

# HOUSING

## A WINNING ISSUE

Labour Housing Group's Annual General Meeting on 11th March heard from Labour councillors how they won in Barnet, Westminster and Worthing and are now making a real difference to their constituents.

We tell the story of how Labour fought a twenty-year battle for the London Borough of Barnet on pages 6 and 7 of this issue.

Our submission to Labour's manifesto process identifies our priorities and is also reproduced here on pages 2 and 3.

We are united in believing that housing is not only dear to the hearts of many voters across the country but that a warm, safe and affordable home underpins success in other policy areas such as health, education and employment.

We will continue to argue this at Labour Party Conference this autumn in the form of our conference motion, "Housing - a winning issue".

### Also inside this issue

Page 2-3: Labour's National Policy Forum – response to consultation

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### LHG MOTION FOR LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

#### Housing – a winning issue

In a rich country like Britain, it is a major scandal that many people are dying because of poor housing conditions, such as damp and mould, or have no home at all.

Many people cannot afford to heat their homes or pay an excessive proportion of their income in rent. Others fear poor fire-safety, live with dangerous cladding, or suffer under the feudal system that is leasehold.

**We know that only Labour can fix Britain's broken housing system.** Labour already has the policies to do this, and our Shadow Front Bench is working with leaders across all sectors to ensure that the essential human right to decent and genuinely affordable housing can become a reality for all.

We need now to ensure **every voter** knows that transforming Britain's housing will be a priority for the next Labour Government, especially as it underpins other priorities such as good health and social care, affordable living costs and achieving net zero.

Annual Conference agrees that the Labour Party will make housing a winning issue at local and national levels by:

- Showing how things will be different under a Labour Government
- Explaining how we would develop an equitable, genuinely affordable, accountable, and sustainable housing system
- Regularly promoting Labour's policies for tackling housing failings that affect all tenures and ages, throughout the country

# LABOUR'S NATIONAL POLICY FORUM CONSULTATION 2023

The National Policy Forum's consultation requires responses to a range of questions. Labour Housing Group has responded as follows.

## Question

***"How can Labour make home ownership a reality for more families, give private renters the security they need and tackle the scourge of homelessness? How can the next Labour government build more social and council housing and ensure greater investment in genuinely affordable homes?"***

### **Housing is a top priority for Labour**

Millions of people are finding it hard to pay their rent or find somewhere to live. We know that the housing market has failed but we have a way forward. With Labour, decent housing will become a legally enforceable, fundamental human right, underpinned by strong policies that make this right a progressive reality for people across the country, whatever their tenure or circumstances.

### **Labour's alternatives to Tory policies**

#### **1) Tackling the shortage of homes**

Labour's will increase the overall supply of genuinely affordable housing, tackle homelessness and end rough sleeping by:

- Building more council homes.
- Reforming the Right to Buy to prevent further loss of council housing stock
- Allowing local authorities to set their own house building targets, and uprating Housing Revenue Accounts to ensure they are fit for purpose, including cancelling the historic debt.
- Reforming the construction industry and putting meeting need before making a profit.
- Reforming financial structures to help first-time buyers.
- Ensuring that new homes are built to meet local need by ending any tax advantages enjoyed by second homes and short-term holiday lets.
- Reforming the National Planning Policy Framework policies on housing, especially regarding "affordable housing"
- Reviewing the role of Housing Associations
- Adopt a 'Housing First' approach to ending homelessness through offering long term homes to homeless people
- Limit purchase of homes by absentee overseas investors who are not British Citizens, Residents or people with Settled Status

We will end waste by:

- Ending the scandal of empty properties
- Making land available to councils for house building
- Ending stockpiling of land by developers

(Continued page 3)

# **NPF Consultation response (continued)**

## **2) Improving security of tenure and participation**

Labour will:

- End “no fault” evictions, abolish assured shorthold tenancies and provide secure, indefinite tenancies as the norm.
- Replace leasehold tenure with commonhold for all new build houses and flats, enable existing leaseholders to convert to commonhold, and abolish the leasehold system.
- Create a publicly-available register of landlords and agents, regulate and monitor landlords' services, rents, service charges and housing quality, and ensure all landlords wanting to let to private tenants are licensed, trained and accredited.
- Boost access to advice, ensure an effective voice for all tenants, in all tenures and all areas, and support tenants' demands for good quality repairs to be met by landlords.

