

Housing and residential journalist of the year – Gavriel Hollander

Gavriel Hollander's work at *Inside Housing* has made a vital contribution to the ongoing success of the magazine.

The three pieces submitted as part of Gavriel's entry show the range of form and subject matter that he can handle. They also demonstrate his ability to spot a story, an understanding of how to bring it to life, and his flair for writing engaging copy.

Gavriel has a writing style that is compassionate, witty and accessible. He can help the casual reader understand complex subjects, while providing genuine insight for specialists.

The submitted features focus on three very different aspects of the housing market but show a clear understanding of *Inside Housing's* audience.

His report on Finland and how the country has used the Housing First model to tackle a rough sleeping epidemic was original in its conception and thorough in its execution. Elegantly written, it was the first in-depth examination of precisely how the country almost eradicated what had been a serious social problem within a generation. As such, it resonated with our readership and became 2016's most read feature. It also questioned whether the UK has the right approach to homelessness, tying it in with *Inside Housing's* Cathy at 50 homelessness campaign.

Gavriel's investigation into the leasing of 147 homes in Canterbury to families from Redbridge in east London shone a light on an often misunderstood by-product of the housing crisis. Much of the reporting of the story from the mainstream press – including the BBC - had focused on the uprooting of families from their London homes. But Gavriel travelled to the site to discover this was not always the case. Knocking on doors, speaking to residents and local politicians, he found a much more nuanced reality.

Inside Housing prides itself on finding relevant and original housing angles to stories on the national agenda. In the context of the ongoing battle over the future of the steelworks in Redcar, Gavriel's report on the regeneration of Consett in County Durham was the perfect example of this. Rich in colour, it told the story of how the right type of housing can transform a community, while also showing that not everyone benefits from this kind of change.

How Finland fixed homelessness

50 Cathy at 50
 Housing First turned Finland from a country with a severe homelessness problem into one with almost no rough sleepers. Gavriel Hollander finds out how

Matias Toivonen has little doubt what would have happened to him if he had not been given help to live in his own home two-and-a-half years ago. “I thought I’d be dead by now.”

The 64-year-old Helsinki resident’s life has undergone the kind of changes made possible by Finland’s revolutionary approach to what was once a major homelessness problem.

Targeting the vulnerable

Housing First, a system first adopted in pockets of the United States in the 1980s (see box: Housing First), is based on a belief that vulnerable homeless people should initially be given a place to live and only then provided with the support services that are more commonly thought of as the first step to rehabilitation.

Mr Toivonen’s story is not an altogether unusual one. Having left his parents’ home in rural Vihti, around 30 miles to the north-west of

Helsinki, (“I don’t like the countryside,” he tells me) to return to the capital in the 1990s, he spent his time between hostels, temporary accommodation and in an all-night café run by the No Fixed Abode charity. He had health problems, drank heavily and was occasionally aggressive. Eventually, he went lame and his leg was close to being amputated.

Between 2007 and 2013 he lived in a supported housing unit with around 50 other people before the Y-Foundation, a provider of rental accommodation that specialises in housing the homeless, helped him find his own flat. Joonas Pöhö, a housing advisor with the Y-Foundation, explains that the organisation chose to take a chance on Mr Toivonen when it offered him a flat. “We knew he needed lots of support but we decided it was worth trying because he himself wanted to go,” he says.

This type of decision is at the heart of Housing First: the decision to target the most vulnerable and

potentially most needy homeless people, and to set them up with a home at the start of the process of assimilating them back into society. It certainly appears to have had a dramatic impact, with rough sleeping all but eradicated from a high of 4,700 in the 1980s. This is partly why our Cathy at 50 campaign is calling for the UK to look at adopting Housing First here.

I’m in Finland to discover how and why the policy works, what difference it has made and how it could be replicated in the UK.

The story of Housing First in Finland dates back to the 1980s, when the Y-Foundation was founded. It was then that the country’s government decided to tackle a homelessness problem that had been growing exponentially throughout the post-War years. In 1987, there were 18,000 homeless people in Finland, out of a population still below five million. That number was reduced to around 12,000 by the early 1990s but ►

those being helped were not the most needy: the long-term homeless.

