

‘A new model for addressing London’s housing need’

Report from consultation event on
London’s first statutory Housing Strategy
held at Fellows Court, Hackney E2, June 2009



Organised by
London Tenants Federation
in partnership with
**Shelter, Planning Aid for London
and Just Space Planning Network**



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'A new model for addressing London's housing need'



A formal introduction to the event was given by London Tenants Federation (LTF) member Graham Nicholls.

He advised the 70 (plus) attendees that the London Mayor, Boris Johnson, has responsibility for drawing up London's Housing strategy.

In November, the Mayor published a draft strategy which members of the Greater London Assembly were consulted on. As a result of that consultation, a few changes have been made. The draft strategy now goes through a public consultation period that ends on 31st August 2009.

Although there have been previous housing strategies for London, this will be the first statutory one, which boroughs across London will be obliged to comply with.

Unlike other regions of the country, London also has its own Homes and Communities Agency Board, which is responsible for distributing money for new 'affordable housing'; the board is chaired by the London Mayor.

Graham said the event would provide the opportunity to discuss whether, in the face of a huge level of housing need, the unaffordability of both buying and renting, the polarisation of incomes and the need for more social infrastructure, a 'new model for addressing London's housing need' was required.

Speakers Isabel de la Cour, Shelter, Michael Parkes, Planning Aid for London (PAL), Richard Lee, Just Space Planning Network and Jean Kerrigan, LTF were asked to outline one key issue their organisation would like included in the strategy if they were responsible for its publication.



Isabel de la Cour: Shelter believes everyone should have a home. The strategy should look at where we want to be and work backwards to achieve this.

London has the most acute levels of housing need in the country; over 350,000 on council waiting lists, 200,000 overcrowded households and 50,000 living in temporary accommodation. This has devastating consequences. Children in bad housing are twice as likely as others to leave school without GCSEs. Children living in overcrowded homes are 10 times more likely to contract meningitis. There is a strong link between overcrowding and childhood tuberculosis.

Boris Johnson has retained the previous Mayor's targets for building 50,000 affordable homes in London over the next three years, but has changed the previous split of these homes from 70% social rented and 30% low cost ownership to 60% and 40% respectively; 5,000 fewer social rented.

He proposes a major shift to home ownership, despite rising levels of repossessions (26,000 last year). Predictions are for higher levels this year and next.

The 50,000 new affordable homes target is challenging and even more so at present. With a recession and rising repossessions there should be a greater emphasis on building social rented housing than on low cost ownership.

Shelter believes there are ways to overcome obstacles around developing the type of housing London needs. Shelter's discussion paper 'Building Blocks' considers land use, buying up market housing for use as social rented housing, and development of Local Housing Companies and Community Land Trusts.

Michael Parkes: Planning Aid is a network of town planners, structured regionally, providing independent advice for those unable to afford a consultant.

The draft London Housing Strategy has relatively small focus on affordable housing. There need to be new models, funding streams and delivery agencies in order to focus on this particular need in London, not just for the three years 2008-11 of this strategy, but for the following three year period.

Formal consultation on a revised London Plan will commence in Autumn 2009. The draft, for GLA Assembly members, says the Mayor will 'take into account resources available when setting new affordable housing targets for the period after 2011'. We shouldn't look at the London Housing Strategy in isolation.

In April this year the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned that 'despite the tax rises and spending cuts announced in the budget, future Chancellors would be forced to raise even more money to fill a "breathhtaking" long-term hole in the public finances. The scale of the problem is so great that even with years of tax rises and spending cuts, the national debt will not be low enough to meet Mr Brown's now abandoned "sustainable investment rule" until 2032'.

We have to look at affordability in the context of limited public spending resources. How do we prioritise these resources? Social rented housing must be a priority. I believe this leaves a big question mark over intermediate housing.

Richard Lee: Just Space is a regional network of about 12 voluntary and community sector organisations, including the LTF, Planning Aid for London, London Civic Forum and Age Concern, that come together to provide an overview and to influence the development of the London Plan and the Mayor's Strategies to ensure they meet the diverse needs of Londoners.

