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Housing & Communities

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Dear Matt,

Thank you for your email of 7 December to the Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP, enclosing the latest report of the APPG for Council Housing. I have been asked to reply as this matter falls within my ministerial responsibilities.

It is pleasing to see the active role tenants had in compiling this report and the ways in which they were able to share their personal experiences. Council housing policy should always be shaped by tenants, so we can deliver the service they expect to see and deserve. The Government will continue to work to deliver affordable, safe, decent and good-quality housing, with landlords who respect tenants and listen to their views.

Shortage of Council Housing

The APPG report raises the issues of waiting lists, particularly referring to Southwark and Rochdale. The Government has given local councils freedom to manage their own waiting lists, so they can decide who should qualify for social housing in their area and develop solutions which make best use of the social housing stock. Social housing waiting lists have fallen by almost 600 000 households between 2010 and 2020.

The allocation of available land to developers was another point raised in the report, as you mention that some commercial buildings are being converted into homes, but do not need to go through local planning processes, allowing “modern slums to flourish”. Permitted development rights for change of use to residential are making an important contribution to housing delivery, with over 82,000 new homes delivered under such rights in the six years to March 2020. These are additional homes, many of which may not have otherwise been delivered through the full planning process. To help ensure that the homes delivered under the rights are quality homes we have legislated to ensure that from 6 April 2021 all new homes delivered under permitted development rights, must as a minimum, meet the Nationally Described Space Standards.

We agree that we need to maximise the supply of new affordable housing, and make sure that more people in housing need have access to a good-quality home at sub-market rent. Since 2010, the Government has delivered over 574,100 new affordable homes, including over 403,400 affordable homes for rent, of which over 156,600 homes for social rent. The Government is investing over £12 billion in affordable housing over 5 years, the largest investment in a decade. This includes the new £11.5 billion Affordable Homes Programme (AHP), which will provide up to 180,000 new homes across the country, should economic conditions allow.

On the issue of empty homes, the Government is taking decisive action to lower the number of empty homes by giving councils stronger powers to increase council tax on these properties. Taking these steps has meant the number of empty homes has fallen by more than 30,000 since

2010 and 96% of second homes are now charged full Council Tax. It is for councils to decide when to use their powers to deal with empty properties, and they have the flexibility to focus on locally determined priorities and allocate their resources accordingly.

The report raises concerns about the affordability of rents. The social rent formula, used to set the initial rent on the vast majority of rented social housing, takes account of relative local income levels (as well as the relative value and size of the property). *The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016* required social housing landlords to cut their rents by 1% each year for four years (subject to certain exceptions). From April 2020 our rent policy allows rents to rise by up to the Consumer Price Index plus 1 percentage point. Our policy aims to strike a balance between the interests of existing social housing tenants and making sure that we build enough homes to help those in housing need. It is also important to ensure that landlords have sufficient rental income to manage and maintain their existing homes to the right standard. We have made very clear that the CPI plus 1 percentage point cap is a ceiling. Councils and housing associations are free to apply lower increases, or indeed to freeze or reduce rents, if they wish to do so.

Poor conditions and Safety

The Social Housing White Paper was published in November 2020, outlining a wide range of reforms which will ensure all council housing is safe and decent, and landlords are held to account if they fail to deliver this standard of housing. The conditions described by residents in your report are completely unacceptable.

The Government has committed through the Social Housing White Paper to review the Decent Homes Standard, considering whether it needs to be updated to make sure it is delivering what is needed for safety and decency today, including on issues such as damp and mould, which you mention in your report.

Alongside the Decent Homes Standard, we will be transforming our approach to social housing regulation, placing tenants' interests at the heart of our regulatory system through a new, robust consumer regulation regime. This regime will be backed by a new set of key performance indicators for all landlords to report against, and regular inspections of the largest landlords every four years.

No resident should need to wait 13 months to receive a smoke alarm, as was the experience of one resident you share in your report. The Government announced on 23 November 2021 that smoke alarms will be made mandatory in all social rented homes, with a requirement for carbon monoxide alarms in rooms with fixed combustion appliances and upon installation of any heating appliance.

The APPG report raises the issue of the Self-Financing Settlement of April 2012, which you say means that councils cannot renew stock or retrofit existing homes due to councils having unmanageable housing debt. The development of the self-financing model for Housing Revenue Accounts took place over a number of years, with significant input from the sector, and after extensive consultation. The sector welcomed the move to, and freedom represented by self-financing and the ability it gave authorities to set local priorities in response to local needs.

Estate Demolition and Regeneration

We know that demolition and regeneration of estates is an emotive topic for tenants. It is centrally important that tenants are consulted throughout these processes. The Estate Regeneration National Strategy, published in December 2016, sets out the Government's expectation that all estate regeneration schemes should have the support of a majority of residents. The Strategy also highlights the importance of resident involvement throughout the regeneration process.

Residents should be given opportunities to participate in developing the vision, initial decisions, options appraisal, design, procurement and delivery of schemes.

Discrimination

No council housing tenant should feel discriminated against or harassed. The written submission from the Housing with Pride steering group at the University of Surrey highlights shocking statistics. All tenants should be treated with respect and have their concerns listened to and responded to by staff who are courteous and act in a professional manner.

The Social Housing White Paper commits the Government to a review of the professional training and development for all social housing staff. The review will examine the experience, skills and professional development needed to drive forward cultural changes to ensure that all residents are treated with respect.

In July 2021 we published *Help for social housing tenants when faced with anti-social behaviour*, an information guide clarifying the different responsibilities that police, local authorities and landlords have in tackling anti-social behaviour, making it clear to tenants who can give them the most appropriate support and assistance. This can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-with-anti-social-behaviour-for-social-housing-tenants>.

Tenant Voice

We understand that residents want to be heard, and the most important part of this is to be heard by their landlord, who can directly make improvements to resident's experiences of social housing.

The Government is committed to implementing the reforms laid out in our Charter for Social Housing Residents – the social housing White Paper, which will deliver transformational change for social renters. We continue to develop our reform of a range of social housing regulations and will look to legislate as soon as practicable.

The new consumer regulatory regime will lead to greater monitoring and oversight of landlord performance. This will include ensuring tenants have opportunities to hold their landlords to account, and that landlords are providing information to tenants. As part of the new regime, tenant satisfaction measures will be introduced to help assess landlord performance on issues like repairs and complaints handling.

The APPG for Council Housing is an important forum through which tenants and campaigning groups can share their views and experiences. We look forward to working with you closely in the coming months and years.

I trust this information is helpful and I thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours ever,



EDDIE HUGHES MP