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Gordon Brown last night signalled his support for the biggest council house building programme for decades to kick-start the construction industry and the economy.

The Prime Minister said restrictions should be eased so that local authorities could keep more from council house rents and borrow more money for social housing.

Under the scheme, local authorities could build their own homes or take over public-private projects that have stalled in the recession.

The proposals would bring about the biggest increase in council house building since the introduction of the Right to Buy scheme brought in by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

The number of social homes constructed each year has tumbled since then and just 375 were built in 2008.

The move would also help the 4.5million people waiting for a council house and provide a much-needed boost to the beleaguered construction industry.

Mr Brown said any changes would have to be accompanied by reform and should address issues such as the high levels of unemployment among residents.

He said: 'We will be ready to move whenever necessary and I believe that councils should be given greater opportunities to play a bigger role.'

'Of course investment in social housing must be aligned with reform so that, for example, social housing providers working with local authorities and Jobcentre Plus to address the high levels of worklessness that can be concentrated within this sector.'

Mr Brown said that if local authorities can convince the government that they can deliver quickly - and cost-effectively - they would be fully supported.

The Prime Minister admitted he has in the past stonewalled proposals for local authorities to build social housing because he didn't want it to show up on the public finances.

But yesterday he said: 'We will not allow old arguments and old ideologies to stop us getting on with the job together when there are families that need homes, when there are bricklayers, carpenters and electricians ready and able to work, when there are construction companies that are ready to build houses.'

