

HUSING

CONFERENCE REPORT



by Sheila Spencer

It was definitely a good year for LHG at Annual Conference.

We held 3 fringe meetings, were represented on the platform of another fringe meeting, and, best of all, moved the Housing Composite on the main floor of Conference.

John Cotton, LHG chair, gave a storming speech as the mover, focusing on the need for housing as a human right to be enshrined in British law, which was of course the subject of our motion to Conference.

Many of the following speakers (including several LHG members) described the huge challenge facing both long term residents and local authorities in the many areas of the country where increasingly local families are priced out by 2nd homes and holiday homes, and quite a few drew from their own experiences – including one delegate who was facing eviction from the home she shared with her child.

Others talked about the iniquitous situations facing many private renters living in inadequate homes with landlords/agents who took their money but did nothing to maintain good standards. It was notable that many speakers were young people, some unable to foresee a time when they could rent a decent home, let alone buy.

There was an emergency motion about Grenfell, moved by the FBU, aimed at holding ministers and contractors to account. It also asked Labour to campaign for more sustained investment in local authority building control and fire safety, and to oppose privatisation, deregulation and contracting out of such services.



Sheila Spencer
(LHG Secretary)



COUNCILLOR JOHN COTTON
LABOUR HOUSING GROUP

**LHG HARD
AT WORK
(see pages
2-4)**



KEIR WELCOMES CONFERENCE DELEGATES



What's a "Composite Motion"?

Because motions may be submitted by any Constituency Labour Party or affiliated organisation (such as Labour Housing Group), the Conference Arrangements Committee seeks to group similar motions together under a "lead" motion that aims to encapsulate their content.

HOUSING COMPOSITE MOTION

Moved by **Labour Housing Group**, seconded by **St Ives CLP**, passed by a show of hands.

This motion asks that the Party demand that the government takes action now to end the housing crisis by:

- Enshrining a right to adequate housing in law
- Fully funding councils to deliver 150,000 social rent homes each year including 100,000 council homes
- Repealing anti-squatting legislation and the Vagrancy Act
- Ending Right to Buy
- Strengthening tenants' rights and ending 'no-fault evictions'
- Giving councils stronger powers of compulsory purchase to tackle land banking
- Giving councils powers to restrict 2nd home / holiday home purchases, and to charge a levy on 2nd homes to be used to provide local social housing,
- Ending homelessness by instituting a 'housing-first' system
- Committing to strengthening tenants' rights
- Funding the retrofitting of council housing
- Building disability housing and in the meantime encouraging local councils to include houses specifically designed for single occupation or couples

The motion noted that the UK has obligations under international law to ensure that everyone enjoys the human right to housing that is affordable, accessible, habitable, secure and culturally appropriate, without discrimination.

Unfortunately, while the 1998 Human Rights Act protects rights such as free speech, it does not explicitly guarantee the right to adequate housing. Setting this right into legislation would help to eradicate homelessness, and could avert housing problems for people in all tenures. It also asked the Labour Party to place the above actions at the centre of its housing policies.

The full Housing Composite can be read [here](#), and the emergency motion about Grenfell can be read in Conference Arrangement Committee Report 2 (Page 25) [here](#).

LHG AT THE CONFERENCE FRINGE

Council Homebuilding

This meeting launched LHG's publication [*The Missing Solution: Council Homebuilding for the 21st Century*](#).

An idea from one of our Patrons, James Murray MP (who chaired the meeting), this report captures some of the best of Labour councils' ideas on how to deliver new council homes, as well as thoughts on arranging finance and harnessing the Housing Revenue Account, options for governance, building sustainable homes, tackling rent issues, and involving tenants.



Contributors Paul Hackett (Smith Institute), Cllr Satvir Kaur (Southampton City Council), Jenni Hill (ARCH Tenants' Group) and Rachel Blake (LB Tower Hamlets) spoke about the need for funding for councils to build again, and the way that council homes can contribute to regeneration and resident empowerment, and to meeting other needs.



Speakers: <https://bit.ly/3bke1Um>

Q&A: <https://bit.ly/3GsQz5l>

Housing as a Human Right

As well as the campaign to build council houses, LHG's 40th anniversary was marked at Annual Conference by our pledge to get housing to be treated as a human right in this country's laws.