The Mayor has a statutory duty to "*promote social inclusion and tackle deprivation and discrimination*". This is crucial, given the widening gap between rich and poor in London, and includes affordability, accessibility and integration.

For us, the key issue for the London Housing Strategy, is provision of the amenities and social infrastructure that all Londoners need, in addition to homes. There should be good internal and external space standards, exceeding Parker Morris. There must be public green spaces, local shops, local health, education, recreational and community facilities within walking distance of our homes.

Age Concern's "Towards Common Ground: A manifesto for lifetime neighbourhoods" is very good on these issues; in fact the manifesto is relevant to everyone's needs. Just Space feels Lifetime Homes Standards must be extended to standards for Lifetime Neighbourhoods and this concept should be central to the London Housing Strategy.

Jean Kerrigan: The London Tenants Federation would argue for an evidence-based strategy, derived and implemented in a bottom-up fashion. My experience as a delegate of the Mayor's Housing Forum is that the views of tenants and this kind of approach are often alien to the policy makers.

Examples include promoting the private market to solve London's acute housing need, despite contrary evidence and sound arguments that a programme of council house building would do this. Private house building in London is at a virtual standstill, private sales of new homes have dropped and housing associations say they can no longer honour plans to build new social rented homes.

There is flimsy evidence that everyone wants to own a home. Our experience shows that the lack of good quality low-cost rented homes has pushed many into ownership above their financial limits; an increasing number face repossession.

'Mixed tenure' communities are promoted on the supposed benefits for social housing tenants, who are stereotyped as non-aspirational and 'workless'. But evidence from tenants on the ground shows the policy is being used to justify demolition of the council homes so desperately needed, with no 'trickle down' effect and the loss of local affordable shops, services and amenities, which are replaced by more expensive ones servicing wealthier communities. Buy-to-let has also resulted in transient rather than sustainable communities and has increased anti-social behaviour on our estates.

We should respond to consultation on the Mayor's plans in large numbers, strengthened by our own evidence in writing, photographs and video, making it more difficult for the decision-makers to ignore us.

Questions and comments

Housing need must be addressed, but would speakers address the problem of where to build new homes, particularly when we are struggling to keep the green spaces so desperately needed in our boroughs? (Haringey)

Richard Lee: The solution could be building higher or increasing densities, as occurs in other European cities. Given the pressures on central London, a more even distribution of housing across London should perhaps be considered. Some of the land dedicated for employment use could perhaps be released for housing and community purposes, including green space.

Michael Parkes: Studies are carried out on the availability of land and capacity to build more homes; this is where the targets for building new homes come from.

The need for higher percentages of social rented housing should be addressed in the mix of housing development. There are cases where there has been an overall loss of social rented homes and green space in regeneration schemes.

Boris Johnson has set out policies to protect gardens in London. Tenants should demand the same protection for their 'gardens' - the green spaces on estates.

I'm concerned about the change in split of affordable homes, that previous social rented targets haven't been met and that in some regeneration schemes there is a loss of social rented homes. (Newham)



Michael Parkes: We need to keep an eye on the way in which the new homes are counted – are they really additional homes, rather than just new ones that have been built to replace some that have been demolished. The number of social rented homes in any development is negotiated between planners and developers. Where less has been provided than was agreed in planning permission, local authorities have a right to address the breach.

Void council properties that are in a poor condition should be brought up to a habitable standard to address need, rather than being sold off. (Lambeth)

Jean Kerrigan: It is tragic that family sized street properties are being sold off by councils, particularly when the Mayor has quite a lot to say about increasing the number of family homes and of addressing empty homes. It would seem logical to have money available regionally to address the two things in one go. Currently the Mayor allocates money to address the issue of empty private homes, but not those owned by councils.

Workshops

Workshop 1 London's Housing Need, facilitated by Isabel de la Cour, Shelter.

