



1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge

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Annual Review

2nd October 2025

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Why can't councils build more homes?

Councils have in the past been major housebuilders. They don't build on the same scale today, but many are keen to do so. Through interviews and discussions, [1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge](#)¹ discovers what works and what needs to change to build more new homes, focusing on the vital role of councils.

If the Government's mission is to deliver 1.5m new homes during this parliament, then its key delivery arm is local government - as planning authority, in joint ventures with the private sector, and through direct delivery.

We have been visiting a different council each month, producing video interviews on building sites and completed developments and publishing those videos primarily on [YouTube](#) and [LinkedIn](#), and also on [TikTok](#), [Instagram](#) and as [audio podcasts](#). We have analysed the content of the first 10 sets of interviews, conducted between October 2024 and September 2025, for this report.

The campaign gives a voice to officers, members and leaders, to enable the Government, development partners and council colleagues to hear from the people at the "coalface" of delivery, and understand both the ingredients for the successful provision of new homes, and the blockers that must be overcome to get even more homes built.



¹ Full details at www.1-5m.co.uk

Local authority participants October 2024 – September 2025

Month	Council
November 2024	Slough Borough Council
December 2024	London Borough of Ealing
January 2025	Cambridge City Council
February 2025	London Borough of Hounslow
March 2025	London Borough of Barking and Dagenham / Be First
April 2025	London Borough of Lambeth
May 2025	Westminster City Council
June 2025	London Borough of Camden
July 2025	London Borough of Brent
September 2025	London Borough of Sutton

These councils are all in London and other high-pressure areas where there is a strong need for more housing. We will expand our coverage across the country, continuing to visit councils to build an ever-more comprehensive picture of the shared factors behind success and failure, as well as the variations from place to place.



Our case study sample may have been self-selecting, in that the pro-growth councils are most likely to want to be interviewed about housing delivery. Nine of the 10 case studies made leaders or cabinet members available for interview, all of whom described themselves as pro-development. It may be that most or all councils are positive about new housing – the campaign will reveal this as our coverage grows to include councils in other areas and circumstances. While “strengthening political will” was not one of the biggest challenges, it was ranked as significant by several councils. One noted that this will become a bigger issue as local elections approach.

It is likely that interviews with developers, or architects, or housing associations would produce a different list of challenges. However, we believe the difference would be more in degree than in substance – council capacity or gaining planning consent might be seen as bigger challenges by the private sector, but they are seen as significant challenges by both private and public sectors. This simply underlines the inter-connectedness of different parts of the housebuilding sector.

In any case, what follow are the genuine views of councils, the Government’s key delivery arm for its housing ambitions and a crucial voice in the housebuilding debate.

What are the top challenges?

We asked our 10 case studies to identify the biggest challenges holding them back from building more homes. We compiled a list of the main challenges identified by two or more councils, and then asked all 10 to rank them in terms of the impact that resolving them could have on accelerating the delivery of new homes. The 10 highest-ranking challenges identified were, in order:

1. Viability

2. Funding

3. Building safety regulation

4. Market stability and investment confidence

5. Land availability and assembly

6. Density and infrastructure delivery

7. Construction industry capacity

8. Community engagement and trust

9. Gaining planning consent and using local plans to support housebuilding

10. Council capacity

These challenges are not separate, but interrelated. Viability has emerged as the biggest challenge, for example, but is affected by just about all the others. Delays in gaining building safety approval impact viability; a lack of capacity in the construction sector pushes up wages, also affecting viability; and so on. Other challenges shape each other, too: a shortage of planners, or lack of local political will, can both suppress the supply of land coming forward in Local Plans, for example. This means that any real solutions cannot tackle the issues in isolation, but need to look across all of them, if delivery is to be substantially improved.

What are the solutions?

We asked our 10 case studies to identify solutions to the challenges they had highlighted. Their suggestions broadly fall into two camps: policy changes needed from central government and ways that councils themselves can increase delivery.

Policy changes needed from central government

1. **Long-term funding to the affordable housing sector** via direct grants rather than competitive bidding would give councils (and housing association partners) the financial strength to develop new homes.
2. Building at height can provide new homes in dense urban areas while preserving much-needed green spaces. A **policy environment that supports and encourages high-rise housing in already built-up areas**, with fewer barriers, would help here.
3. Skills and education policy should **help young people appreciate the opportunities available in the housing sector** – from construction, to planning, to engineering, to housing management, all areas facing stiff recruitment challenges.
4. **First time buyer support** would help boost homeownership and support mixed tenure developments and the private sales that subsidise social and affordable homes.
5. Central government should **reward and celebrate councils who are delivering**, to boost delivery capacity where new homes are most welcome, and to support the local political drive to provide them.

