

OPEN LETTER TO THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, 1 November 2004

“A PROMISE IS A PROMISE”

Dear John Prescott,

AT THE Labour Party Conference on September 26th you said: “Public financing of housing doesn’t treat local authorities on a level playing field and I want to see that changed and I promised to do that and look at an enquiry into it”. You told delegates you were “near agreement”. Your housing minister said after the vote: “We recognise yesterday’s vote and we will engage as a result of that...We are continuing the review as we promised to do...We are continuing a negotiation, a discussion, with the various interested parties.”

This public commitment to a level playing field for council housing by the Deputy Prime Minister, accompanied by a promise of an inquiry, is a promise council tenants around the country expect to be honoured.

However in your letter to Austin Mitchell MP, delivered in time for the DCH national conference on October 29, attended by more than 350 council tenants, local councillors, trade unionists and MPs from 86 areas, you say “The review mentioned in your letter was explicitly conditional on the mover of the alternative wording... agreeing to withdraw”.

In discussions leading up to the conference we understand significant progress was made on the issue of allowing ‘good’ performing authorities to access the additional investment currently conditional on ALMOs – without the need for councils to set up a private company. We also understand that the Treasury broadly accepted the clear financial evidence we have presented demonstrating that the ‘fourth option’ is financially viable.

This offers a clear way forward. If your department also agrees to provide commitment and resources for a ‘Continuous Improvement Task Force’ – to bring together best practice on issues such as voids, repairs and housing strategy – it would help all authorities improve their performance and access these funds.

The current government position is inconsistent and flies in the face of evidence from the National Audit Office, the Commons Public Accounts and ODPM Select Committees, the Local Government Association, House of Commons Council Housing group of MPs, trade unions and others. Privatisation of council housing is deeply unpopular and there is no evidence to support the dogmatic insistence on separating housing management from strategy.

Government Ministers have put considerable emphasis on ‘choice in public services’. Denying council tenants the right to choose to remain as council tenants and get improvements to their homes clearly fails this test.

We urge you to stand by the commitment you made – this is not a procedural game. A promise is a promise.