## **3) Tackling climate change and providing a safe and attractive environment**

- Labour's new homes will be designed to provide decent, sustainable, low carbon housing for all.
- Labour will ensure all new housing is free of cladding issues through tight regulation and close monitoring by local authorities, and ensure all new housing is built to fire safety standards.
- Labour will take action to ensure that existing houses and flats are made safe without any cost to the residents
- Introduce a new and strengthened Decent Homes quality standard, including ensuring that homes in all tenures would be free from damp, would have access to outside space, and would produce biodiversity net gains
- Retrofit existing homes to make them greener and more energy efficient
- Encourage developments which facilitate low-carbon lifestyles through active travel (e.g. 15-minute cities)

## **4) Human rights and tax and benefits reform**

- Labour will incorporate housing as a human right into UK legislation.
- Labour will reform the social security system, and abolish the Bedroom Tax.
- Replace Council Tax and Business Rates with a Land Value Tax

# THE NEW NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

By Duncan Bowie

The English planning system has not been fit for purpose for a long time. Successive Conservative governments have alternated between fundamental reform and tinkering.

In contrast with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is no national spatial plan for England since the 2010 Localism Act abolished regional planning, weakened local strategic planning and saw neighbourhood-based plans as the best system.

For some years, the Labour Party was tempted by the perceived attractiveness of localism, failing to recognise that areas don't all have the same development needs nor equivalent development capacity.

The big challenge for any government is the relationship between national government, regional and sub-regional areas and local authorities. Some framework for national allocation of resources to areas is needed, as is some structure for collaboration between neighbouring local authorities.

The Conservatives have managed to get in a terrible muddle on the issue of housing targets. With no regional planning authorities and no framework for ensuring or even enabling collaboration between local authorities, the Government decided to develop an "algorithm") to set housing targets for each local authority area, on the basis of them adding up to a national target of 300,000 a year, with councils being penalised for failing to deliver their target.

This algorithm has not offered a reasonable method of assessing local housing needs or assessing local development capacity. The targets that it provided generated massive opposition not only from local authorities but also from Conservative MPs, many in the Home Counties, who did not want new homes built in their relatively leafy areas.

So the Government initially rewrote the formula to take pressure off the leafy areas by increasing urban area targets by 35%.



They then faced a backbench revolt over the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill and decided that any targets were advisory rather than mandatory.

**It is not surprising then that many councils have reduced their housing targets, and in some cases put work on local plans on hold.**

Although the Government Chief Planner, Joanna Averley has subsequently said that councils should continue to progress their plans and that, unless there are 'exceptional' (but undefined) circumstances, councils should still meet their targets, including the 35% urban uplift.

The Government has reaffirmed its commitment to protecting the Green Belt (which is often not very green in terms of meeting environmental objectives) and that councils are not required to review their Green Belt boundaries even if this is the only way to meet local housing needs.

Meanwhile the Chief Planner says that this should not stop councils reviewing Green Belt boundaries if they wish to.

## The new National Planning Policy Framework (continued)

The *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)* also proposes that councils can take into account the past performance of a planning applicant in determining a planning application – the premise being that if a developer has not built out an existing planning consent, they should not get a consent for a new development. This sounds a good idea, but is problematic.

Firstly, planning consent is not personal to the applicant, but attached to the site. This means a developer or investor can sell on land with planning consent, normally at a much higher price than they paid for it since the value derives largely from a planning consent.

**Hence the importance of a council being able to put a levy on the value uplift, whether through planning gain (s106 at present) or through Community Infrastructure Levy, or the Government's proposed (but inadequate) new infrastructure levy.**

The government has not only failed to recognise that planning consents are not always granted to house-builders, but also that there must be clear criteria for assessing any liability if planning applications are not to be subject to legal challenge on these grounds. (For example, must the permission relate to a site within the specific local authority or can it be anywhere in the UK as a whole?)

