

KILL the HOUSING BILL

SECURE HOMES FOR ALL CONTROL RENTS



Photos: Debbie Humphry

Evidence to the House of Lords, 2 February 2016



This campaign

is supported by Defend Council Housing, Kirklees Federation of Tenants, Camden Assembly of Tenants, Tower Hamlets Tenants Federation, National Bargee Travellers Association, Radical Housing Network, GMB, Unison, Bakers Food and Allied Workers unions, NUT London Teachers Housing Campaign, Unison Camden LG, Cambridge City and other branches, Unite Housing Workers, the Green Party, John McDonnell MP, London Gypsy Traveller Unit, Islington Hands Off Our Public Services, Islington Private Tenants, Hackney and Waltham Forest Trades Councils, Leeds Hands Off Our Homes, Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, Morning Star

On 2 February 2016 tenants from all sectors, trade unionists and housing campaigners gave evidence to members of the House of Lords about the potential impact of the Housing and Planning Bill. More than 60 people attended the meeting, from a range of backgrounds and places. They shared a variety of experiences and concerns, but there was unanimity that the Bill represents a huge threat to local communities, does nothing to ease the housing crisis and in fact, will make it worse.

The following summary gives a flavour of the evidence given. Thank you to all who took part.



'It is wrong to penalise council tenants in a misguided attempt to address the housing crisis. The promotion of 'Starter Homes' and the removal of the obligation to build social housing for rent makes no sense: if you can't afford your rent how can you afford to buy?'
John Pemberton, Wolverhampton Federation of Tenants Associations



Wolverhampton Tenants

'Tenants across the Midlands are frightened by this Bill. It's immoral that the government is attempting to finance the Right to Buy for Housing Association tenants by forcing councils to sell off their 'high value' homes when they become empty. The proposed 'Pay to Stay' will cause hardship and damage mixed communities. A household of three people with total income of £30,000, i.e. three people earning less than the minimum wage, could be asked to pay rent at almost market levels. How is that an encouragement to work? And the question is, how will it be policed? It will result in an administrative nightmare and there are legal issues that the government appears not to have considered.'

'Secure tenancies have built settled communities. If the Bill abolishes them, there will be no incentive for people to improve their homes or be active in their communities. It is wrong to penalise council tenants in a misguided attempt to address the housing crisis. The promotion of 'Starter Homes' and the removal of the obligation to build social housing for rent makes no sense: if you can't afford your rent how can you afford to buy? If you want to help private tenants, cap private rents. It is no longer possible to feel pride in Britain when so many have no decent home and tented communities spring up all over the country as homelessness increases.'

Custom House Tenants, east London

'The tenants in Custom House are part of the People's Alliance. Many would be adversely affected by the Bill. Instability in communities will result from the lack of secure tenancies. Regeneration in Custom House will put up prices beyond what people can afford. Residents believe that the community will be destroyed by the dash for profits.'

Kilburn Housing Co-op

'Our Co-op has worked hard to keep rents low and affordable. The low rents are subsidised by unwaged work, with volunteers contributing their time to the co-op. The imposition of 1% annual rent reductions will severely impact us. It is absurd that these rent reductions are being imposed on social housing at the same time as private sector rents are allowed to spiral through the roof. Housing co-ops are pressing for an exemption from the rent reduction because they are not the same as housing associations. They are concerned about the Bill and will protest at the grotesque idea that the private market is allowed to operate unfettered by regulation as the affordable sector is trashed.'

A housing association tenant from Kensington

'I've worked all my life. I live with my 30 year-old son, who can't afford a home of his own and together we have a household income of £40,300. I'd like to be able to save for my retirement, but that won't happen if I'm expected to pay the near market rent that will effectively take the whole of our joint income. I could end up relying on benefits. The average age of housing association tenants is high. We took tenancies in the 1960s and '70s not because we were vulnerable but because it was normal. The social contract was that we do all these ordinary jobs and we get housing we can live in. We are not being subsidised. We've *paid* for our housing, over and over again. Out of current rents we are paying for the upkeep of the buildings, plus service charges, plus taxes. Many will be in the same position as me and fearful of the future.'

The London Gypsy Travellers Unit

'Our members already struggle to find suitable homes. We will be even more discriminated against under the Bill that reduces the obligation for local authorities to

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Mick Patrick, Harlow tenants



provide permanent sites. Sections 225 and 226 of the Bill would remove a clause that requires councils to assess the needs of Gypsies and Travellers. This proposal plus a change in definition which only recognises those living illegally at the side of the road as Travellers, disregards our cultural identity. This Bill could mean that no more Travellers' sites will be built, at a time when existing sites are already over-crowded.'

