

***'The target of achieving Decent Homes in the social housing sector is being used as a Trojan Horse by the Government in a dogmatic quest to minimise the proportion of housing stock managed by Local Authorities.'* - ODPM Decent Home Select Committee**

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) Select Committee finally released its report on Decent Homes on 7th May - after gathering piles of written evidence (such as that submitted by the LTF - reported on in our last newsletter) and hearing oral evidence. A full copy of the report can be obtained through the Stationary Office or on the following web address - <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmmodpm/46/46.pdf>

Summary of the report

In 2000, the Government set itself a Public Service Agreement (PSA) target of bringing all social housing up to the Decent Homes standard by 2010. In 2002, this target was broadened to encompass also 70% of dwellings in the private housing sector, occupied by vulnerable households. The Committee welcomes and supports this target.

The evidence received in the course of this inquiry has, however, led us to conclude that the target is in danger of not being met, and that the Government needs to address a number of problems of policy formulation and implementation.

- We believe that the Decent Homes standard is set at a too basic level and that by 2010 it will be seriously out of step with reasonable tenant expectations. As a consequence we recommend that the Government set a more aspirational 'Decent Homes Plus' standard to be achieved at a later date.
- We believe that the target of achieving Decent Homes in the social housing sector is being used as a Trojan Horse by the Government in a dogmatic quest to minimise the proportion of housing stock



managed by Local Authorities. The Government must put money where its mouth is and leave it up to tenants to decide who should own and manage their homes. The Government should provide a level playing field in terms of funding so that tenants and Local authorities have real choices.

- In the private sector, the limitation of the Decent Homes target to just 70% of dwellings occupied by vulnerable households makes little sense. The Government needs to give much higher priority to the achievement of the Decent Homes standard across the private sector. This should be done partly through funding incentives and partly through statutory means.

It is clear that more funding is needed in order to achieve not only the current Decent Homes target, but also any expansion of the target as currently conceived. We therefore urge both the ODPM and the Treasury to allocate the necessary additional funding in order to ensure that this vital target will be met by 2010, and that the expanded 'Decent Homes Plus' target, recommended in this report, can be achieved.

The Need for Investment

Earlier this year the Barker Review stressed the need for investment in new homes. Census figures show huge increases in London's overcrowding (see p3). And hardly a week passes without both housing and national press reporting on arguments for direct investment in council homes.

07.05.04 ODPM select committee report on decent homes published.

12.05.04 An all party group of council housing MPs took evidence at the House of Commons on the need for direct investment.

02.06.04 The Guardian newspaper reported that a broad-based coalition of councils, unions and tenants groups has been formed to urge ministers to respect council tenants' choice if they vote against hiving-off their homes to new management.

29.06.04 The LGIU releases its pamphlet 'Housing—the right to choose'

29.06.04 The LTF sends it's second Open Letter to John Prescott (see p2)

30.06.04 Austin Mitchell MP secured a parliamentary debate on tenants right to choose direct investment. Transcript of the debate can be found on the LTF website www.londontenants.org

Kingston tenants reject stock transfer

Tenants in Kingston have for the second time rejected whole borough stock transfer. An earlier proposal was rejected in 1994.

The recent proposal was to transfer homes to a newly formed Kingston Upon Thames Housing Trust.

65% of tenants voted in the ballot. 37% voted for transfer and 63% against. 51% of leaseholders voted. 43% were for and 57% against.

LG IU pamphlet 'Housing—The Right to Choose'.

On 29th June the Local Government Information Unit released its pamphlet 'Housing—The Right to Choose'.

The pamphlet argues for a continued and developing role for council housing and calls for a government u-turn on funding the modernisation of council housing. It questions whether current government policies on social housing gives tenants and future tenants a genuine choice in housing.

The pamphlet can be down loaded from the LGIU website - www.lgiu.gov.uk

More on Decent Homes.....

London Tenants Federation sends second Open Letter to the Deputy Prime Minister

Almost a year after sending our first open letter to John Prescott, the London Tenants Federation has sent a second. We never received a formal response from the Deputy Prime Minister last year, so members felt that we should ensure that he doesn't miss this one! The letter was photocopied to an AO size and sent recorded



Content of the letter

Dear Mr Prescott

Further to our letter of 29.07.03, supported by 16 London borough wide tenants federations/organisations, we write

again in support of Camden council tenants, who voted earlier this year to reject the proposal to set up an ALMO. The LTF believes that this decision should be respected and that Camden Council should have equal access to funds to bring tenants homes to a decent standard.

