

The background of the entire poster is a photograph of a construction site. Two workers in hard hats are silhouetted against a bright, orange and yellow sunset sky. They are standing on a steel framework of a building under construction. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds.

# HOMES FOR THE PEOPLE NOT THE PROFITEERS

Housing Commission  
Communist Party £2

**Do you work in HOUSING? Whether you are building homes, campaigning against rent rises, working in urban or rural planning, or struggling to improve your neighbourhood, there's a place for you in the COMMUNIST PARTY.**

**It's the only party with policies to solve the homes crisis, the run-down and sell-off of housing services and would take radical action to control the speculators.**

**Our Housing Commission brings together campaigners, researchers and those who actually build homes, fit for the people, driven by an accountable public sector. Join us, get involved.**

**Our party is owned by the workers, not the billionaire 'developers'.**

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# **Introduction: why housing matters**

Every human being wants, and needs, a roof over their head. We all want a place of safety, for ourselves and our loved ones. A good quality, affordable home is a basic human right – and one which is denied to millions of our fellow citizens. Homelessness and the lack of affordable homes to rent or buy, for all age groups, is a chronic and growing political and social crisis in England, Scotland and Wales today.

Homelessness and poor quality, insecure and expensive housing have devastating consequences for the physical and mental health of working class, poor and vulnerable citizens; children's education and family stability; social cohesion and community development and job security.

Deregulation, outsourcing and privatisation culminated in the horrific loss of life at Grenfell Tower with further disasters waiting to happen in the new slums of permitted developments, while more than a decade of austerity has seen the loss of enforcement resources and expertise in local authorities.

This crisis illustrates the class basis of inequality and oppression within our society. Here we see exposed the devastating impact of rentier capitalism and property speculation.

The Communist Party of Britain campaigns for a new approach to housing designed to meet the needs of the peoples of Britain and eradicating homelessness, rather than creating super profits for landowners, developers, their shareholders and bankers.

## **From private to public and back again – a brief history of social housing**

The first council housing was built after the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act with the first council estate, Boundary Green, developed in Shoreditch, East London over the following decade.

At the end of the First World War 75% of the population lived in the private rented sector (PRS)[1]. There was no security for tenants, conditions were often appalling, particularly for the poorest, and overcrowding was

endemic. The 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act, (the 'Addison Act') was passed in response to social unrest at housing conditions before and during WW1, leading to a commitment by Lloyd George to build 500,000 'homes fit for heroes'. The target was not met, but subsequent legislation cemented the powers for local authorities to build housing.

By the late 1960s more households were renting socially than privately, overwhelmingly in council homes, and by 1971 the number of owner occupiers roughly equalled those who were renting. After that date owner occupancy would be the most common form of tenure in the Britain.

In 1979, the PRS accounted for less than 10% of housing while 31% were council homes, accommodating over 40% of the population [2]. By this time rent regulation and security of tenure restricted private landlords' profits and their ability to evict tenants at will. Margaret Thatcher's government deregulated the PRS in 1988 – abolishing security of tenure and rent controls for new tenants. The PRS is now the second largest housing sector in England – with over half a million more tenants than in council and housing association properties combined.

The 'Right to Buy' – introduced by Thatcher in 1981 – has so far resulted in the privatisation of over two million council homes. Initially sold to sitting tenants with a public subsidy in the form of a 'discount' on the market value, (increased by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition in 2012 to a maximum of £112,000 in London), around 40% of these homes are now in the hands of buy-to-let landlords, charging up to three times the council rent for the same properties [3].

Some 1.3 million council homes were transferred to housing associations between 1988 and 2008 [4] The Blair/Brown government insisted on the incremental privatisation of council housing in order to take the cost of borrowing for its Decent Homes Programme and new build off the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR). This consolidated the decimation of council housing; local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales owned fewer than 1.6 million properties by 2018, against five million in 1979 [5].

Across Britain, only 17% of households now live in council or housing association properties, of which around 7% are still in council ownership. 19% now live in the PRS while 64% are owner/occupiers [6].

Social housing was defined as low-cost accommodation provided either by local authorities (council housing), or housing associations – not for profit organisations, on long-term or secure tenancies. It is now increasingly targeted at households which cannot afford to meet their housing need in the market. As an affordable option for the population as a whole it has been completely undermined by successive governments despite a million households on council housing waiting lists indicating enduring demand for the security of low-cost, publicly-owned and run housing.

Most recently the 2016 Housing and Planning Act intended to abolish secure and assured tenancies for new council and housing association tenants in England, replacing these with fixed term tenancies of up to ten years with succession rights restricted to fixed term tenancies only. The strong opposition from council and housing association landlords resulted in the British government deferring the full application of this provision, leaving it open to individual landlords to decide whether to apply fixed terms to new tenancies. Many did not due to the administrative and financial burden of reviewing and renewing fixed term tenancies, but some, including Britain's largest landlord, Clarion, did.

This Act also introduced the concept of 'pay to stay' where local authorities were given the power to charge market rents to tenants earning in excess of £60,000 per annum. The original proposal was to make this a requirement for anyone earning in excess of £30,000. This was dropped in the face of strong opposition from landlords and campaigning groups which pointed out the disincentive to work such a proposal would have, and the fact that there is no legal mechanism that can require tenants to declare their incomes to their landlord.

## **Divergence in Scotland and Wales**

While the broad framework of housing policy has been the same across Britain, executive and then legislative devolution for Scotland and Wales has brought about some significant divergences in policy. These have reflected the different balance of political forces in each country. In Wales, Labour has been in office continuously since 1998, sometimes in official or unofficial coalitions with Plaid Cymru or the Liberal Democrats, governing with a social-democratic outlook. In Scotland, the SNP took control from neoliberal Labour in 2007.

Since then, governments in Edinburgh and Cardiff have pursued more progressive policies, especially in areas such as private-sector rents and tenancies, planning, council housing and – notably in Wales – second or ‘holiday’ homes. The ‘Right to Buy’ council houses was abolished in 2016 in Scotland and 2019 in Wales. Moreover, the Scottish and Welsh governments have expanded tenants’ rights and provided support for council-house building.

In Scotland, short-term caps have been imposed on private sector rents, while permanent accommodation has been provided for homeless people. In Wales, a progressive Land Transaction Tax (in place of Stamp Duty), council tax rates (up to three times higher) and planning restrictions are being used to discourage holiday home ownership which has had such a damaging impact on local community life and the Welsh language. Scotland also operates a Land and Buildings Transaction Tax and a double-rate council tax on second homes. Both transaction taxes raise revenue directly for the Welsh and Scottish governments.

However, care should be taken not to exaggerate the impact of these divergences. In some cases they could have been bolder, despite a lack of powers and resources, and they have not fundamentally resolved major problems when it comes to unfit and affordable housing, land ownership and use, tenants’ rights and land and property speculation. In particular, these progressive policies have not ended the domination of housing across Britain by market forces, private and corporate ownership and the drive for profit. Nor, in themselves, can they bring the economic stability and social justice that people and their communities so desperately need. |

## **Housing and working-class struggle**

Tenants in Britain, throughout Europe, and in many other countries, have organised groups, federations, and movements for over a hundred years.