**A planning application should be determined on the basis of whether the proposal conforms to the local plan.** That is, whether it is an appropriate development for the site and is actually needed, not on the basis of which individual or organisation is the applicant.

There is much more in the proposed NPPF. For instance, councils will no longer need to identify a five-year land supply to demonstrate that their housing target is deliverable and that they can meet housing needs.

*Such new shorter timetables for plan making are unrealistic, given the lack of council planning policy resources, the slowness of the planning inspectorate system and the delays caused by Government interventions and policy shifts.*

There are other process issues, for instance:

- Supplementary planning guidance, such as that based on specific areas or topics, would need to be prepared or integrated into local plans to the same timescale.
- Further guidance is yet to come on design and 'beauty', whatever the latter means.
- There is much more guidance on on-shore wind, energy efficiency and mansard roofs.

There is also an unpublished proposal that national development management policies<sup>1</sup> should override local plan content even though it has been subject to consultation, *Examination in Public* and an inspector's report.

**Moreover, there is nothing substantive in either the NPPF or the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill to establish a workable framework for local authority collaboration which would allocate housing capacity between neighbouring authorities.**

Lastly, there is also the prospect of further substantive NPPF changes in the medium term, given that Government has really not yet decided what it actually wants to do with the planning system.

*Meanwhile, it is reassuring to know that detailed discussions of alternative options are now taking place within the Labour Party which needs to work up its own proposals on how to make a planning system work.*

Duncan Bowie

<sup>1</sup> Which may not have been subject to the parliamentary decision-making process.



# WINNING THE BATTLE OF BARNET

*Barnet's Deputy Leader Ross Houston spoke to the Labour Housing Group's AGM on 11<sup>th</sup> March.*

Thank you for inviting me today to talk about how we won the Battle for Barnet 2022, and the role that housing played in it!

**It's taken us a while, but Barnet, as an outer-London borough that had been Conservative for the last twenty years and had never had a Labour majority on the council, finally turned red in a landslide victory last year.**

We went from an Opposition Group of 22 to an administration Group of 41 overnight, with a massive majority of 19. This is a borough with three Tory MPs we need to defeat.

We were helped by dissatisfaction with the Government, and also by the leadership Keir has shown in dealing with anti-semitism in the Party as Barnet has the highest proportion of Jewish residents of any local authority area in Europe.

But our local campaign, manifesto and messaging was also key.

There were concerns over what Labour would do with council tax, whether we would go over to fortnightly bin collections, and whether we would stop up roads with loads of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) — all issues we needed to neutralise, and robustly rebut from the Tory attack.

In terms of housing, there was also the concern about over-development — particularly building height — and protection of green spaces from development that we needed to address.

We tackled each of these upfront – mostly by setting out clear commitments in our top 5 pledges which are:

- We will freeze your council tax in 2022 and keep it low.
- We will invest in more CCTV, better lighting and community safety hubs.
- We will protect weekly bin collections & bring back the community skips service to tackle fly-tipping.
- We will protect and enhance green spaces and declare an immediate climate emergency.

- We will stand up to developers: we need more affordable family homes not tower-block blight.



LTNs came up as an issue part way through the long campaign after we had set our top 5 pledges, and so we developed a policy that we would not impose any LTNS anywhere in the Borough unless a significant majority of residents in an area asked for one.

Our contract with the public is that we will deliver on our Top 5 key pledges in our first four years and try to deliver as much of our longer-form manifesto which has around 150 pledges as we can by 2026.

Many of these are housing pledges including technical policy changes like moving from 5-year flexible tenancies over to

secure tenancies, revising housing allocations to ensure non-secure tenants on regeneration estates get some priority and reverting to two offers from one.

***But the truth is that none of this made it into our campaigning beyond being stated in our manifesto.***

That's because to win we needed to gain the trust of residents on their key worries about over-development, the proliferation of tower blocks in what is, for the most part, a suburban outer-London context, and the concern that we would start building on green spaces to deliver more affordable homes.