Discussion focused on homelessness, over-crowding, numbers on council waiting lists and rising home repossessions in London. Key points from the discussion -

- Policies in the draft London Housing Strategy appear to be politically led rather than evidence based.
- What evidence is there that low cost home-ownership (LCHO) is successful and that people want to live in it? There are also questions over the affordability. Improving take up isn't simply about re-marketing. LCHO has had low take up because people don't want to live in it or it is very expensive.
- Design of the housing is very important. Good design can help reduce noise coming from other flats/neighbours.
- Housing needs were being met when councils were building homes. There should be a return to this and necessary levels of accountability. Concern was expressed about the amount of money that is drained from council housing; billions from right-to-buy and tenants' rent used to pay off historic capital debt.
- A register of private landlords is recommended by the Rugg Review. Poor landlords could be struck off the register and where this occurs their properties would be transferred to a social landlord. Concerns were raised by some about the potential impact of this on the tenants and of social landlords' ability to manage additional stock. Others felt a bad landlord had a detrimental effect on tenants and their neighbours and that increased private landlord regulation could help tenants.

Workshop 2 Affordability, facilitated by Michael Parkes, Planning Aid for London

Debate in this workshop focused primarily on sustainability and prioritised funding for social rented housing. It was felt the subject needed a full day's discussion.

- Intermediate housing should be removed from the definition of 'affordable'.
- Sub-letting and Right to Buy should be abolished.
- Means testing for benefits should be abolished.
- The image of council housing and council tenants needs be radically improved.
- Rent control should be reintroduced, taking into account local circumstances.
- Few council or housing association tenants have household incomes of up to £74,800. The upper income level for eligibility to any housing built with the support of public funds should be reduced to around £25,000.
- Centre stage for any 'new models' for delivering affordable housing should be council housing. The Mayor should encourage the compulsory purchase of land, which should be held for community regeneration. In these circumstances tenants should be involved in land studies of land left idle or underused.
- Models should be developed for tenant involvement in Community Development Trusts

Workshop 3 The Fellows Court Experience, facilitated by Fellows Court TRA and London Tenants Federation

Fellows Court tenants detailed evidence of what can be achieved in bottom-up working. This were compared with experiences of regeneration schemes elsewhere, particularly the top-down approach on the Ferrier's Estate, Greenwich.

- Empowering residents through training and building bottom-up democratic and accountable tenants' organisations will make any improvements or regeneration more cost-effective and sustainable. This needs adequate funding.
- Experience of similar schemes varies from borough to borough. We should consistently document our own evidence of what works and what doesn't.
- There needs to be clarity of process in any regeneration scheme. This should include tenants first setting out what existing problems are and identification (in a transparent fashion) of how much funding is available so that tenants can identify their own priorities for solving problems within available budgets.
- Funding should be available for more events such as this, so that tenants of all tenures and voluntary sector groups can get together to share and exchange.
- The Mayor is to hold a large event on the draft London Housing Strategy; tenants and voluntary sector organisations should be equally involved (in terms of numbers) or a separate event should be organised for the non-professionals.

Workshop 4 Our homes, our communities, facilitated by Richard Lee, Just Space Planning Network with representatives of equalities groups.

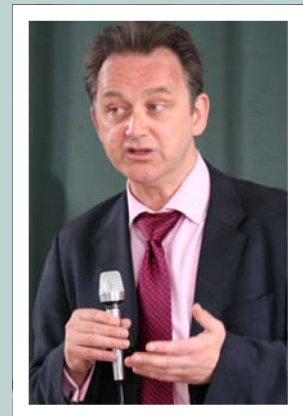
The workshop looked at how everyone's needs might be addressed. Presentations were given by London Gypsy and Travellers Unit and Stonewall Housing (representing lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender communities).

- The Mayor has a legal duty to provide strategic direction and leadership. The draft strategy doesn't do this, but rather focuses attention on the boroughs – giving them more control. It fails to ensure equalities issues are adequately covered by the boroughs. There needs to be a stronger and joined-up approach.
- The strategy is weak on supported and sheltered housing. It suggests 1,250 new supported homes, which is actually a pittance. We are not told where this figure comes from, or what research has been done on levels of need. There is concern that councils are closing down sheltered housing units. There is need for accessible smaller units for older people moving from family homes.
- Housing mix and size of housing is referred to in the draft London Housing Strategy, but providing more family housing should not be at the expense of other needs. There is also need for single person social rented housing.
- There needs to be more on infrastructure in the strategy. There should be an approved infrastructure plan before more development takes place.
- LTF's definition of a sustainable community should be included in the strategy with the addition of local employment needs.