“Policy used to be much more short-sighted,” recalls Juha Kaakinen, chief executive of Y-Foundation. “Before, when we were talking about homelessness it wasn’t about building more affordable social housing or targeted measures for homeless people; it was very much the thinking that these people needed support first and then they could [get everything else].”

In 2008, the government launched the national programme for the reduction of long-term homelessness, known as Paavo. The initiative was led by the so-called ‘Four Wise Men’ (see box: The Paavo scheme), with Mr Kaakinen acting as programme co-ordinator.

Paavo’s aims and methods were radical. The programme specifically targeted the long-term homelessness problem, with an aim to halve numbers by 2011 and end it entirely by 2015, doing so by, among other

“Taking care of these people is a good investment.”

things, converting homeless shelters in Finland’s biggest cities into rental housing. The government also set targets for the number of new flats to be built to aid the programme in each of the 10 cities in which the policy was implemented.

While the most difficult cases, such as people with severe mental health problems, tend to be placed in supported housing units, albeit ones where they are rent-paying tenants, the principle is aimed at housing those who are able to get by with less support in ‘scattered’ housing, pepper-potted around communities. Inevitably that can cause friction for existing residents, but there seems to be a willingness here to put society before the individual.

“Most Finns obey the law,” one young Y-Foundation employee tells me when I comment how - in contrast to London - everyone in Helsinki seems to wait for a green light to cross the road. Kimmo Tiilikainen, the minister for environment and housing, accepts that there are “practical problems” with the Housing First approach, but thinks the battle for hearts and minds has been more or less won.

“If neighbours can see that these people can manage their lives and make improvements, and they can see it really helps, then it’s acceptable to people,” he says. “We have a political consensus that homelessness is not right.”

That consensus was hard won, however. Jan Vapaavuori, Mr Tii-



Main: Matti Kaijansinkko from the Helsinki City Planning Department shows *Inside Housing* the 9,000-home new development on Jätkäsaari
Left: Matias Toivonen
Inset above: Juha Kaakinen

likainen’s predecessor, who implemented Paavo in the first place, admits to using some “political pressure” on at least two of the municipalities involved. But for the former minister, other factors were more important when it came to being allowed to develop innovative solutions to a long-standing problem.

“There is a strong consensus [behind the programme],” he argues. “The political argument is a combination. It’s not only good social policy; it has a big safety and security angle, as the more homeless people there are on the streets, the more unsafe the

city is. And there’s an economic argument, too: taking care of these people is a good investment.”

Local attitude

Mr Kaakinen estimates that each homeless person that is taken off the streets saves social and other services around €15,000 (£13,000) a year. Yet none of this could be done without funding and investment.

“All the flats we build for this programme are subsidised,” says Mr Vapaavuori, candidly adding: “I don’t think we could do it in a more market-driven system.”

So where does the money come from? A crucial part of the financial jigsaw is funding from Finland’s Slot Machine Association, which has supplied €50m to help purchase scattered housing developments. Furthermore, all affordable social housing in Finland is backed partly by government grant and partly by loans, capped at 1.7%, issued by the state-owned but independent Housing Finance and Development Centre. The fund is responsible for €6.5bn of loans.

“Without this [funding] system, we would not have succeeded in the

Housing First		
Housing First was developed as a new way to approach homelessness in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. Schemes have followed in cities including New York, Chicago, Denver and San Francisco. In 2010 it was adopted as 'best practice' by the US Interagency Council on Homelessness.	Although the approaches across the different schemes vary, they retain some key features, including the concept of offering permanent housing as quickly as possible to anyone finding themselves homeless. The schemes are based on the principle that housing	is a basic human right. Housing First has also been adopted in parts of Australia, Canada, France and Japan. Although there have been small-scale trials in the UK, it has yet to gain traction. A 2008 report from Shelter cited a lack of supply as a key reason for this.

The Paavo scheme
The Paavo scheme in Finland was developed by the so-called ‘Four Wise Men’: Paavo Voutilainen, director of social welfare for the city of Helsinki; Hannu Puttonen, the former chief executive of the Y-Foundation; Dr Ilkka Taipale, one of the Y-Foundation founders and a former politician; and Eero Huovinen, bishop of Helsinki. The Y-Foundation’s current chief executive, Juha Kaakinen, was the programme coordinator.

homelessness programme,” states Peter Fredriksson, a senior advisor at the Ministry of the Environment and one of the key architects behind Paavo. “The revolution of the services wouldn’t have been possible without this money. It channels state money to municipalities; they did not need to put their own money in at all.”

