

DEFEND COUNCIL HOUSING

ELECTION 2005 QUESTIONS TO CANDIDATES

Successive governments have been trying to get rid of council housing. The last government pushed three options of stock transfer, PFI and Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs).

But they faced increasing resistance from a broad cross party campaign of tenants, trade unions, councillors and MPs who are calling for a 'fourth option' to give tenants real choice. The 'fourth option' would provide a level playing field and allow councils to invest directly in their homes.

Half the local authorities in England, all but one in Wales and the majority in Scotland still have council housing. Many urgently require additional investment to improve their homes. Allowing councils to invest direct makes sense. Council housing is cheaper to build, manage and maintain than the alternatives and the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee concluded that councils could improve homes for £1300 less than alternative landlords.

The housing crisis is causing misery for millions: more families are living in temporary accommodation, overcrowding is affecting many households and many others are facing severe financial problems from market forces in the private sector.

We want to know what candidates in this election think about these issues.



Do you agree?

Yes / No 1 Council tenants should have the right to choose to keep their secure tenancies and lower rents and still get their homes improved

Yes / No 2 Councils should be on a 'level playing field' with other landlords and have the same right to borrow against their income to fund improvements to existing and build new homes

Yes / No 3 The £1.5 billion government takes from tenants rents and the £550 million profit from 'right to buy' sales each year should be reinvested in council housing

Yes / No 4 Since council housing is cheaper to build, manage and maintain than the alternatives local authorities should be enabled to continue to provide council housing if they choose

Yes / No 5 The ODPM Select Committee was right to conclude that the government is being 'dogmatic' in forcing councils to stock transfer, PFI or ALMO their homes

Yes / No 6 Many local authorities experience real problems making Registered Social Landlords accountable to their tenants and elected local councillors

Yes / No 7 Legal constraints on private company directors mean that tenants on the board are required to act in the interest of the company and are not allowed to act as representatives

Yes / No 8 The policy of encouraging RSL mergers and takeovers is leading to a few multi million national companies that will be more remote and less accountable than existing council landlords

Yes / No 9 There is no evidence of any benefit from separating housing strategy from housing management to justify forcing local authorities to get rid of their homes before they can make improvements

Yes / No 10 Councils consulting tenants should be required to conduct a 'fair and balanced' debate so that tenants hear all the arguments before a formal ballot

Yes / No I support the campaign for the 'fourth option'

and pledge to join with tenants, trade unions, councillors and MPs to urge the next government to agree the 'fourth option' to allow councils to invest in their homes and give tenants real choice

Name

Signature

Constituency

Political Party

Defend Council Housing Background Briefing



Q1

'secure tenancies' and lower rents

Council tenants have a unique 'secure tenancy' which prevents landlords using the hated Ground 8 to get a mandatory eviction. Council rents are also lower - 20% on average than Registered Social Landlords

Q2

a 'level playing field' for council housing

Unlike other types of landlord councils are not allowed to keep all the income from tenants rents or all the proceeds from capital receipts to re-invest. This discrimination is the major cause of the backlog in repairs and improvements

Q3

the robbery goes on...

Government siphons off £1.5 billion from tenants rents each year along with £0.55 billion in 'right to buy' receipts. Selling homes to RSLs leads to higher rents and so higher housing benefit bills too. Money that could be re-invested

Q4

cheaper to build, manage and maintain than the alternatives

Councils can borrow at lower rates of interest, don't pay telephone number salaries to senior managers or pay VAT. Millions can also be saved on consultants and expensive setup costs involved with privatisation

Q5

dogmatic pursuit of privatisation

The ODPM Select Committee of senior backbench MPs accused the government of being dogmatic and supported the arguments for a level playing field and an investment allowance to give tenants real choice

Q6

RSLs unaccountable

Many councils experience real problems trying to hold RSLs to account. Shelter found 43% of local authorities after transfer had trouble discharging their homeless responsibilities and their record on repairs is notorious

Q7

tenant power a con

Councils pretend tenant directors gives us real power but the Audit Commission says 'Often this misapprehension is a direct result of mis-selling the role at the time of the transfer'. Research shows their role is 'symbolic'

Q8

mergers and takeovers

Almost every day the press reports another RSLs is being subsumed into a major regional or national company. Many are diversifying into building 'homes for sale' and other partnerships with the private sector

Q9

no evidence separate company brings benefits

Ministers claimed that hiving off housing into a separate company improves services but there is absolutely no evidence to support this. Many councils argue the opposite - that separation leads to conflicts of interest

Q10

democracy goes to the wall

Councils conduct one-sided privatisation PR campaigns paid from tenants rents. Increasingly they call ballots early - before tenants have heard the case against, take down anti privatisation posters and refuse use of local halls

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ★ Send a copy of the 10 questions and pledge to every candidate in your area
- ★ Tell the local papers, radio and TV and ask them to contact all the candidates and report on their responses
- ★ Write a letter to the local paper and raise the questions on radio phone-ins
- ★ If candidates are speaking at local meetings make sure these questions are raised
- ★ Hand out the questions when candidates go 'walkabout' on estates or in shopping areas



For more background information look on the campaign website

And let DCH know what response you get so we can publish returns on the website

defendcouncilhousing.org.uk

The 'Fourth option'

Tenants, and our supporters amongst councillors, MPs and trade unions, are campaigning for the 'fourth option' as an alternative to the three options of stock transfer, PFI and ALMOs. We say government should ring-fence all the money that belongs to council housing to provide an 'investment allowance' that would enable councils to borrow prudentially to carry out improvements to our homes direct. The proposal has been supported by the ODPM Select Committee, Local Government Association, the TUC and major unions, several political parties, and many local authorities who have given evidence to the House of Commons Council Housing group's inquiry.