Ways that councils can increase delivery

1. **Political will** is key. All of the case studies who were delivering successfully credited strong support from local councilors as critical to this progress. As well as sustaining councils' own delivery capacity, this gave investors confidence in an area, bringing people together to encourage housebuilding.
2. Councils should **engage with the private sector** to understand their needs, so that partnership working can deliver both for the council and for investors. Opportunities for this are often locally unique and can include engagement with universities, owners of vacant land and local businesses.
3. A **proactive approach** from councils towards stalled sites can help - working in partnership to find creative ways to make them viable. This may involve making compromises around spaces, height, tenure mixes or building methods.
4. Councils have a key role to play in **building local support for new homes**. Open communication at an early stage in the process, involving local residents in design, surveying residents and businesses to understand their needs, and demonstrating the long-term benefits of new homes can all help.
5. **Embracing new technology** can save money and improve efficiency. This may include procuring at scale to facilitate off-site manufacturing, digital innovations, and using AI and automation for routine tasks within planning.

The research has also identified things that the wider housing and construction sector could do to support councils in building home homes: maintaining **good communication with councils**, especially around any difficulties in bringing schemes forward, **supporting councils who have got into difficulties** on their own sites (for instance if a contractor has gone out of business) and **training up new workers** to address the skills shortage.

In detail: the challenges

1. Viability

The case studies were in high-value areas where building homes for market sale ought to be viable, and able to generate some cross-subsidy for social housing. However, viability of development was identified as one of the top three challenges by eight of the 10 councils. The main reason for this is that housebuilding costs have risen steeply in the last five years – by around 30-40% – but that increase was not factored into the price paid for land. Rising costs have therefore left a black hole in many development plans, causing them to stall.

Other factors identified as impacting viability for all, or almost all, councils included:

- **Insufficient grant rates** having not kept pace with construction costs.
- **The GLA's design standards** which impose rules around the light in flats.
- New **planning requirements** (around biodiversity in particular).
- New **building safety requirements** have increased costs (discussed separately, below).

Factors that affected viability for some councils included:

- Some councils require **building to specific standards** using the most sustainable methods, or enforcing a local design preference, which increases build costs.
- **Delays in obtaining planning permission** increase costs, especially when interest rates are high and money has been borrowed to buy land.

There was strong agreement that locally imposed design standards were increasing the quality of new homes, but concern as to whether the balance between quality and viability/numbers was currently being struck, with one councillor describing it as “building BMWs for everyone, when it might be more affordable to include some Ford Fiestas in the mix”.

Several authorities reflected that, with hindsight, they or others had overpaid for land, and this had caused viability problems. Others reported that land values remained high, despite a weakening housing market: landowners' price expectations can be slow to respond to changing market conditions, leading to them holding on to undeveloped land or brownfield sites with vacant buildings in the hope of better conditions in the future.

One issue identified by several of the case studies is the **reduced interest from housing associations in taking on the affordable homes required through a S106 condition**. This is because housing associations' own finances are stretched for many of the same issues facing councils (investment in their existing stock, rising construction costs, higher costs of borrowing).

Solutions that some authorities have found included:

- A **proactive approach** from councils towards stalled sites, working in partnership to finding creative ways to make them viable.
- Making **compromises** around spaces, tenure mixes or building methods to adjust viability calculations
- Increasing **density**
- **Working closely with housing associations** in particular, and engaging them at an early stage to ensure that the social housing planned via s106 fully meets their needs.

2. Funding



A lack of funding was identified as a top three issue by eight of the 10 councils. Councils are responsible for housing waiting lists and for accommodating homeless households – they are therefore very keen to ensure that social housing is prioritised in new developments. This, however, requires subsidy. The case studies were in relatively high-value areas which ought to mean that s106 provides some cross-subsidy from the sale of market homes, but this is challenging in the current environment for all the reasons discussed under “Viability”.