In a way, this is the crux of why a Housing First-based system was both given the go ahead in the first place and has since proved a success. It is operating within a wider housing system that is designed to maintain mixed communities, and in which subsidies are still seen as playing a crucial role. In Helsinki, the situation is helped by the fact that the city owns more than 70% of the land. Jätkäsaari is a major development on a wind-swept peninsula of reclaimed land jutting out into the Baltic Sea from the south-west of the city. There, around 9,000 homes are being built in numerous phases, the last due to complete in 2025.

Although there are unlikely to be any ‘scattered’ housing units for the homeless here, the tenure mix speaks loudly to the local attitude to development. There is a roughly even split of market sale, private

rent and social homes.

“Wherever we build we are trying to make a good social mix,” says Matti Kaijansinkko from the City Planning Department. “As long as the city is the landowner, that is working quite well.”

Although funding for development comes from central government, aided by the Slot Machine windfall, councils are called on to fund some of the services that are necessary to make Housing First work for the more vulnerable long-term homeless.

On the site of Finland’s first psychiatric hospital, in Lapinlahti in the west of Helsinki, the Alvi Association operates a supported housing unit for 23 residents with severe mental health problems. A team of 11 work around the clock on the site, costing the city €140 per resident per day. Yet here too, the Housing First principle of autonomy and self-reliance rules.

Residents plan their activities, including a shopping and cooking rota. They all pay rent for their apartments and have normal rental contracts that they must honour.

“These are their homes,” explains Juha Järvinen, director of the association. “We are working in their homes, they are not living in our workplace.

When you leave space for [them] to decide what kind of life they want and how to get it, they are taking control. Our role is just to make them understand the possibilities.”

Housing First has brought Finland’s homeless population down to less than 7,000. The majority of those still homeless - around 80% according to Mr Kaakinen - are staying with friends or relatives.

“It’s a stunning result,” says Matt Downie, director of policy and external affairs at Crisis. “They used to have a bigger homelessness problem than we have.” Could the UK follow their lead? Mr Downie is sceptical. “We’ve got a system that is the exact opposite of Housing First. In Finland they made a strategic choice [to do this]; that allowed them to change everything.”

The stark numbers are impressive, but it’s in the individual stories that the success of Finland’s model can be seen. Matias Toivonen never dreamt he would have his own apartment, let alone be planning trips abroad, as he is now. His years on the street have left their mark, in hooded eyes and missing teeth. But he laughs as he speaks. “I did not imagine my life would be this good,” he says. ■

Redbridge Council has leased 147 homes in an old army barracks in Canterbury - more than 60 miles away - to help rehouse people on its waiting list. But neither council is overjoyed about the situation. *Gavriel Hollander* investigates the strains pitching local authorities into competition with each other to house their homeless residents

A 21ST CENTURY *Canterbury* TALE



*Howe Barracks,
August 2016*

The military history of Howe Barracks in Canterbury remains only in the names of the streets that snake through the neat, prim family estate: Ypres Court; Sevastopol Place; Talavera Road.

Such evocative, exotic names - and the fury and chaos of the battles they commemorate - are a far cry from the calm, baking hot late summer's day on which *Inside Housing* visited the estate. Yet there is a battle of another sort brewing, albeit more quietly, in this seemingly peaceful corner of England's Garden. And it's a battle that could be reproduced across the country.

"I just wanted somewhere I could bring my kids up properly."

Earlier in the summer, Howe Barracks hit the headlines when it emerged that Redbridge Council in east London, some 65 miles away, had leased 147 properties from Annington Homes to house families who had been languishing on its waiting list, some for over a decade.

Canterbury City Council, which also bid for the homes, was not happy, claiming they would be better allocated to people on its own housing list.

Mixed reactions

In the week before the EU referendum, a far right group calling itself the South East Alliance staged a small protest outside the former barracks. Meanwhile, a Facebook group was set up to promote a petition calling on the government to stop Redbridge's 'takeover' of the homes. The petition ►

has garnered 3,000 signatures, while the Facebook group also attracted the kind of Islamophobic comments that have become almost de rigueur on social media.