Presentation on the draft London Housing Strategy

Alan Benson

Head of Housing and Homelessness
Greater London Authority



Every local authority's housing strategy will have to be in general conformity with this first statutory London Housing Strategy.

The Mayor has money to go with the strategy. He is chair of the Homes and Communities Agency in London with £6 billion to allocate between 2008 and 2011.

Once the government has decided how much money is allocated to each region the Mayor has power to make decisions on how much is allocated where, including how much each borough has to spend on things like regeneration.

He has new powers to ensure that the Homes and Communities Agency does what it is supposed to do.

There are new challenges relating to the economic downturn. On the supply side, Housing Associations and developers are facing difficulties. Housing Associations are finding it hard to borrow money and sales of homes, including intermediate homes, have slumped. A number of developments have been mothballed.

On the demand side, despite falling prices, people still can't afford to buy.

Shared ownership products are not moving. Lenders are no happier to lend to those looking for shared ownership than to other owners. First-time buyers are at their lowest level in 10 years.

Old problems haven't gone away, including those of affordability, overcrowding (the only region in the country where this problem has got worse over the last 20 years), homelessness (we are a long way from meeting targets), quality of homes (many, particularly in the private sector, are unfit).

There is a significant need to invest.

Boris Johnson hasn't changed much of what the previous Mayor, Ken Livingstone, was doing. The number of promised affordable homes is the same, although there has been some change in the percentage of those homes that will be social rented. He is keener to work in a collegiate fashion with the boroughs, whilst Livingstone was keener to 'beat up' boroughs not delivering on affordable housing. He has dropped the centralised target-setting for each borough and instead is negotiating with them individually to agree the number of homes they will produce.

Specifically, Boris promises (as did the previous Mayor) 50,000 new affordable homes by 2011 and the introduction of a 'First Steps' low-cost home ownership scheme relating to income levels, not to key-worker / type of employment. Households with incomes of up to £74,800 will be able to access the scheme (in its first year).

He wants to improve the rented sector. Private renting is fundamentally important in London, particularly for young educated people. There will be more private rented housing than social rented housing in London by the time of the Olympics.

Boris is working with the Homes and Communities Agency to get institutional investment in the private rented sector.

He is keen to see an improvement in the quality of homes in London. A Housing Design Guide is being developed. It will include space standards for the private sector, which the developers are not happy with. However, we are the only European country without private-sector space standards. Parker Morris plus 10% is being promoted.

The draft strategy proposes tougher eco-standards and a retrofit programme.

The Mayor wants to see major regeneration schemes kick-started and money has already been allocated through the Homes and Communities Agency to do this.

In terms of maximising delivery of homes regionally, there is the Homes and Communities Agency investment plan and consideration of how to devolve power locally. The Mayor is trying to return to the situation in which government and Homes and Communities Agency funding is allocated directly to the boroughs rather than sub-regionally.

Local delivery is to be focused on tackling homelessness (except around rough-sleepers), improving existing housing conditions, providing support, improving management and tenant empowerment.

Achievements to date include getting local authorities to commit to delivering 40,000 new affordable homes and money being allocated to kick-start major regeneration schemes. The big challenge is getting developments off the ground and finished.

Consultation on the draft housing strategy finishes at the end of August 2009. The Secretary of State will need to formally agree the strategy and it may formally be published by the end of the year.



Further publications and consultations will include an Integrated Impact Assessment, an Equalities Impact Assessment, the London Plan Statement of Intent, Supplementary Planning Guidance and the Housing Design Guide.

Questions and comments to Alan Benson

Much of this is about continuation of market-led solutions, which many tenants and community organisations don't support. Since the Tories are leading the way on devolution, how do you square the circle in setting out a regional strategy?