The other way to subsidise social housing is grant, from central government or councils’ own resources (which can include money ringfenced for new housing delivery, such as receipts from the sale of properties under the Right to Buy). Councils can also borrow against future rental income. Challenges here included:

- Overall pressure on **council finances**, particularly from temporary accommodation demands, but also from increasing expenditure on stock maintenance and meeting new energy efficiency standards.
- The rising **costs of construction** (as discussed under “Viability”) and grants from the GLA or Homes England not having kept pace.
- The high cost of borrowing for councils via the Public Works Loans Board.
- **Insufficient capacity within the Housing Revenue Account** to borrow more. This is due to high expenditure on existing stock (including fire safety work), higher interest rates and insufficient rental income.
- The costs of **re-homing people** who need to move from an estate or area while it is regenerated.
- Increased costs associated with **building a higher standard** of new homes and using the most sustainable methods.
- Delays in obtaining **planning permission**.
- **Insufficient anticipated rental income** from the new homes to fund the construction.

Ways identified by some councils to help overcome these difficulties included:

- Working in **partnership** with the private sector and with Homes England or the GLA to facilitate access to borrowing.
- Additional funding from central government allocated via **direct grants** rather than bidding.
- **Low rate borrowing** or **debt support** for councils, to help them overcome barriers in borrowing against their Housing Revenue Account.
- Additional **flexibility** around funding, to allow councils to direct grant to the schemes most in need of it.

3. Building safety regulation

New building safety regulations apply to all new housing over 18m in height. This impacts at least some of the new homes in all 10 of our case studies and, in the central London areas, pretty much all new housing. It was a high ranked issue by all our inner London councils, and identified as a significant issue in all 10. Councils recognised the value of building safety but also reported that the new regulations had increased costs, extended project timelines and added an additional level of risk and uncertainty. There are three issues:

Firstly, councils have had to **divert more of their own resources into upgrading their existing stock** to meet fire safety standards. This has left them with less money and reduced access to borrowing to fund new homes.

Secondly, the requirements for buildings over 18m in height **increased building costs** via the cost of adding a second staircase, and the loss of housing space in order to accommodate it. This has made some projects unviable.

Thirdly, the **implementation of the new Building Safety Gateway process has not gone well**. It was described as an “obstacle to delivery”, “causing profound angst” and “a disaster”, with some developments held up for 18 months or more. The Regulator is under-resourced, and has not provided the clarity needed to applicants, causing many schemes to be reworked or re-submitted and causing major delays in approving new projects.

Solutions suggested included more engagement and communication with the Regulator, to better understand requirements.

A variety of other regulation has created issues for local authorities trying to build more homes. Building safety was the only one around which council views consolidated, but most case studies highlighted other regulatory challenges, including:

- New regulation around the **condition of existing homes** has diverted funding into programmes to tackle mould and damp, which leaves less money available for new build.
- At councils undergoing financial difficulties, new and **lengthy council processes** to approve even minor expenditure.
- Additional **planning requirements** such as play spaces and daylight.
- Higher levels of **energy efficiency** required to meet the latest building standards, or required by councils in the interests of net zero ambitions.
- **Procurement processes** that make it more difficult to switch supplier, for instance if one goes out of business.
- Regulations around the use of the **Housing Revenue Account**.

The lesson is that increased regulation pushes up costs for those who have to comply with it (both councils and developers). It also increases costs for councils and other bodies who are responsible for ensuring compliance with those regulations, and in some cases the overload of work for these public sector bodies was reported to be causing delays. For example, one authority reported new homes to have remained unoccupied for 10 months awaiting approval by the Highways Agency. Solutions suggested included the application of IT to free planners from mundane and routine tasks; and increased flexibility in the use of funding.

4. Market stability and investment confidence

Market instability and turbulent prices over the past five years pose a significant capital risk for direct council housing delivery in many of the case studies. The ability to cross-subsidise affordable housing through private sales was reported to be hampered by a slow market, requiring higher grant funding to kickstart projects.



Rising interest rates and construction costs have created an **uncertain market for investors** and caused some construction firms and housebuilders to go out of business. This has had a knock-on impact throughout the housing supply chain with some councils losing contractors part-way through a scheme. These schemes are then reassessed and often become unviable as prices and conditions have changed since the projects started. As a result, companies and councils become more **risk-averse**, seeking to protect themselves from losses by becoming more cautious about the risk-sharing that is needed for successful partnership working.