The lazy narrative here is familiar: a London borough has moved jobless residents it can’t house itself out of town, passing on the problem to someone else; the newcomers are unhappy at being uprooted and the natives are restless. But does that story match the reality of what’s going on at the former Ministry of Defence (MoD) base? And are there advantages to doing this on a larger scale than ever before?

In Somme Court, mother of four Gifty Kwaku is tidying her home of just two weeks with evident pride.

“They did not force anyone to move here,” says the 39-year-old, when asked if she felt she had a choice about her new life. “It wasn’t hard for me as I just wanted somewhere I could bring my kids up properly.”

“It was all drugs and prostitutes. I was desperate to get out.”

Ms Kwaku says the family has been in temporary accommodation for 11 years, despite both her and husband Kojo being in work.

Having been shunted around between B&Bs and private rented accommodation in both Redbridge and neighbouring Newham, the family had sought a move out of London for a while and had even begun looking in other parts of Kent. But her zero-hours contract as a carer and Kojo’s largely commission-based job as an IT consultant meant private landlords repeatedly turned them down, as their rent was reliant on housing benefit.

“We don’t depend on the government for charity but we don’t earn enough to rent without the council,” she explains, although she says both are already looking for work in their new home.

With a ready smile and an engaging manner, it’s perhaps unsurprising that Ms Kwaku says she has felt welcome in Canterbury: “I like the town and the people,” she says. “I feel at home here.” But not everyone shares that experience.

Barbara Motsisi and her nine-year-old daughter, Christina, were among the first new residents at Howe Barracks and had been living in their two-bed house for eight weeks when *Inside Housing* visited. She says she has been met with a mixed response.

“I was with my daughter and someone said to us: ‘why don’t you go back to your own country?’,” recalls Ms Motsisi, who shrugs off the incident. “It doesn’t bother me,



When two worlds collide		
There are 45 families in temporary housing in Canterbury, compared to around 2,500 in Redbridge. The London council has 4,500 freehold properties that have not been sold under the Right to Buy, an	8,000-strong housing register and some 2,000 households in temporary accommodation. Canterbury plans to build 16,000 homes by 2031. Part of this pipeline is on Howe Barracks next door to the new residents	from Redbridge. There, Taylor Wimpey has bought land from the MoD for 500 homes, 30% of which will be affordable and offered to the council’s “preferred registered provider”, says a spokesperson.

though. What can you do?”

Gesturing across the wide sunlit common that lies opposite the estate, she makes a favourable comparison with the flats in Chatham where she had previously been housed, 30 miles from Redbridge, and where she claims she was repeatedly robbed.

“It was all drugs and prostitutes there,” she says. “I was desperate [to get out].”

She feels she has to “start again” after leaving friends and family behind in London but adds: “We just wanted to move somewhere better for our children; some things you

have to give up.”

Ms Motsisi’s friend Eliza Khan, who is also walking with her daughter on the common, is happy with her surroundings but senses Canterbury’s newest residents are not entirely welcome.

“I think there is a bit of racism here,” she says. “One of the girls I know won’t go out without someone else with her.”

Prioritisation problems

The far right protest, however, seems out of step with the attitude of most locals. Canterbury might be just a stone’s throw from Thanet, where UKIP has control of its only council in the country, but it has a far more cosmopolitan feel than some other nearby towns. In the city centre, just a 20-minute stroll from Howe Bar-

racks, market stalls accept euros while a busker plays Edith Piaf’s *La Vie en Rose* on an accordion.

The problem may not be who the new residents of Canterbury are so much as who they are not. With a £30m budget for temporary accommodation alone in 2016/17, Redbridge’s housing problem is more acute than Canterbury’s, but the city still has a waiting list. There are currently 2,700 households on the list compared to 8,000 in Redbridge (see box).

“If you’ve got local people who need housing then that should be the priority,” says Laura Burchell, who moved from London to buy her house on the estate with her partner two years ago.

Ms Burchell, who works as a speech therapist in the local area,

Above: Gifty Kwaku, who “feels at home” in Canterbury
Right: looking into the rest of the barracks, where the Taylor Wimpey homes will be built



admits that it is “not as integrated or multicultural as London”, but does not believe intolerance is behind some of the negative reaction to the mass migration from the capital.

