

# Stop Press Leasehold reform on the Agenda?

The government has recently produced a consultation paper on unfair practices in the leasehold housing market. This is in response to widespread critical reports in the press, especially in the Guardian, about the problems with leasehold houses. All leaseholders should respond to this consultation paper.

If you require further information, please contact LHG Member Dermot Mckibbin who is particularly interested in leasehold reform. His email address is [dermotmckibbin@btinternet.com](mailto:dermotmckibbin@btinternet.com)

## Join Us!

Join Labour Housing Group and help us take the fight for decent housing for everyone to the Government

Labour Housing Group is an organisation of individual Labour Party Members and Affiliated organisations. Our purposes are to raise awareness of housing awareness of housing issues in the Party, to develop and publicise new policy initiatives, and to lobby at local and national levels for progressive housing policies. If, like us, you are deeply concerned about the crises in Britain's housing, join us and help us start the huge task of correcting years of Tory dogma and neglect.

We have enclosed a number of LHG membership application forms with this edition of our Newsletter. Please encourage your Party colleagues to consider joining us in the fight for better housing for all, for the Right to a Home. You have to be a full individual member of the Labour Party to join LHG - that's all!

NB Individuals must be members of the Labour Party and agree to be bound by Labour Party rules and the LHG constitution

The opinions expressed in articles in this Newsletter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Labour Housing Group

# HOUSING



August 2017

Editor - Ed Derrick

Honorary Patrons: Lord Roy Kennedy and Nicky Gavron

The Newsletter from Labour Housing Group

## Editorial

Events overtook LHG's Spring newsletter which, when in her 'wisdom' the Prime Minister called the General Election, was already at the printer. Not long afterwards the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower changed everything. LHG's response to Grenfell is set out in this issue in an article by our Chair Paul Eastwood and commentary by one of our Patrons, Lord Roy Kennedy.

It is important that Labour does not fall into the trap of allowing the Government to set the terms of debate about housing. Of course we have to have ripostes to its irrelevant policies and doubtful claims - doing so is part of our role as Opposition in Parliament. But our wider role and responsibility is to present our alternative vision - of housing policies based on the needs of people and not finance, on collaboration rather than exploitation, on fairness and equality rather than privilege and wealth.

So in this edition we also continue our look at what is being done by Labour in the great cities where Labour is in power, through the offices of our elected Mayors.

After Grenfell, it is of course right to say 'never again' - but equally obviously, once was once too often. How on earth could a wealthy, technically advanced and supposedly democratic society have got its values so distorted that the safety of its people is held to be of less importance than saving a little money? Grenfell raises huge questions about the nature of British society and politics which go far wider and deeper than housing issues alone. But whilst we will of course contribute to the wider debate, housing is what we in LHG are about - and I suggest that we can do little better as a starter than to echo the words of Terrie Alafat (Inside Housing, 28 July 2017), namely that "we passionately believe in the power of good housing, and of the vital importance of everyone having a decent, affordable place to call home. Now it's time for a UK-wide conversation about the value of social housing".

*Ed Derrick*

## LHG at the Labour Party Conference

### Housing after Grenfell

6.30 pm on Sunday 24th September 2017  
Friends' Meeting House, Ship Street, Brighton BN1 1AF

#### Confirmed Speakers:

Rt. Hon. John Healey M.P. - Shadow Minister of Housing  
Alison Inman O.B.E. - President of the Chartered Institute of Housing  
Andy Winter - Chief Executive, Brighton Housing Trust

Ship Street is in The Lanes area of Brighton, and runs between Kings Road (the sea front) and North Street, and is a short way east of the Conference Centre.

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## Dealing with the Tories' Housing Crisis - Bristol Fashion

With average house prices over £ 1/4m, and private rents over £1,000 per month it is hardly surprising that housing was one of the biggest issues in the 2016 Mayoral election in Bristol, and is a top priority for the new Mayor's administration. Our headline pledge was to increase home building from the low under the previous independent Mayor, from 460 to 2000 per year by 2020, with 800 affordable.

Labour took majority control of the council as well as the Mayor in the election and arrived with a well-developed housing strategy. This had been built in the months prior to the election with a twin tracked approach of policy groups for party members and roundtable events with the building industry. The first major decision of the administration was to take 80 hectares of council-owned land off the market, to enable the council to release the land for development in a controlled way rather than fuelling land speculation.

