

tunein

Modular Housing



**Can modular housing solve
the housing crisis?**

The UK Government has targeted housebuilders to build one million homes by 2020. It is a target that looks increasingly distant despite consensus across the political divide and an acceptance by the industry that strides need to be made

The pace of turnaround for new homes is hotting up. According to Government figures some 217,000 were delivered to the market in 2017 – an increase on the previous year and the highest rate for a decade.

But the Government cannot afford to let that rate drop. If the housebuilding sector is to make real inroads into delivering affordable, quality housing to all UK citizens then that rate has to be the norm rather than the exception it is currently.

Which is easier said than done. Housebuilders are battling against a perfect storm of an uncertain economy, skills shortages and planning hold-ups. The uncertain economy will fix itself in time but the planning hold-ups and skills shortages may take a while longer. But fixed they must be.

The tough target of one million new homes by 2020 will remain little more than wishful thinking unless the sector, the money-men and the general public change their minds on Modern Methods of Construction.

At present the UK housing sector is rife with public misconception. It is proving difficult for MMC to shake off the association with post-war concrete prefabs and the cold, damp low-rise homes they provided.



Modern methods of construction

MMC – be it modular building, steel or METHODS timber frame, structural insulated panels, pod construction – offers owners and occupiers high-quality, high-specification homes that can be built quickly, are engineered and manufactured exactly, are cheaper to live in and are better for the environment.

“We need to change the mindset people have over prefabrication. I prefer to call them ‘Precision Manufactured Homes’ because that is exactly what they are,” says David Nash, Senior Associate at Concert.



TUNE IN_Can modular housing solve the housing crisis

Nash argues that the use of MMC doesn't automatically mean a decrease in the quality of the design, that MMC is just as flexible as traditional building techniques and that home owners and occupiers are becoming more accepting of the concept.

Certainly quality design isn't a problem. Architects are just as capable of coming up with an award-winning housing scheme using MMC as they are traditional bricks and mortar.

The quality of the architecture doesn't change, just the method of delivery, explains Adam Williams, associate at Concert. “New home owners, certainly in more urban areas, are unlikely to be interested in the method of construction. Their drivers will be based around technology in the home, wi-fi speeds, proximity of transport links, gyms, restaurants and pubs, will they wonder about how their bathroom wall was put together? The occupants just want a good, dry, well-built home,” he says.





/ MMC / Developers / Planning

Despite everything, recent years have witnessed MMC get something of a foothold in the UK housebuilding sector, certainly in our city centres where developers have cottoned on to the benefit. Most high-rise residential projects inside London and our larger provincial centres have some element of MMC and its use is distributed across the different housing sectors. From what was once a market solely for hotels or student accommodation we now see PRS schemes, social housing, affordable and private homes all using MMC.

It is one thing speeding up the method of housing delivery but unless the process of making sites available to development is simplified then new housing targets are likely to be missed.

Developers berate the planning pipeline for being too long-winded and taking too long, leaving them little choice but to take on more land than they might want or need while as they wait for results from planning applications. The public accuses those developers of land-banking and artificially inflating prices. It makes no commercial sense for developers to deliberately hold on to huge sections of land but there is an inevitability that that will happen if every scheme gets bogged down in the planning process.

It can take years for an application to clear all the planning hurdles with no guarantee that developers will ever see a return on their investment. And while robust planning rules are in place for a reason, there is some frustration in the industry that plans can be rejected – sometimes against the professional advice of an authority’s own planning officers.



Green space development

There is also a crushing need for a review of the preserved green spaces including London's Green Belt that encircles most UK cities and has remained stubbornly sacrosanct as far as planning applications go since its post-war introduction. While no-one wants to decry the importance of green belt land in controlling urbanisation, a review is necessary, argues Adam Williams.

"The green belt restricts the supply of land. We need to be grown up about it and recognise that there are parcels of 'green belt' land that can be developed without affecting its overall integrity," Chris Warwick Senior Associate says.



Unlocking some brownfield sites within the green belt area has the potential to deliver thousands of new homes into areas of suburban and rural England where they are badly needed but there are also huge numbers of brownfield sites in our towns and cities that are ripe for development. Unfortunately, these tend to be smaller, more awkward sites that are of no real interest to the larger housebuilders and often face a contamination legacy that makes them costly to develop and therefore unattractive to smaller firms. Here is where local authorities, housing associations and social housing providers can step in.

By relaxing some social rent housing requirements, increasing the number of shared ownership properties in a development or somehow stalling the rise of the land's value, the figures could be made more attractive - encouraging development.

“There is lots of land available that has the potential for housing development but land values are continuing to rise which then puts pressure on the financial bottom line for developers. Perhaps there should be some level of legislative control over that land to prevent its value soaring and ensuring it remains attractive for further development, perhaps by the smaller firms the Government wants to encourage,” says Chris Warwick.



The green belt restricts the supply of land. We need to be grown up about it and recognise that there are parcels of ‘green belt’ land that can be developed without affecting its overall integrity



Right sized homes



Developers complain that larger apartments on a scheme are always the last to be taken so maybe they should think a little out of the box and embrace the circle.

Even when planning permission is granted and development underway there is still the argument that current housing developments do not offer the full spectrum of property the market requires.

First-time buyers seem to be taken care of as do those looking for larger family homes - but there is precious little in-between.



Incorporating an element of senior living into schemes could help free up larger family houses lived in by 'empty-nesters' and favoured by those with a growing brood.

“
We need to start thinking about the
housing market being a one-way ladder
”

“We should think the market as more of a circle where first time buyers move into small one or two-bedrooms, then on into their second homes with a view to moving onto a large family home in which to bring up the kids.