“Within half a mile you have people in temporary accommodation so you can see how it feels like a kick in the teeth [to them].”

Attempts to reconcile

Canterbury City Council was initially not shy about expressing its unhappiness over Annington’s decision to lease the homes to Redbridge following a closed bidding process, during which the council was unaware that it was up against a London borough. Council leader Simon Cook told local press that it would lobby for legislation to prevent it happening again.

Redbridge Council’s executive member for housing Farah Hussain believes it was unhelpful for Canterbury to be so vocal in its opposition, but nearly four months later, Mr Cook tells *Inside Housing* that he “does not accept in the slightest” any suggestion that the council’s actions have made it more difficult to integrate the new residents.

“Making it public was the right thing to do,” insists Mr Cook. “There will always be people who won’t welcome outsiders, but we could not hide this under a bushel.”

Integration is now his concern, and he says that “at officer level” the two councils are working well together.

“I would not wish for this to become a ghetto community of people from Redbridge; I would rather they became part of the wider community of Canterbury.”

Back in Redbridge, however, Ms Hussain says the idea of building a community is what the plan is actually all about.

“I don’t think people do understand [what we’re doing],” she tells

Inside Housing. “Councils have been doing this for years. The only difference is that this was potentially 200 homes all in one block. To me, that is preferable.”

Last year, *Inside Housing* research found that between July 2013 and July 2014, London boroughs placed 1,388 households into accommodation outside the capital. But this is thought to be the largest single relocation.

Ms Hussain admits there has been a “mixture” of responses but says she has heard that some people have been going to their local MPs “demanding to be sent to Canterbury”.

Besides the benefit of families being able to build a community alongside each other, the move has allowed Redbridge to put in place a full-time housing officer of its own.

While Redbridge has no plans to do what it’s done in Canterbury a second time, Ms Hussain says it has “not ruled it out”. And while there is no imminent sign of any legislation to curb councils’ ability to lease properties for its residents elsewhere in the country, there’s every chance the issues fermenting at Howe Barracks could be repeated.

“Rents have gone through the roof in London and councils can’t afford it,” says Ms Hussain. “If the government wants to introduce legislation to stop councils placing people in other districts then they have to provide the money to house them locally.”

Now some of the dust has settled, Ms Hussain and Mr Cook agree that the councils are working in tandem to make the best of the situation. But even if some, such as Gifty Kwaku, are happy in their new home, no one sees it as a solution to the country’s housing needs.

As Ms Hussain says: “We’ve made this decision but it’s not a choice we wanted to make.” ■

A TOWN TRANSFORMED

Following the closure of Consett's steelworks, a housing-led regeneration changed the face of the town. *Gavriel Hollander* finds out if the model can be replicated

On 12 September 1980, molten iron ore oozed out of the giant blast furnaces of the Consett Iron Company for the very last time. As it cooled, the industry that had helped build the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Blackpool Tower - and had created this remote Durham town nearly a century-and-a-half previously - breathed its last.

What followed were two decades of managed decline, depressingly familiar to industrial towns across the North East, as well as those in the coal fields of Derbyshire and Wales. Around 3,500 people were laid off overnight, with at least twice as many

total jobs lost in the community.

That decline has now largely been arrested and, in part, it's thanks to a far-sighted council and a housing-led regeneration project set in train a generation ago.

But Consett's story is more than just a history lesson; it has practical implications for another North East community.

