together finance, procurement, legal, planning, housing, asset management and development, with the expectation that each function has ownership and agency over the development.

In practice, this shared ownership is reflected in how teams approach problems. One interviewee said this is reflected in questions that conclude with "how can we as one project team resolve this?" rather than passing the issue off to another. This can save time over the life of a project, particularly where public-private partnerships or mixed-use schemes require complex judgement across commercial, regulatory and service considerations.

Dedicated contacts and embedded resources were repeatedly cited as key to effective joint working. Examples included dedicated procurement and specialist development finance contacts, finance business partners located within development project teams, paid-for planning advice secured through programme-wide planning performance agreements, and dedicated communications staff funded by the development programme. These kinds of arrangements facilitated dialogue, built relationships and strengthened corporate understanding and intelligence around development, making it easier to anticipate issues and translate development needs between professional disciplines.

Interviewees emphasised the importance of shared strategic priorities in supporting collaboration across housing development programmes. This includes clear links between housing development and wider corporate objectives supported by delivery plans with realistic and aligned targets. One key mechanism for this is likely to be an affordable housing investment plan linking housing needs assessments and stock condition information to remedial and redevelopment solutions. Such plans can demonstrate how council-led development helps address wider corporate priorities, establishing it as a whole-council responsibility rather than solely a development function

This is particularly important where new homes contribute not only to reducing homelessness and therefore temporary accommodation pressures, but meet specialist housing needs for social services, improve failing estates and strengthen the long-term asset base.

Collaborative good practice also includes structured learning in which there is a corporate review of completed



Plashet Road, the first Passivhaus standard affordable homes in Newham, completed in 2024. © Ken Frakes / Bugler Developments

schemes, exchanging honest views on what worked and what did not. The value of these lessons learned processes is that they can improve, in particular, future briefs, specifications, procurement routes, handovers and aftercare. Several interviewees emphasised that trust is built through open conversations, mutual respect and a shared sense that teams are working towards the same outcome: good homes and communities with a sustainable future.

The conditions that make collaboration possible

The interviews suggest that effective corporate working is underpinned by a set of interlinked foundations that develop over time. Governance arrangements and formal processes are important but, ultimately, effective collaboration depends on political commitment, clear roles, sufficient capacity and a culture that allows difficult issues to be raised early and resolved collectively. Where building blocks are aligned, corporate working becomes less dependent on individual relationships and more embedded in how the authority does business. Political and senior leadership commitment creates the mandate for teams to prioritise council-led development; clear roles and governance make collaboration effective; capacity and capability give teams the time and skills to engage; and culture creates the conditions for teams to work together towards shared delivery objectives.



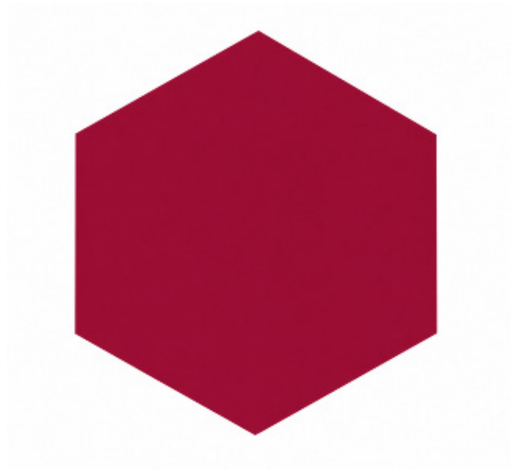
Commitment

The first building block is clear political and corporate commitment. Council-led development needs to be understood as a strategic priority that connects to homelessness, housing need, specialist accommodation, regeneration, asset performance and long-term financial sustainability. Support from members, chief executives, executive directors and senior leadership teams helps set the conditions for collaboration.



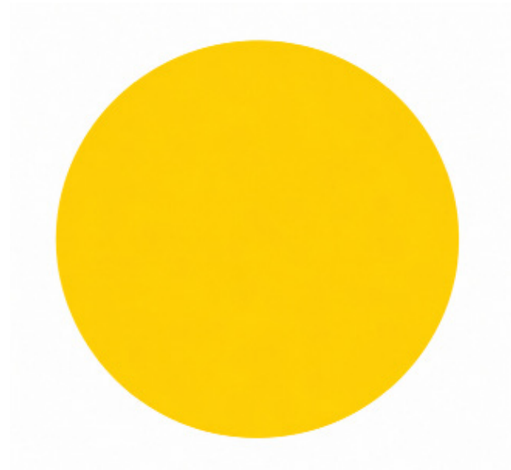
Clarity

The second building block is clarity of roles and decision-making. Teams need to know who holds knowledge on modelling viability, development funding, HRA capacity, planning policy, procurement strategy, specifications, resident engagement, handover and aftercare. In respect of decision-making, governance should give teams confidence that decisions are transparent, delegations are clear and appropriate, risks are visible and there are no surprises for colleagues who must manage the implications.



