The days of a bricks and mortar solution to decline in Britain’s post-industrial cities are over. No more, the government says, can we afford to throw money at schemes which merely knock down and rebuild, spiralling into the same state of decline decades down the line.

The post-war construction boom, combined with a municipalist approach to housing, informed a progressive housing policy 50 years ago. But it holds no sway in the 21st century lexicon of regeneration and sustainability.

So it’s novel to hear of a council that’s put ‘bricks ’n’ mortar’ at the centre of plans for a city that epitomises Britain’s urban malaise over the last half century.

Sheffield is the city of steel, a former industrial heartland and, in the past, a hotbed of left wing council politics. But in January, after a year working with the DTLR’s Community Housing Task Force, the council bit the bullet and submitted a proposal for a place on the 2002/03 housing stock transfer list.

The facts are that the council’s 64,704 homes need hundreds of millions to bring them up to scratch, £435 million to pay off overhanging debt and a £100 million cheque from the Treasury to set against the stock’s low value.

A meeting with housing minister Lord Falconer is pencilled in for the beginning of March.

But for now, the minister might be tempted to read a section of the submission in which the council says: ‘Effective neighbourhood renewal is not just about bricks and mortar, but equally it cannot just be about economic and social regeneration. Without investment to transform housing and the environment, residents benefiting from regeneration by securing jobs often just leave.’

The council’s plan for stock transfer is aimed at the physical regeneration of homes in the city, but it is also deemed crucial to wider plans for regenerating the city as a whole.

Nerves of steel

Regeneration is supposed to be about more than bricks and mortar. But renewal can be housing led, as Paul Hebden reports
Low demand blights the northern and eastern areas of the city. Plans for a rejuvenated city centre are also underway.

So what is the role for housing? Director of housing Joanne Rooney is keen to emphasise that 'bricks 'n' mortar' need not be a byword for failed attempts at regeneration.

But at the end of the day, it’s about the money.

‘In order to sort out the whole of Sheffield there has to be major capital investment as well as social regeneration,’ Ms Rooney says.

‘Large scale voluntary transfer is the only way that capital can be put in. What other source of major infrastructural investment will Sheffield get? What else is there?’ she asks.

Stock transfer was inconceivable before the 1999 local elections. A traditional Labour authority, Sheffield was synonymous with hugely expensive capital projects such as Supertram and the impressive Don Valley Stadium.

But it was unimaginable that private investment would be used to lever in the types of money needed to turn around the city’s estates.

A change of political leadership under the Liberal Democrats changed all that.

It also kick-started the type of consultation needed if the council ever hoped to carry tenants with it.

Ms Rooney says: ‘Many councils make decisions about the strategic options for the future of their housing, then they speak to tenants.

‘But we’ve worked for three years with tenants and residents, strengthening the movement and openly and honestly discussing issues of low demand and long-term funding. Through that we arrived at the best option.’

If the logic of ‘ground up’ consultation works out in practice then Sheffield should get the green light when it puts its plans to a tenant ballot in the next 18 months.

But there’s a dark cloud hanging over the plan to turn Sheffield around as a place to live and work: low demand.

Ms Rooney is one of a select group of housing professionals from the north and Midlands who have been pressing Lord Falconer to institute an £8 billion market renewal fund.

‘Stock transfer will bring in investment across the city,’ she says.

‘But because of the number of housing issues, for some areas of the city we need public and private work. Market renewal funding for us would be about extra resources going to longer term regeneration across all market tenures.’

The housing market in the south of the city does not need propping up, but investment in the less affluent northern and eastern parts of Sheffield is badly needed before abandonment sets in.

Community, social, or municipal homes owned by local authorities and housing associations have to endure a poor reputation.

‘I don’t like to label it,’ Ms Rooney says, ‘I call it simply “rented housing” and make it as attractive as other forms of tenure.’

Coupled with that are ongoing plans to regenerate the city centre and create more jobs.

But if people are prepared to shop and work in the city, what’s to stop them living in the city too?

‘Housing is one of the council’s key corporate aims,’ says Ms Rooney, ‘It sits alongside other corporate priorities for taking Sheffield forward, you won’t find another [council] chief executive in the country with as much knowledge about housing as here.’

Bold words indeed.

But the city still has a way to go before realising the scale of regeneration its ambitious leadership has in mind.

Challenges include making stock transfer stack up, no mean feat considering that the financial modelling predicts a £100 million shortfall.

And the £8 billion market renewal fund has still to progress further than Eland House.

Whether both proposals ever get past the Treasury is in the lap of the gods.

Sheffield Council stock transfer proposal

- 63,706 tenanted homes to transfer
- Six subsidiary landlords and a parent RSL will take ownership of the stock
- Sale price: +£56.8 million
- Estimate of one-off payment necessary to clear overhanging debt is £435 million
- Tenant ballot to be held in March 2003
- Transfer to be complete by December 2003
- Total number of council tenants expected to fall by 20,000 by 2006
- 2001 survey found 72 per cent of tenants were very or quite satisfied with the housing service
- Discussions held with The Royal Bank of Scotland and the Nationwide Building Society to fund the transfer.