Housing struggles across England, Scotland and Wales have been a continuous but often overlooked feature of political activity since the 1880s, with male workplace struggles taking centre stage. Community and Tenant organisations have usually been led by women and have forced through significant legislation in some cases.



The earliest was part of the Great Dock Strike of 1889 in London, where workers withheld rent as part of their battle against dangerous working conditions, precarious employment and low pay. This rent strike helped them to win their battle and to form a new trade union.

The late part of the 19th century saw rent strikes breaking out among tenant farmers in Ireland, against the owners of large estates. In 1901 90% of renters on the estate of Baron De Freyne in Roscommon County withheld rent, resisted evictions by building barricades, fought the police, and illegally constructed new dwellings. This caused a national scandal and in 1903 the English Parliament was forced to adopt extensive agrarian reform, putting an end to the system of tenant farming.

## Heroes and villains

During WW1, while men were away fighting, the women left behind were seen as easy targets by landlords of tenement buildings in Glasgow. They imposed a 25% rent increase and those unable to pay faced eviction. The Glasgow Women's Housing Association, led by Mary Barbour, Mary Laird and Helen Crawford started the backlash against this in May 1915.

Mass demonstrations, eviction resistance and rent strikes ensued. By November, 20,000 people were on rent strike and trade unions, in defiance of wartime regulations were threatening strikes in support of their members who were tenants.

Fearful that munitions production could be affected and that a unified challenge to government authority might unfold, the 1915 Rent Act was introduced which established rent controls in Britain for the first time, fixing rent to pre-war levels. A few years later the Addison Act made state provision of housing a right for the first time. The scale, intensity and strategic power of the Glasgow Rent Strikes made them the decisive factor in forcing this legislation.

The government sought to reverse the Addison Act soon after WW1 but a sustained campaign against rent increases in Clydebanks between 1920-27 prevented this. Direct-action tactics and legal activity were used to prevent persistent attempts to decontrol and raise rents, while blocking multiple evictions in the area.

The International Union of Tenants was founded in 1926, revived in 1955, and is still in existence. For much of that time tenants' organisations have been seen as allies and reflections of the trade union movement in working class neighbourhoods.

Stepney Tenants Defence League (STDL) was set up to fight rising rents and poor conditions endured by the inhabitants of East London slums in 1938. It was led predominantly by women and communist Ella Donovan became a full time organiser for the STDL teaching tenants how to organise, determine their legal rights and collectively fight landlords. By the end of February 1939, the STDL had recovered £10,000 in overcharged rents and had won rent reductions totalling £18,000. It had also forced landlords to carry out numerous repairs.

There were also significant rent strikes in Birmingham and Leeds in the 1930s. Leeds tenants had already been involved in an unsuccessful rent strike in 1914. The 1934 rent strike was the first time the council tenants movement came out in serious opposition to its local authority landlord.

Many existing council tenants saw their rents double in order to subsidise the cost of housing people from the slums and were subjected to means testing to qualify for rebates. This sowed division between tenants and was further fuelled by Conservative councillors claiming that the slum tenants did not deserve to live on the council estates. In return the Labour Party claimed that all rent resisters were high-earners who could afford to buy their own home but preferred to live in a subsidised house.

Those refusing to pay were served with eviction notices and chose to take their cases to court, but the courts ruled in favour of the council. Losing in court, it seems they took out their frustration with the Labour leadership through the ballot box, and the following year, the Conservatives won control of Leeds city council. It is a familiar example of the divide and rule politics that is commonplace today.

## **The post-war fight for homes**

The summer of 1946 saw the biggest squatting movement in British history. Squatters began to move into bases left empty at the end of the war in which Nazi bombs had destroyed 200,000 homes and left another 250,000 uninhabitable.

The first occupations were probably in late 1945 but the movement snow-balled in the summer of 1946, apparently after sympathetic newsreel coverage of a squat at a base near Scunthorpe.

By August almost 40,000 people were squatting in over 1,000 disused bases. Although Communists and others supported them, the squatters, desperate for homes, did not consider their actions political so much as taking matters into their own hands as the new Labour government struggled to tackle the housing shortage.

Occupying empty bases was not an option for homeless people in inner cities so local Communist leaderships began to organise squatting of empty properties, first in Birmingham in August and then in London in September 1946.

A political furore developed after London Communists placed 100 families in an empty seven-storey luxury block in Kensington, then more families in other properties. Five leading London Communists were arrested and put on trial for conspiring to incite and direct trespass.

Further occupations of private property were halted. All five were convicted but not fined or imprisoned, and the Labour government showed increased urgency in tackling the housing crisis, notably delivering over 156,000 pre-fabricated homes between 1946-9 [7]. Originally intended as temporary housing for up to ten years, and erected on empty land, including bomb sites, many were occupied for decades before redevelopment, with some continuing into the 2020s.

1968 to 1973 saw over 80 rent strikes and tenant protests taking place across the country, with varying degrees of success, by private tenants. The withholding of rent of 11,000 London households, along with lobbying and demonstrations led to the passing of legislation limiting rent rises.

## **The 1972 Housing Finance Act**

In 1972 the Tory government of Ted Heath implemented the Housing Finance Act in England and Wales and its equivalent in Scotland which promoted so-called “fair rents”. Local councils would be forced in stages to

increase rents according to the value of the house as if it were for sale on an open housing market.

Kirkby, on the outskirts of Liverpool was built in response to slum clearances from Liverpool docklands. Poor quality design and construction combined with a long backlog of repairs, were apparent from the earliest days along with high unemployment and a lack of facilities and services. By the early 70s, factory closures meant more unemployment for the area.

The '72 Act resulted in a £1 rent rise for Kirkby tenants and this brought long held grievances to a head. Women on the Tower Hill estate formed the Unfair Rents Action Group and organised a rent strike which lasted for 14 months. Rent collectors were followed to ensure nobody paid their rent. Barriers were erected to keep bailiffs out and there were clashes at council meetings.

After 14 months of rent strike, multiple court orders, and two men being jailed, the rent strike was called off. However, the women on the estate did not view this as a defeat. They drew strength from the strike as a blueprint for further community activism and empowerment for working class women.

Under the same legislation, a £1 rent increase for Clay Cross tenants resulted in 21 councillors being surcharged and banned from office, some were bankrupted and their goods and cars seized, for daring to defy the Tory government. The councillors believed that housing was an essential human right, and kept rents low using subsidies from the rate account. They provided elderly persons bungalows with full time 24 hour warden support, but councillors were surcharged for paying wardens a living wage, against the Tory wages controls at the time.

Initially, councils in England, Scotland and Wales pledged to fight the new legislation, but as implementation loomed, one by one they fell away, leaving Clay Cross to stand alone. The Tories were determined to squash any rebellion, and in January 1973 the District Auditor ruled that eleven Clay Cross councillors were 'guilty of negligence and misconduct' and surcharged them 'jointly and severally' a total of £6,350. The 'jointly' bit meant that all were liable for the total, taking them over the £2,000 limit and into automatic disqualification from office.