Our fringe meeting (organised jointly with the [Labour Campaign for Human Rights](#)) heard all about the strong case for this to happen: Lucy Powell MP gave an excellent account of the wide range of ways in which this would make a difference to the lives of people living with housing insecurity, poor housing conditions or management, or unacceptably high housing costs; Cllr Amanda Pinnock (Kirklees Council) spoke about the way that the right would help to tackle inequalities; and Alicia Kennedy (Generation Rent) highlighted the plight of private tenants,



and looked forward to the day when their rights would be assured.

Leilani Farha (former UN Rapporteur for the Right to Adequate Housing) was at the last minute unable to join the meeting via Zoom on the day, but later in an interview gave LHG a fascinating insight on the way that the right to housing has changed how people think about tackle housing issues in Canada, and how cities around the world are also adopting this way of thinking. Her key point, that homelessness is a violation of human rights, should become our watchword in the Labour housing movement.

Amanda Pinnock



Speakers: <https://bit.ly/3jKDF9i> Leilani Farha: <https://bit.ly/3mkWmlG> Q&A: <https://bit.ly/3BznWAh>

LHG AT THE CONFERENCE FRINGE

Building Back Stronger: green and warm homes for all

Organised jointly with [SERA](#), speakers at this meeting highlighted the urgent need for both building sustainable new homes, and retrofitting our existing stock.

Mike Amesbury MP (Shadow Minister for Housing) spoke about the embarrassing mistakes and lack of action from the Tory Government, which has withdrawn green home grants, and failed to put in place any sort of programme to ensure that new homes are built so as to not need retrofitting in the future: only 2% of new homes are future-proofed.

He highlighted the fact that councils have led the way on building new sustainable homes. Brian Berry (Federation of Master Builders) agreed that there had been a total lack of leadership from the Government on both retrofitting and the new homes programme.

Rob Cheesewright (Smart Energy GB) outlined the benefits of smart meters.

Leonie Cooper (London Assembly Member) provided examples of the London Mayor's forward-thinking housing programme, including retrofitting. Zoe Watson (Levitt Bernstein Architects) talked about the need to get private landlords involved in retrofitting, how to balance the costs of producing on-site and off-site renewables with cost of the use of energy in the home, and the steps needed to get to net zero carbon in homebuilding.



(right to left) **Ross Houston** (LB Barnet), **Heather Johnstone** (LB Camden) and **Amanda Pinnock** (Kirklees Council)



<https://bit.ly/3GtDDwk>

Ending Veteran Homelessness

LHG was also represented at a fringe meeting hosted by the union Community and SME4Labour. This called for more action to prevent homelessness amongst ex-service personnel, and in particular for better preparation for people before they exit the forces, and more action from councils' Armed Forces Champions.

John Healey MP (Shadow Secretary of State for Defence) made a pledge to build the case for more assistance, drawing on the testimony given by Labour Friends of the Forces as well as people attending the meeting.



<https://bit.ly/3Bi4KXz>

OTHER HOUSING CAMPAIGNS

FABIAN/SHELTER PAMPHLET

The Fabian Society and Shelter have jointly published a policy report entitled "Home Front" which is available from their website [here](#).



It contains an article by LHG's Executive member and Tower Hamlets Councillor, Rachel Blake.



Who could disagree with massively improving the insulation of homes in the UK? Even the utility companies are officially on board.

The **Insulate Britain** campaign is correct in arguing for greater urgency, though it must be admitted that blocking motorways seems to have gained few new allies for the cause.

Much more troublesome is finding the solutions. There seems to be no detailed, published assessment of the scale and nature of the task.

IB demands spending on public housing, which is good, although the worst of the problem almost certainly lies in private rented accommodation and owner-occupied properties where the landlords and occupants may lack the knowledge and the means to carry out such work.

Sounds like yet another job for local authorities to lead on...

NEW HOMES FROM EMPTY HOUSES

Action on Empty Homes

has developed an *Empty Homes Toolkit* to turn empty houses into affordable homes.



It has been developed in consultation with local authorities and community-based schemes already experienced in working together to achieve this.

