

HANDS OFF OUR HOMES

INVEST IN COUNCIL HOUSING

COUNCIL TENANTS ARE UNITED to demand an end to attacks on our tenancies, rights and benefits. We need investment in existing and new council housing. The private sector is unaffordable and cannot provide the homes we need.

We are not subsidised, second class citizens. Our rents have paid for our homes several times over. In fact, government robs money from council housing – £2 billion from our rents this year (see page 2).

Council housing works. It is cheaper to build, manage and maintain than any alternatives and provides the secure, affordable housing millions of people are desperate for, with an accountable landlord.

Public land should be used to build a new generation of first-class council housing. With five million on housing waiting lists, and homelessness rising, an increase in genuinely affordable and secure publicly-owned homes for rent is vital.

The Government are threatening to remove life-time secure tenancies, force up rents, and cut access to council housing (see page 4). There is no electoral mandate, or justification for these attacks on tenants, which will hit the elderly, the sick, the poorest and most vulnerable.

The Prime Minister is breaking his pre-election promises. David Cameron said, on 30 April 2010, 'We support social housing, we will protect it, and we respect social tenants' rights'. The Conservative party said they had 'no policy to change the current or future security of tenure of tenant'.

The threat to our tenancies comes on top of major cuts to housing benefit and housing services, with housing offices and repairs services being cut. Yet the rents we pay for these services are still going up.

Tenants have resisted privatisation and fought hard to defend and im-

prove our homes and estates. Together tenants with trade unions, councillors and MPs can fight off these attacks on council housing as we have many others.

We are standing together now to demand:

- **Hands off secure tenancies – no means testing for present or future tenants**
- **Stop the robbery of £2 billion a year from council tenants' rents**
- **Ringfence and reinvest all the money that belongs to council housing, from rents and sales**
- **Use public land to build publicly-owned, secure and genuinely-affordable rented housing**
- **Invest now in existing and new council housing**

Some Councils are pushing stock transfer to a new private sector landlord.

They pour money into glossy brochures and propaganda promoting a 'yes' vote.

Transfer is privatisation. It means big risks: the loss of secure tenancies and a democratic accountable landlord, and the chaos of the private housing market. Legally and practically housing associations (also called RSLs or Registered Providers:



Tenants protest at Parliament against Government attacks on tenancies, rents and benefits 15 February 2011

Picture: Corine Dhoddin

Tenants say no to privatisation

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

● **Join Tenants Delegation on Protest at Conservative conference, Manchester, Sunday 2 October. Assemble with DCH banner, 12 noon, Liverpool Road (off Deansgate) – bring local banners and posters**

● **Demand Councils reject attacks on tenancies and rights (see back page)**

RP) are in the private sector. They are increasingly run as big businesses, with bond issues on the money market, land speculation, and 100 per cent 'for profit' housing developments.

Home Group, one of the biggest with homes in nearly 150 local authority areas, is selling off nearly 5,000 tenants' homes in a restructure.

Hyde Group is selling off its care and support subsidiary, and pushing

more property sales.

Transfer puts tenants' homes at increasing market risks, with banks and lenders in control. Transfer will mean temporary tenancies and higher rents for many, breaking up stable communities. After transfer the landlord will use fixed term tenancies for new tenants, and up to 80 per cent market rents on new and existing homes being relet. Many Councils will not use fixed term tenancies

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“For the average person without some form of benefit, ever-increasing rents remain far from affordable. When did our caring society change to money grabbing. I am all right jack, pull up the ladder one? It reflects on the hostility boiling up around the country. Those who judge should put their own house in order first. And take on board how the other half have to live, who would love affordable housing and are not getting any thing like it! Alan Rickman Winchester DCH

“With private housing rents continuing to rise while wages fall it is becoming harder than ever for many to afford a roof over their heads. Combined with the government’s cuts in housing benefit, we are on the brink of a major homelessness crisis. The case for affordable and secure council housing has never been more urgent.” Mark Serwotka PCS union General Secretary

