



OPINION



Ready, set, innovate

'All life long, the same questions, the same answers'. The words of the playwright Samuel Beckett came to mind reflecting on industry reaction to the prime minister's first Housing Summit.



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In order to secure the step-change in housing perhaps it's time to ask different questions. And now is the perfect time to do so.

Because, whatever is said while sipping tea with the prime minister, company report after company report cautions about the next period for housing.

There are individual companies, housing associations and councils who have the appetite and commitment to do much more. However, there is not a universal or uniform capacity or capability to effect a further step change to another 100,000 homes a year through existing industry practices alone, or a 'one size fits all' approach.

But more can be done. Two examples are in the delivery of manufacturing

and harnessing private finance.

Much has been said about the importance of the skills shortage, of off-site and manufacturing, but there has been inadequate attention on how to get homes delivered on the ground and how to finance them.

All the same core delivery problems apply to any type of building, be it brick or cement, wood or aluminium.

But these challenges become more acute for manufacturing. Like any factory system, it needs scale and certainty. It can deliver variety, but it needs consistency.

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This has led to a policy conclusion that this needs extensive land supply and new towns to make it worthwhile to press the button in the factory. But that has not worked well to date.

Perhaps it will but perhaps there's a better way to get homes delivered fast and on existing sites across the country: Make it a delivery competition.

It's been done in the past where national government underwrote manufacturing costs and local councils found and prepped sites. A modern version could see factories whirring and many more homes on the ground more quickly.

Private finance is also an important part of housing supply. There is a surplus of mortgage money. New ways of financing purchase for the under-35s are important.

This could include direct loans recoverable from tax, a more targeted and graduated Help to Buy product, combined rent and purchase schemes, and housing tax relief.

In addition, there are billions of pounds in the investment markets looking for housing assets, be those housing association or council or market rented stock. Investors want built and proven assets and re-financing provides new sources of funding for additional homes.

The money doesn't all need to come from government.

There is so much potential to do so much more. The theme of the next PM's Housing Summit should be to support innovation and competition.

As Apple would say, it's time to 'Think different'. ■

