

New Statesman, FMB and HBF

Building Post-Brexit Britain: The Skills Shortage and Barriers To House Building

- **Chair: Jon Bernstein, New Statesman**
- **Melanie Onn MP, Shadow Housing Minister**
- **Lewis Sidnick, Director of Corporate Affairs, NHBC**
- **John Slaughter, Director of External Affairs, Home Builders Federation**
- **Brian Berry, Chief Executive, Federation of Master Builders**

Melanie Onn opened the debate by discussing the skills gap within the construction industry. She said that particularly in light of leaving the EU, where firms need to do more to prepare and ensure that we will meet the housing demand and secure enough apprenticeships as a condition for public contracts. Onn announced that Labour plans to build 250,000 homes every year, and stressed the need to invest more money in social and council housing, as well as taking the heat away from the rental market which is having even more problems, especially in the metropolitan areas.

Lewis Sidnick spoke about the NHBC, stating that they are focused purely on the consumer, want to see homeowners move into homes of a higher quality. Lewis spoke of a key issue of skills, with Brexit coming as a ticking time bomb there is a need to upskill current people within the industry and a need to widen the pool of people that already work in the industry. He said that there needs to be a focus on the recruitment of women in the industry also, and showing that there are many types of roles available including office jobs and management roles. He said that we need to broaden the type of skills that are on offer, not just in typical construction but modern construction and offsite construction. He concluded by speaking about the need for modernisation of the UK's construction industries, citing that other EU countries are far more modern than the UK.

Brian Berry gave an overview of how the housing crisis has effected successive governments for years, and said that on the whole, not enough houses are being built to meet the demand. He said that last year, 190,000 houses were built when we should be building a quarter of a million homes each year. He said that housing prices have inflated by 40 times since 1961, and with 1.2 million people on the social housing waiting list, there has been a 140% rise in rough sleeping since 2010. He said that the number of local house builders have dropped off, with a 140% rise in rough sleeping since 2010. He also mentioned that the number of local house builders has dropped off, and without them, the required number of houses cannot be reached. Brian put this down to the fact that local house builders are unable to obtain suitable plots of land, because the planning system is built up to support large developments and therefore neglecting local planning. He said that smaller plots of land need to be available for local house building. He said that another restraint is due to the lack of finance, with local house builders finding it difficult to get loans from major banks, stressing a need to ease up the lending to small local house builders to build the required number of houses. Another restraint is in the planning system, which is unduly onerous on small builders that don't have the resources of the large contractors. He said that this needs to be simplified and reduce the burden on small builders. Berry agreed with Sidnick in regards to the skills crisis, adding that 59% of members of the Federation of Master Builders have problems recruiting bricklayers, plasterers and carpenters.

He said that there is a need to develop homegrown talent rapidly, making it more attractive for anyone who wants to come into the construction industry. He said that a friendlier approach towards the EU is needed as this country needs to continue to sustain and build infrastructure through new labour coming in.

John Slaughter said that there are numerous issues in which we must tackle to solve the housing crisis, from planning reform to ensuring that there are affordable housing offers for everyone, particularly first-time buyers. Slaughter said that it is important that the industry does its bit in investing in skills in skills and training. He said that the Home Builders Federation have, in the last 18 months, set out a major initiative in their home building skills partnership, trying to get its members to collaborate to achieve better skills and training outcomes. Slaughter stated that 25 or more companies are already actively involved with a shared agenda of attracting more recruitments and training them to agreed industry standards, developing skills in the sub-contractors' supply chain. He said that the government needs to play its part by introducing more flexibility into the apprenticeship levy so that large builders and others can potentially transfer more of the funding in the apprenticeship levy digital accounts to other parties such as sub-contractors to assist with skills in the supply chain. Additionally, the government needs to get T-levels right and ensure that they are fit for purpose for the construction industry board in a way that properly responds to what the industry wants rather than in an elitist and top down way. Finally, a more sensible post Brexit migration regime, would require continued access to the European labour market.