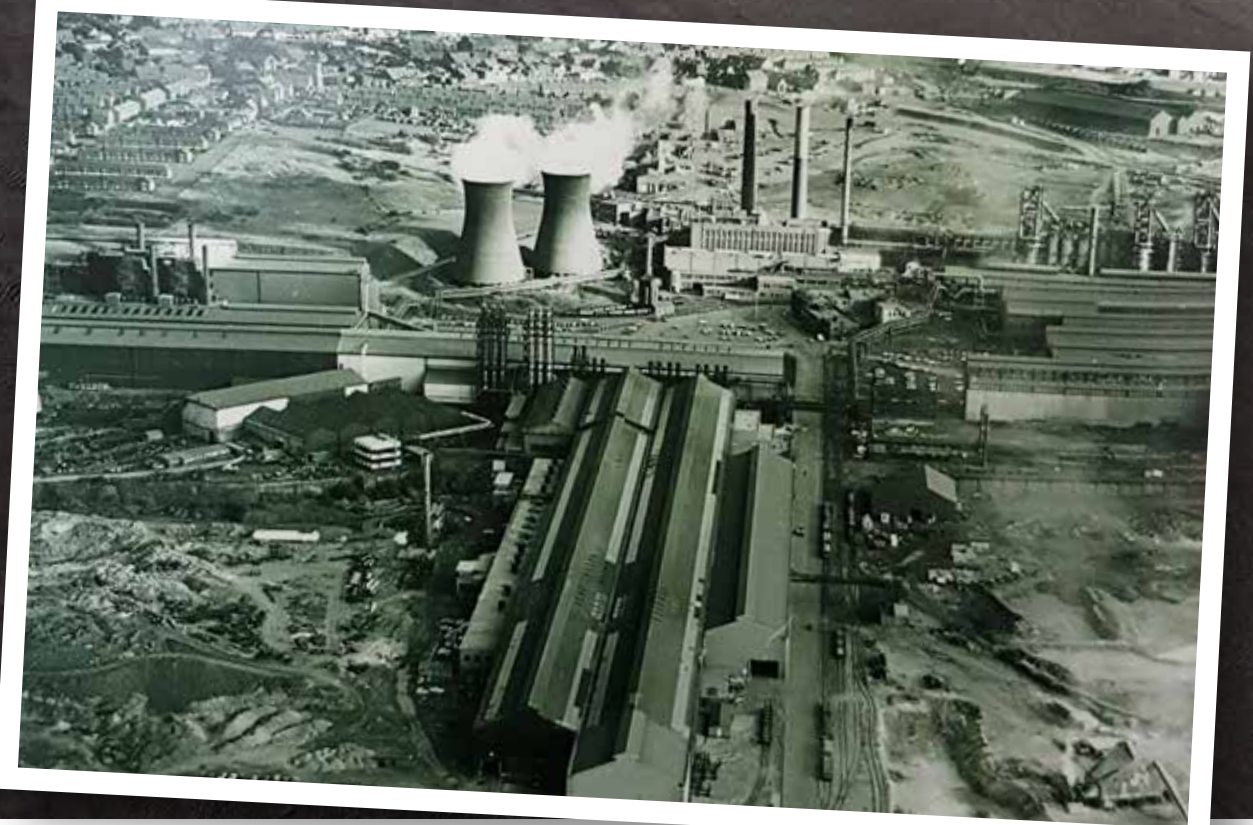
End of an era

It is just over a year since the coke ovens at Redcar's steelworks - 50 miles to the south-east of Consett - went out for the last time. So what lessons could that community learn from its near neighbour? And how

vital could housing be when it comes to turning its fortunes around?

Inside Housing visits Consett as the world is waking up to the news that Donald Trump is to be the next US president. Mr Trump's unlikely triumph came on the back of promises he has made to restore jobs and prosperity to the former industrial heartland of the Midwestern states. The snow-flecked Durham hills may seem a million miles away from America's so-called rust belt, but there are parallels.

"Politicians will be politicians and say they can get businesses in, but it's only five or 10 years later that they realise the reality that it will never ►



happen.” These are the words of Mike Clark, land director at – and one of the driving forces behind – the Genesis Project, a regeneration scheme that has changed the face of Consett.

Mr Clark, who was chief housing officer (and later chief executive) of the now-defunct Derwentside District Council when the Genesis Project was in its infancy, remembers the impact of the closure.

“It was the death of the town,” he recalls matter-of-factly. “People really believed that. We lost 10,000 people very quickly. We were left with the older people, or people in ill health. It took us until around 2004/05 to start turning it around.”

He characterises the change of approach as moving “from regeneration through industry to regeneration through housing”.

The project was the community’s answer to the question of how to attract people back to the area and, through that, to breathe life back into the economy. Mr Clark is scathing of the initial response to the closure from some local politicians.

“They did not have a plan B or a plan C. They said they would replace [the steelworks] with another industry that would employ thousands of people. But to expect to attract an employer that will employ 3,000 people is pretty unrealistic. That realisation came to Consett and the council only years after the steelworks closed. It was patently obvious that we were failing to regenerate on the back of industrial development; something had to change.”