These councillors were ordinary working people and had no prospect of paying this amount. An appeal was lodged in the High Court: they lost, the



district auditor being awarded a further £2,000 costs. Labour selected a new 'second eleven', ten of which were elected, and their first decision was to continue the policies of their predecessors. They were eventually surcharged a total of £2,229, just enough to ensure their disqualification, for maintaining the fair wages policy.

The government sent in a housing commissioner to collect the rents – Patrick Skillington a retired civil servant from Henley on Thames, a place very unlike Clay Cross. His opening press conference was disrupted and he fled after just ten minutes. He was denied an office by the council and had to work from Chesterfield Hotel, some six miles away. A policy of non co-operation with him was maintained by these 21 councillors, and tenants were asked to only pay the rent as set by the council. When he left (upon local government reorganisation in 1974), not a single penny of the rent increase had been collected. He was not surcharged, but was given a stipend of several thousand pounds for his 'expenses'.

Over subsequent years Labour councils, implementing Tory austerity, have often argued "if we don't do it the government will send commissioners in and it will be much worse", as if Labour cuts were better than Tory ones!

The Labour government of 1974-79 refused to lift the surcharges, the original eleven were bankrupted, unable to obtain credit and lost possessions to bailiffs. The second group of councillors were saved from bankruptcy by donations from the labour movement, but remained barred from office. This tiny town in North Derbyshire fought and kept the Tory government at bay for 2 years, they saw off a commissioner, just imagine what a major city, or many councils standing firm together, could have done – these cuts could have been halted in their tracks.

## **Housing campaigning – down but not out**

By the 1970s the quality of council new build was not sustained as the development of high-rise tower blocks proliferated. Corrupt architects like Poulson and large builders profited. Tenants faced huge heating bills, black mould, asbestos, crumbling panels. This on top of high rent increases following the capitulation to the 72 Act, resulted in tenants organising opposition throughout the country, developing powerful tenants' federations and Tenants' Charters.

Thatcher's Conservatives were elected in 1979 on their notorious 'Right to Buy' slogan, a pledge to abolish council housing, and create a 'property owning democracy'. In addition to implementing, for the first time, secure tenancies for council tenants, the 1980 Act also introduced the so-called 'Right to Buy'. Discounts reached three quarters of market value and nearly half of all council housing was sold, the rest was starved of investment. This criminal neglect was part of the campaign to discredit the idea of council housing and turn working class families against the idea of renting and living on estates.

Over the past three decades the Labour Party has largely abandoned 'council housing' as a political objective, supporting the 'deregulation of the housing market'. Alongside this, tenants' organisations have been systematically weakened and destroyed. Many of the powerful tenants' federations were forced to disband. In 2005 the Liverpool Federation decided, after years of political attacks, funding cuts, and judicial reviews, to wind up the organisation, rather than collaborate in the destruction of tenant rights through the city council's policies.

Tenant organisations were not entirely subdued by these setbacks. In 1985 the Department of Environment Estate Action (EEA) set up an initiative aimed at developing partnerships between government and local authorities to invest in the upgrading of estates while improving management and maintenance. This was followed by the establishment of Housing Action Trusts (HATs) in 1988. These non-departmental public bodies (not dissimilar to Urban Development Corporations) aimed to take over local authority housing within a designated area, ostensibly in order to improve the housing stock and the quality of the environment.

Emphasis was also given to increasing diversity of tenure in areas with high concentrations of council tenants, as the Tories believed this would weaken the Labour vote. The Tories wanted to transfer whole estates to private companies through HATs and encourage private landlords to take over individual estates.

Tenants mobilised and hundreds of meetings were held to explain the implications. Tenants defeated this so called 'Tenants choice' law by demanding the right to ballot and very few estates were transferred to a HAT in consequence. Defend Council Housing and thousands of council tenants mobilised around transfer ballots and ALMOs because tenant organisation won that right in 1988.

This period also produced the National Tenants and Residents Federation (NTRF) in 1989, and a rash of Labour councils setting up more 'tenant participation' in response. Hundreds of 'sponsored tenant organisations' developed, organised and funded by council landlords.

Many independent tenants' organisations were active in the anti-Poll Tax movement which arguably brought down Margaret Thatcher.

The Tenants' and Residents' Organisation of England (TAROE) is an officially recognised resident-led organisation representing tenants and residents across England. It was set up in 1997 as a merger of the National Tenants' Organisation (NTO) and the NTRF. Unfortunately, TAROE was subsumed into the government consultation role and was encouraged to take on roles that were more appropriately performed by councils, e.g. TAROE teamed up with contractor Mears to create a housing inspection service in 2011. The new joint venture company called Asert aimed to employ tenants as customer service champions, tenant inspectors and dignity and energy efficiency champions. The Asert board consisted of two unpaid representatives from TAROE and Mears.

At the European Social Forum in London in October 2004 there were tenant movements from Italy, Central Europe and Russia all describing the struggle against privatisation of housing and the 'neoliberal' Europe championed by Tony Blair.

Tenant organisations, Defend Council Housing and others managed to frustrate the transfer and privatisation policy of Blair's New Labour, and to offer up alternatives but this was insufficient to prevent an escalation of estate transfers under the Labour government's watch. The Blair/Brown governments far from reversing the decline ensured more estate transfers took place under their watch.

These histories suggest that tenants' organisation remains a powerful force. It is not surprising that in campaigns against privatisation both unions and the tenants' movement have been targeted. The tenants' organisations, in 2006, mobilising around Defend Council Housing, suggest that there is still a tenants' *movement*.

Many councils that retained their housing stock were starved of the funds necessary to meet the decent homes target, resulting in a managed de-

cline of stock which has been earmarked for 'regeneration' almost invariably resulting in the decanting and demolition of estates which are then handed over to private developers with those estates which remained in council ownership and management suffering from a lack of investment due to the restriction of subsidy and borrowing.

Today's housing crisis is the legacy of the 'Right to Buy', the Tories' determination to destroy council housing and a failure by the Blair/Brown Labour government to abolish the legislation and resurrect the building of publicly-owned homes at scale. The decision by John Prescott to cap the 'Right to Buy' discount staunched the haemorrhage of council home sales to tenants to a trickle, but the failure to abolish the legislation enabled the coalition government of 2010 to increase the discounts since when over 200,000 more homes have been lost from the council stock.

In the last ten years, there have been some spectacular campaigns run by students against rip-off rents. 150 students at University College London went on rent strike in 2015 and launched the Cut The Rent campaign to tackle poor living conditions and high rents.

Within months around 1,000 students had joined the rent strike and regular demonstrations caught the attention of the media. The following year, negotiations were held with UCL Accommodation, and the students won £850,000 to use as an accommodation bursary over the next 2 years, but the following year they went on strike again and increased the win to £1.2million and a rent reduction for 2018-19.

The 'Cut the Rent' movement spread to other campuses across the country, securing wins for students at Goldsmiths and the University of Sussex.

The occupation and rent strikes on several university campuses during the Covid pandemic was prompted by the disgraceful decision by universities to lure their students into moving into expensive accommodation when they knew the campuses would be closed. There were some superb victories, for instance the campaign led by members of the Young Communist League in Manchester securing huge rent rebates for the students.

