

Homes for All response to Green Paper issued August 2018

The Government's green paper - "A new deal for social housing"- comes against a background of failure. Since 2015, this Government's one major piece of housing legislation, the Housing and Planning Act 2016, has disintegrated under campaign pressure. Four housing ministers have issued two more inconsequential White Papers.

This Green paper includes two further climb downs on the 2016 Housing and Planning Act. It abandons plans to force councils to sell off higher value homes, or pay a levy, and will scrap the law on this. And Councils will not, for the time being, be forced to give new tenants Fixed Term (two year minimum) tenancies instead of permanent secure tenancies – though Ministers want to come back to this.

This shows a weak government desperately trying to change its reputation, without the real action needed to make a difference. But it's also fundamentally dishonest. Behind fake post-Grenfell sympathy, it proposes measures which look to be directed at more privatisations, and a new stick to beat council housing with.

In 74 pages of talk about the importance of council housing and housing associations, and the need to respect tenants, there is little of substance, and no commitment to the direct investment needed to produce the "new generation of council homes" the Prime Minister says she wants, in her intro.

The paper covers five main areas:

1. Safe homes – including maintenance, repairs and decent homes standards
2. Responding to tenant and leaseholder complaints and resolving disputes with landlords
3. Regulation, inspection and making residents' voices heard
4. Ending stigma for tenants
5. More council and housing association homes

It includes five main threats we reject:

- Performance indicators and an 'easy comparison' table of landlords with a 'friends and family' test. We want clear and absolute rights and standards we can hold landlords to, and more say for tenants in enforcing these
- The language of 'more choice' by comparing services, is false. This would give more power to Government and Regulators (who set the agenda and choose the indicators) . To stop abuses and institutional indifference as at Kensington & Chelsea, tenants and leaseholders need more powers and checks on landlords
- Financial penalties on landlords to deter bad practises would punish tenants and leaseholders and threaten more privatisations, take overs and mergers. These do not improve landlord services, but generally make them more remote, while undermining tenants' voice and rights
- To increase truly affordable, non-market rented homes is vital, and requires direct investment through grant, requiring councils to build homes for council rent. Housing associations should only receive public funding if they build homes to meet local housing need, recognise and work with independent tenant organisation, and are democratically accountable.
- Money raised from Right to Buy receipts should be returned to councils and ring fenced for council housing investment – it should not be used to build more shared-ownership and unAffordable Rent homes.

1. Safe homes

The paper claims councils have been 'fully funded' to do the necessary fire safety work, exposed after Grenfell. In fact the £400 million of funding is not enough to cover all the work needed, and is being cut from the rest of the housing budget. Government deregulation measures and underfunding created this danger, and government must bear the cost of correcting it.

We demand full funding for all the necessary fire and other safety works, to large panel systems and others, necessary to bring all homes to safe standards. This must be in addition to, not taken out of, existing housing budgets.

Ministers have announced since this paper, a ban on flammable cladding, which it seems is not a complete ban, according to the Fire Brigades Union. Partial measures and posturing are dangerous

and unacceptable. Ministers are 'consulting' on restricting or banning 'desktop studies' of cladding systems, and on banning the use of combustible materials in the external walls of high-rise residential buildings [para 29]. They propose that residents should have the right to see fire risk assessments and other detailed safety information. [para 33].

We say ban desk top studies and use of combustible materials immediately, and restore full independent and enforceable fire safety and building regulation, with residents having full rights to see these.

The Paper also proposes a review of the current decent homes standard, to enforce safety standards.

2. Complaints, disputes

The paper says 'residents should have a stronger voice to influence decisions', a good complaints process and redress. But it doesn't propose anything that would make this happen.

We say: residents die when landlords don't listen. Tenant-led inspection, reporting and scrutiny are key. Restore independent tenant and leaseholder organisation, with a duty on all landlords to encourage, fund and recognise them. We demand regular tenant-led inspection, reporting directly to the relevant committee/Board. Include elected tenant and leaseholder representatives to oversee and scrutinise housing strategy and decision making.

The paper proposes new performance indicators to 'compare the performance of landlords'. How does it help tenants in east London, to know that a Yorkshire landlord is better at gardening? The paper seriously suggests that tenants and leaseholders need landlord league tables to help us understand the alternative to poor landlord services. We know what a good service is, and what needs doing to a leaking roof, draughty windows or failing lifts and heating systems!

Introducing landlord league tables will waste millions of pounds to create extra layers of bureaucracy and form filling, without improving or building one home. After cutting 60 per cent of housing funding in 2010, and undermined housing service funding, this is the kind of gimmick we've seen used in public education and health services. Manipulating fears in the name of improving "accountability" after Grenfell is rank hypocrisy and cynicism.

3. Regulation, inspection, tenants voice

Regulation must be to meet minimum absolute standards agreed by tenants. Tenants and leaseholders must be part of any inspection process. The purpose must be to expose any failings and improve these.

We reject an Ofsted- style inspectorate and league tables, used to further privatise, outsource and deregulate services, undermine local democratic accountability and drive through Government's aims. Ministers' true intention is revealed on page 38, referring to a "new stock transfer programme" under the guise of "empowering residents".

This same disingenuous language was used while giving away 1.3 million council homes to housing associations (HAs) between 1997 and 2010. Many promises were made to tenants to persuade them to transfer: very few were kept. The results were higher rents, weaker tenancies and longer waiting lists. HAs, even those claiming to be "community-led", have proved to be less accountable - and increasingly business-oriented - landlords.

4. Stigma

The policies of this and previous governments have undermined council housing, cut services and undermined building standards and regulation. The running down of standards and the acute shortage and rationing of housing, the Bedroom Tax, other benefit cuts and accusations that tenants are unwanted, 'subsidised', 'scroungers' have created the "stigma" on tenants that Ministers are now claiming to care about.

Council housing is not 'subsidised housing' – it more than pays for itself. Government has for decades siphoned off money from rents: this needs to be refunded, and the false 'historic debt' lifted from council housing, to invest in existing and new first-class, energy efficient homes for council rent.

5. More council and housing association homes

After Grenfell, the government needs to put right a lethal legacy. This green paper won't.

- **We need to decisively reject privatisation and firm up commitments to invest in council housing, including fully funding safety works.**
- **We demand a residents' ballot on any redevelopment scheme, before planning permission or works can be approved. This is the way to make landlords listen.**
- **Truly independent, properly funded, tenant organisations are vital for rebuilding the trust lost before and since Grenfell.**
- **All public land must be ring fenced for use to build council homes to meet local housing need; 50 per cent ratio for other private development sites.**
- **We need a plan based on investment in existing and new decent, secure, genuinely affordable, energy efficient and safe homes for all.**