Capacity

The third building block is capacity and capability. Larger programmes can support specialist roles, programme management offices and embedded corporate resources. Authorities with smaller development programmes may need to rely more on informal agreements, shared processes, external support or corporate prioritisation to secure the same level of input. Skills, corporate memory (including knowledge of past decisions, established processes, working relationships and lessons learned from previous schemes) development literacy and cross-team training are all important, particularly for finance, procurement, asset management and development management.



Culture

The fourth building block is culture. Effective authorities create channels for people to talk early, air difficult issues constructively and understand each other's constraints. Interviewees described the value of curiosity, listening, realistic expectations and an attitude of asking how issues can be resolved together. This culture matters because council-led development sits at the intersection of competing pressures: political ambition, financial constraint, regulatory compliance, resident expectations, commercial markets and long-term stewardship.

Recommendations

These recommendations translate the research findings into practical actions to strengthen council-led housing delivery. They will inform the ongoing work of the Council-led Housing Network and Future of London's wider programme of activities.

1 Establish a clear corporate narrative for council-led housing, linking new supply to homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures, specialist housing need, estate renewal, community outcomes and the long-term strength of the Housing Revenue Account and asset base.

2 Create structured involvement of finance, procurement, planning, legal, housing management, asset management, communications and relevant specialist services from the feasibility stage onwards to build shared ownership and make full use of corporate expertise in problem-solving.

3 Use dedicated contacts, embedded roles or formal service arrangements to provide continuity between development teams and key corporate functions.

4 Resource asset management and housing management to act as effective clients, shaping briefs, employer's requirements, specifications, handover, maintenance and aftercare.

5 Strengthen programme governance so that boards and gateway processes support assurance, problem-solving and timely decision-making whilst not creating additional reporting requirements.

6 Adopt a "no surprises" approach with all stakeholders and particularly finance, procurement and governance colleagues by sharing risks, assumptions, cost changes, programme changes and key decision timelines early.

7 Invest in shared data, including housing needs assessments, waiting list analysis, specialist housing demand, stock condition, stock performance and Housing Revenue Account modelling, so that development choices are grounded in the wider housing and asset context.

8 Develop procurement approaches that combine compliance with commercial acumen, allowing sufficient time for market engagement, social value, risk allocation and realistic tender design.

9 Build learning loops from completed schemes, including corporate post-project reviews, incorporating lessons learned, aftercare feedback and structured evaluation of handover, resident experience and asset performance.

10 Recognise and celebrate the contribution of all teams involved in council-led delivery. As one interviewee observed, "when the keys are handed over, lots of people have helped make that moment possible." The "glory" as another interviewee put it belongs to everyone across the corporate ecosystem.

Conclusion

Council-led housing delivery depends on much more than the capacity of development teams alone. It requires a corporate environment in which political ambition, financial stewardship, regulatory compliance, procurement expertise, legal and governance assurance, housing and asset management knowledge, resident engagement and delivery capability are brought together. The research shows that tensions are inevitable, particularly where resources are constrained and risks are significant.

However, these tensions can be productive when teams engage early, understand each other's constraints, share information openly and work from a common purpose. The strongest message from the research is that local authorities should treat council-led housing as a whole-council endeavour. Future of London will continue to support this agenda through the Council-Led Housing Network, helping boroughs, partners and practitioners share learning, test ideas and strengthen the corporate conditions needed to deliver good homes and more sustainable communities.

Local authorities should treat council-led development as a whole-council endeavour, with the corporate structures, capacity and culture needed to deliver new homes.

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Future of London runs the Council-Led Housing Network to provide access to expert knowledge through our expert panel, offer peer-to-peer support via dedicated peer groups, and share good practice through a unique resource library. The network is supported by the Mayor of London as part of his commitment to growing new council house building.

The network is open to all London boroughs. If your team is involved in council-led housing development, **register your interest here** to be part of it.

Future of London
70 Cowcross Street
London EC1M 6EJ

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