As cabinet member I set four priorities for the first year in office:

1. Increase the volume of housing development, affordable housing delivery and establishing a council owned delivery company
2. Reducing the number of empty council properties from 550 to 250 (already down to 406 by January 2017)
3. Reduce the number of families in temporary accommodation (unfortunately still over 500 in January 2017)
4. Improve standards in the private rented sector and adopting an ethical charter for the sector.

Year two priorities will add to this list by establishing a citywide tenants' federation, encompassing all tenures and reviewing who is social housing for and how is it allocated?

Underlying our work is the creation of balanced communities across the city. This has already put us into some rather intense meetings with developers about affordable housing contributions. The planning system is producing around half of our policy requirement and we are using our land ownership to lever new affordable and social housing. As a stock retaining authority we are also maintaining a council home building programme and are about to start the city's largest new build development for three decades.

Labour has also ensured that the voices of those failed by the housing market as well as those of developers, investors and other housing interests are heard in the council. We are about to hold our second 'Big Housing Conversation' in partnership with a private tenants campaign group ACORN. This brings together officers, politicians and tenants/homeless people. We are also working with community led organisations to put more housing development under community control.

Despite the eye-watering cuts in our finances we are investing additional revenue into an enlarged cross departmental housing delivery team to get more homes built. The mayor has also spearheaded work with the faith community to get more buildings open for rough sleepers in the City.

Outside of the years of the Second World War, we probably have to go back to before 1919 to find a worse operating environment for delivering social housing. In Bristol our housing policy is one of our flagship activities and one which our administration will be judged on in our next elections in 2020.

*Paul Smith, Cabinet Member, Homes and Communities, Bristol City Council*

Effective regulation is essential to a well governed sector. The shifting in the focus of regulation to a position where it is almost exclusively about finance and "value for money" has led us to where we are today. Some housing associations are far too financially driven, financially focused, and largely unaccountable, to the point where even in Kensington and Chelsea they can leave properties empty while the survivors of Grenfell are living in hotels. This plainly cannot be right, but where is the regulator on this? "Value for Money" is supposed to be qualitative as well as quantitative, but the numbers always win.

Now, more so than ever, housing associations and bodies that manage housing on behalf of local authorities must address the issues of transparency and public accountability if they are to retain the confidence of the public and politicians. With no regulator to enforce this, each landlord has to take the lead.

Landlords now have to give their tenants confidence that their homes are safe. Many tenants in tower blocks will wish to be rehoused, which is a situation each landlord will have to manage. Tenants who bought their flats now face the prospect that their property has a much reduced resale value. The economic as well as the social aspects are only beginning to unravel. The housing crisis just got a whole lot worse, literally overnight.

The term "game changer" is very over used, but over the past 40 years it is difficult to think of any other thing - with the possible exception of the introduction of Right To Buy - that has been more capable of resetting the rules than the fire at Grenfell Tower.

Just like the 11<sup>th</sup> century Tower of London in Tower Hamlets, Grenfell is a symbol of where power lies in our society at a point in time. If we are to respond positively to Grenfell, as we must, we have to be bold and brave and beprepared to confront some inconvenient truths.

*( This article is based on an earlier article submitted to "Labour Briefing" immediately after the Grenfell fire by Paul Eastwood, Chair of Labour Housing Group )*

## House of Lords Report

The tragedy at Grenfell Tower shocked us all, both the immediate tragedy and the complete failure of the local authority to respond effectively to the needs of the survivors and the local community. The forthcoming public enquiry needs to get to the bottom of what happened and also address the wider social issues. Since the tragedy I have sought to question the Government on their actions at every opportunity.

Providing effective scrutiny and challenge to the Government is one of the main areas of work the House of Lords undertakes.

After seven years in office the Conservative Party has a record of failure which they own entirely. We were able to secure some significant wins during the passage of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and the regulations that have followed.

These include the abandonment of the 'Pay to Stay' proposals, the banning of letting agents' fees and the protection of the tenancies of families who have school age children. In this we were helped by labour Housing Group members and Labour Councillors working with us and providing the evidence to challenge the Government's ill thought out plans.