“The TUC will work with Defend Council Housing to change government policy in favour of council housing.” Nicola Smith TUC Head of Economic & Social Affairs

“Never has the time been more right for a massive programme of sustainable investment in council housing – to get five million off waiting lists and to maintain high quality homes.” Heather Wakefield, National Secretary, Unison

“The failure to provide affordable housing for rent is undermining the life chances of thousands of families. The savage cuts the Government is making to social housing funding is making an already bad situation far worse. Only by providing councils with adequate funding to directly build new properties for rent can the growing homelessness crisis be resolved.” George Guy, UCATT acting General Secretary

“I support the campaign” Councillor David White, Stockport

Stop the robbery

INVEST IN COUNCIL HOUSING

Council Housing finance is to be reformed. Years of campaigning and demands by tenants, trade unions, councillors and MPs have exposed the underfunding and robbery built into the current funding of council housing. This year (2011-12) national HRA rent income will be an estimated £6,600m. Government take almost £2 billion of this, after giving back Major Repair and Management allowances for council housing. Reform is needed. But what is proposed will not guarantee the secure financial future for council housing we were promised.

The proposals will break up the national funding system. After a one-off financial settlement for each local authority, local authorities will fund their own housing from rents – described as ‘self-financing’. The new funding built into the reform is only a quarter of what’s needed. The Government’s own research for the detailed Review of finance, has shown how badly underfunded council housing is currently. They showed Major Repair Allowances (MRA) need to increase by 54 per cent, and Management & Maintenance Allowances (M&M) by 10 per cent. Instead these will increase

by 24 per cent and 5 per cent. And no capital funding is promised to meet the £7 billion backlog for improvement works. Allowances will not rise in line with costs. Increases will be linked to the Retail Price Index (RPI), but maintenance costs have gone up at twice the RPI rate in the last ten years. This is a once and for all settlement, that gives no chance of a rise in allowances in future years. There will be no safety margin. Local council Housing Revenue Accounts will have to bear the strain of any interest rate rises or other unforeseen problems in their 30-year

business plans. We have to keep up pressure for guarantees on rents and security of jobs and tenancies if council housing gets into financial trouble. The ‘ring fence’ to ensure Councils spend housing money only on council housing, is not being tightened up. Tenants, unions and councillors need to keep a very close check on how funding is used, to stop abuses. The Robbery of capital receipts from sale of land or homes, will continue. This is money that belongs to council housing, and it should be reinvested not siphoned off by Government.



National Tenant Council members join the protest at Parliament, 15 February 2011

from page 1 and oppose market rents.

MERGERS AND TAKEOVERS Around one in 15 RSL landlords have been or are going through mergers and takeovers since 2005. Many are council transfers. Tenants get no say; once you transfer business interests decide. ‘The notion that residents are so concerned about the name on the rent book or the side of the van that does repairs is a bit of a fallacy.’ Keith Loraine, chief executive, Isos Housing (formed by winding up Isos, NomadE5, Castle Morpeth Housing and Milecastle) ‘If you have got more homes, you are going to get more voids, which will fund development.’ Angus Groom, WM Housing director of Corporate Services. Tenants get no say. Decisions after transfer are dictated by business interests. Local control is another broken promise.

Vote No to transfer

UNITED CAMPAIGN CAN WIN

CAMPAIGNS UNITING TENANTS, trade unions, councillors and MPs against privatisation, have succeeded across England, Scotland and Wales. Get together with all those against transfer, to make sure tenants hear the case against. Contact unions for practical help, and DCH nationally for speakers and advice.