As a Group of Labour councillors, building more affordable homes is a key priority for us, so the lack of available land to build – even in a geographically large borough – and viability issues which tend to push development to taller buildings or building on green space has meant some sensitive framing and messaging to enable us to win that trust.

We started by taking a tough public stance on Government housing targets – which sounds counter-intuitive in terms of building more affordable homes, but it was essential to gain the permission to talk about and be trusted on the issue.

We were clear in regular messaging that the Government's housing targets of between

## Winning the Battle of Barnet (continued)

4000-5000 have been fuelling over-development, and we made a pledge to continue to speak out against targets that are unworkable in Barnet.

We counterposed the Government targets with Sadiq's lower targets of 2,364 new homes per year for Barnet which were more locally acceptable and had some cross-party support.

**We called for a more sensible approach to targets that enable councils to respect the housing context in their area. For us we needed planning policy to respect the outer-London suburban nature of much of the Borough.**

And we promised to bring our planning service back in-house from Capita, to ensure we had direct control over the service and could effect the change we wanted to see in development in the Borough.

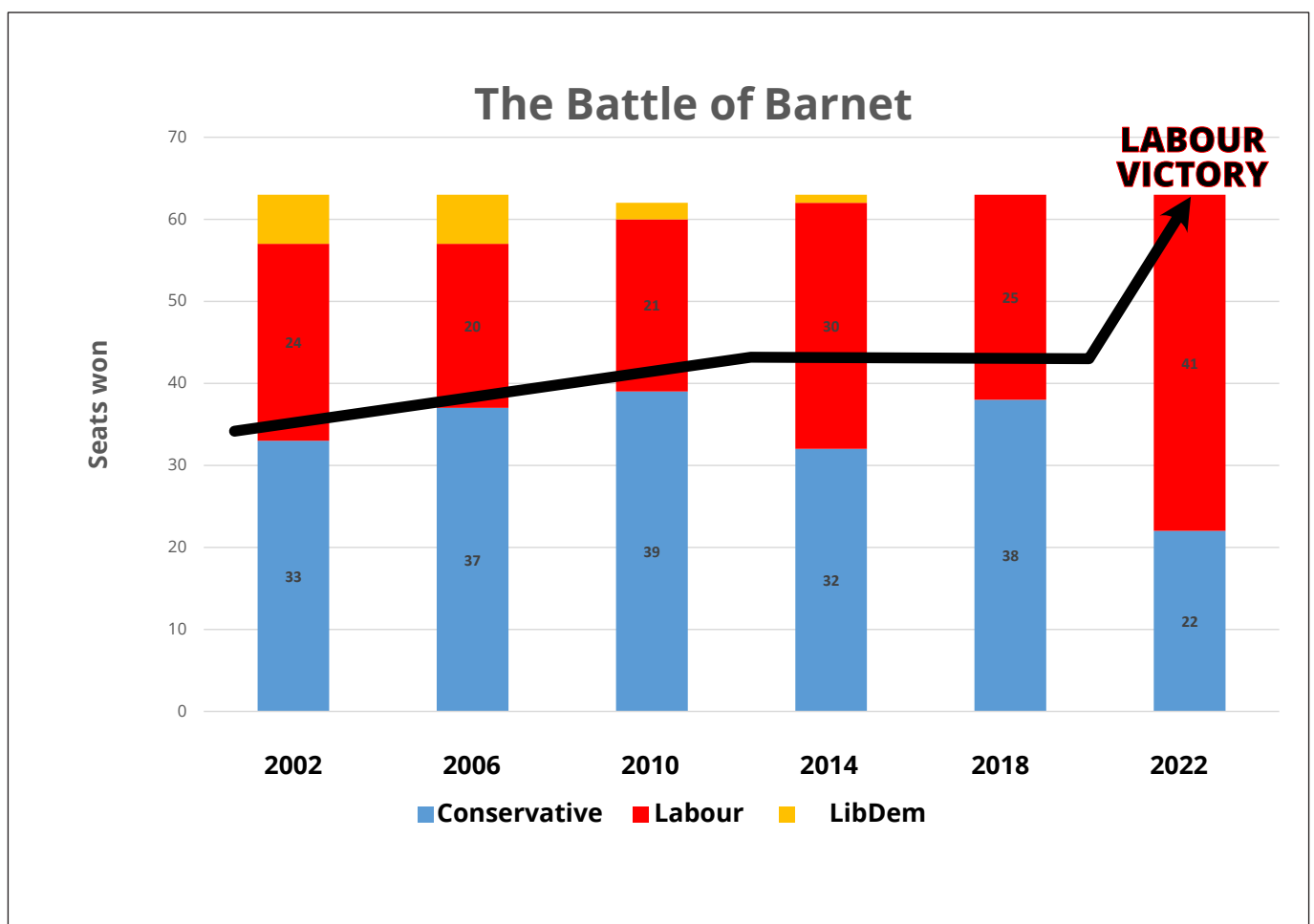
And, last but not least, we had a hard commitment not to build on any green spaces.