It is important to note that as the private sector has grown exponentially, with sky high rents and poor conditions, so has tenant dissatisfaction. This has naturally led to a number of national and regional private sector tenant organisations being formed, fighting for an end to Section 21 'no fault'



evictions, (which are more appropriately described as revenge evictions as they all too often happen after a tenant complaint about disrepair) and organising to defend tenants at risk of eviction. For the working class to once again have a united voice on housing it is important that joint work is developed between groups working in the private rented and social and council rented sectors, not least because many private tenants are living in ex-council properties.

In Wales and Scotland, measures have been introduced to increase private tenants' rights on security, rent increase frequency and to restrict the grounds on which landlords may serve 'no fault' termination notices. As a 'cost of living' response, temporary rent caps have been introduced in Scotland where much of the pressure for reforms has come from the country's tenants' union – Living Rent – and left Labour MSPs. The challenge is now to translate this into a permanent rent control regime as promised by the SNP's Scottish Green Party allies.

## Homelessness

Ken Loach's seminal 1966 film 'Cathy Come Home' gave rise to organisations like Shelter and Crisis campaigning against homelessness, culminating in the 1977 Homeless Persons Act. This, for the first time, placed a statutory duty on local authorities to help homeless households.

Before the 1977 Act, the final, harrowing scenes in the film were a reality for thousands of the poorest families. Children in homeless families were routinely placed into care, many never to return to their parents and thousands transported under the Child Migrant Scheme for fostering and adoption to Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada and Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe). There were no safeguarding procedures in place, resulting in many children subjected to physical and sexual abuse, and conditions of slavery.

The '77 Act, while providing welcome relief for families and vulnerable adults, enshrined the notion of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' homeless people – distinguishing between 'priority' and 'non-priority' and 'intentionally' and 'unintentionally' homeless households.

Those deemed not in priority need were entitled only to unspecified 'advice and assistance', which rarely extended to the provision of accommodation.

The provision for rough sleepers was primarily large dormitory-style hostels, some provided by local authorities, others by charities, notably the Salvation Army. These were often unsanitary, lacked privacy and could be frightening and dangerous places which did little more than provide a bed at night, and respite from police harassment under the Vagrancy Act. Those in priority need, but 'intentionally homeless' (ie homeless as a result of their own behaviour) would only be entitled to short-term emergency accommodation under the provisions of the legislation.

## **One Step Forward, Two Back**

Homelessness began to increase in the mid-1980s, as Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' reduced the housing stock available to help homeless families and council house building came to a standstill. Council housing waiting lists increased, which in turn meant non-homeless households were waiting much longer for help leading to a spiralling of homeless applications as the only route into council housing for households in housing need.

The numbers of families placed long-term in unsuitable temporary accommodation increased exponentially. The 1996 Housing Act consolidated much housing legislation and outlawed the use of B&B and shared accommodation for families with children except for a maximum of six weeks in an emergency.

The introduction of buy-to-let mortgages in 1996 also saw the growth of the amateur landlord and the steady transfer of ex-right to-buy properties into their hands as the former tenants cashed in on the equity gifted to them by Thatcher's brazen attempt to buy the votes of the working class.

## **A strategic wrong-turn**

The last Labour government made the reduction in homelessness a key priority. The 2002 Homelessness Act required local authorities to take a strategic approach to the prevention and relief of homelessness with the intention of reducing both homelessness and the demand for social housing. Local authorities were set targets of halving the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010 and to end rough sleeping.

That strategy was predicated on using the private rented sector (PRS) for households threatened with homelessness. Local authorities in areas of high housing need leased private sector housing for use as temporary accommodation and made use of rent deposit schemes to enable homeless households to access the private rented sector because of the shortage of social housing. Many of the 40% of ex-council homes now owned by private landlords have been leased back to local authorities for use as temporary accommodation or let under rent deposit schemes at far greater cost to the public purse than if they had remained in local authority ownership.

By the time Labour lost the 2010 election its homelessness targets had largely been achieved. Rough sleeping had been all but eliminated. The housing support sector under the Supporting People programme established in 2003 refocused to assist with the prevention of homelessness and enabling people to achieve and sustain independent living in the community. The use of B&B-type accommodation for families had been all but eliminated except on an emergency basis and numbers in temporary accommodation halved.

The election of the Blair government in 1997 did not address the causes of homelessness – a shortage of housing that provides secure and affordable homes for people who could not afford to buy or rent in the private sector including those who needed support to maintain their tenancies. It failed to reintroduce security of tenure or rent regulation for private sector tenants. This failure guaranteed that the PRS could not provide a long-term solution to housing need. A largely unregulated private sector dominated by small and medium-sized landlords would inevitably result in an increase in churn and homelessness as those landlords sought to maximise short-term returns on their investments, typified since 2010 by the conversion of family homes into houses in multiple occupation, single-person bedsits and latterly Air BnBs.

In Scotland, the SNP government has promised support for local authorities tackling conversions to ‘Air BnBs’, but then backs off in response to business interests. There is, though, a welcome commitment to ensure that the homeless move quickly from temporary accommodation into permanent housing. Yet, today, almost 15,000 households are in temporary accommodation as access to genuinely affordable housing is increasingly restricted to the neediest groups. Rather than significantly increase social housing supply, the assumption is that more ‘housing options’ will translate

need into demand for market housing. In Wales, the number of homeless households has doubled to 4,500 since 2016.

## **Cuts, cost-shunting and crisis**

The pressure on local authorities to make extensive use of the PRS to prevent and resolve homelessness laid the foundations for today's crisis. Evictions from the PRS now account for 78% of all homeless cases [8] – many of whom are the people whose previous homelessness was 'prevented' under Labour's strategy by the offer of a private sector tenancy.

The imposition of austerity by the Con-Dem government from 2010 heralded a financial crisis in local government and voluntary sector homelessness services. This began with a cut and then freezing of local housing allowance and temporary accommodation subsidy in 2011, the imposition of the Bedroom tax – cuts of up to 25% on housing benefit if properties were deemed to be under-occupied; and cutting entitlement for single people under the age of 35. Thus, rent increases would not be matched in benefit payments, particularly for private tenants.

Housing support services such as homelessness hostels and women's refuges were also hit hard by the removal of the ring-fence on Supporting People grant – leading to huge cuts in the supported housing sector.

In 2013, the government implemented an overall benefit cap for non-working households – at £350 per week for a single person and £500 per week for a couple or family with dependent children. This meant for a non-working family with two or more children there was no suitable private sector accommodation anywhere in the country that was affordable – and for non-working families with four or more children not even council tenancies were affordable. This meant those local authorities, primarily in London, that were heavily reliant on the PRS for its temporary accommodation supply would have to make up the shortfall – in London this cost was £177million in 2020/21, totalling £1.35 billion between 2015 and 2021 [9] – a subsidy direct from London council-tax payers to private landlords.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2018 (HRA) placed additional duties on local authorities for the prevention and relief of homelessness. This gave increased rights to assistance for people regarded as 'non-priority' but

stopped short of introducing a statutory duty to provide them with accommodation.