TRANSFER MEANS PRIVATISATION Housing associations (now called ‘Registered Providers’ RP or Registered Social Landlords RSLs) are private companies in law. Talk of ‘not for profit’, community-based ownership or co-operatives is window dressing to disguise this basic fact. Because they are private companies their borrowing is more expensive, they pay VAT (unlike Councils) and are not subject to Freedom of Information (FOI). The Housing Association sector is run on commercial principles with many mergers and takeovers. Many lobbied Parliament for the right to become profit-making companies, and several want to float on the stock market (see *Inside Housing*, 13/11/09).

LOSS OF SECURE TENANCY Council tenants’ ‘secure’ tenancies are lost after transfer. Housing associations say their tenancies give equal se-

curity but these promises are not statutory rights; and new tenants won’t get these extra promises.

MORE EXPENSIVE Housing Associations pay more for borrowing, have higher management costs and gross fat-cat salaries. The Public Accounts Committee of MPs found it costs £1,300 more to improve each home through stock transfer costs than it would have cost for the Council to do the work.

HIGHER RENTS AND CHARGES Housing Association rents and charges are much higher than council rents. Our council ‘secure’ tenancies guarantee us the legal right to a ‘reasonable’ rent. Housing associations are allowed by law to charge a market rent and their trade body lobbied government to be allowed to increase their rents faster (‘Building Neighbourhoods’, National Housing Federation, September 2007). Government plans to force up council rents to match Housing Association rents through ‘convergence’ are in disarray, put back three times.

LESS ACCOUNTABILITY Individual tenants and tenants associations can lobby our local councillors and, if we don’t like the way they run our homes, vote them out. This direct democratic relationship is lost if we are privatised. Housing associations are run

by a board of directors who are legally accountable to the company. Having tenant Board Members is a con. “At the time of transfer, tenants are often led to believe that the explicit role in representing the interests of their fellow tenants on the board. This is not compatible with the accepted principle that as board members they have to work for the principles of the organisation” (‘Housing: Improving services through residential involvement’, Audit Commission, June 2004).

RISK Housing Associations are big businesses. Many are regional or national businesses diversifying into non housing activities. Many ‘local’ associations get swallowed up by big regional or national companies a few years after ‘transfer’. Private landlords want to get their hands on the land our estates are built on. One fifth of transfer associations got into difficulty (Society Guardian, 25 May, 2005). Tenants in south London, privatised by Presentation Housing Association, were horrified to find out just weeks after stock transfer that their new landlord was forced into a merger “after it failed to prove it could generate enough income to cover its loan repayments” (Inside Housing, 31 October 2008). If things go wrong, there is no return. Transfer is a one-way ticket. ● See DCH website for more on the case against stock transfer: www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk



Leeds Tenants Federation demand a Right to Rent for all

Ensure fair and balanced debate

Many councils try and fix the outcome of stock transfer ballots by spending a fortune on one-sided propaganda; changing the date or calling ballots at short notice, taking down material opposing their proposals; refusing opponents access to addresses of all those entitled to vote, etc. Pressure from campaigners and MPs has forced the government to bring in a code of practice to help remedy this democratic deficit. It still falls short in many areas but, unlike the previous guidance, councils are legally obliged to follow it. The code of practice says: “Local authorities should ensure that the information provided gives a full, fair and objective picture of the proposed transfer so that they can demonstrate that tenants have been properly consulted and informed” (Annex 1:3) “The [offer] document should explain that, although transferring tenants will have broadly similar rights, some rights will be lost while others will be provided by contract rather than by statute.” (para 16) “There are additional grounds for possession available to the new landlord that may be used against existing tenants in the event that the transfer goes ahead and these should be explained.” (Annex 1: 20) See Consultation before disposal to private sector landlord: statutory guidance (CLG, July 2009) www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/tenantconsultationguidance You also have the right to obtain all addresses of council-owned homes through the Freedom of Information Act. The Information Commissioner has ruled twice that councils must release the addresses (not names) – FS50082890 4th May 2006 and FS50066606 3 January 2007. Councils employ expensive consultants to write reports assessing