These free regional launch events are currently available:

- 18th November 2021, 10.00am – 1.30pm
St James', Oxford Road, Manchester
- 25th November 2021, 10.00am – 1.30pm
Custard Factory Digbeth, Birmingham

More information at <https://www.actiononemptyhomes.org/community-action-on-empty-homes-toolkit>

Whether Michael Gove believes himself promoted or 'bust to the ranks', he wasted no time in renaming his new job as *Secretary of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities* after his appointment on 15 September 2021.

He inherits the thorny problem of funding the removal of high-rise cladding and, according to his predecessor Robert Jenrick, the refusal of the Treasury to find the cash.



HOUSEBUILDING: A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON

This Labour Party Conference seems like a victory for the case for a big increase in public housing. The political argument has been won and we are all keen to get on with the work.

But it also a good time to recall that we have been here – or somewhere like it – before.

The **Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act of 1919** (a.k.a. the Addison Act) provided subsidies to local authorities for the construction of 500,000 houses in three years. Although this marked a key point in the argument for public housing, sadly, it resulted in 'only' 213,800 homes being built.

Circumstances were exceptionally difficult, with the ruination of World War 1 followed closely by the world-wide **Great Influenza Epidemic of 1918** which is considered to be one of the deadliest pandemics in history, killing about 3% of the global population, mostly young adults.

The war caused house building costs to rise enormously. For instance, it was reported to a Manchester Housing Committee that houses that had cost £250 to build pre-war were now costing £1,250.

WHAT NOW?

In 2021, the *Covid19 pandemic* threatens not only the supply of skilled labour (amplified by the impact of Brexit on the availability of foreign workers) but also of basic raw materials.

To the steeply rising prices of commodities such as gas and oil we can add those of timber and cement.

(The effects of forest fires, unseasonal floods and container vessels stuck in the Suez Canal are all in this mix.)

It is tempting to think that the only obstacle to large-scale housebuilding is political obstruction, but this is far from being the case. There are and probably will be real shortages of many types for some time to come.

Competing priorities – an earlier example

In 1945, the commitment to raise the school leaving age ("RoSLA"), for which plans had been laid as far back as 1918 and that should have been implemented in 1939, were still in abeyance.

There was Cabinet opposition to RoSLA expressed by Nye Bevan and Hugh Dalton who argued that both the labour and raw materials needed for the additional classrooms were also required for house-building. (The final decision went in favour of RoSLA implementation.)

So we should not be surprised if similarly conflicting demands occur in the 21st Century.

We may need to bear in mind that the real aim of our policies is to "provide homes" rather than "build buildings" and that, in some circumstances, renewal or refurbishment of existing homes may require less labour and/or materials than new build.

SHORTAGE SCOREBOARD

In August 2021, the Construction Industry Training Board reported that:

"There were already issues with worker shortages created by the end of freedom of movement for EU citizens, given that the UK does have a reliance on migrant labour. Our research shows that just over 8% of the building sector workforce is from the EU. In 2019, 15% of the sector's employers were reliant on migrant workers and that's only fallen to 13% now.

We thought that people in high-demand areas such as carpentry and management would be added to the protected occupations, but the new immigration system didn't allow for that. And then many workers returned to their country of domicile and have stayed there because of the pandemic."

PUTTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN PLACE IN ENGLAND

Now that the Labour Party has accepted LHG's *Housing as a Human Right* resolution at Annual Conference, we are fully expecting this to be set out in the manifesto for the next General Election.

Although we have the encouraging examples of Canada, Portugal and some individual cities around the world, there is still a lot to do before we are ready to propose how to enshrine the principles in legislation.

Firstly, we need to understand what adopting legislation to implement the right would mean. [The United Nations Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing](#) tell us that:

"States often misunderstand the right to housing as merely a commitment to housing programmes, a matter of socio-economic policy insulated from human rights values and imperatives and without meaningful accountability or access to justice."

In practice, [as Leilani Farha \(right\) said in her recent interview for LHG](#), it can mean changing the priorities for resource allocation, shaping decisions about housing affordability, what is built and where, and changing laws which govern other services such as health, social services, and criminal justice.