By weaving this messaging into our door-step script and into leaflets, press and online media up-front, it enabled us to also talk about our desire for more affordable family homes within these constraints, and our key pledge to build 1,000 new council homes at London Affordable Rent.

We have had many challenges since the election through the Tory mis-handling of the economy and of Brexit with the doubling of the cost of borrowing, labour and supply shortages.

We want to deliver good quality social rent homes that we know that we will be able to be proud of in 100 years' time.

**Being on the side of residents on this issue has been key to our success.**



# SAVING THE PLANET - AND OUR HOMES!

There is no sign of the joined-up thinking and national leadership from government that is desperately needed to make our homes warm, safe and affordable.

*Labour will need to fill that gap.*

## What are the problems?

- How can we stop the Earth from overheating - with all the effects such as floods, wildfires and polar erosion that we are already seeing?
- How can we ensure people can comfortably heat - and cool - their homes without worsening the problem?

## Why must homes be made more energy efficient?

Because heating UK homes produces nearly 17% of the country's greenhouse gas emissions, which are responsible for climate change.

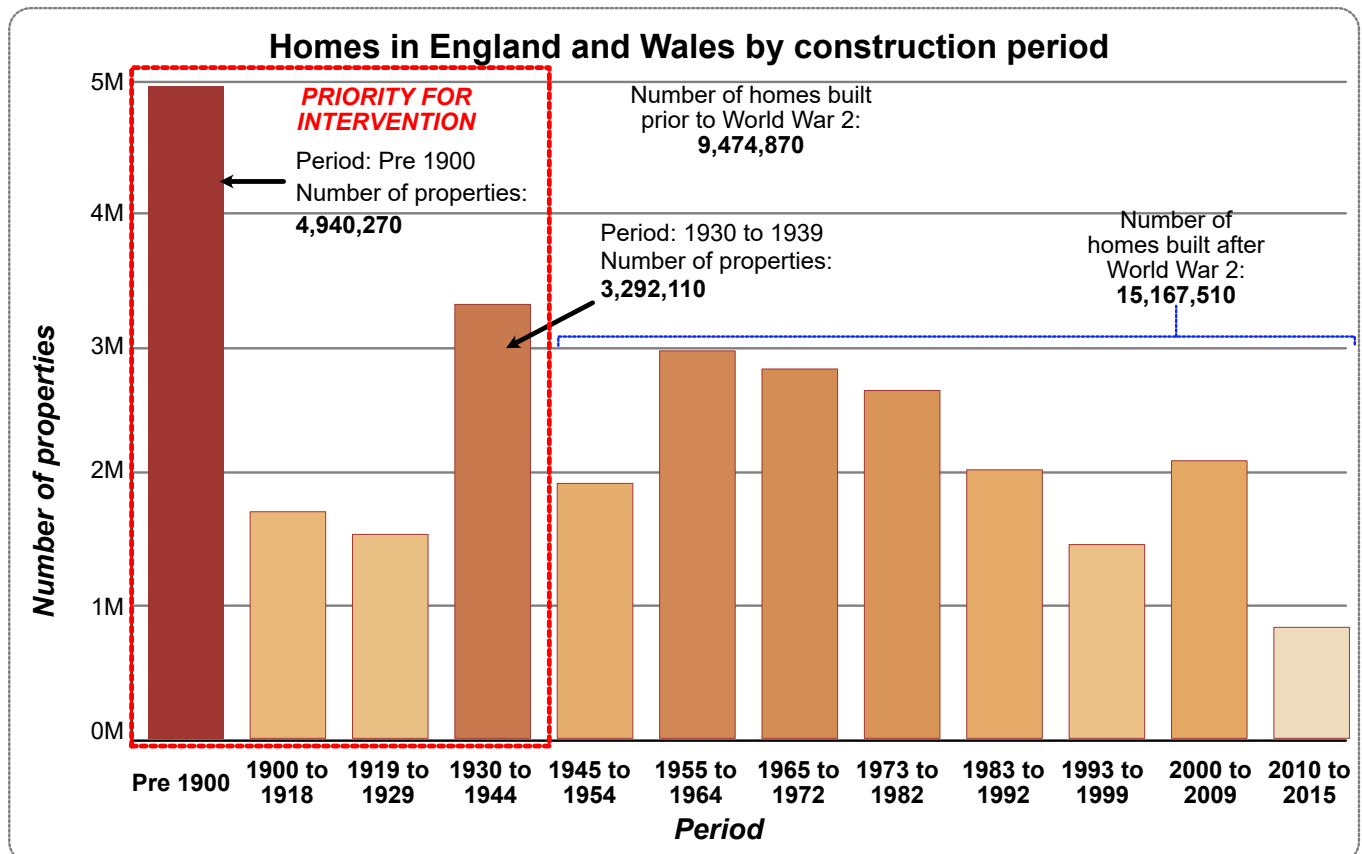
## Why must we target our efforts?