Comparing the government's homelessness statistics for the quarter ending December 2009 with those of December 2019, rough sleeping had increased by 250%; the number of homeless acceptances by 350% and there was a 42% increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation [10].

## **Building standards and enforcement**

The right to adequate housing and shelter is written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and is recognised in some national constitutions.

But what are 'adequate standards' and how are they applied?

Immediately after World War 1, the Tudor Walters Report proposed that 'homes fit for heroes' should be pleasant – each with a bath and most with 3 bedrooms – but economical in the use of materials as there was a scarcity of bricks, wood and skilled labour. The newly formed Soviet Union and the ideology of a workers' state was the trigger for the British government to realise that provision of decent housing was crucial to avoid the 'threat of Bolshevism'. However, the reluctance of the government to give adequate subsidies to local councils, meant that cost cutting drove down standards – so size and quality of fittings were compromised.

Sixteen years after World War 2, and after large scale, and sometimes hastily built council housing programmes, the Parker Morris Report stated that 'the problem of designing good homes is the same whoever provides them – both private enterprise and public authority housing alike.' The report continued: 'Since the end of the war, the country has undergone a social and economic revolution, there is full employment, a national health service, and an improved welfare system ... and improved incomes'. The improved incomes also meant that space was needed to accommodate the new consumer commodities and suited an expanding individualised commodity boom.

Parker Morris standards specified relatively generous provision regarding sanitation, floor and storage space and thermal levels.

Adequate space standards also meant a suitable density of housing. So rather than the pre-war squalor of the slums where 50 units of accommodation per acre was the norm— the new planning allowed for an average of 15-17 units per acre. Across England, Scotland and Wales, all major cities embarked on huge slum clearance programmes. The 1950s and 1960s also saw the proliferation of high-rise building. It was argued that tower blocks surrounded by public open space could provide good population density, offering good sized rooms and improved views while being cheap to build, which many of them did and were popular with many tenants.

However poor subsequent public investment in maintenance, management and repairs led to these properties falling into disrepair resulting in later demolition of many blocks, often to make way for private developments.

In the private sector the Parker Morris Standards influenced the 1967 and subsequent standards set by the National House Builders' Registration Council (now the National House Building Council) but were never adopted as written.

Parker Morris standards were not applied in the 1970s to housing associations, so conversion and improvement work was minimal and shoddy, in contrast to council housing.

In the late 1970s, the traditional work of Direct Labour Organisations (the construction, repair and maintenance of council housing), was increasingly put out to tender – notably in Conservative councils. After Thatcher's election Compulsory Competitive Tendering was introduced, resulting in the outsourcing of this work in the vast majority of local authorities. The drive to keep costs to a minimum, meant that the Conservatives abolished Parker Morris standards in 1980. Consequently, council houses became meaner and smaller, along with much private-sector new build.

In 1995, Geoffrey Randall of Research and Information Services proposed the introduction of a comprehensive mandatory licensing scheme to address poor standards in the private rented sector. He reported that 'despite 17 Acts of Parliament and sets of regulations that address the problem', one in 5 private rented houses was statutorily unfit. In this context, government plans to achieve a 50% reduction in the number of non-decent privately-rented homes by 2030 seems woefully under-ambitious [11].

## **After 20 years of Tory neglect – ‘decent homes’**

In 2000, the Labour government set a target – ‘to ensure that all social housing (council and housing association) meets a set of decency standards by 2010.’ In order to keep the costs of investing in improving council housing off the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR), local authorities were pressurised by the Blair government into transferring their stock either to housing associations or set up an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO). Campaigners fought hard to prevent this move away from public accountability, but nevertheless the majority of local authorities transferred some or all of their stock in order to secure the funds needed for large-scale investment, accelerating the privatisation of council housing.

While council stock transfers were more of a feature of the previous Labour administrations in Scotland – the massive privatisation of Glasgow’s housing is the most infamous of these – the SNP administrations have allowed the Wheatley Group to morph from the original Glasgow stock transfer association into a property focused holding company. It is acquiring ex-council and housing association property across Scotland as it diversifies into ‘mid-market rent’. Other national housing associations have been doing the same, Scotland’s distinctive community and tenant-orientated housing associations are being marginalised by this process.

In Wales, with substantial exceptions such as in Cardiff, much council housing stock has been transferred to new housing associations, some on a new ‘mutual’ model. This has resulted in higher rents but also higher investment in existing properties. Levels of public accountability and tenant involvement vary greatly.

## **Housing finance and development**

The combination of the ‘Right to Buy’ and the abolition of private sector rent controls and security of tenure created the conditions in which housing became a commodity for private investment. This was accelerated by the de-mutualisation of building societies, deregulation of the financial sector and an explosion of investment by banks into property from the 1980s onwards.

The fetishisation of ownership of land, bricks and mortar has been rammed down the throats of ordinary people for decades, and yet since a 70% peak in owner-occupation in 2001, the proportion of the population that owns its own home has fallen, with younger people virtually shut out of home ownership altogether, and some 30% of all 30-45 year-olds living in the private rented sector by 2020.

## **The commodification of homes**

When housing is viewed as a commodity, supply is restricted in order to control and raise prices. This has led to decades of under-investment and a huge net imbalance between supply, demand and need.

Landowners profit from speculative land values, driven by developers whose prime motive is enriching their shareholders and who fight their obligations to deliver affordable homes and community infrastructure with the threat of refusing to develop land in their ownership. It is ludicrous that developers' contributions of affordable housing and infrastructure under planning legislation are negotiated on a case-by-case basis – regardless of local planning policy – and determined primarily by the deals struck between developers and landowners.

This is in sharp contrast to the period from the end of the Second World War until Thatcher's election in 1979.

Strict financial regulations restricted the supply of credit for the development and sale of private housing. Taxes, financial regulations and rent controls prevented property owners from extracting excessive rents while state intervention in the land market and council house building reduced market volatility and provided low-cost alternatives. The Thatcher government began deregulating the financial services sector in the early 1980s, which undermined government tools for regulating the housing market.

The price of land keeps house prices high. Three-quarters (74%) of house price increases between 1950 and 2012 in Britain can be explained by rising land prices (the remainder attributable to rising construction costs) [12]. In the two decades to 2016 land prices quadrupled [13]. The attraction for banks of mortgage and land related lending is that mortgagors pay back a whole lot more than they borrow and land is great collateral. If the borrower defaults the bank gets the house and the land it sits on. Domestic



mortgage lending went from 20% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the early 1980s to over 60% by 2015 [14].

## **Market manipulation**

The 2008 financial crisis was precipitated by the sub-prime mortgage scandal caused by the financial sector lending more than the value of property on an industrial scale. This in turn precipitated a collapse in house prices, as did the recession of 1990/91 presaged by high inflation and interest rates.

Instead of a substantial fall in land prices, the major developers, the leading banks and the government ensured that the value of developers' land banks remained artificially high.

If land prices had been allowed to crash, as had happened after many previous market busts, many developers would have faced bankruptcy. The banks chose in the main not to foreclose on their assets as this would have hastened the downwards spiral in land values, which would have exacerbated the financial crisis given their exposure to the property market.