The housing market itself is also weak currently, as buyers' finances are strained by high interest rates, and lack of confidence about the future of the economy and housing market. Increased stamp duty for landlords and second homes has reduced demand from that sector of the market, and particularly affected the ability of housebuilders to sell new homes off-plan. This impacts on the sale price and rate of sale of market homes – which are needed to create the cross-subsidy for much of the affordable housing. One council suggested that the public sector had not yet learned to make investment attractive to the private sector. They tended instead to emphasise their own needs rather than showing how the needs of the private sector investors could be met.

All of the case studies who were delivering successfully credited the political will of local councillors as critical to this progress. It was clear that strong ambition from the council's leadership can give investors' confidence in an area, bring people together and drive delivery.

As elected bodies who must answer to the electorate, councils face a unique set of challenges in planning for the long-term to bring forward new homes. All 10 case studies were relatively stable, politically, which was acknowledged to be a significant benefit to housing delivery. A strategic approach to housing, bringing forward complex brownfield or larger scale sites, requires thinking on a scale of 10-15 years or more. While recognising this, politicians are often impelled to focus on the shorter term for which they know they will be in control. Gaining cross-party political consensus was therefore identified as essential to ensure the most significant projects can attract the investment needed to go ahead.

Ways to increase investor confidence included:

- **First time buyer support**, to help boost homeownership and support mixed tenure developments.
- Engaging with the wider industry via events such as UKREiIF to understand the needs of the private sector, and how to **attract investment** to their area.
- Contractors who can specialise in stepping in to **rescue stalled sites** affected by contractors going out of business.
- **Cashflow support** in the early part of a new housing scheme, until the sales of new homes have completed, would help attract investment.

5. Land availability and assembly

The case studies were all constrained urban areas with very real challenges in identifying sufficient land for new homes. Their focus was therefore on brownfield sites, which bring a range of challenges that increase costs and financial uncertainty.

A key challenge was that **landowners were not always willing to sell or develop their land**. Some councils reported sites that were owned by companies who were not professional developers and had unrealistic expectations of the price of the land, or were holding onto it as an investment asset. Councils do have powers to force them to sell via Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) but would normally try to work to bring sites forward without this, as the CPO process was found to be slow and costly with unpredictable outcomes and political consequences.

Many urban brownfield sites have **multiple landowners** within a small area, and **a complex set of legal arrangements** for land ownership and rights.

Councils may assemble land and then sell it for development (possibly because they lack the capacity to deliver it directly) but **once sold they lose control** of what happens next. At the Cavalry Barracks site in Hounslow, the developer went into administration and the council was powerless to accelerate delivery.

Ways forward differed between the case studies, as each enjoyed unique opportunities. For instance, Cambridge had found success from **working in partnership** with local landowners (such as the university). Meanwhile Barking and Dagenham had large-scale industrial land with potential for redevelopment and found a **strategic approach to land assembly** was helpful in de-designating industrial land for residential use while ensuring that businesses remain within the borough.

Several councils had focused on regeneration of existing council estates, on using **land already in public sector ownership** as a catalyst for starting off larger scale development via the use of CPOs. Another called for greater collaboration **between public sector agencies** to identify and assemble adjacent sites.



6. Density and infrastructure delivery

Housing targets have risen, and our case studies were all urban areas with constrained land availability. Building at high density was therefore a key priority for them. Increasing density was identified as part of the solution to ensuring schemes were viable and there were some examples where increasing the population could sustain communities by ensuring the survival of High Street shops, pubs and restaurants.

However, increasing density **puts pressure on existing infrastructure**, and building housing at high density may leave little space for providing new infrastructure onsite. New infrastructure often relies on a rise in population to support it, yet at the start of a large development that **population is not yet in place**. Councils lack control over the timing of some aspects of infrastructure delivery, so that local people become disenchanted with and oppositional to development.

Challenges around providing both density and infrastructure included:

- The **London Plan's** approach to density that sought to curtail rather than promote it.
- The **Building Safety Act** deterred developers from building anything over six storeys.
- **Opposition from existing residents** who are concerned about the pressures a growing population exerted on existing infrastructure, especially access to GPs and traffic congestion, as well as the changing appearance of their area.
- Ensuring there was sufficient **electricity** for the new housing (something that may become more of a challenge once new homes are off-gas).

Sites suitable for high density housing were often **complex brownfield sites**, where there were multiple landowners, remediation costs and heritage challenges, adding further challenges.