The scale of the task must not be underestimated. There are many factors to consider, but they include the age of buildings. Overall, the UK has older houses than most EU countries. While this may include many attractive buildings, they are almost invariably harder and more expensive to modify to improve energy efficiency. A key factor is whether the house was built with cavity walls. Broadly speaking, this makes many prewar homes a problem.

Certain styles of building will also present greater problems to insulate and heat, such as park (mobile) homes. There may also be issues with listed buildings.

In some cases a building's location and setting e.g. exposed, sea-facing etc will require greater modifications to achieve a given energy saving.

Only a comprehensive approach will make it possible to tackle these issues.





## WHAT TOOLS MIGHT WE USE?

There are useful sources of information to help focus national and local efforts.

- Energy Performance Certificates cover about 60% of homes and provide an A-G rating, providing a basis for targeting worst cases requiring intervention.
- Aerial infrared photography could provide “big picture” information on areas of unusually high heat loss and could now be provided relatively cheaply by drones.
- Energy companies’ data from bills could be combined with Valuation Office records to assess consumption that is out of the ordinary. (A technique already used to spot cannabis farms!)

## ALTERNATIVE HEATING SOURCES

Solar panels and wind turbines offer useful, if intermittent energy but are reliant on suitable locations.

**Heat-pumps are currently attracting interest but present their own obstacles** such as:-

Upfront cost - despite government grant of up to £5,000, The Energy Saving Trust (EST) estimates it can cost between £7,000 and £13,000 to install an air-to-water pump in your home.

This is hardly an investment that most of the population can easily afford.

No “off the shelf” designs - every home currently calls for individual assessment and a tailored package so there are limited economies of scale.

Limited range of brands, especially those bringing “green jobs” to the UK. Currently, the German-owned companies of Vaillant and Worcester-Bosch are rare examples.

Reputable installers are hard to find. There are only 3,000 qualified heat pump installers in the UK compared to 130,000 registered gas heating engineers.

Homes need to already be well-insulated.



**WHAT ABOUT A STRONGER ROLE FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES ?**

## WHAT ARE ENERGY PERFORMANCE CERTIFICATES (EPCs)?

EPCs were introduced in 2007 under the Housing Act 2004 and are required whenever a house is sold.

They provide an A-G rating system following an energy assessment by a qualified assessor who checks the property for key items such as cavity wall, floor and loft



insulation, domestic boiler, hot water tank, radiators, heating controls windows for double glazing, and so on.