So the market froze, developers cut their outgoings, recapitalised and built nothing. House prices recovered relatively quickly preserving the developers and banks but there was no re-basing of land and house prices and no opportunities for new entrants to the housing market.

The government was happy with this situation, it avoided further pressure on banks' viability and it kept house prices up thereby not alienating home owners, a key demographic for the Tories.

It is no coincidence that around 50% of the Conservative Party's funding comes from the financial sector [15], and many Conservative MPs work for that sector. For these reasons alone you would not expect them to do anything that would undermine the banks' profitability.

## **Subsidy shenanigans**

This toxic supply structure is still in place. Following their election in 2010 the Con-Dem government failed to address the fundamentally flawed supply-side and instead consolidated increasingly massive demand-side subsidies, at the expense of developing homes for social rent. By far the

biggest subsidy goes to home ownership; not taxing capital gains on principal homes, 'Right to Buy' discounts and various schemes designed to help first-time buyers; and for private landlords who are the main beneficiaries of housing benefit/local housing allowance.

In 1975, public subsidy for housebuilding, primarily by local authorities was £14billion, against demand subsidy in the form of rent rebates and mortgage interest relief of £3.1billion.

By 2003, subsidy for the supply of new homes and major repairs was just £5.4billion, against nearly £11 billion demand subsidy primarily in the form of Housing Benefit and 'Right to Buy' discounts. This figure peaked at over £24billion in 2015/16, declining to over £17billion in 2020/21 [16]. The growth of the housing benefit bill was in large part due to the deregulation and exponential growth in the PRS since the introduction of buy-to-let mortgages in 1996, and the implementation of the Local Housing Allowance which matched benefit increases to private sector rent increases until they were capped in 2011.

## Planning without power

Land ownership and control is the key to increasing the supply of affordable homes. The breakdown of land ownership in England's is as follows: [17]

- 30% – Aristocracy/ gentry
- 18% – Companies and LLPs in Britain and overseas
- 17% – New money
- 17% – Unaccounted for
- 8.5% – Public sector
- 5% – Homeowners
- 2% – Conservation charities
- 1.4% – The Crown
- 0.5% – The Church

The proportions in the two devolved nations are probably a little different, with more land owned by aristocratic estates in Scotland and less in Wales.

Millions of people are affected by the lack of supply. The total amount of land held by private developers is not quantified, and this lack of transpar-

ency hampers the ability of local authorities to specify where development should take place in their local plans. Since Thatcher's election in 1979 some two million hectares of publicly-owned land (around 10% of Britain) has been privatised – the vast majority sold to private developers [18].

Much of this formerly public land has been banked by developers to control the supply of new housing and keep house prices artificially high.

Local communities and democratically elected councils have little control over where housing is developed. The government sets targets on the number of homes to be delivered in each area regardless of local plans. The relaxation of rules on so-called permitted developments following the 2016 Housing and Planning Act – which allows the conversion of commercial buildings into housing without planning permission – means local authorities and communities are almost powerless to influence the shape of the built environment which is increasingly developer-led, determined by land availability and developer demand, rather than local need.

It results in the wrong homes, of the wrong tenure, being built in the wrong places, unable to meet assessed housing need.

It gives a further excuse to some local authorities to avoid addressing politically 'difficult' issues, such as the need for Gypsy and Traveller sites and the development of supported housing for people who need help to achieve and maintain independent living, including people with substance misuse problems or mental illness, care leavers, people with learning difficulties, people with a history of offending and people with repeated or long-term experience of homelessness (often as a result of one or more of the above-mentioned vulnerabilities).

Many 'permitted developments' do not meet minimum standards set out in building regulations and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). Only 22% of such dwellings up to 2020 met the minimum national space standards compared to 73% of those with full planning permission. These conversions are likely to be on an industrial estate remote from transport or local amenities, and lacking outside play space which harm the health, wellbeing and quality of life of those placed there. Such developments are routinely being used as temporary accommodation for homeless households by local authorities, notably in London.

After suffering up to 60% cuts in their budgets since 2010 local authorities no longer have the staff needed to enforce standards, creating a time bomb of squalor and fire risk for the unlucky occupants of these blocks.

The post-2019 Tory government's own statistics suggest that 300,000 new homes per year are required simply to meet demand from new households as a result of demographic change. This would make zero inroads into tackling the current backlog, and yet this level of house building has not been seen since 1970.

Meanwhile by September 2020 there were over 200,000 homes which had been empty for more than six months throughout England, and more than 24,000 second homes apiece in Wales and Scotland.

## **The climate dilemma – refit or renew?**<sup>[19]</sup>

Around 50,000 buildings are demolished in England, Scotland and Wales every year. Not all buildings are suitable for refurbishment, but perfectly good housing is scheduled for demolition and rebuild rather than refurbishment and retro-fitting, and the driver, as always is money.

Big profits are made in redevelopment, with flats and even whole blocks bought by investors to lie empty in some cases – a sobering thought when this country is in the throes of a housing crisis.

Companies that have taken over social housing often operate a system of managed decline, where they allow them to fall into disrepair, then declare that they need to be demolished and the site redeveloped. The buildings in question are often structurally sound but in need of updating and improvement to be more energy efficient.

Reducing emissions by replacing old buildings with new energy efficient ones would seem to be logical but it's not that simple. 126 million of tons of waste are produced in Britain each year by demolition. The pollution involved in demolishing a building and constructing a replacement – production of materials, transport of materials to the site and the construction itself – mean that the cost to the environment is huge.

New construction is currently VAT exempt but retrofitting is not. This should be swapped around to incentivise a more sustainable approach. Refurbishment and retro-fitting of older buildings could provide much needed

work for local businesses, quickly boosting skills and green jobs and helping the local economy.

When unsound buildings have to be demolished more effort should be made to recycle the materials. New developments should be designed with adaptation, easy deconstruction and reuse in mind.

## **The social cost**

Redevelopment of council estates usually includes a mix of tenancies, leases and private ownership, resulting in a reduction of social housing on the site. Social housing tenants who want to stay and rent one of the new homes will face higher rents.

Those who take up the offer of alternative social housing can find themselves placed miles away from friends, family and support networks and facing a longer and more expensive commute to work. Children may need to change schools and established working-class communities are torn apart in what can only be described as the social cleansing of England's cities. For some the only option for remaining within their own community is the insecurity and cost of renting privately.

## **The rip-off continues**

When the Con-Dem government increased the discounts on the 'Right to Buy' in 2012, it permitted local authorities to retain all 'Right to Buy' receipts to help replace council housing stock. The 'self-financing system' that year applied strict conditions however, including the requirement that receipts be spent on new council homes within three years, or the money would have to be paid to the Treasury.

Because of the natural time lag for new housing developments, the 3-year time limit was almost impossible to achieve in respect of new build (the funds could not be applied retrospectively to ongoing schemes nearing completion). Many boroughs therefore resorted to buying properties (including 'Right to Buy' buy-backs) at market prices in order to prevent the loss of 'Right to Buy' receipts to the central government.

In 2012, the government devolved financial control of local authority housing to the remaining 171 stock-owning authorities – but at a cost. The

Treasury distributed £21bn of so-called housing debt to each stock-owning borough, most of which then borrowed from the Public Works Loans Board (PWLb) to pay off this debt. [20] [21].