Ways identified to overcome the challenges around density and infrastructure included:

- Ensuring that **s106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions** were spent locally on facilities that can be seen, helping build local support for the new housing.
- Providing **upfront funding for essential infrastructure** in situations where the CIL rate was too low to cover what was needed, or the returns from CIL came in too late.
- **Building at height** so as to create additional space at ground level for community facilities and open spaces.
- Specify **minimum height targets** and **reward optimised sites** to move debate more constructively towards possibility.
- Using **CPO powers** to secure the infrastructure required.

7. Construction industry capacity

Most of the case studies were experiencing issues around recruitment and the capacity of the construction sector. The shortages were reported as being nationwide, rather than local, and **delaying both the planning process and the delivery of new housing, as well as reducing the quality of new homes**. Constraints on immigration and Brexit were thought to have contributed to the shortages, alongside some companies having gone out of business or shedding staff because of the financial difficulties the sector has experienced in recent years.

Shortages within the construction sector included:

- **Builders.**
- **Building control inspectors** (who can be directly employed by a council or by a private company).
- A dearth of construction companies with the capacity and resilience to take on and deliver **larger scale work**.
- The increasing scarcity of **SME contractors**, leading to a reliance on a small number of larger companies and, consequently, higher prices for smaller projects.
- The small number of **school leavers** choosing the construction sector due to a lack of knowledge of the range of job roles in the sector.

Ways to tackle the problems included:



- **Partnership working** between councils and developers to leverage in the technical expertise needed.
- **Long-term funding** for social housing and a **stable policy environment** for the housebuilding sector, to give the industry time to grow.
- **Modern methods of construction** including factory-built housing, 3D printing and digital solutions around Proptech and BIM to improve efficiency.
- Working with private sector partners to **train workers**, including skills hubs and apprenticeship schemes.
- **Promotion of the construction sector** to young people and new graduates, as a way to build homes and change lives. Graduate recruitment schemes can help to do this.
- **Adapting procurement** to support local supply chains and giving them forward visibility of the future pipeline.
- Sensible use of **immigration** policy to fill short term needs.

8. Community engagement and trust

The case studies varied, with some describing their populations as “generally pro-growth”, but others experiencing local resistance to change, protest and social media campaigns against new housing. Challenges included:

- A **minority of anti-housing people actively engage** in the planning process of their own accord.
- Local residents can be **suspicious of developers’ motives** and profit-driven intentions, and sometimes also the council’s motivation.
- Regeneration projects need to overcome people’s understandable **emotional attachment to their homes** and need to build trust that the long-term outcome will be better.
- **Long timelines** for development and ‘consultation fatigue’ and disappointment if expectations are not well-managed.

Ways they had found to overcome opposition included:

- **Open communication** and door-knocking to **engage proactively** with people at an early stage in the process.
- Walking residents through the need to meet **housing targets**.
- Involving local residents in the design of new projects, ensuring that regeneration is done “**with, not to**” residents, and tackling likely concerns such as parking proactively.
- **Surveys** of local residents and businesses to understand their needs and highlight benefits.
- Demonstrating the **long-term benefits** of redevelopment.



9. Gaining planning consent and using local plans to support housebuilding

Local authorities have responsibility for making Local Plans, which have the potential to support housing delivery in the right places, but can be challenging to adopt. In addition, local authorities are the agencies which grant planning consent, but council-led housing delivery has to obtain planning permission in the same way as any other new housing.

Challenges in the **plan-making process** included:

- **Engaging busy local people** in the plan, as it is long, complex and can easily become jargon-heavy.
- Changes in the **political make-up** of a local council during and after the plan-making process.
- A **very lengthy process** for adopting a Local Plan, including examinations and public inquiries.
- **High turnover of planners** during the plan-making process.
- **Translating the vision from the Local Plan to reality**, as funding was insufficient to realise aspirations, particularly around infrastructure investment.

This was relatively low-ranked as a challenge because some of the case studies reported that their Local Planning Authority was fully on board and that their Local Plan was **successfully driving growth, bringing sites forward and helping them plan and instil confidence in investors**. Ways to make it work included:

- Using **new technologies** to engage local residents in plan-making.
- Hardwiring the local growth plan into the Local Plan, which increases **investors' confidence**.

Challenges in obtaining planning consent included:

- Long **delays** of up to a year or more from submission to a decision. Causes of delays included: protracted s106 negotiations; a shortage of planners; slow timetables for planning committees.
- **Overly-detailed local planning policies**, requiring long consultations and reports and slowing the process down.
- **High standards for quality or carbon** required in a Local Plan, adding costs and design complexity.