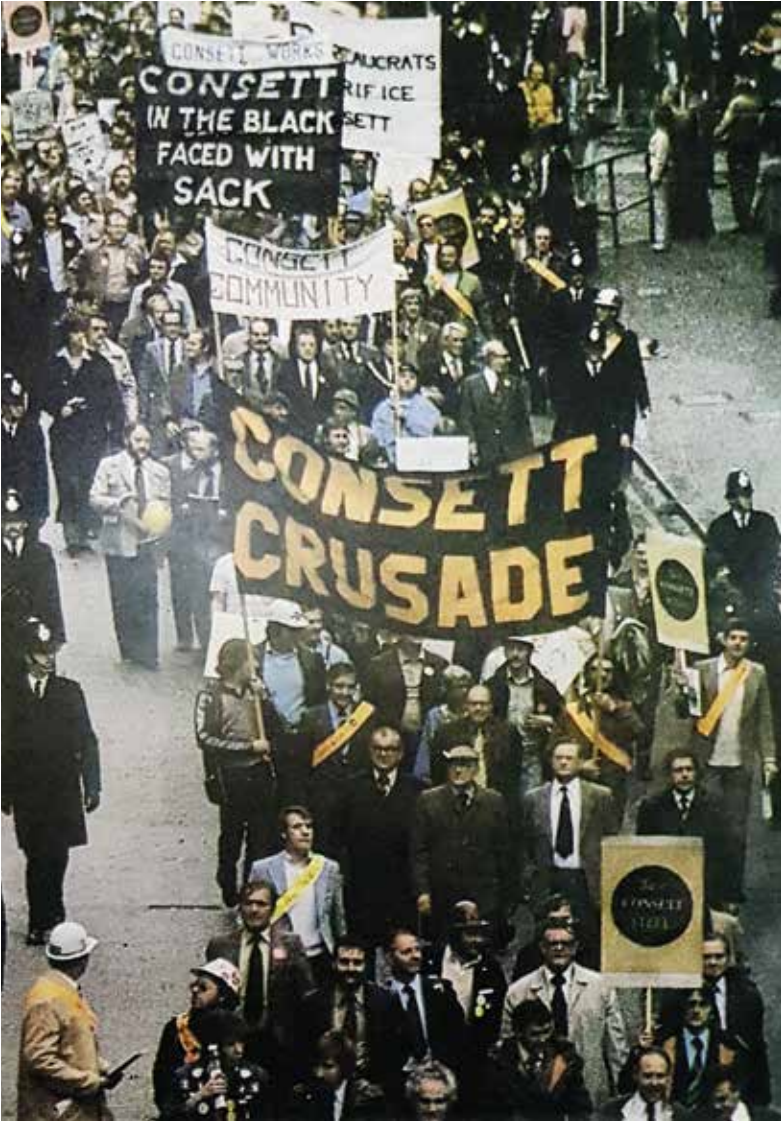
Now, across the 700-acre site that was once home to the hulking machinery of Victorian industrialisation, there are stretches of green fields studded with low-level housing sites at various stages of completion.

Symbolically, the houses that make up the Genesis Project sit directly on top of the steelworks site, with much of the hardware buried underneath what is now lush grassland. Where once the furnaces pumped out so much red dust that locals wouldn’t hang their washing outside on certain days, now the town is attracting 60,000 cyclists a year on the coast-to-coast route.

The housing itself would also be unrecognisable to generations of steel workers and their families. While the high-density Victorian terraces still prevail on one side of town, the steelworks itself is home to row upon row of detached, well-spaced houses, the majority of which are built or being built for private sale.

Eventually, there will be more than 2,000 homes here delivered by the Project Genesis Trust – a charitable coalition of the council and local developers Dysart Developments.

Initially, the land was offered to volume house builders, with Persim-



Above left: Consett steel workers march on Westminster, London
Above right: new housing on the steelworks site
Below: the last molten iron from the blast furnaces tapped at Consett on 12 September 1980

mon the first to take up the opportunity in 2003. While other house builders – including Barratt – have followed suit, much of the current wave of development is being undertaken by Amethyst Homes, a subsidiary of Dysart.