The upshot of the reallocation of the housing debt is that council tenants, who through their rents have repaid the original loans that built their homes many times over, provided up to £2 billion per year in interest and debt payment to the Treasury from their rents, rather than that money being used to maintain and manage their homes. 2012 also saw the British government apply new rent formulae for social housing which resulted in a loss of income for councils and Housing Associations, tearing up long-term business plans predicated on the previous rent formula and directly impacting the supply of new social housing. The 'Drop the Debt' campaign is lobbying for the write-off of what is essentially fictitious debt enabling more investment in improving existing council housing and ensuring rents are genuinely affordable.

## **Applying the lessons of history**

Contrast the failings of the past forty years with the period from 1945 to 1979. The 1950s and 1960s saw house building reach a peak with 425,000 new homes being built in 1968 [14]. The effect was a rapid increase in home ownership accompanied by a drop in private renting.

This mixed economy era saw state-sponsored house building by councils co-exist with development by private firms and to a lesser extent by non-profit housing associations. The years in which the state built most were also those in which the market built most, suggesting that state supply caused little if any "crowding out" of private investment. State supply not only supported private investment it operated counter-cyclically by smoothing the peaks and troughs inherent in the speculative business model employed by private house building firms.

An average of 90,000 council homes a year were built between 1946 and 1979. By 1979 five million council homes had been built, funded by a combination of public subsidy and loans from the PWLB, with interest rates set by the Treasury. The PWLB powers and responsibilities were transferred to the Treasury in 2019.

Council house building steadily declined from 1984 with almost none developed from 1995-2005.

Between 1990 and 2004, private developers did not exceed 150,000 completions per annum despite owning huge banks of housing development land (by 2018 over 42,000 parcels of housing land). Controlling supply ensures prices and therefore profits remain high.

Housing associations have never delivered anything approaching the numbers built by local authorities in the 35 years after the second world war – in 2018 just over 48,000 so-called affordable homes were delivered – nearly half of which were from private developers' planning obligations under S106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 [22]. This is the provision that Michael Gove sought to repeal in the 2020 review of Planning rules, replacing with a generic Community Infrastructure Levy on developers, rather than a requirement to deliver built affordable homes in developments. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill published in 2022 offers no solutions to the country's housing crisis, a range of superficial changes to resident consultation and a further erosion of the ability of local authorities to control the type of development that goes on in their communities.

The delivery of more than 200,000 homes per annum has, since 1939, only been achieved as a result of major Local Authority housebuilding programmes [23]. The moratorium on council house building for 25 years, the transfer of council stock and the 'Right to Buy' resulted in most local authorities outsourcing their technical expertise, with the loss of in-house architects, surveyors, technical officers and direct labour organisations (DLOs).

The willingness of councils to build in Scotland and Wales is to be welcomed but needs to be balanced by grant levels which do not put pressure on council rents and tenants' services. The record of the Scottish government puts that of the British central government to shame, extending grants to local authorities while also encouraging them to use 'public' procurement hubs that favour monopoly and usually anti-union construction companies. In Wales, greater local authority borrowing powers and Welsh government grants are being used to stimulate social and council house building – with many more building starts now underway – and the purchase of private sector properties.

Nonetheless, local councils have a very long way to go before they will be in a position to materially contribute to new housing supply, as the following table shows:

***New council housing completions [24]***

Financial Year	Council house completions			UK completions	
	England	Scotland	Wales	Private	Housing Assctns
1969-70	135,700	34,120	7,900	185,920	7,390
1978-79	93,300	10,190	3,880	151,970	22,830
1996-97	450	240	20	153,470	30,950
2009-10	370	410	0	116,420	34,030
2016-17	1,830	1,020	0	144,830	30,260
2017-18	2,020	1,370	80	156,100	32,660
2018-19	2,560	1,390	60	165,420	34,480
2019-20	1,850	1,450	90	169,030	38,410
2020-21	1,610	1,450	90	148,300	30,010
2021-22	1,300	2,710	70	164,800	36,450

Only 4% of all ‘affordable’ housing delivered between 2016 and 2020 was at the social rent, typically 60% or less of market rent [25]. The remainder were either at so-called ‘affordable rent’ (80% of market rent) or shared ownership schemes neither of which are affordable for people on average and low incomes.

Over a million households are on council housing registers. This is an indication, albeit an under-estimate, of continuing demand for social rented housing. It is clearly time to wrest control of the housing market from the self-serving interest of private developers, banks and their shareholders.



# **Fixing Britain's broken housing market – a people's strategy**

The Communist Party of Britain calls for an integrated strategy for meeting people's housing need that gives power to local communities, delivers good quality, genuinely affordable homes and contributes to solving the climate emergency.

The following list of demands incorporates the Communist Party's Charter for Housing – designed to meet social need rather than private greed. This requires an overhaul of housing planning, finance and subsidy rules; abolition of homelessness; a return to building social homes at scale; proper regulation and enforcement of the private rented sector and housing standards; recreation of council design and build capacity with a huge expansion of training and apprenticeships in construction; proper democratic control of place-making. It requires workforce planning, changes to legislation and a willingness to utilise the powers that local authorities have to restore genuine control of place-making to local communities.

## **Planning, subsidy, development, standards and control**

- Ensure that all housing development and place-making is undertaken on the basis of assessed need and locally-agreed plans. Local planning authorities will be required to set out the public policy priorities for the use of development sites, and have the power to reject development proposals that do not meet those objectives.
- Learning from best practice in Wales and Scotland, address the scandal of new properties lying empty by relaxing planning regulations to permit change of use from unsold low-cost home ownership properties to social and affordable rented ones.
- Abolish recent Permitted Development powers which effectively remove English local planning authorities' control over development.

- Change the regulations covering the provision of Gypsy and Traveller sites so this becomes a statutory duty for all housing authorities to resolve the chronic shortage of safe and secure sites for this most marginalised section of our community.
- Establish national financing institutions to develop housing and infrastructure in accordance with assessed needs, rather than maximising the returns of lenders, developers and international investors and/or money launderers.
- Actively enforce limits on the banking sector's involvement in, and exposure to, the property sector including commercial real estate.
- Establish national and local savings institutions that specialise in housing finance, with priorities conducive to national and local housing strategies.
- Change the basis of housing subsidy to favour the supply of public sector homes and amend planning policy to maximise the proportion of social housing to be delivered on all housing developments.
- Write off the fictitious housing debt levied against local housing authorities by the Treasury.
- Abolish VAT on retro-fitting existing homes and provide financial incentives to local authorities and housing associations to refurbish existing housing stock rather than decanting working class homes and demolishing their communities.
- End the subsidies and other incentives for home ownership. Tax home-owning households and landlords on the value appreciation of properties owned; ensure profits on the sale of land for development above original use value are taxed on the same basis and across Britain.
- Remove all preferential tax treatments for international 'non-dom' and corporate purchasers of residential property.
- Apply progressively penal rates of taxation to owners of vacant land and properties.

