

Housing – Critical Futures.

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A home is a human right

That the housing crisis is complicated shouldn't be an excuse to not take action. It is a basic human right that everyone has a decent, warm home that they can afford with security for the future. Yet in 21st Century Britain a home is becoming an ever more precious commodity – young people are being priced out of having their own home with over a quarter of 20-34 year olds living with their parents. When we asked Unite young members we found that 86% of our members under 25 years old were living with their parents with the rest renting privately or in a house share. The removal of Housing Benefit for these young people will only make this situation much worse. It hinders the ability to live independent lives and for those who, for whatever reason, do not get on with their parents, and the removal of Housing Benefit just adds more barriers to finding a more suitable home. It's not just young people affected by the housing crisis however. Tackling the housing crisis is a win-win for everyone: it brings with it multiple economic and social benefits. There is an urgent housing need in Britain – and we need action to tackle it. Here are some of the things Unite believes should happen:

End the housing shortage

We need to build at least 240,000 additional homes a year just to keep up with the new households that form each year – and there is a large backlog because we have been under-building for years. If we don't address this root cause then house prices and private sector rents will continue to soar away as the housing shortage keeps getting worse in the years and decades to come.

1) We should build at least 1 million new homes – public investment for a large scale council housing building programme. !

- Not only does building homes address the desperate need but, for every £1 spent on housing construction an extra £2.09 is generated in the economy, *and* it creates a direct saving in future tax and benefit payments for the government!
- **We must direct investment by central government to local councils so that they can build in the most straight forward, practical and efficient method for stimulating provision.** We've had years of house building being left to the private sector. Our housing market is broken and the severe housing shortage is the result.
- As well as providing more direct central funding from government, we can lift the borrowing cap for local authorities so that they can borrow to invest in homes.
- If we are to address the huge national shortfall in home building we need regional home building targets that ensure that rural areas benefit from social housing builds, as well as our urban centres.

2) End the automatic 'Right to Buy' – we need to dramatically increase the number of council homes

- Because of the ConDem government policies 35,000 homes for those on low incomes were lost in one year. At the same time there are over 1.3million households on the social housing waiting list in England alone. Unite think that as well as building more homes **the 'Right to Buy' council homes should end** full stop. But at the very least we can all agree that councils should not *have* to operate the policy, so that **where a local Council has got a housing shortage the elected representatives can decide to suspend 'Right to Buy'**. It is not enough that one new council home is built for each one that is lost under 'Right to Buy'. We need to increase the number of council homes. Scotland has already suspended the Right to Buy and Wales is considering it.
- The demolition of structurally sound council homes that could be brought up to decent homes standard and in which communities want to continue to live must end.

A home you can afford

House prices and private rents have soared away – if a pint of milk had risen as much as house prices over the past 30 years it would cost £10.48! The National Housing Federation has forecast that

without any control private rents will rise by another 35% by 2020 - much more than wages are predicted to grow.

Already More than 4 million private renters live in poverty and, on average, private renters spend a whopping 40p out of every £1 they earn on their rent. But the private rented sector is in a worse condition and costs over £20 more a week in Housing Benefit than the social rented sector – the difference equates to more than £1.8 billion a year.

The solution isn't to punish tenants by cutting their Housing Benefit – and it is not to carry on with public spending increasingly funding private landlords who want to charge spiralling rents into the distant future.

3) Introduce rent controls in the private rented sector to stop people being priced out of their home – and end rip off letting fees!

- The maximum that rents should increase by each year should reflect, and be linked to, people's ability to pay. For example, by linking it to average wage growth or the 'cost' of housing.
- Legislate to end letting fees – tenants should not be charged with the cost of setting up their tenancy.

4) Housing benefit should be available to all adults living in Britain and set at an appropriate level.

- **Housing Benefit should be available to all adults living in Britain; the Bedroom Tax abolished, the benefit cap removed, and the cuts from the changes to the Local Housing Allowance and the non-dependent deductions reversed.** Households should not be punished for spiralling housing costs caused by successive governments' failure to build homes. The Housing Benefit cuts by the ConDems have hit well over 1 million households and have drained £2,745 million out of our economy! The Housing Benefit cuts are contributing to the social cleansing of our inner cities and risk entrenching people who do not know their rights, or cannot afford decent housing, into dangerous, poor and illegal living conditions. Despite the 'scrounger' rhetoric about benefit claimants, three-quarters of new housing benefit claimants are people in work. They need help because soaring housing costs have outstripped stagnant wages.