I always seek to make the case for social housing to alleviate the problems that hold people back and prevent them from thriving at every stage in their lives. I grew up on a Council estate in South London and will always be grateful to Southwark Council for providing a home that was safe, warm and dry at a rent my parents could truly afford.

We must all stand up for social housing just as the Labour party did in the 1960s and 1970s.

*Lord Roy Kennedy*

Firstly, with rare exceptions, an ending of local authority house building - homes that were built quickly and largely experimentally 40 - 50 years ago were not replaced with better quality housing.

Secondly, reductions in maintenance and management resources, led to planned preventative works being cut and caretaking posts being scaled back. Where people live in high density housing with shared facilities, caretakers are the “eyes and the ears” that are essential to identifying problems and quickly dealing with them.

Thirdly, flats being sold under Right To Buy, while creating mixed tenures, made the blocks much more difficult to manage and control. Management allowances failed to recognise this. Subletting and overcrowding became much more common.

As a society, we have collectively not seen anything wrong in “shoe horned” people into high rise buildings - that is until a tragedy strikes. We should want better than this. Tenants deserve better than this.

**Labour Housing Group has committed to a 10 Point Plan to respond to the Grenfell fire. These points are:**

1. The Government, not tenants, must meet the costs of making all properties managed by local authorities and housing associations compliant with best practice on health and safety. A key part of this making Building Regulations clearer, with health and safety the top priority
2. A national debate must be begun on future housing provision, with input from tenants and people on housing waiting lists, to ensure that the homes we build in the future are ones which people wish to live in, feel safe in, and help break down the negative stigma of public housing
3. There must be a thorough review of housing regulation. The system has become too focused on finance and quantitative issues, rather than on service standards and how well landlords relate to and respond to their tenants
4. Housing management standards need review. The value of housing management being a key element in helping communities work well needs recognition, but also that much housing management is labour intensive. There is no better example than the role of caretakers, who have been reduced in number and status under the cuts to local authority funding since 2010. We recommend better sharing of good practice between landlords, with the CIH championing best standards for the 21st Century
5. The Government's Green Paper on Corporate Governance Reform needs widening to include housing associations, local authorities, ALMOs, and other managers of housing, to ensure that every landlord is working towards the highest standards in governance. A timescale should be imposed for reaching a defined high standard of governance
6. Housing associations, and TMOs, must urgently address how they demonstrate openness and accountability to the users of their services, to local councillors, and to Government. All landlords should be subject to the Freedom Of Information Act
7. Where housing associations operate regionally or nationally, they should consider transferring the management of their homes to locally based landlords, where those locally based landlords can demonstrate good and more open relationships with partner local authorities
8. Additional support should be provided to facilitate and promote the further development of co operative housing
9. Every landlord should demonstrate that at least on an annual basis, they have provide information to their tenants on health and safety in their home, which complies with current best practice. Additional support should be provided for all tenants who are vulnerable in any way
10. Government support for tenants' representative bodies at regional and national levels must be restored However, all of these things will not be possible with a government that is committed to a low tax economy freed of “red tape” ( i.e., proper regulation ).

## LHG AGM Report 2017

The AGM was held at Camden Town Hall at 11am on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> July 2017. 17 members were present.

### **Chair's report and report on EC activity**

Paul Eastwood opened the meeting to explain that this would be largely a business meeting as plans for speakers had been disrupted by the general election.

Paul then spoke about the Grenfell Tower disaster, which has been the issue on everybody's mind since it happened. The need for Labour Housing Group is greater than ever as the Labour Party must develop housing policies that put much needed investment into social housing and ensure that there is proper oversight and that tenants are listened to.

The new EC was appointed at the conference fringe meeting in Liverpool in September 2016. Emma Burnell and Nicky Gavron had left the committee and were thanked for their contributions. Nicky Gavron has been appointed LHG Patron, along with Roy Kennedy.

Kerry Pollard who was chair for many years had been unable to attend the Liverpool fringe. He is a true housing champion and the committee will express its gratitude to him at the fringe meeting in Brighton in September 2017.

The London group held a successful policy event and AGM and produced a report on community-led housing.

An event in the North East had been planned but had had to be postponed due to the general election.

Two newsletters have gone out and another is being prepared, containing information about LHG and articles on housing from a Labour perspective.

