

Notes on [Housing for the Many: A Labour Party Green Paper](#) - The good, the bad and the worrying

Introduction

Taking the most optimistic view, the Green Paper offers a real shift in the right direction. Alternatively, it's a recipe for half-measures and the continuation of failed pro-market policies. Campaign pressure will decide which. There are some important things to welcome, but overall a lack of ambition/vision, compounded by worrying vagueness on critical issues. These are the pressure points around which we must focus our campaign energies.

The Good

Labour is taking the housing issue seriously; this is very welcome and reflects both the depths of the crisis and campaign pressure for action. Alongside a recognition that Grenfell captures the failure of current/recent policy, good points in the Green Paper are:

- Ending the 2010 'Affordable Rent' tenure (i.e. up to 80% of market level).
- Scrapping Bedroom Tax and protecting Housing Benefit for under-21s.
- "Pausing" (but not scrapping) Universal Credit.
- Stopping the loss of social rented homes by ending conversions by HAs to Affordable Rents, suspending Right to Buy and not requiring councils to sell-off "high value" empties.
- Scrapping Conservative government plans to end secure tenancies.
- Redirecting government subsidies away from Housing Benefit, towards direct investment in new homes.
- Lifting borrowing caps so councils can build more homes.
- Ballots on estate regeneration schemes involving demolition, no loss of social housing and "like for like" offer for existing residents to return.
- Keeping the Land Registry in public hands.
- Making apprenticeships a condition of housing grants to developers.
- Allowing councils to charge 300% Council Tax premium on homes empty for over a year.
- Commitment to fit sprinklers to high-rises.
- Extension of Decent Homes programme (but not much detail on this).
- Extending Freedom of Information to HAs and TMOs.

The problem is that even these "commitments" are written in a way that allows too much wriggle-room and space for compromise.

The Bad

- No repeal of the Housing and Planning Act (2016).
- No explicit commitment to build council homes.
- No firm commitment to address the corporate practices of HAs.
- No commitment to retain public land to build council housing.
- Housing investment of £4bn, ie 2010 level, which isn't enough.

It's a mistake to present ideas for social housing without reference to other sectors, particularly private renting. It's essential to link them, or risk divisiveness.

The worrying

Labour's general failure to seriously campaign on an alternative set of housing policies, is also reflected in the Green Paper, which is full of conditionality, caveats and potential cop-outs.

While quite rightly ditching the government's ridiculous definition of "affordable housing", the paper presents another one that could become equally discredited.

Instead of a simple, unambiguous statement in favour of council housing as the only genuinely affordable rented housing, Labour's Green Paper presents five different varieties of "affordable" housing. This is over-complicated, prone to manipulation by politicians and developers and potentially divisive. This approach is heavily influenced by Sadiq Khan's emerging policies (although recent comments suggest he may be having second thoughts) and by US housing

policies. It runs the real danger that investment doesn't go where it's needed most.

The paper continues the practice of suggesting that homes provided by councils and HAs are basically the same, blurring the central question of publicly-owned land and housing as a key protection against private market pressures.

Where there is mention of the importance of councils building again, it's qualified with use of local housing companies and commissioning, neither of which can produce genuine council housing that's public in perpetuity. While lifting the cap on council's borrowing is welcome, there's nothing about writing-off historic debt.

It's good that Labour's Green Paper is not playing a vacuous "numbers game" and talks about the type of homes we need, not just the amount. But some firm numbers on how many council homes a Labour government would build, would help win the argument. Instead, the numbers that are provided look unconvincing.

The Paper has clearly been heavily influenced by the HA lobbying machine. There is only muted criticism of the sector and nothing tangible about how it can be reformed. It repeatedly suggests that HAs have been "forced" to become more commercial, when in fact they've lobbied for it.

Equally, there's no plan to control or regulate private developers.

In conclusion, the Green Paper is a step in the right direction, but not a bold enough one.