

A positive future for social housing in London

Four things London Tenants Federation will be looking for in the 2018 Social Housing Green Paper

Announcing the Social Housing Green Paper in September 2017, Sajid Javid expressed the need for a “fundamental rethink of social housing in this country”.

We agree. The horrifying and avoidable fire at Grenfell Tower has thrown into sharp relief the many holes in this and successive governments’ approach to housing. Health and safety red flags have been ignored, social housing tenants have been both ignored and unfairly stereotyped and the tenure as a whole has been allowed to shrink, with the shortage of social rented housing so acute that households made homeless by the fire are still awaiting replacement homes more than a year later.

The result of rolling back on funding for social rented housing has been a ripple effect through the wider housing market, pushing up private rents and house prices for first time buyers and pushing those most in need onto the streets or into unfit private, temporary or B&B accommodation.

We are proud tenants of social housing and we believe social rented homes to be the best type of housing for all those who cannot afford market prices. And we are not alone in that. There is a growing consensus that investing in a long term social rented housing delivery programme is the only way out of the housing crisis.

With this Social Housing Green Paper, the new Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government has the chance to mark a turning point in the crisis that has engulfed and divided London and the rest of the nation. Here are the four most urgently needed shifts which we will be looking out for:

1. Meaningful action to ensure the safety of all tenants and residents on social housing estates

We support the set of six fire safety recommendations made by Tower Blocks UK¹, alongside the recommendations made in the London Assembly Planning Committee’s report ‘Never Again: Sprinklers as the next step in fire safety’²

More broadly, we believe better health and safety must be achieved through:

- Sufficient funding and training provided to ensure high quality overseeing of contractors’ work by directly employed Clerks of Works
- Requiring landlords to involve tenant representatives in setting the contract brief prior to tendering for works contractors and in making the final decision on awarding the contract
- Limiting the length of chains of sub-contractors permitted within landlord works contracts and encouraging landlords to bring services back in house

¹ <https://www.towerblocksuk.com/>

² <https://www.london.gov.uk/assembly-publications/never-again-sprinklers-next-step-fire-safety>

2. A commitment to a substantial long-term social-rented housing delivery programme sufficient to address rising homelessness, overcrowding, decade long waiting lists and the displacement of low income households from London

The London Mayor's 2017 Strategic Housing Market Assessment³ showed that London must build 40,753 new social rented homes a year for the next ten years if it is to meet both projected need and the substantial backlog of need. We want to see the government commit the necessary funding to make this happen.

Governments have been given enough time to test out market-based approaches to addressing the housing crisis and the evidence shows that these are not working.

Across all tenures we have failed to build enough homes in London. Whilst a fifth of that backlog is for market housing, the vast majority - 78% of all unmet need - is for social rented homes. Only 2% of unmet need is for high cost intermediate products such as shared ownership.

A commitment to fund the social rented housing London needs would not only directly improve conditions for low income residents but would relieve demand-side pressure on the housing market and reduce the overall housing benefit bill.

To support this objective, we would like to see:

- Grant funding ringfenced solely for delivery of additional social-rented homes. Until the backlog of need is thoroughly addressed, grant funding should not be spent on other housing products
- Public land which is suitable for housing development ringfenced exclusively for new social housing
- Local authorities and smaller or community-led organisations prioritised for receipt of social housing grant funding
- A lifting of the local authority borrowing cap to enable councils to once more build in higher numbers
- A suspension of the Right to Buy until unmet need has been addressed
- The return of historic Right to Buy capital receipts totalling £42bn to local authorities to support the provision of new social rented homes

3. An end to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of social housing and its tenants

Governments have adopted the view that social housing should be a tenure of last resort. We disagree. We are proud tenants of social housing and we believe social rented homes to be the best type of housing for those who cannot afford market prices.

Whilst more people are now in work, there are growing numbers whose terms

³ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_shma_2017.pdf

of employment are precarious, whether they are self employed or on zero hours contracts. For those on the lower and irregular incomes it may not be possible or prudent to take on huge amounts of debt to own their own home. But the exploitative rents, insecure tenancies and appalling conditions within the private rented sector are no good alternative.

Why, then, are we remodelling social housing tenants' rents and contracts to more closely resemble private sector rents and contracts? Why have we allowed the repairs and maintenance of social housing to precipitately decline? And why are we demolishing what social housing we do have? 135,000 London council tenants have been displaced due to demolition in the past 20 years.⁴

We want to see tenants on long term secure tenancies paying rent which relates to the actual cost of management, maintenance and repairs to their home. We want to see a commitment to develop and invest in lifetime homes that are accessible for the duration of peoples' lives and built to last at least 150 years.

To support this objective, we would like to see:

- A commitment to end 'affordable rent' and a new government White Paper investigating how social rent setting can move away from reflecting housing market costs to more closely reflect the actual cost of management, maintenance and repairs
- New social rented homes to be let on long term secure tenancies
- High standards set nationally for upkeep of and routine improvements to residents' homes
- Protection of existing social rented homes through ensuring estate demolition may only go ahead subject to the approval of existing tenants and residents via a ballot

4. Vocal and meaningful support for tenant democracy

The Hackitt Review identified the need for meaningful tenant involvement. In our view many of the methods increasingly adopted by social landlords do not constitute meaningful involvement in decision making about our homes. Tenant involvement is often a service which we pay for through our rents but which serves only the landlord's purposes, and not ours.

Landlords and the government often frame tenant engagement as 'customer engagement', but this assumes a certain level of choice as consumers that social housing tenants just do not have. It also means that much of the intimate knowledge we have about our homes and communities is more readily dismissed.

⁴[Loretta Lees](http://www.urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/blog/2018/challenging-the-gentrification-of-council-estates-in-london/), Principal Investigator of the ESRC-funded project [Gentrification, Displacement, and the Impacts of Council Estate Renewal in C21st London](http://www.urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/blog/2018/challenging-the-gentrification-of-council-estates-in-london/)

We want to see participatory, democratic and accountable tenants and residents' organisations involved in decision-making about social housing at all levels (local, landlord-wide, regional and national).

This could be achieved through:

- Setting out how the housing regulator will require landlord compliance with the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard
- Requiring landlords to set aside a proportion of tenants' rents to fund the establishment and running of independent local and landlord-wide tenants and residents organisations
- Extending the Right to Transfer and the Right to Manage to housing association tenants
- Extending the requirements of the 2000 Freedom of Information Act to housing associations in receipt of public funds

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About London Tenants Federation

London Tenants Federation is a tenant run membership organisation. We bring together borough and London-wide representative social housing tenants organisations. We work in close partnership with the London Federation of Housing Co-ops and the National Federation of TMOs.

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