### Are EPCs representative?

Typically 6 out of 10 homes on the Valuation Office Agency's (VOA's) Property Attributes list are covered.

For homes built before 1929, that figure is likely to be more like 5 out of 10. While 8 out of 10 flats and maisonettes are included, fewer than 6 in 10 detached homes have been assessed.

## ELEPHANT(S) IN THE ROOM

The greatest obstacle to starting a credible, national programme to tackle this vital job is a lack of political will.

For many Tories, the increased role of the state is unacceptable.

Even among those who accept the need, there remains the problem of co-ordination across Government Departments.

There are also ethical and practical issues with spending public money on private property unless there is a clear public benefit.

# LABOUR HOUSING GROUP AGM 2023 REPORT

The theme for this year's AGM was Housing: a winning issue. We heard from councillors involved in 3 councils which were Labour gains in May 2022: Barnet, Worthing and Westminster.

**Cllr Ross Houston, the new Deputy Leader at Barnet**, spoke about the need for more affordable family homes, rather than tower blocks, and efforts to stop over-development. The new Labour Group has also pledged to deliver good quality social rented homes, aiming for 1000 new council homes, and emphasised that quality is key – it's not just about promises on numbers of houses.

**Cllr Emma Taylor** from Worthing said that housing was the biggest issue in the election campaign, in a borough where local wages mean that many people can't afford to buy, and where private rents are outside the local housing allowance limits.

There is also a lack of affordable land, but high demand for housing in all sectors, including holiday homes. The new Labour Council is committed to building council homes, reducing high numbers of households in temporary accommodation, and meeting local housing need.

We had also been due to hear from **Cllr Satvir Kaur**, the new Labour Leader of Southampton, but illness got in the way of her coming to speak about their successful campaign in 2022.

**Catherine West MP** gave a summary of the key priorities for an incoming Labour Government. Reforming the private rented sector would be a very high priority, alongside bringing down living costs through better insulation, greatly increasing the country's council housing stock, enabling more people to buy their own homes, and supporting co-operative housing development. She supported the move to end the feudal leasehold system we currently have, and

welcomed the current ideas about transferring some private rented homes into council stock, where landlords are unable or reluctant to retrofit to make houses energy efficient.

**Cllr Adam Hug, the new Leader of Westminster**, told the meeting what changes the new Labour Council had been able to make since winning in 2022. The Council is planning to build over 1000 council homes in the next 4 years.

There will be a higher proportion of social rented homes built by developers, more retrofitting of council homes and increased efforts to record and reduce the number of empty homes. There will also be renewed involvement of tenants and residents to help shape policy and provide feedback.

Our speakers agreed that housing is an issue that can win or lose elections. As Catherine said, we won't be able to do everything we need to do in the first 5 years, but the councillors showed that listening to residents is vital so that we know what their priorities are.

In addition to reports from officers, the rest of the AGM focused on a motion about the absence of housing in the 5 missions announced recently by the Labour Leader, with the meeting agreeing to communicate our disappointment about this to the Leader, whilst emphasising how crucial housing will be to the success of all the current missions, and a lively debate about the need for a commitment to end the Right To Buy (RTB) in England.

The meeting agreed an amendment to the motion to call for an end to RTB, which set out the need to reduce discounts, control who can buy homes sold under RTB, not allowing RTB on newly built council homes, and funding replacements and buy-back of RTB homes.

# TORIES' BOILER SCHEME FIASCO

**Yet again, a Tory response to climate change fails to deliver.**

The Government's *Boiler Upgrade Scheme* grants households £5,000 to help switch from a gas boiler to a low-carbon heat pump, but this flagship scheme has been described as "seriously failing" by a House of Lords inquiry.

## Why it matters

Heating in UK homes produces nearly a fifth of the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change.

***"Heat pumps? Never heard of 'em"***

Baroness Parminter, Chair of the Lords Climate Change Committee told Government "The scheme isn't working as well as it needs to.

It is absolutely critical that the government boosts public awareness... we need to give people the confidence to know about why these changes are important."