In our previous letter to you, we stated the London Tenants Federation's view that housing management structures should be the outcome of decisions made by tenants and their local authorities about what works best. For some this may be Arms Length Management. However our view is that such decisions should be prompted neither by financial need nor the existence of preferential funding arrangements. Whatever structures are chosen, tenants must all be treated with equality. Funding arrangements should therefore be the same for all.

We asked that government reconsider its policy, which stipulates the only financial options open to local authorities unable to reach the decent homes target are stock transfer, PFI or Arms Length Management Organisations.

We have never received a formal response to our letter of July '03.

As a tenants organisation we are increasingly concerned that government policy on this issue is damaging relationships between tenants, between tenants and leaseholders and indeed between tenants and their local authorities.

In some boroughs, agreements relating to tenant involvement in decision making are being flouted in the debate around decent homes. The Federation of Islington Tenants Associations raised this as a concern with the ODPM and us. We believe this to be contrary to governments stated desire to have tenants involved in decision-making about their homes and communities and fear that it not only encourages distrust but also failure to engage.

We ask again that the government reconsider this policy and allow an option for tenants to remain under the direct management of their local authorities should this be the clear wish of tenants and their local authority.

London Housing Strategy - LTF Conference

Tuesday 14th September - Friends House, 173 Euston Road

Plans for a long term housing strategy for London are being developed by the London Housing Board. We need to make sure that tenants views are heard

The London Housing Board, made up of officers from the Government Office for London, The Association of London Government, the GLA, the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and the London Development Agency is beginning to put together a long term strategy document (to 2015) for housing in London.

Ensuring tenants views are heard

In attempt to make sure tenants views are heard, the LTF is holding a tenants conference in September. We have invited a range of London's politicians and officers from the at the national, regional and local level. We have also invited Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

There will be 2 parts to the conference -

Issues of democracy and accountability.

- The London Housing Board is made up of unelected officers. How will they be accountable to London's tenants?
- If decisions are being made at a regional level, what is left for local decision making?
- What decisions are now being made at the sub-regional level?
- What chance do we have of being genuinely involved at a regional level and sub regional level, when many of us find tenant involvement poor even at a local level?

- How will tenant involvement at the regional and sub regional level be supported and resourced?
- What do we mean by good tenant involvement?

Sustainable Communities

- The accepted professional definition is a community of mixed tenure. Is a condescending view of social housing tenants implicit in this definition?
- What do our communities need?
- Do we need assured levels of stability, good standards relating to green, play, community and youth spaces.
- Should there be a legislative return to Parker Morris Standards?

Attendance at the conference is limited to about 8-10 tenant representatives from each London borough. If you would like to attend we need to know by 1st September.

If you have a tenants federation in your borough, please let them know—they in turn will advise the LTF.

If you don't have a borough wide tenants federation please contact the LTF directly — e-mail sharon@camdenfed.org or tel 020 7383 2227

Overcrowding in London

1 in 20 London households are overcrowded. The capital has the worst overcrowding in the country, and for the first time ever it's worse in social housing than in the private sector.....

According to the Association of London Government (ALG), information from the latest census shows that London has the worst overcrowding in the country. Overcrowding has been increasing here since the early 1990s, whilst in the rest of the country it continues to decrease. Since 1991, severe overcrowding has increased in the capital by 47%, whilst it has fallen by 9% in the rest of the country.

The Facts

- 1 in 20 of all households in London are now overcrowded and 1 in 50 are severely overcrowded.
- There is six times as much severe overcrowding in London as there is in the rest of the country.
- London has 4 times the level of severe overcrowding of the next most overcrowded region.
- Severe overcrowding increased in every single London borough between 1991 and 2001.
- Between those years severe overcrowding in London's council housing has doubled, overtaking the private sector for the first time ever.
- The increase in the housing association sector is almost as large.
- Overcrowding is most highly concentrated amongst five of London boroughs: Tower Hamlets, Newham, Hackney, Brent and Southwark. These are also the boroughs with the

highest levels of severe overcrowding. Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Southwark have very high overcrowding in the social rented sector, while in Newham and Brent it is concentrated in the private sector. In this analysis any single bedroom with more than 1 and up to 1.5 occupants is defined as overcrowded and one with more than 1.5 occupants defined as severely overcrowded.

