Employer's Agents & 1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge

Hosted by Lovell

Lovell Partnerships Employer's Agents Roundtable Report

October 2025

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What this sector can contribute to the delivery of the Government's housing ambitions

1. Introduction

Employer's Agents (EAs) rarely feature in the headlines of housing delivery - yet their work quietly determines whether schemes succeed or stall. Sitting between clients, contractors, funders and regulators, they are the connective tissue that translates ambition into delivery and delivery back into learning.

The **Lovell Partnerships Employer's Agents Roundtable** in London, October 2025, brought together a dozen senior figures from across the sector - representing leading consultancies, contractors and advisors - to examine how EAs can help unlock the Government's **1.5 million new homes** ambition.

Hosted by **Lovell Partnerships** and chaired by **Toby Fox**, founder of 1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge (www.1-5m.co.uk), the session formed part of a growing series of conversations feeding insight to local government, industry partners, MHCLG and Homes England.

The format provided four short opening perspectives - from **Paul Houghton (AECOM)** on clients, **Claire Flowers (Potter Raper)** on EAs, **Lorraine Casey (Lovell)** on contractors, and **Jeff Endean (Cast)** on government and policy - before an open exchange between Employer's Agents and industry leaders including **Martin Arnold, Bellrock, Airey Miller, Hunters, Pellings** and **Lovell Partnerships.**

What emerged was a remarkably candid and constructive conversation. Participants acknowledged that the sector faces significant headwinds - from viability and procurement complexity to Gateway 2 delays - yet they also identified clear, practical ways forward.

1.1 Why the Employer's Agent voice matters

Employer's Agents act as the client's appointed representative under JCT Design & Build contracts - the person who turns an employer's requirements into a deliverable contract, manages change, and certifies progress and completion. They sit at the point of translation between what clients want and what contractors can deliver. When engaged early, EAs help shape realistic briefs, align stakeholders, and surface "buildability" issues before they become calendar and cost problems.

They are, in effect, the connective network of the housing system - linking ambition, regulation and delivery. EAs have panoramic visibility across the process: they see the policy ambitions of councils, the commercial realities of contractors, and the safety and viability pressures shaping each scheme. That makes them one of the few professional groups able to provide government with grounded insight into how national policy plays out in practice.

If government wants earlier collaboration, proportionate safety, and faster delivery, it needs the people who turn those aims into reliable routines.

2. What's Working: The Hidden Connectors of Delivery

Despite widespread uncertainty in the housing system, Employer's Agents continue to perform an essential, often unseen, function. They act as the connective network of a living system - linking the ambitions of clients to the practical realities of construction, regulation and funding.

What's working well today

Trust-based partnerships are delivering results. Early collaboration and continuity of relationships between EAs, contractors and councils allow faster decision-making and fewer disputes.
Transparency through open-book approaches and shared risk logs builds confidence.
Culture matters: professionalism, empathy and communication underpin successful programmes as much as process.

This emphasis on trust and collaboration mirrors the best of local government delivery practice highlighted in the first Annual Review of *1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge*, showing that the sector already holds many of the tools for improvement - provided those tools are recognised and supported.

3. Clients and Procurement: The Early Engagement Gap

The most consistent theme across the roundtable was that Employer's Agents are often brought in **too late** to influence the strategic direction of projects.

This is not due to unwillingness but to **structural barriers** in how local authorities fund and procure development. Until a project is approved and capital funding released, any professional advice counts as *revenue spending*, making councils reluctant or unable to commission the technical input that could save time, cost and risk later.

The group concluded that **procurement models** often entrench this problem. Portal-based, price-weighted frameworks reward compliance rather than collaboration. They may deliver low fees, but they block the trusted-adviser relationships that make delivery efficient and resilient.

These early-stage constraints also connect directly to the **Building Safety Act and Gateway 2**. Late technical input and rushed design development increase risk and delay. Earlier EA involvement would allow potential Gateway 2 issues to be identified and managed long before submission - a simple procedural change that could unlock significant capacity across the system.

4. Employer's Agents – From Contract Administrators to Strategic Facilitators

The roundtable confirmed that the Employer's Agent role is evolving fast. Once defined narrowly by Design & Build contract mechanics, it now sits at the intersection of project management, cost consultancy, and strategic advisory.

Rather than compliance checking, today's EAs help **define what success looks like** - advising on buildability, risk and procurement strategy, and balancing speed, quality and value. Trust is central. As participants put it, trust is not achieved through frameworks or compliance alone; it comes from repeated demonstration of fairness, transparency and competence.

A new generation of EAs is emerging - analytical, people-focused and fluent in cost, design, regulation and delivery. The profession's task is to articulate its strategic value, attract new talent, and promote **continuity of relationships** that build knowledge and performance over time.

What the sector can do
- Invest in **soft skills** as actively as technical training.
- Promote **continuity** of appointments to build knowledge and relationships across programmes.
- **Clarify the EA offer** to clients and the next generation.
- **Champion early engagement** and share case studies showing measurable value at RIBA Stage 0–2.

What government can do
- Recognise EAs' contribution within the **Building Safety Act ecosystem**.
- Encourage **procurement frameworks** that reward trust, continuity and early input.
- Support **industry-wide training and accreditation pathways**.