Amethyst has outline permission for 480 homes on the Genesis Project site, with 89 completed or near to completion in the first phase. Of those, 30 are allocated to the Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes Association (DAMHA), but 45 of the remaining 59 have already been sold.



Mr Clark is proud of the achievements of the trust in making Consett a desirable place to live, but it hasn’t been easy. “I spent months and months of my life convincing house builders that there was a market here. We were never going to maximise the land value, but all of these people will pay council tax and spend money locally.”

The Genesis Project itself is focused entirely on the disused steelworks site, but the trust operates a subsidiary that has redeveloped a further 1,000 homes in the town centre.

Depopulation meant the town did not have a need for more housing, but the existing stock was not right for the community that those behind the Genesis Project hoped would emerge.

It is a ‘build it and they will come’ mentality. And to some extent, it has worked. Several large employers have set up shop in Consett, including food manufacturer Greencore, which employs several hundred people at its factory. In an out-of-town retail park there is one of the country’s largest Tesco supermarkets, a Costa, a Starbucks and a McDonald’s. In total, the trust has brought in some £185m of private sector investment, with virtually no public funding.

“For me, it’s all about [attracting] people,” says Alex Watson, leader of the council throughout the 1990s and a former steelworker himself. “You need to be able to give them a home and make sure the infrastructure is right.”

The ‘R’ word

Both he and Mr Clark admit that there has been intermittent opposition to such a major change in the community. “There’s always suspicion when you go into partnership with the private sector,” accepts Mr Watson.

But he believes that those battles need to be won, both in Consett and now in Redcar: “They have to embrace the SMEs; they have to find out what their needs are.”

However, early signs are that Redcar might not take as long to turn around its fortunes as Consett did. With a devolution deal in place for the Tees Valley and an elected mayor on its way soon, the area has more power to dictate solutions than Consett had 35 years previously.

A land commission has already been established and there are discussions underway about what to do with what is now unused land on the steelworks site.

“It will not necessarily be housing-led but housing will be a part of it,” says Iain Sim, chief executive of Coast & Country Housing, which owns and manages 10,000 homes in Redcar and Cleveland.

“The combined authority is trying

“It was the death of the town. People really believed that.”

to plan the future use of that land. One of the asks in terms of housing is to look at [getting] flexibility within the national programme.”

That flexibility, for Redcar, would allow it to build the type of housing that is needed to regenerate the area. As in Consett, that does not mean building more social or affordable housing as the demand is low. Instead, it’s about increasing the for-sale offer and modernising existing stock to attract investment.

“It’s about diversifying the economy,” explains Mr Sim. “We have to attract people and so the housing offer and the town centre have to be right, and that brings into play the ‘R word’.”

Indeed, in communities that have been devastated by sudden unemployment, regeneration can become a divisive concept.

Back in Consett, while the £200,000 houses of the Genesis Project look like they have been lifted from the pages of a catalogue and the out-of-town shopping suits a new generation of commuting residents, the town centre has certainly seen better days.

On a Wednesday afternoon, many shops are boarded up and the only familiar high street brand names belong to the bookmaking chains. Some pubs are open, but trade isn’t brisk.

“I think there’s definitely less of a community now,” comments Elaine Dixon, a tenancy income officer at Derwentside Homes, which took over the running of the council’s housing stock in 2006. Tellingly, the housing association is based not in the town centre, but in a modern business park some five miles away.

Ms Dixon has a special place in Consett’s history. As an 18-year-old, she presented a 20,000-name petition to prime minister Margaret Thatcher at the culmination of a march on Downing Street ahead of the steelworks’ closure in 1980.

“I think a lot of older people would have liked it more as it was before,” she adds, but admits that the transformation was necessary. “Everybody thought that was it and the town would be finished, but that wasn’t the case.”

The Grey Horse pub is a 10-minute walk from the town centre and it is here that the new Consett meets the old. The pub was opened at the birth of the steelworks. Now, in a sign of the times, it is run alongside its own microbrewery. The names of the ales – Red Dust, The Furnace – reflect the town’s industrial heritage.

“There was nothing when I came,” says manager Kathleen Croft, who has been running the pub for 11 years. “Now there’s a few other pubs opening up and some bars. It’s definitely filling up.” ■