- Require local authorities to compulsory purchase development land and empty properties for housing and infrastructure development where private developers have not commenced building within two years of the grant of planning permission or five years of purchase, funding to be provided in England by the Public Works Loans Board and retained 'Right to Buy' receipts and in Scotland and Wales via the devolution block grants.
- Implement an immediate ban on the sale of publicly owned land in England, Scotland and Wales to private developers.
- Set clear minimum standards for housing of all tenures in the three nations, including minimum room sizes, that can be easily understood by landlords and tenants, and applied equally to permitted developments, other conversions and new build.
- Revise the Housing Health and Safety Rating System legislation across Britain to make it easier for landlords and tenants to understand, streamline enforcement processes and ensure that every local authority provides adequate resources for enforcement.
- Ensure developments meet environmental, economic and social sustainability objectives including environmental and safety standards, in accordance with carbon reduction targets, and achieve thermal comfort, efficiency and fire safety.
- Develop a programme to retro-fit existing housing to improve thermal and energy efficiency and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.
- Raise the minimum energy efficiency rating for all rented homes to 'B' from the current low of 'E', as problems of damp, excess cold and fuel poverty in older properties are common in the private rented sector and increasingly so in older council and housing association homes.
- Extend the Energy Performance Certificate requirement to include multiple occupation lettings which are currently exempted.
- Recognise the impact of the loss of council Direct Labour Organisations and in-house design and development expertise – and re-introduce them

- Engage construction and local government trades unions and local communities in developing local housing and infrastructure plans.
- Establish state-run national construction apprenticeships and graduate training programmes.
- Support a major programme to build new council housing with targets set to meet locally-assessed need and demand.
- Implement PWLB funding for the regeneration and replacement of council estates that cannot be brought up to decent homes standards, with no dependence on private finance and on the principle of no loss of social and affordable housing supply.
- Develop proposals for and embark on a programme of returning council and Housing Association leasehold properties to public ownership and control, giving sitting tenants and leaseholders the option of reverting to affordable housing tenancies and providing social landlords with first refusal on buying back properties sold under the 'Right to Buy'.
- Transfer ex-council freehold properties back to public ownership and control on the same basis where the owner fails to maintain and manage the property to specified standards.
- England to follow Wales and Scotland and abolish the so-called 'Right to Buy'.
- Bring ex-council voluntary transfer housing association stock and arms-length management organisations back under the direct democratic control of local authorities.
- Invest in the re-establishment of effective council Building Control departments, ensure all inspection regimes are independent of the construction industry and legislate for an extensive regime of inspections during and after construction, with criminal penalties for deviation from approved plans and approved materials, especially in relation to fire safety.

- Freeze social housing rents for 12 months and peg future increases to the Retail Price Index; review rent restructuring in the council and housing association sectors and ensure rents for all social housing are set at genuinely affordable levels.

## **Protecting tenants and leaseholders, eradicating homelessness**

- End the housing leasehold scandal: abolish ground rent for owner-occupation; outlaw the practice of developers selling on leases to third parties; make developers liable for the costs of remedial work on bad construction; give statutory protections to leaseholders on service charges, maintenance, and the right to peaceable enjoyment of their homes.
- Require the freeholders of tower blocks to replace inflammable cladding within 12 months – without financial penalty to leaseholders; failure to comply must result in transfer of said blocks to local authority control on CPO terms.
- Local authorities and housing associations to be fully reimbursed for the cost of removing inflammable cladding either by the contractors that installed it in the first place, or by central government grant where this is not possible.
- Impose local caps on private sector rent levels, subject to a national maximum.
- Introduce full regulation of the private rented sector, including rent controls and compulsory registration, with sufficient funding for local authorities to enforce minimum housing standards and security of tenure for at least five years.
- Reform the different legislation in England, Scotland and Wales to restrict 'no fault' evictions to only the most unavoidable of circumstances.
- All local authorities to keep a register of all private rented properties, with details of current owners and agents – as required in other European countries – to assist with enforcement.

- Landlords and agents to meet ‘fit and proper’ criteria and to be part of a recognised landlord association.
- Council-held Information on rogue landlords to be made public (not just shared between councils), and available to potential tenants on demand before signing a tenancy agreement.
- As in Scotland and Wales, all social landlords in England should be registered and the information available on application.
- Lift the overall benefit cap to incorporate sufficient housing benefit to meet the capped rent levels and provide local authorities with 100% housing benefit subsidy.
- Repeal the Bedroom Tax and restore full housing benefit for all under 35s.
- Amend the Homelessness Reduction Act in England to make the provision of suitable accommodation to all homeless households a statutory duty, regardless of priority need or ‘intentional’ homelessness, in order to end rough sleeping and the placement of vulnerable families in unsuitable accommodation.
- Restore funding for supported housing and related services, to ensure that the need for hostels, refuges, sheltered and other supported housing is assessed and incorporated into local housing development plans.
- Restore funding for housing advice services and ensure that legal aid is accessible for all housing-related problems.
- Reinstate security of tenure and full succession rights for council and Housing Association tenants across Britain.
- Introduce full protections to leaseholders from harassment and overcharging by freeholders, including where freeholds are sold to new owners and developers.

# Democratise housing

The Communist Party has identified a number of actions needed to create a powerful housing voice for the working class:

- Involve tenants' and residents' groups, trades unions and other community organisations in developing local housing and infrastructure plans that can meet the needs of all.
- Build a truly independent tenants' movement linked to the trades unions, People's Assembly, housing and other campaigns.
- Ensure housing campaigns are embedded in communities, involving local tenant and resident groups, the local trades council and union branches, the People's Assembly and other community groups. Develop a united approach under an agreed set of demands relating to housing.
- Build community organisation in localities engaging people living in all forms of tenures and local trades councils, to apply pressure to local authorities on the development of its housing plans and to feed into regional and national housing campaigns.

## Conclusion

For over 40 years the prevailing ideology in Britain has been to commodify homes as a source of income and profit rather than fulfilling an essential social need.

Low-cost publicly-owned housing has been systematically vilified as a tenure of last resort, while legislation designed to privatise the majority of this vital resource has left a run-down, under-invested rump that is no longer capable of fulfilling the state's statutory duties to the most vulnerable in society – people who are homeless, overcrowded, sick, disabled and, above all, poor – let alone provide a sustainable and affordable source of homes for those sections of the population that can't afford or don't want to buy.

Thatcher's brazen attempt to buy the votes of the working class has resulted in nearly half of this stock now in the hands of private landlords, charging far more than councils and costing the public purse a fortune in higher housing benefit payments and the cost of accommodating homeless households in the private sector.

Local communities now have virtually no meaningful input into how their neighbourhoods develop. Gentrification in areas where land and homes are in short supply continues apace with working class communities increasingly atomised and low-paid workers forced to move further away from their workplaces.

Decades of deregulation, enforced privatisation and the hollowing out of local government must stop. Communists support the development of community organising campaigns and calls for the coordination of extra-parliamentary struggles for housing justice with those of the trade union movement, environmental campaigners and community safety. This extra-parliamentary campaigning must pressurise government to begin the transformation of the housing sector from cash cow to public service.

We hope the demands listed above can form the basis of a united campaign for homes for all.

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