Then as we move into senior life and the children leave home there is a requirement for smaller homes again for occupation by seniors.

There needs to be some joined up thinking between planning authorities and developers about researching exactly what type of homes are required.

That research can then influence the style and type of house that we deliver,” says Chris Patrick.



Right sized homes

FAST

COST EFFECTIVE

CONSTRUCTION

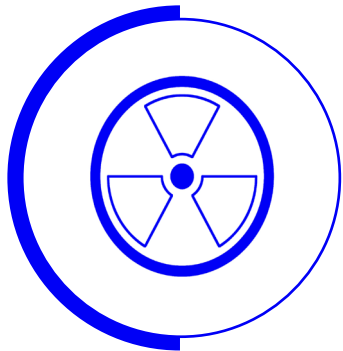
Modern methods of construction can certainly play their part in providing the country with the rich, varied, well-designed housing stock of the future it deserves, when combined with an unambiguous and streamlined process and targeted delivery of demanded homes and tenure most needed.

The potential for MMC with its faster, cost-effective construction to offer greater predictability and time savings on delivery at a reduced risk for developers, particularly smaller firms with potentially greater exposure, sits well for exponents of these methods and for those who have a role to play in delivering the one million homes the country needs and helping to solve the housing crisis.

But the sector is a complex beast. There are plenty of influencing factors that can affect those housing numbers. A planning rethink and the greater uptake of MMC facing into a demand home delivery might help.

Summary to overcome the housing crisis

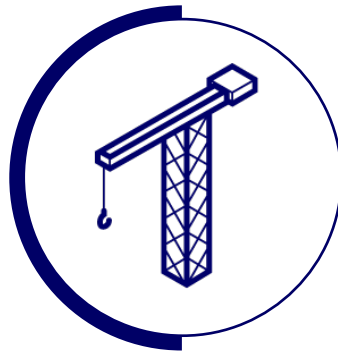
Hot topics



CONTAMINATION



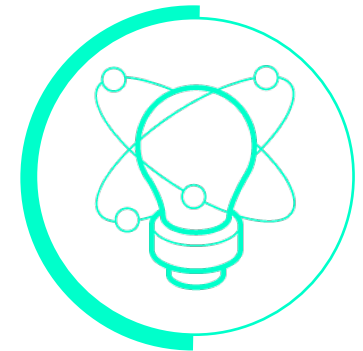
SENIOR LIVING



MMC



PLANNING



**TECHNOLOGY &
SKILLS SHORTAGE**

CONTAMINATION

Look at all delivery options available to develop contaminated and brownfield land sites. Make use of local authority or social housing delivery mechanisms to ensure that small, contaminated pockets of developable land within urban centres are used to help sate demand for new homes where they are needed most. Alternatively plots that are currently not financially viable for development through scale or contamination could be incentivised and made economically viable by reflecting this in Sectional Agreement obligations, for example recognising the consequential improvement in the locality by development and moderating affordable housing requirements accordingly.

SENIOR LIVING

Relieve pressure on the middle and higher rungs of the housing ladder by providing smaller, high quality right sized 'senior living' homes for those currently at the top. Encouraging developers to look at the viability and delivery of quality schemes which meet resident accommodation requirements, provide easy access to a range of facilities and make senior living aspirational, the industry should challenge the public's perception of senior living homes and provide some welcome flexibility and movement in the market.

MMC

Encourage the use of Modern Methods of Construction across all housing developments by building well designed, quality homes that provide true communities and that are delivered quickly and efficiently in areas of demand. Doing so will change public perception and prove that MMC can help in all stages of development and throughout the supply chain. MMC are well represented on higher density urban projects, the challenge is to push that popularity to the fore so that MMC becomes the immediate focus for all architects, designers and developers, regardless of scheme location, if current UK housing targets are to be met and forward house building strategies to be realised.

PLANNING

Carry out an open and robust review of current planning legislation, including that of the green belt and preserved green spaces, to unlock the development potential of ex-industrial and brownfield sites within. Engage more with the public, pointing out the benefits a new development could bring, helping develop a positive attitude to projects. Speed the planning process by encouraging authorities to follow the advice of their planning officers, reducing any appetite to 'land bank', releasing sites that have been locked in the planning process and making them available for immediate development.

TECHNOLOGY AND SKILLS SHORTAGE

The desperate shortage of skilled trades, engineers and operators has and will continue to blight the construction sector. Apprenticeships and greater access to technical courses will help but there is an ever pressing need to look at how best to utilise the industry's existing skilled resource and create employment opportunities for those currently outside the industry. Embracing new methods of working and new technologies - perhaps from unrelated industries - throughout the supply chain, will enable developers and manufacturers to focus skills to help deliver housing targets. BIM needs to be fully accepted across the supply chain, particularly in social housing, PRS and build-to-rent schemes to integrate with MMC solutions and form a coordinated supply chain able to respond to high demand.

Contributor

Paul Thompson

Journalist

Paul Thompson is a freelance journalist who specialises in technical features on construction, property development, architecture, housing and infrastructure.

He is a graduate civil engineer with several years' post-graduate experience working for consultants, local authorities and contractors before turning his hand to journalism at the start of the new millennium.

He was technical features writer and materials editor at Construction News for eight years before leaving London and moving to Bristol in 2008.

Since then he has worked for many titles including New Civil Engineer, Ground Engineering, Construction News, Contract Journal, Building as well as local newspapers and technical websites.

tunein

Thank You

Union House
182-194 Union Street
London SE1 0LH

t: +44 (0)20 7799 1100
f: +44 (0)20 7799 1101

london@weareconcert.com

London & Manchester



[@weareconcert](https://www.instagram.com/weareconcert)