Secondly, we would need to identify which aspects of housing legislation need to be amended as a result of adopting the right. This would include tackling homelessness, revising landlord and tenant law and setting renting policy.

There would also need to be references to the right to space and provision of facilities to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Legislation should also serve to limit the scale of empty properties, to guarantee the right to safe housing and to provide a right for tenants' voices to be heard.

Thirdly, it would seem sensible to examine the varying impact in different parts of the country. For example, we may need to shape laws to control second and holiday homes in areas such as coastal towns, National Parks and London.

As Leilani says, the right to housing would provide a funnel through which every decision taken that touches on housing should promote the right and move it forward.

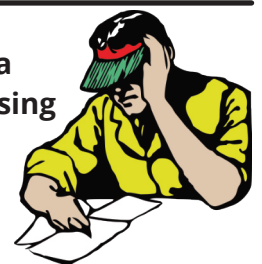
Fundamental changes to the way the country thinks about housing would result from this right becoming law, so to get to the point where we can propose legislation, LHG will need to build support and gain momentum by working with other housing campaigns, social and community movements and other progressive thinkers.

As was the case with the campaign for legislation in Canada, the right must become "everyone's baby".

Are you involved in a group which could work with LHG to make the right to housing a right for all in this country? Can you suggest groups we should work with? Could you get stuck in to help to build awareness of the benefits it would bring?

If the answer is yes, write to info@labourhousing.org and we'll take it from there!

If you would like to make a contribution to LHG's Housing Newsletter, please email the Editor at pauljmartin@clara.co.uk



LHG EXECUTIVE 2020-2022

LHG's Executive was elected at the AGM 21st March 2020 for the two years to 2022.

Executive members

Andy Bates (co-opted)

Janet Berry

John Bevan

Rachel Blake

Nick Bragger (co-opted)

John Cotton

Ed Derrick

Gerard Heffey (co-opted)

Ross Houston

Heather Johnson

Paul Martin

Amanda Pinnock

Sheila Spencer

Christopher Worrall
(co-opted)

WHAT IS THE LABOUR HOUSING GROUP?

The Labour Housing Group is a lobbying group that is affiliated to the Labour Party and dedicated to the development of a socialist housing policy.

You can contact us at <http://labourhousing.org/contact> and join us at <https://labourhousing.org/membership/>

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

YOU CAN \$TILL HE£P

If you are too busy to give time and energy, you can still help us in our work by making a donation by bank transfer to:

"Labour Housing Group", Account number 50478080, Sort code 08-90-06,

Co-operative Bank, PO Box 1AN, Blandford Street, Newcastle, NE99 1AN.

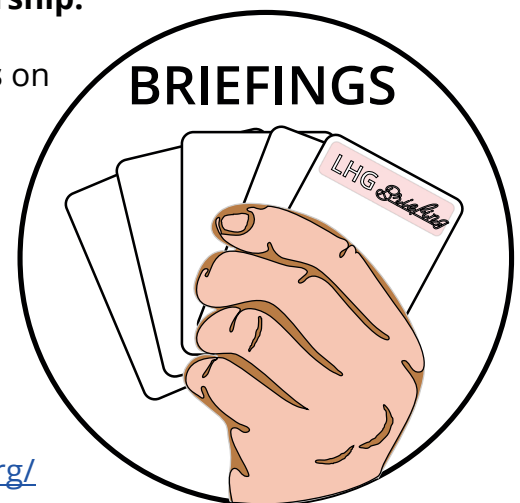
Of course, you can also send a cheque made payable to "Labour Housing Group" c/o **The Treasurer, Flat 2, 8 Torrington Park, London N12 9SS**

Please quote "40th Anniversary"

For readers new to housing policy issues, *Labour Housing Group* publishes a series of short guides aimed at a wide readership.

Our published **Briefings** on current topics include *Homelessness, Rough Sleeping, Affordable Housing, Private Renting Sector, Rural Housing* and *Leasehold Reform*.

They can be found at:
<https://labourhousing.org/resources/lhg-briefings/>



The latest edition covers *Council Homes*.

If you would like to contribute, please email our Policy Officer, Paul Martin at pauljmartin@clara.co.uk.

Opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of the Labour Housing Group.