5. Contractors – Partnership and Delivery at Scale

If Employer's Agents are the connectors of the housing system, contractors are its engine. They ultimately turn ideas into homes. Yet that engine is under strain from skills shortages, supply-chain fragility and regulatory complexity.

What's working
Relationship-based delivery moves schemes from approval to site more smoothly.
Transparency on cost and risk through open-book models and early contractor involvement (ECI) is sharing risk more intelligently.
Simple solutions - standardisation, design efficiency, and strong local supply chains - achieve speed and quality without unnecessary complexity.

Challenges and barriers
- Procurement remains **too impersonal**; portals don't test compatibility.
- **Skills and materials shortages** are systemic.
- **Risk pushed down the chain** undermines resilience; shared risk logs and realistic contingencies are essential.

Gateway 2
Earlier collaboration between contractors, EAs and building control can help pre-empt delays - embedding buildability and compliance discussions before submission. Government must ensure the **Building Safety Regulator** has adequate resources and clear guidance.

6. Government and Policy – Creating the Conditions for Delivery

Government sets the rules of the game - funding, regulation, planning and confidence. The roundtable's message to government was simple: **set the direction, provide stability, then trust the sector to deliver**.

What's working
- National ambition (the **1.5m homes target**) helps local confidence.
- The **Building Safety Act** is improving standards; the challenge is implementation.
- **Devolution** and combined authorities can align infrastructure and housing decisions.

What needs to change
- **Gateway 2** must move from fear to function, a shift toward a more pragmatic, collaborative approach that supports delivery rather than obstructing it.
- A **stable capital funding** programme is needed.
- **Procurement reform** should reward collaboration and continuity.
- **Policy alignment** is essential across planning, housing, skills and net zero.

Sector role
Use a collective voice, provide evidence, and demonstrate stewardship of public value.
Government role
Stabilise policy and funding, resource the regulator, back devolution, and treat housing as essential infrastructure.

7. What We Can Do Now – Sector Actions

- **Work earlier, think broader** at RIBA 0–2.
- **Build partnerships that outlast projects;** value continuity.
- **Share knowledge,** not just contracts - templates, checklists, Gateway readiness tools.
- **Invest in people** - technical and, critically, human skills; mentor the next generation.
- **Tell a joined-up story** through the *1.5M New Homes* campaign and similar platforms.

Immediate commitments
- Compile this report and share with local authorities, MHCLG, Homes England and partners.
- Invite other EAs to endorse or contribute further reflections.
- Convene a follow-up working group on early engagement, procurement, and Gateway 2.

8. Recommendations for MHCLG and Partners

1) **Make early engagement affordable and legitimate** - capital budgets for RIBA 0–2 advice; early-advisory lots in frameworks; programme-level appointments.
2) **Reform Gateway 2** - resource the regulator; publish practical, example-driven guidance; create a consultative review panel with EA/contractor/building-control input.
3) **Shift funding from revenue to capital** - multi-year settlements; invest-to-save recognition for early technical input.
4) **Modernise procurement** - two-stage tendering, open-book, relationship/performance metrics.
5) **Invest in skills and capacity** - national skills initiative; secondments; EA role research.
6) **Provide policy stability** - a 10-year housing/regeneration framework; maintain AHP/One Public Estate/devolution deals with clear envelopes.
7) **Back collaboration, not competition** - inter-sector delivery forum under MHCLG; use the *1.5M New Homes* evidence base as a model.

9. Conclusion – Connective Tissue

Across the *1.5M New Homes* campaign - from councils to developers and now Employer's Agents - the message is clear: the barriers are shared, the solutions are shared, and progress depends on **alignment, trust and timing**.

The same themes echo through all three reports (*Annual Review*, *Unlocking Housing Delivery*, and this EA Roundtable): **start early; build capacity, not bureaucracy; simplify and stabilise; and trust collaboration**. Government's role is to create enabling conditions - stable policy, capital funding, proportionate regulation. The sector's role is to use that stability to deliver - working earlier, sharing knowledge, and investing in people.

Employer's Agents complete the picture: professionals who see every side of delivery and keep the system connected. Their voice, alongside councils and contractors, gives MHCLG a grounded roadmap to turn the ambition of **1.5 million new homes** into reality.

10. Speakers

- **Lorraine Casey**, Regional Managing Director, *Lovell Partnerships*
- **Jeff Endean**, Director, *Cast*
- **Claire Flowers**, Partnerships Director, *Potter Raper*
- **Toby Fox**, Founder, *1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge* (Chair)
- **Paul Houghton**, Affordable Housing Sector Lead – UK & Ireland, *AECOM*

11. Participants

- **Anthony Boden**, Pre-Construction Director, *Lovell Partnerships*
- **Neil Brooks**, Head of New Business & Partnerships, *Lovell Partnerships*
- **David Capel**, Director, *Hunters*
- **Gary Lawrence**, Partner & Head of Project Management, *Pellings*
- **Chris Martin**, Partner, *Martin Arnold*
- **Paul O'Connor**, Director and Head of Residential, *Bellrock* (formerly *John Rowan & Partners*)
- **Kieran Vincent**, Director, *Airey Miller*

12. Additional Contributions

- **Will Taylor**, Associate Director, *Rund*

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1.5M New Homes: The Local Government Challenge is an independent campaign visiting a different council every month, recording video interviews with officers and members to learn what works and what needs to change to get more homes built. The campaign founding sponsor is Red Loft. www.1-5m.co.uk.

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