Decent homes for all

An estimated 660,000 households in England are overcrowded. It occurs most in the social and private rented sectors. In October 2014, 1-in-10 private renters in England reported that they had suffered ill health in the past year because of the poor state of where they live, with many saying they had problems with mould and damp, electrical hazards and pest infestations. We have one of the least regulated private rented sectors in Europe –and a proliferation of poor housing that costs is the result.

As well as an unacceptable number of homes being in a poor state, nearly three-quarters of private sector landlords are private couples or individuals, with half of all landlords owning fewer than five properties – and anyone can become a landlord if they have the money. Many may simply not be aware of their obligations to tenants – as well as being inclined to increase rents to improve their return. But there are also plenty of examples of exploitative private landlords that tenants should not be at the mercy of.

5) Everyone should have a decent home – that means it should at least be free from damp, be well insulated and warm, safe, pest free and not overcrowded

- **Investment in a national, council-led programme to provide basic insulation** measures to the 10 million homes without cavity wall insulation and full loft insulation would create jobs, create warm homes and reduce fuel poverty – it is better for the environment and people.

6) Private landlords should be registered and licensed to ensure decent homes, minimum standards and tenants' rights are respected

- Scotland already has a register for private landlords which has a 'fit and proper persons' test, and Wales is introducing one this year. **There should be mandatory registering and licencing of private landlords, administered and enforced by the relevant local authority** which contains: a 'fit and proper persons' test; ensures that decent homes standards are met and maintained; that tenants' rights are respected; and helps prevent 'revenge evictions'.

A secure and stable home for the future

The ending of an assured short hold tenancy is the largest cause of homelessness recorded by local authorities, with half of tenants in the private rented sector have a tenure of 1 year or less. While the argument put forward is that these contracts offer flexibility for people who are very mobile, the truth is that for an increasing number of people, couples and families who want to settle down,

'flexibility' simply means insecurity, and a barrier to making long term plans in a home or a local community. The private rented sector is now the second largest type of housing provided in the UK.

7) Restore security of tenure to the social rented sector, and introduce it in the private sector – we need longer term lets.

- **Restore security of tenancy in the social rented sector and legislate to provide longer term lets of 3 to 5 year tenures in the private rented sector.**
- There is a growing evidence that 'revenge evictions' where tenants are evicted by their landlord after complaining about the state of their accommodation or a landlords (in)action. **Landlords should not be able to issue no fault eviction notices if they have failed to meet safety standards or a tenant has lodged a complaint with the local authority in the past year.**

Supporting Housing Support

Creating homes for everyone who needs them, and ensuring that tenants and residents rights are respected, means that some people will need extra funding or support to enable: independent lives; that everyone who needs it has access to housing advice and legal support; and that homes and estates are maintained to a decent homes standard.

8) Everyone should be enabled to live independently, and feel at home in their home

- **Restore the ring-fence to 'Supporting People'** – funding given to local Councils by central government to provide supported housing to enable older and disabled people to live independent lives **and ensure it is funded properly so it can do the job it needs too.** The ring-fence was removed by the ConDem coalition and local authority services have been hit extremely hard by the programme of public spending cuts and austerity.
- **Restore the Independent Living Fund** for disabled people.
- The programme of austerity has had a devastating impact on local authority services such as social care and occupational health services that can make the adaptations to homes that some people need to continue to live in them. There is an alternative to austerity and these cuts don't have to be made.

9) Improve accessibility for Legal Aid for those facing eviction and other housing problems

Legal Aid for those facing evictions is means-tested and the funding pot has been severely cut causing a decrease in the numbers of organisations that support people. It has left some

areas with no legal aid practitioners who can support people in challenging evictions or dealing with other housing problems. Unite is part of the *Justice Alliance* which has opposed cuts to Legal Aid and reducing the scope of what people can claim Legal Aid for.

- **Expand the scope of Legal Aid provision to include Housing Benefit entitlements and to support tenants taking action against disrepair.**

10) No privatisation of our housing and support services and ensure housing workers receive decent pay, terms and conditions

- The delivery of housing support, advice services and maintaining a decent homes standard requires a well-paid and trained workforce. Where possible bring repairs and maintenance services back 'in-house' and end further transfers of housing stock away from councils with no privatisation of Housing Associations.

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