

Report finds that more than 40 percent of British housing is substandard

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Housing charity Shelter has marked the 50th anniversary of its founding by issuing a report on the standard of housing in Britain today.

In the introduction to “The Living Home Standard,” Campbell Robb, Shelter chief executive, writes: “[T]he housing crisis facing this country is as challenging and as far from fixed as it was in 1966. Fewer houses are being built, there are too many families in temporary accommodation, house prices continue to rise and conditions in parts of the private rented sector are as bad as we have seen in decades. These are just some of the consequences of decades of failure by successive governments to address the root of these problems, to build more truly affordable homes and to provide a comprehensive housing safety net.”

At the beginning of the year, Shelter, working with British Gas, set out to define what attributes should be taken into consideration to establish an adequate housing standard, known as the Living Home Standard. The market research company Ipsos MORI was commissioned to survey a cross-section of people to ask them what should constitute a good standard of housing. They did this through discussion groups, surveys and workshops over a period of nine months.

They came up with five basic parameters or “dimensions”: affordability, decent conditions, space, stability and neighbourhood. The five dimensions were then subdivided into a total of 39 attributes, some classed as “essential” and some as “tradable.”

For example, under affordability, an essential attribute was that the occupant would not have to worry that the rent or mortgage payments would rise to a level that would be difficult to pay. Included in the definition of decent conditions were that the house could be heated safely and effectively and was free of mould or damp. Regarding space, it was considered essential for

all members of the household to be able to have privacy. Under the heading of stability, the people surveyed considered it essential that those living in the house had control over how long they could live in it. It was also felt essential that people should “feel reasonably safe and secure in the local neighbourhood.”

Shelter described the result as a standard, “split between essentials that all homes must meet and tradables which take account of differing needs and priorities between households. It is a standard that applies to all homes, irrespective of their tenure, size or age.”

Using these definitions of a good standard of housing, Shelter set out to measure how the housing stock in Britain measured up. It surveyed nearly 2,000 people across the country to see how their homes compared to the Living Home Standard. Its conclusion was that 43 percent of people in Britain did not live in a home that matched up to the Living Home Standard.

Commenting on the number of homes not meeting the standard, Shelter’s director, Roger Harding, writing in *iNews* said: “Although these seem like not much to ask for, the huge number of homes that fail to this Standard is a sad reflection of just how widespread our housing problem has become.”

The highest proportion of homes failing to meet the standard were in London, where nearly three quarters of residents classed their home as being below it, followed by Wales and the East Midlands, where just below half said their homes did not match the standard.

The criteria most mentioned by respondents was that of affordability, with just under 30 percent citing it, followed by decent conditions, which was cited by nearly 20 percent.

For those owning their homes but paying a mortgage, the figure was nearly 40 percent. Among those renting

their homes—whether from the local authority, privately or from a housing association—around two-thirds considered their homes below the standard.

Speaking to the *Metro* newspaper, Shelter executive Robb explained, “Every day we hear from young people and families who scrape by each month in a struggle to meet their rents, living from one short-term contract to the next, and often coping with poor conditions. With our ever-growing housing crisis forcing millions into private renting, it’s simply not right that so many of these are failing to meet their needs. ... A home should be a place where you can build a foundation for your life.”

BBC’s “Newsnight” programme featured an item marking the 50th anniversary of the showing of the play *Cathy Come Home* on the channel’s then “Wednesday Play” slot. It was written by Jeremy Sandford, produced by Tony Garnett and directed by Ken Loach. The play highlighted the plight of families facing eviction and homelessness and the devastating impact on their family lives. It had a huge impact on public consciousness. The housing charity Shelter was founded shortly afterwards, reflecting the concerns of much of the population towards the issue of homelessness.

“Newsnight” noted the enormous decline in the supply of social housing provision over the last 60 years. In 1954, the provision of social housing peaked with nearly 208,000 homes built. In 1966—when *Cathy Come Home* was first broadcast and Shelter founded—some 140,000 social housing homes were built. By 2015, the figure had fallen to a mere 24,610.

Speaking to “Newsnight,” Jon Sparkes, the chief executive of homeless charity Crisis, highlighted the figures on homelessness for England, explaining 73,000 households are in temporary accommodation and an average of 3,500 sleep on the streets each night.

Writing in the architecture and design online magazine *Dezeen*, on September 30, Phineas Harper, deputy director of the Architecture Foundation, wrote, “The housing crisis isn’t a crisis. ... ‘Crisis’ suggests a natural disaster, something beyond human control that serves nobody’s interests. The housing crisis is none of these things—it has been carefully planned, orchestrated over several decades, and is now delivering exactly the economic and social conditions it was intended to, making some people a lot of money in the process. ...

London has become an urban basket case in which the average rent can gobble up three quarters of the average post-tax salary. ... The housing shortage has been created and sustained by a political strategy unfolding over nearly 40 years. It is no more unseen than a hangover after a wild night of drinking. To call it a crisis misses the point: we have created a monster, now we must kill it. Four decades of inflating property prices while failing to build significant numbers of new homes has delivered exactly what it was designed to—inequality.”

Access to decent affordable housing is a basic human right, but under capitalism it is becoming increasingly unavailable. The austerity programme, which has plunged millions into poverty over the last decade, exacerbating the housing crisis, must be reversed and billions poured into the economy to provide decent-paying jobs, free and high-quality health care, housing, education and social services for all.

The wealth must be taken from the billionaires and used to meet essential social needs. Only a socialist reorganisation of society can satisfy the desperate and growing need for decent housing for all.



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