the investment needed to bring all homes up to standard (a lot) – and setting this against predicted income (not enough). They may use these figures to try to drive through privatisation options – claiming this is the only way to get improvements or fund future repairs. Democracy – is the options group representative, or hand-picked and exclusive? Are resources available for both sides to put their case to all tenants so that there’s a fair and balanced debate, followed by a ballot? Put the tenants’ alternative priorities, for essential works and keeping council housing. Ask unions



for help and challenge privatisation in leaflets, letters to the press, petitions and delegations to the Council. So-called ‘Independent Tenants Advisors’ are rarely ‘independent’ or ‘tenants’. Most make their living by ‘helping’ councils organise stock transfer. Check the facts for empty promises. Privatisation puts tenants at risk, often means homes for sale being built on our kids playgrounds or other open spaces. Don’t let the council muddle up the financial and the political arguments and present their views as ‘facts’ while calling alternative views ‘propaganda’ and ‘lies’.

AFFILIATE AND ORDER MATERIAL FROM DEFEND COUNCIL HOUSING

Annual affiliation fees: Tenants/Community Organisations: Local £10 District/Regional £25 National £50 Trade Union Organisations: Local £50 District/Regional £100 National £250

Copies of this newspaper £20 per 100 / £120 per 1000	Name
Case for Council Housing pamphlet £10 (or £2.50 for individual tenants / bulk orders)	Address
House of Commons Council Housing group report 'Council Housing: Time to invest' £10 (or £5 for orders of more than 10 copies)
Annual subscription to Campaign Mailings & Briefings £15	OrganisationPosition
Posters 10 for £1, 100 for £7	Tel No(s)Email
	National newspaperAmount £.....
	PamphletsAmount £.....
	Affiliation feeAmount £.....
	Mailing SubscriptionAmount £.....
	PostersAmount £.....
	DonationAmount £.....
	(Cheques to Defend Council Housing) Total Amount £
	Send to: Defend Council Housing, PO Box 33519, London E2 9WW

4 DefendCouncilHousing

“Cambridge City Council, as a stock-retaining Local Authority, is opposed in principle to ending security of tenure and offering tenancies on a short-term basis.”
Cambridge City Council

“Leeds City Council has agreed not to implement flexible tenancies for council tenants. Speaking directly to Leeds Tenants Federation, the Executive Member for Housing said the council and its ALMOs would oppose any reduction of security for new tenants” **Leeds City Council**

“It is wrong to try to change the terms of tenancy, and turn council estates into transit camps. We need to build more council housing; this is the path to recovery, as in the 1930s.”
Austin Mitchell MP, chair House of Commons Council Housing Group

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HOUSING EMERGENCY

Government is pushed through controversial proposals to take away life-time secure tenancies, push rents up to 80 per cent market levels, cut back access to council housing, and introduce the principle of a means test.

These policies have been attacked from all sides; tenants are leading protests locally and nationally. Already nearly half of councils surveyed say they will not implement some or all of the new powers.

DCH and other tenants and campaigners have joined together to fight these attacks. We are demanding MPs and Councillors publicly oppose attacks on tenancies, rents and benefits, and give a commitment to join a united

campaign to defend tenancies, rents and benefits, and build the homes we need.

What you can do:

Councils are deciding now if they will use ‘flexible’ tenancies and means tests, and other new powers.

- Organise local Housing Emergency meetings, petition and lobby of Council and MPs to defend secure tenancies, rents and access to council housing.
- Demand your MP opposes Localism Bill ‘flexible’ tenancies and cuts in access to council housing; up to 80% market rents and housing benefit cuts
- Contact info@defendcouncilhousing.org.uk or avmitchell@parliament.uk for more information.



Austin Mitchell MP speaking as tenants build a cardboard city outside Downing Street to protest at Government attacks

Photos © Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Localism Bill attacks tenants

The Localism Bill now going through Parliament gives landlords new powers to change tenancies and rights. Councils and housing associations can choose whether to use these. Housing associations will combine these with up to 80 per cent market rents.