### **Action Plan for the forthcoming year**

LHG's response to Grenfell was discussed. It was decided that we should make a submission to the Grenfell inquiry and to the call for input to the terms of reference of the inquiry. Ideas discussed were

- the need for greater accountability of TMOs, ALMOs and councils that manage social housing
- a complete review of housing standards and enforcement
- the need for standards in leaseholder properties to be upheld and a resolution for issues regarding leaseholders' ability to pay for improvements that impact on safety
- government funding must be provided for safety improvements
- addressing issues of high rise buildings that were badly built Upcoming events planned are the fringe event in Brighton, the North East event and an event in Birmingham with the Fabian Society.

### **Approval of accounts and budget and appointment of auditors**

Ross Houston, LHG Treasurer presented the accounts and a draft budget for the forthcoming year. The accounts and budget were approved by the meeting. Ross thanked Heather Johnson and Alex Heslop for auditing the accounts. Kerry Pollard proposed that Heather and Alex continue as auditors. This was seconded by David Leah and agreed by the meeting.

***Continued Overleaf***

### Membership Report

David Leah, LHG Membership officer, reported that membership stands at 247 individual members and three affiliated CLPs. This is a six percent increase in individual members since September last year and there has been a nine percent increase in paid up members. Efforts continue to contact members who have not paid up. Four members contacted had deceased and two resigned.

Peter Challis volunteered to assist David in the membership role as David has limited time available.

The meeting agreed to keep the membership fee at £25 / £5 unwaged.

### Conference delegate report

Alex Heslop gave a verbal report. A written report had gone out in the December newsletter.

### Resolutions from members

No resolutions were received.

### Any other business

Sheila Griffin raised the issue of people with mental health problems living in tower blocks.

Liz Davies reported that the Society of Labour Lawyers may be holding a public meeting on CPO.

Glyn Thomas spoke about London LHG's inquiry into mutual/co-op housing. The report has been sent to the GLA. Amongst other things it proposes a hub to provide advice on financing housing schemes outside the state sector. It was reported in an article in Co-op News.

## Kerry Pollard moves on

Kerry Pollard, who stood down after last year's AGM, served as Labour Housing Group's Chair for several years, having been involved with us for over thirty years (so far). Kerry's lifelong commitment to public service includes being M.P. for St Albans from 1997 to 2005, an elected Member of St Alban's Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council, and serving as a Magistrate in the same County. He remains an active member of LHG's Executive Committee, taking the lead in the development of our new website which is due to launch later this year and helping organise LHG's events programme. We look forward to his continuing contributions to the work of the Executive, and wish him all the best for the future.



*Paul Eastwood, Chair of Labour Housing Group*

## Housing After Grenfell



In the aftermath of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, many people are asking "how could this have happened?"

As the initial shock subsides, long term major challenges will emerge.

To begin with, most tower blocks in the UK were built in the 1960s and 1970s when successive governments were primarily concerned with the delivery of "units" rather than homes. Quantity over quality. Tower blocks were almost exclusively public sector local authority housing. The private sector showed little appetite for stacking families one on top of the other. There were few design flourishes, most blocks were functional and brutal. The trend towards cladding these towers was as much for aesthetic reasons as for improving energy efficiency and weatherproofing.

Built in the 1970s, Grenfell had one major design flaw - a single staircase, serving 120 flats. In the aftermath of the tragedy that has recently happened, many people will rightly query how this design was deemed suitable or safe. One way in, one way out. Bad enough at peak times for footfall, but disastrous in an emergency situation.

As the year on year supply of affordable housing shrank, tower blocks increasingly began to be used for housing families with young children or even extended families sharing rooms. In the early days of tower blocks, lettings policies often prescribed that flats in high rise blocks were for single people, couples, or couples with one older child. As time went on, these policies were relaxed. Tower blocks were being used for purposes they were not originally intended for. As Grenfell demonstrated there were approximately 700 people living in 120 flats: Do the maths.

The reasons why the tragedy took place should be fully explored in the public inquiry, which must be wide ranging and get to the truth. The key learning points must be shared and acted on without delay.

Some facts are non controversial. There can be no doubt that many years of reductions in the funding for local authority housing had three major consequences.

### Continued Overleaf