UNISON trade union

'The union has undertaken extensive research of our members about the impact of the housing crisis on their quality of life. This Bill will do nothing to increase the amount of genuinely affordable homes and we now wonder where the low paid are going to live? In the past UNISON members have largely been home owners, but now they are more likely to be tenants in the private sector, particularly young members. Housing has been identified as the biggest issue for our members. One in four say that rent is a problem, many are paying 60% of their income to keep a roof over their head, but also experience sub-standard conditions and the constant threat of eviction.'

Harlow Council Tenant

'The Housing Bill will be a disaster for Harlow and the other New Towns that were founded on good quality, permanent, secure, affordable council housing. Harlow's the fourth most deprived town in Essex. It has experienced a massive population increase as people move out from London trying to find a home they can afford. The new build that has taken place has delivered only 10 to 20% social housing even though there are 3,500 people on the housing waiting list. When the New Town of Harlow was built, council homes were built at a cost of £2,000 each. Tenants have paid this amount back in rent several times over. It is wrong to say that council housing is subsidised housing.'

Defend Council Housing – Southwark

'The proposal that private developers can build state-subsidised 'Starter Homes' instead of homes for social rent won't help many people in Southwark. You'd need a salary of £75,000 a year to afford a Starter Home, far more than most people in housing need can afford. So-called 'Pay to Stay' will push more working families into poverty, on to benefits, or out of the borough. For example, a couple, both hospital workers, with a combined income of £51,000 if pushed onto market rent would pay £448.16 a week, 47% of their income.'

Generation Rent

'We're glad to see the Bill contains some attempt to improve conditions for private renters, but we also need real improvements to security of tenure. As the housing shortage increases there's been a spike in 'no fault' evictions and many tenants are frightened to demand the repairs and service they're entitled to. We're also very concerned that 'Starter Homes' will crowd out the building of new social housing by providing tax payer funded subsidies to a buyer who could sell the property at market rate and make a significant profit. The 20% discount should be in place in perpetuity so that future first time buyers can benefit.'

Kennington Park estate – Tenants Assoc chair

'Our tenants are scared stiff because they know we are sitting on prime real estate. Market rents are artificially high. I pay £140 a week, the tenants in the flat above pay £200 per room, or £800 for the same size flat, and that is with a relatively good private landlord who only fits two tenants to a room. That then becomes the market rent! So my rent could go up from £6,000 to £24,000 just like that. People are on fixed incomes and the Bill makes no exclusion for pensioners.'





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East Thames Housing Association tenant

‘There could be thousands who won’t be able to pay and have nowhere to go to. They will stay and won’t pay. To avoid a rebellion like the poll tax the Act will have to be repealed. This is the London Clearances, like the Highland Clearances.’

The following other concerns were raised:

- ‘To identify which tenants would be subject to ‘Pay to Stay’ the landlord will have to means test everyone. This will change the relationship between landlord and tenant, be divisive and there is no legal or administrative basis for gathering this information.’
- ‘Vulnerable and disabled tenants who have lived in their homes for 30 to 35 years are particularly anxious about the changes. Nobody has given them the information they need. They don’t know what their rights are or where they stand. They are concerned about the breakup of communities that they have built and been supported by.’
- ‘I am a teacher and I earn £40,000, and pay £700 a month for my council flat, which is in an area where one bed flats rent privately for £2,500. I will not be able to pay near-market rent and will go down to part time work. I now pay higher rate tax, helping the government coffers. How will that help? I know lots of others in a similar situation. It will make my old age impoverished. If I get tossed out for being some sort of wealthy undeserving person, Camden Council will be forced to sell my flat and then a wealthy developer will rent it out at much higher cost.’
- ‘What’s in the Bill for people on the housing list? It’s as if the housing list is a phantom that does not exist. The Bill offers them nothing.’

- ‘Pay to Stay will break up families – a joint income will push many people over the threshold, even if they are on below average wages, and one partner will be forced to move out so the other can stay with the children. Young people will be forced to leave home if they start earning, and some couples will not be able to move in together or marry. This will also put additional pressure on housing stock, increase homelessness, prices, rents, and the cost of Housing Benefits.’

- ‘There’s a recruitment crisis in many professions in London. This Bill will only make matters worse.’
- ‘What’s going to happen at the end of time-limited tenancies? Tenants may find that when the tenancy is reviewed at the end of the period they’re assessed as no longer in priority need and therefore the Council has no requirement to house them. This is a real concern to those with children once those children are no longer dependents.’
- Removing secure tenancies means any council tenant who applies to move will lose security; this would include those who transfer because their homes are overcrowded or bigger than they need. Women who have been victims of domestic violence will have to choose between their safety and their family housing security.’
- ‘Many council estates are strong, local communities, where people care for each other, for family and for vulnerable or disabled tenants. As a Myatts Field South estate tenant representative said, ‘we’ve got an estate that works’.
- ‘Many council estates are now being lined up for comprehensive ‘regeneration’ and the Bill’s plans to re-designate them as ‘brownfield’ sites will accelerate this. But what’s going to happen to the rights of tenants and leaseholders?’