Her Committee had concluded that take-up of the grant is so low that the national target is "very unlikely to be met".

**The Government's own research shows 80% of people in the UK did not know what a heat pump was, let alone were aware of the scheme.**

*In case you wondered, heat pumps use electricity to run and can be three times more efficient than a gas boiler. The aim is for householders to switch to cheaper and renewable systems that produce fewer emissions.*

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## GOVE LETS GRENFELL FIRMS OFF THE HOOK

Michael Gove's tough-sounding regulation of builders has already begun to fail. He has had to give 11 housebuilders a last-minute reprieve after they failed to sign up to his building safety scheme by the deadline.

This contract underpins the government's response to the Grenfell fire which requires housebuilders to spend £2bn on remediation works and provide details of how they will replace any flammable material.

Gove had previously threatened that any firm that failed to comply would be barred from building residential properties in England but instead gave them more time after a week spent tweeting threats to major housebuilders.

In response, developers complained of delays at Gove's Department of Levelling Up saying the contracts had not been available to sign.

## WHAT ARE 15-MINUTE CITIES?

["15-Minute Cities"](#) is an idea popularised by Professor Carlos Moreno of the Sorbonne. It proposes that most of what you need or want – places of work, homes, shopping, education, sport, social life, pleasure – should be within a 15-minute walk or cycle ride, as in a traditional town or city.



This has upset Nick Fletcher, Tory MP for Don Valley who believes this is a socialist nightmare. In contrast, Tories

prefer "greater choice" – more shops, schools and amenities - as long as you are prepared to travel further. It helps if you have a car, of course.

Increasingly this means goodbye to local shops and amenities. It is now commonplace to see primary school pupils being driven to school because it is too far from home.

The pandemic briefly reminded us how local traders offer a lifeline, but the drive to centralise ("bigger, cheaper, better") continues unabated.

One good thing about MP Nick Fletcher's antipathy to *15-minute cities* is that he underlines the fact that this is about values and politics and how they directly affect the built environment.

## LHG EXECUTIVE 2022-2024

*Elected at the AGM on 12th March 2022 for the two years to 2024.*

### Executive members

Andy Bates (co-opted)

Janet Berry

John Bevan (co-opted)

Rachel Blake

John Cotton

Ed Derrick

Gerard Heffey (co-opted)

Ross Houston

Heather Johnson

Paul Martin

Dermot McKibbin (co-opted)

Amanda Pinnock

Sheila Spencer

Christopher Worrall

## 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

# WELCOME ABOARD!

**Regional Branches of Labour Housing Group are a great way to develop local and regional policy ideas.**

Our branches in the South West, North West, North East, London and Parliament meet with policy experts, hold policy days and campaign days and prepare manifesto ideas.

All LHG members living in the **West Midlands** will soon be invited to the launch of the new branch .

If you are from the **East of England** or the **East Midlands**, please do get in touch as we hope to set up branches for these regions soon.

Rachel Blake (Vice-Chair LHG)

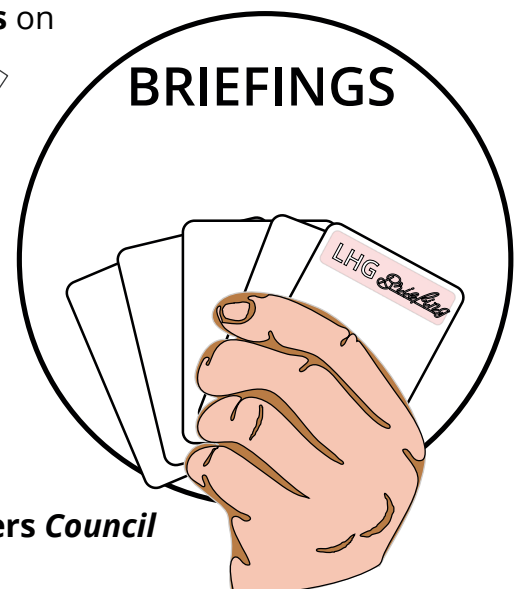
You can contact us at <http://labourhousing.org/contact>



**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](mailto:pauljmartin@clara.co.uk).

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