I recently had a letter from Boris in response to my concerns about the West Hendon regeneration scheme, including lack of affordability, over-development and creation of ghettos. His response was that he would leave this to the local authority and the developers. What we will end up with is more concrete, traffic wardens and anti-depressants. Why under the current economic circumstances are we still dependent on a failed market solution, rather than money going directly to support council housing?

Despite West Hendon regeneration proposals stretching over the period of two different Mayors, it is still a long way from actually going forward.

The Mayor actually has limited powers. Boris will be addressing issues of space standards, which will be a significant shift, but unfortunately since planning permission has already been given, he won't be able to demand changes here.

The government wants councils to be at the forefront again in relation to building new homes; whether this actually means building council housing we will have to wait and see. It could actually be a Conservative government that does this. Whatever, the private sector is actually 'stuffed' at the moment.



Would you explain what you mean by institutional involvement investment in the private sector and how targets for social rented and intermediate homes will be enforced?

Outside the UK, large institutions tend to dominate management of the private rented sector, as opposed to the small and individual landlords-type sector we have here. This tends to result in a better private sector.

Boris doesn't like to 'enforce', he prefers to encourage and feels there will be sufficient incentives for boroughs to reach the targets they have agreed.

What contributes to a better society and how does the London Housing Strategy help to do this?

The London Housing Strategy is strong on the desire to see more mixed communities in London, which aim to create a better society. This has been a priority for policy makers for 40 or more years.

Homelessness is a local responsibility, but the Mayor intends that rough-sleeping be dealt with London-wide. There is also a lot of hidden homelessness; people who find it difficult to access support at the local level and who actually also need London-wide support.

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility around homelessness and Boris is not keen to interfere in local responsibilities or to be too directive. He will, though, select issues where he feels he can use his influence as Mayor. Rough-sleeping is one such issue.

Rough-sleeping occurs in clusters and is often addressed by volunteers delivering £1m worth of services to street-homeless people for free. There should be ways for organisations like ours to access funds regionally.

The Mayor is holding a consultation event on the London Housing Strategy on 8th July. Similar events in previous years have been dominated by housing professionals, landlords and developers.

London Tenants Federation has consistently argued for a better balance of attendees; more equal percentages of tenants and representatives from other voluntary sector organisations alongside the professionals. LTF has been offered only three places this time, whilst in previous years it has been allocated eight or 10. Why has there been a reduction and why is the balance so heavily weighted to the professionals?

We have been bombarded with people asking for more places – including those from local authorities and developers. Council housing does only make up 16% of the housing in London and other voluntary sector agencies have been invited to the event.

Why is the Mayor's Office allowing reductions in levels of social rented housing in regeneration schemes? The Ferrier estate in Greenwich is one such example, where there was an overall loss of more than 1,000 social rented homes. Given the extreme levels of need for social rented housing, what guarantees will you give us that this will not continue?

There should be no overall loss of 'affordable' housing, measured by number of homes or by bed space. I am happy to look into this particular example.

A New Model for Addressing London's Housing Need was held on 4th June 2009 at Fellow's Court Community Centre, Fellows Court Estate, Weymouth Terrace E2 8LR

It was one of a series of consultation events organised by the London Tenants Federation, with a grant from the GLA and match funding from its London Councils funding, aimed at engaging tenants in discussion about the draft London Housing Strategy and encouraging them to respond to public consultation on the strategy.

The London Tenants Federation brings together borough wide council tenants federations and organisations aiming to provide a strong voice regionally for council tenants. It has representation on the Mayor's Housing Forum and chairs the Forum's Community Engagement Sub-Group.

It operates by consensus and has developed relationships with tenants of other tenures and other voluntary and community sector groups that have an interest in housing and community issues.

London Tenants Federation would like to thank Shelter, Planning Aid for London and Just Space Planning Network for their support in organising and running the event.

It would also like to thank Alan Benson, GLA Head of Housing and Homelessness for his presentation on the draft strategy, Fellows Court TRA for their support in running one of the workshops and all who attended for their valuable contributions.

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