Census data also shows higher proportions of overcrowding in black and minority ethnic (BME) households. 12% of white British households lack one room or more, whilst the figure is over 35% for BME groups in general and as high as 62% in the case of Bangladeshi households.

Effect of overcrowding on health

Research carried out by the ALG demonstrates a strong correlation between the incidence of overcrowding in 2001 and incidents of Tuberculosis. The rate of TB infections began to rise again in the early 90s (after a long decline) paralleling the increase in overcrowding.

De Montfort University Report on Health and Education

In late 2003 the ODPM commissioned the De Montfort University to produce a report on the impact of overcrowding on health and education. The full report produced in May '04 can be found on the

ODPM website http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_028620.pdf

It's Findings

- Overcrowding can have severe effects on the health and the well being of household members, especially children.
- There is a relationship between overcrowding and respiratory conditions, meningitis and TB in children and respiratory conditions and TB in adults.
- There is a relationship between overcrowding in childhood and respiratory conditions developed in adulthood.
- There is a relationship between overcrowding and children's mental health.
- There is some evidence of a relationship between overcrowding and children's social and emotional development.
- A recent study found household overcrowding during childhood to be significantly and independently associated with slow growth rate.
- There is evidence to suggest a relationship between overcrowding and educational under attainment.
- One study also found a significant association between overcrowding and child maltreatment.

Statutory Definition of Overcrowding

The statutory definition of overcrowding has been in place since 1935. It was intended only to be a temporary definition. It states that a household is not overcrowded if there is room to sleep in the kitchen or living room. Children under 10 are counted as ½ people and babies not counted at all.

A group of MP's and Shelter have proposed a new definition and hope that the existing definition may be changed in the Housing Bill currently going through parliament.

However unless the government is prepared to put money into building homes that we can all afford, it is perhaps unlikely that they will agree a new definition that will increase the demand for more homes.

Moonlight Robbery

Government make a profit of £1.5 billion from our rents
The Moonlight Robbery Campaign, launched by the Tenants and Residents Organisation of England calls for the fairer use of tenants rent payments.



Our rent payments cover the cost of management and maintenance (M&M) allowances. This is money the government allows our councils to use for services like estate cleaning and repairs. Our rent also covers the cost of major repairs allowances (MRA) - for councils to fund major repairs.

Nationally, however, we pay on average £26 a week more in rent than the level of M&M allowance. After the MRA allowance is taken into account the final excess figure is £15 per week. In London the figures vary from borough to borough, from minus £10.54 per dwelling per week (City of London), to £23.96 (Harrow). On average, in London, we are paying £6.79 a week more in rent than our councils are getting in M&M and MRA.

This money is clawed back by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). In 2003/4 nationally this amounted to a significant profit for Government of £1.5 billion on the running costs of council housing - from our rents.

The total amount that councils were allowed to spend on management and maintenance of our homes in '03/'04 was £4.5 billion.

At the same time research carried out for the Government, by the Building and Research Establishment, shows that councils actually need £5.5 billion to fund an adequate management and maintenance service for our homes.

The ODPM has claimed that if the subsidy by Government to council *Cont'd p4*

Housing Benefit Reform

The government set out proposals for HB reform in October 2002 in the Department for Work and Pension's (DWP) 'Building Choice and Responsibility: a radical agenda for Housing Benefit'. Reform is being piloted in the private rented sector.

1 in 6 households in England and Wales claim Housing Benefit (HB). Only 815,000 in the private sector claim HB most claimants are social housing tenants. The government intends introducing reform to the social housing sector, once rent restructuring has been completed and are looking to carry out a social housing pilot.

There are 2 main changes—

1. **Rent is paid directly to tenants rather than to the landlord.** The rationale for change is couched in government speak of 'rights and responsibility'.

