

Massive collapse of UK housing built for “social rent” in last decade

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According to government figures the number of new homes built for social rent in Britain has fallen by almost four-fifths in the past decade. This shocking state of affairs has developed as 1.25 million families on council waiting lists must reside in temporary and substandard accommodation.

Around two-thirds of those awaiting housing have been on the council waiting lists for at least 12 months. On average every English local authority has more than 3,500 families awaiting housing.

In Britain, homes for social rent are usually provided by local councils, housing associations and charities.

The data released by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government exposes how only 6,463 homes were built in England for social rent in 2017-18. These figures are substantially down from what was even then an already near post-war record low of just 30,000 a decade ago. At this rate it would take at least 170 years to build enough to house those currently homeless.

While the number of properties for social rent has fallen drastically, the overall number of properties constructed in England that were classified by the government as “affordable” rose by 12 percent last year to 47,355. The misleading title of affordable housing means rental costs are capped at 80 percent of local private sector rents. Unsurprisingly these properties, rather than ones for social rent, are preferred by the construction industry and local authorities because they are more profitable than building genuine affordable public housing.

Housing campaigners have pertinently asked regarding so-called affordable housing—affordable for who exactly?—and criticised the term affordable in these circumstances as a form of Orwellian newspeak. The rent rates for social rental properties take into account local incomes, as well as house prices, unlike the criteria for affordable housing.

The number of so-called affordable rent properties built

has increased since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government came to power in 2011, inversely over the same period the number of social rent properties has declined. Approximately 57 percent of all new affordable homes built last year were for affordable rent, with only 14 percent for social rent. The rest are intermediate affordable housing, which includes shared ownership properties and affordable home ownership schemes.

Housing provision for working class families has declined precipitously since its peak in the 1970s, when almost half the population of Scotland and cities like Sheffield lived in accommodation rented from the local authority. The number of council homes in Britain has halved over recent decades and is now at its lowest level since the late 1960s.

In the immediate post-war decades before mass council housing was built by British local authorities, unscrupulous and criminal private landlords like Peter Rachman predominated. Rachmanite slums have returned to the UK today, only fifty years after they were supposedly destined to the history books.

Today in the fifth richest country in the world, millions of working class families and individuals suffer chronic overcrowding, damp rooms, faulty heating systems or lack central heating or hot water, have no double glazing and/or broken windows, electrical faults and exposed live wiring, leaky plumbing, unsanitary and even outside toilets and, in more and more properties, infestations of rodents and insects.

Savage cuts to the welfare system have pushed many people into “slum tenure” in the private rented sector, according to recent research conducted by academics at the University of York. One in three homes in the cheapest 20 percent of the housing sector did not meet the government’s own Decent Homes Standard. The stock found to be in the very worst condition was located in the West Midlands, where 40 percent of private lets were

deemed “non-decent.”

More than 1.3 million homes rented from private landlords failed to meet the national Decent Homes Standard. In addition, many working class families have bought properties for which they can barely afford to pay the mortgage let alone maintain. Millions of homes need urgent remedial action and regular maintenance.

Because of the destruction and privatisation of public housing since the 1980s, more people live in private rented housing now than at any time since the 1950s and hundreds of thousands of these homes are unfit to live in. Housing-related health inequalities are estimated to cost the National Health Service £1.4 billion a year.

Declining home ownership and a shortage of rented social housing have seen a surge in the number of people renting privately—particularly families with young children. These children are denied the dignity of privacy, somewhere to study, a separate bedroom and frequently must share with siblings of the other gender in addition to all the social problems associated with living in some of the most deprived parts of town.

Growing numbers of other young people do not have any stable accommodation. Figures released by the Shelter housing charity show that 131,000 children in England are homeless, the highest rate in a decade. Of these, 9,500 are living in emergency accommodation like B&Bs, with the remainder in temporary accommodation.

The housing catastrophe is a damning indictment of capitalism. The scandalous shortage of affordable housing has been meticulously designed and orchestrated over several decades, and is now delivering exactly the economic and social conditions it was intended to. In the process property developers, the construction industry and increasingly local authorities—many run by the Labour Party—and companies established by former local government figures, rake in vast amounts of money.

Since the 1980s Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat governments and local councils have conspired to destroy much public infrastructure of which public housing is only the most obvious example. In a country where the population were told to take pride in its social safety net, “from the cradle to the grave,” essential services like housing have been gutted, financialised and turned over to the capitalist market.

In London thousands are eking out an existence in sheds, garages, barges and all manner of temporary buildings, as the capital has been transformed into a playground for the global super-rich and has more billionaires than any other city in the world. In some parts

of inner London, property prices have exploded by 800 percent since the 1980s. At the same time working class people are socially cleansed from London or their public housing turned into a death traps like Grenfell Tower.

Whilst the crisis finds its highest expression in London the housing crisis is not exclusive to the capital. For example, in Greater Manchester—the second largest urban region in the UK with a population of nearly 2.8 million—social housing stock has shrunk by 5 percent in just the six years since 2012. Simultaneously, waiting lists and homelessness have rocketed in the region.

Since 1980, 92,000 council homes have been privatised under the Right to Buy legislation in Greater Manchester alone, and today some 85,639 households languish on council housing waiting lists in the region.

The explosion in social inequality in the UK can be seen in the proliferation of luxury private apartments going up in all major city centres. Central Manchester’s skyline is awash with cranes constructing dozens of private residential developments. At the start of the year, 11,000 flats were being built in 41 schemes, with more underway. Last month, Labour-run Manchester City Council and one of its private development partners, Renaker, celebrated a topping out ceremony for the new 60 storey South Tower in the Deansgate area of the city. Prices for apartments there will start at £390,000 and go to £2 million. Residents will have access to a private swimming pool, sports hall and tennis court. There is no social housing of any kind in the development.

Access to decent affordable housing is a basic human right, but under capitalism it is increasingly unavailable. The never-ending austerity programme, which has plunged millions into poverty over the last decade, exacerbating the housing crisis, must be reversed and billions spent 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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