

Lifetime council tenancies in UK to be scrapped

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The recent amendment tabled by the Conservative government to the Housing and Planning Bill will end lifetime tenancies for those living in council properties who have a secure tenancy agreement.

Secure tenancies are granted by local authorities and offer a tenant a lifelong home that can, in some cases, be inherited by next of kin. The new legislation will force councils to offer all new tenants contracts of between two and five years.

The amendment will not affect those with existing secure tenancies and will not apply to housing associations, which at present are able to offer assured tenancies either for a fixed term or for life.

At the end of the fixed term, councils will have to carry out a review of the tenant's particular circumstances, and decide whether to grant a new tenancy, move the tenant into more appropriate rented social accommodation or terminate the tenancy.

At the point of a tenancy being terminated, councils will be obliged to assist the tenant to look at options of home ownership, or accessing other housing options. A spokesman for the Department for Communities said, "We want to support households to make the transition to home ownership where they can."

The Conservatives have long sought to end lifelong tenancies. In 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron claimed this measure would help increase "social mobility." Local councils have had the powers to offer fixed-term tenancies for some time within current legislation. However, the government has decided to legislate because councils have not chosen to utilise these powers.

The claim that this move will provide "social mobility" or enable an evicted council tenant to buy a home is nonsense. Home ownership is well beyond the means of many people. In 2014, Shelter, the homeless

charity, reported that more than 80 percent of the homes on the market were unaffordable for first-time buyers.

As there is a dire shortage of decent local authority housing, it is likely that those seeking accommodation will have to look to the private sector, which is notorious for high rents and poor housing stock.

Secure Tenancy was introduced in 1979, following campaigns that highlighted the poor housing conditions that existed in crumbling tower blocks and housing estates across the UK in the 1970s. At the time, most council tenants did not have any more rights than tenants in private sector housing. Campaigns led by tenants' organisations forced the Labour government of James Callaghan to include "security of tenure" in the Housing Bill 1979. This was subsequently included in the incoming Conservative government's Housing Act 1980.

The abolition of secure tenancy and the offer of fixed-term tenancies will leave many people living in a state of insecurity.

Private sector housing is already characterised by insecurity of tenure, with many tenants forced to live in poor and substandard accommodation, plagued with damp and disrepair issues. Shelter reported in October that almost half a million privately rented homes suffered from vermin infestations, including mice and cockroaches, in the last year.

A report by the Citizens Advice Bureau issued this year found there are 740,000 privately rented homes in England that are considered unsafe to live in and fail to meet minimum legal housing standards.

It is estimated by Shelter that a third of all private sector homes do not meet the government's Decent Homes Standard, with many tenants not complaining for fear of revenge evictions by landlords.

Prior to World War II, many people still lived in slum conditions with few rights legally. During the war, an estimated one quarter of Britain's 12.5 million houses were damaged.

In the post-war period, with the development of the welfare state, an unprecedented turn was made in confronting the issue of poor housing. There was a massive house-building programme under the Labour government of Clement Attlee, with more than a million homes constructed, 80 percent of them council dwellings. Into the 1960s, 360,000 houses were still being built each year.

The last 30 years have seen a dramatic reduction in the construction of social housing, spearheaded by the Thatcher government and continued under successive Tory and Labour governments. As well as introducing secure tenancies for council accommodation, the Housing Act 1980 also extended the right to buy council homes at generous discounts. In the following decade, more than a million council homes were sold at an estimated cost in today's money of more than £60 billion. The majority of these homes were not replaced, and since 1990 a further 500,000 council homes were sold off at less generous discounts.

Three years ago, the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition extended Thatcher's "Right to Buy" initiative to Housing Associations. These were the very organisations that sprang up due to the largest-ever privatisation of public assets, as councils were encouraged to either flog their estates to Registered Social Landlords, Housing Corporations and Associations, or privatise their management.

Housing Minister Grant Shapps claimed that there would be no drop in the overall number of houses available. In the last three years, a further 35,000 council properties have been sold off. Only 4,000 local authority homes were built to replace them. In the last year, 12,329 council homes were sold and just 1,863 were to be built or acquired to replace them—a ratio of 8 to 1.



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