Many fear that this may lead to in-

○ **Moonlight Robbery** cont'd
housing debt costs were taken into account, that in '03/04 central government made a net contribution of almost £200 million to council housing. BUT this figure ignores the income from 'reserved' right to buy (RTB) receipts. This amounts to 75% of total RTB receipts, which councils cannot use and goes to the Government.

In recent years reserved RTB receipts have far exceeded Government funding for investment in mainstream council housing.

The average annual reserved RTB from 2000-'03 amounted to £1,105 million. Over the same time period the average amount of investment in mainstream housing has been £588 million and the average net disinvestment £516 million.

This is a campaign worth supporting. If government is serious about decent homes it must be serious about good maintenance of our homes, and allow all our rent money to be used for this purpose.

If your tenants fed or TRA wants to get involved in the Moonlight Robbery campaign please e-mail moonlightcampaign@hotmail.com

creased levels of rent arrears and as a result increases in homelessness and threatened homelessness. On 18.06.04, 'Inside Housing' reported on a pilot scheme in Blackpool. Arrears have risen to 4% despite the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) providing extra money to support the scheme's introduction. (Blackpool's HB office gained 3 CAB workers)

Pilot studies carried out by Quadrant Housing Trust and Circle 33 have revealed that social housing landlords could face rocketing arrears if the regime is introduced into the sector.

2. A flat rate 'Standard Housing Allowance' (SHA) is paid for similar sized properties, regardless of the actual rent - to provide a 'shopping incentive'. Those whose rent is above the SHA must find the extra cash or 'shop around' for something cheaper. Tenants whose rent is less than the SHA keep the difference.

The LTF wrote to Chris Pond MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary (Commons) who has responsibilities for the DWP in July '03 raising the following concerns.

- A 'shopping incentive' depends on availability of choice. London has insufficient social housing and no choice.
- Will tenants in London's high value property areas be forced to move from their communities and perhaps out of London if their HB doesn't cover their rent? Doesn't this contradict government's stated policy of building strong and sustainable communities.
- The policy is likely to extend ghettoisation and make some areas inaccessible to London's poorest.
- The policy may lead to an increased level of evictions in London.
- There should at least be choice on whether HB is paid directly to the claimant or the landlord.
- Tenants have not been consulted on the proposed changes.

It took more than 4 months to get a response from Chris Pond. In his letter, he re-emphasised the aims of the reform— 'promoting choice, responsibility, transparency and fairness'. He said he acknowledged the differences between the social and private rented sector and said he 'recognised the advantages of testing a social sector scheme before it is introduced nation wide'. We think this unlikely to be in London.

LTF meets with Shelter

We have had discussion and exchanged information with Shelter about the proposed housing benefit reform. We hope there will be opportunities for us to campaign with them, particularly around how the reform will effect social housing tenants in London.

Shelter's main concerns about the private sector pilots were that direct payment to tenants might increase rent arrears and homelessness; that it might reduce the availability of private sector lettings to those claiming benefits; that the SHA would be too low and force people to move to cheaper areas.

A Shelter policy officer attended the LTF's June meeting to report on their research in 4 of the 'pilot areas' - Leeds, Brighton, Edinburgh and Conwy. They have monitored their own clients, (the most vulnerable), and analysed rent levels, flat ads and 'No DSS levels'.

The LTF was advised of the following - the private rented sector is a very small part of the housing market only 6% in Leeds and 15% in Brighton. 40% of accommodation ads in Edinburgh state - claimants will not be accepted.

40% of claimants in the private rented sector already have HB paid directly to them.

Benefit levels in the pilot areas have generally increased. Those living in overcrowded housing now have some extra cash. In some of the local areas the SHA is higher than the old level. This has increased the percentage of housing available to claimants.

Shelter has not looked at the difference in levels of supply in the social housing sector - this makes a difference.

They suggest it is too early to assess the full impact. A lot of money had been put into providing CAB advice and helping tenants to get bank accounts—unlikely to extend beyond the pilots. Although early results appear to have increased benefit levels, we could place a safe bet that the government will not pay out more overall in housing benefit than its current level.

The DWP is doing its own multi million pound assessment of the pilots—we will update you when it is published.

Effects of gentrification, rent restructuring, housing benefit reform.....



'The standing housing allowance should cover this. Well,..... it is a central London borough. Perhaps you need to 'shop around'. Had you though moving up north?'