Ways identified to increase efficiency in planning included:

- A separate **strategic planning** committee for larger applications.
- Using **AI** for routine administrative tasks within planning.
- **Locally-led development corporations** with integrated planning powers for better coordination.

Some councils were keen to offer faster consents to high-quality developments, though felt this would be hard to do without increased resources. There was widespread support for the Government's recent reforms to planning which aim to streamline some of the processes, though some concern about the changing role of planning committees.

10. Council capacity

All the case study councils reported that their own capacity and resourcing constraints held them back from delivering housing as fast as they would like. Several reported difficulties in retaining staff and filling vacancies. Several highlighted that an inability to recruit was tied up with their wider financial struggles, fuelled in part by having to accommodate growing numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation. One council that had experienced severe financial difficulties had to shed staff, losing a great deal of skills and expertise.



Planning was highlighted repeatedly as a key area of shortages – and these related both to the number of planners, and also to the skills needed for operating effectively in a constantly-changing policy environment. Shortages were fuelled in part by negative public perceptions about local government. One council commented that: “The perceived ‘bureaucratic

and dry’ nature of local government can deter potential candidates, despite the flexibility and transformative nature of the work.” The private sector offers higher salaries to planners, causing an exodus of the more experienced and skilled planners.

Other shortages within councils included:

- **Legal expertise** for instance to negotiate s106 agreements.
- The **design skills** needed within councils to effectively challenge and interpret architectural proposals.
- **Asset management** skills to maintain stock.
- Skills to understand the complexities of **estate regeneration**.

Possible ways to tackle these issues identified included:

- A more sustainable **funding settlement** for local authorities.
- Finding ways to reduce the costs of **temporary accommodation**.
- **Merging** with another local authority, though there were concerns that the transition process itself could risk paralysing existing delivery efforts.
- Establishing a **dedicated team** focused on regeneration and development, in one case supported by a business case emphasising the future financial benefits of development.
- Greater **financial freedoms** for local government.
- Greater use of **digital technology** to raise the productivity of planners.
- Promotion of the **benefits** of careers in public sector housing delivery, including the variety of roles; relatively rapid career ladders; influence of planning on local places; and social impact.
- **Rewarding** councils who do deliver.

Summary

This report has highlighted the obstacles that slow delivery, but more importantly, it has revealed the determination, ingenuity and commitment of councils across the country to tackle those challenges.

Their experiences point the way forward: a more collaborative, better resourced and more confident housing system. If government, councils and industry pull together, the ambition of 1.5 million new homes can become a reality – creating places that are not only built faster, but built better, and leaving a legacy of stronger, more sustainable communities.



Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the local councillors and officers who took the time to take part in this project.



Cambridge City Council: Ben Binns, Cllr Gerri Bird, Molly Savino

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham / Be First:

Barry Coughlan, Caroline Harper, Matt Seaton, Anna Sinnott, Danny Taylor, Cllr Dominic Twomey

London Borough of Brent: Gerry Ansell, Cllr Teo Benea, Kiran Chauhan, David Glover, Jonathan Kay, John Stiles

London Borough of Camden: David Burns, Zohra Chiheb, Cllr Nasrine Djemai, Cllr Richard Olszewski

London Borough of Ealing: Esra Abd Elrahman, Peter George, Cllr Peter Mason, Alison Mayer, Sam O'Neill, Emma Osmundsen, Sarah Phillpot

London Borough of Hounslow: Cllr Tom Bruce, Peter O'Brien, Cllr Shantanu Rajawat, Pratima Sood

London Borough of Lambeth: Cllr Danny Adilypour, Luke Kelly, Nabeel Khan

London Borough of Sutton: Helen Bailey, Linmora Blair, Spencer Palmer, Cllr Jake Short, Adam Tucker

Slough Borough Council: Pat Hayes, Neetal Rajput

Westminster City Council: James Green, Cllr Adam Hug, John Ndukuba, Setareh Neshati, Nithushan Rajaratnam

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The Housing Forum is the cross-sector membership network for housing and construction committed to a 'Quality Home for All'. For more information, or to discuss membership, contact: info@housingforum.org.uk



1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge is an independent campaign visiting a different council every month, recording video interviews with officers and members to learn what works and what needs to change to get more homes built. www.1-5m.co.uk. For more information, contact toby@1-5m.co.uk



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