Private renting: Councils can use 12-month private lets to discharge their duty to homeless people. Many are already refused help. Even those the Council accepts it has a duty to help, would lose the right to wait in temporary accommodation for a council or housing association tenancy.

Councils can also limit who can apply for housing and go on the waiting lists. Already some councils are boasting at removing thousands from the list.

Councils will be able to choose whether to implement these changes. They have to decide ‘collaboratively and transparently’, consulting tenants on what kind of tenancies they will use in what circumstances, and on housing allocation policy. Councils can go on granting secure tenancies.

As ‘strategic housing authorities’, councils can also put pressure on other landlords not to use fixed term ‘flexible’ tenancies or 80 per cent market rents. Islington council has told RP landlords not to impose 80 per cent market rents. And Councils can also regulate and inspect private landlords.

“My personal view is that people should be prioritised based on ‘housing need’ not by their levels of income or their ‘employment status’.”
Julie Dore, Leader of Sheffield City Council

TENANTS CONFERENCE 19 MAY 2011

We call on MPs, Councillors and Tenant Organisations to support tenants campaigning against Government attacks on secure tenancies, rent levels and housing benefits.

The proposed replacement of secure tenancies, up to 80 per cent market rents and drastic cuts in housing benefit were not part of any election manifestos; Prime Minister David Cameron said on 30 April 2010: ‘We support social housing, we will protect it, and we respect social tenants’ rights’ and the Conservative party said they had ‘no policy to change the current or future security of tenure of tenants in social housing’.

Tenants have not been adequately consulted on these changes: the CLG Consultation was shortened to 8 weeks, held over Christmas holidays, and the Localism Bill was put to parliament before consultation finished. Tenants’ responses were not even fully reported on.

We oppose removing the right to a secure tenancy for present or future tenants. This will undermine the stability of our sustainable mixed communities. Means testing and vetting will make tenants fearful that any change in their financial or personal circumstances might mean being made to leave their home.

Signed by:

Linda McNeil, Leeds Tenants Federation (LTF)
Patricia Billborough, LTF
Ruth Vollans, Potternewton Tenants Association
Eileen Short, DCH
Sarjo Bayang, Barnsley
Francis Garbutt, LTF Adel Crag Community Association
Alan Mann, LTF Holt Park Tenants & Residents Association

M Williams, Doncaster
Sam Kajue, LTF
Julia Freer, LTF
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J Jones, TAG
John Davies, Hands Off Our Homes
Mick Patrick, Harlow
Richard Bastow, KFTRA (Kirklees)
Jill Long

Noel Hallis, Potternewton Tenants Association
Michael Dean, LTF
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Jean Lancaster, LTF, Elmfield & Bridge Street Residents Association

Roderic Morgan, HPRA (Leeds)
Mina Kainyek, LTF
Stuart Hodgkinson, University of Leeds
Marina Richardson, Swarcliffe & Stanks
And others

Excluding people from waiting lists and nominations, and putting homeless into unsuitable private lets, would add pressure on inadequate, expensive and insecure private rented housing, and does nothing to provide the homes we need.

Housing benefit cuts will unfairly hit women, the sick and disabled, the young and vulnerable. They will drive people out of their homes and disrupt communities further. They will not create more homes or reduce high rents.

We demand

- full consultation, including ballots, with existing and would be tenants and other affected, on any tenancy strategies including proposals to change secure tenancies, rents or housing benefit
- no replacement of secure or assured tenancies with fixed term tenancies
- no increase of up to 80 per cent market rents
- Cut rents not benefits – regulate private rents and landlords
- No eviction of tenants in rent arrears due to Housing Benefit cuts
- MPs, Councillors and Tenant Organisations support tenants in campaigning against these attacks on our security, rents and benefits