Eviction ban in England extended to end of May, as tens of thousands of renters remain in crisis

Barry Mason
21 March 2021

As part of its reckless reopening of the economy, with everything to be fully reopened by June, the UK Conservative government is to end its ban on private sector evictions for rent arrears on May 31. The ban on evictions was introduced in March last year and has been extended several times.

The government was forced into maintaining an eviction ban out of fear of the social backlash to hundreds of thousands of people being made homeless in the midst of a pandemic.

With Prime Minister Boris Johnson declaring that the current lockdown will be the last, a massive wave of homelessness is set to hit the UK in England and Wales when the ban is lifted in just over two months.

On March 10, Housing Minister Robert Jenrick announced that the evictions ban, that had been due to end March 31, would end May 31. The Tory government came under pressure from housing organisations and charities for the new extension because of the high number of renters who have fallen into rent arrears as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on jobs and incomes.

The Welsh Labour Party-run devolved government last week extended current restrictions on evictions to the end of June. The Scottish National Party government announced that the eviction ban extension will last until September 30. However, the ban on evictions in Scotland only applies to those in areas subject to the higher level 3 and 4 Covid restrictions, meaning that evictions can proceed in areas where there are lesser restrictions in tiers 0, 1 and 2.

In what is falsely described as a major concession, landlords and letting agents in England will, from May, have to give six-months' notice of eviction, meaning that physical evictions can still start in November. However, those tenants with over 6 months' accumulated rent arrears will still be able to be evicted after May 31 with just four weeks' notice. Those deemed guilty of anti-social behaviour will also be able to be evicted with four weeks' notice. The other main exemption is that landlords will be able to evict with just three months notice those deemed to have breached immigration rules under the "Right to Rent" policy.

Housing charity Shelter warned that many tenants remain in a precarious position. In a press release, Shelter chief executive Polly Neate stated, "These extensions will come as a relief to the frightened renters who've been flooding our helpline with calls. While the threat level from the virus is still high, it's right that renters can stay safe in their homes.

"But as we follow the roadmap out of lockdown, the destination for renters remains unknown. The pandemic has repeatedly exposed just how broken private renting is, leaving many people hanging onto their homes by a thread. And, although the ban and longer notice periods are keeping renters safe for now, they won't last forever."

Shelter issued a March 16 press release based on a poll carried out for the charity by data analysis firm YouGov. The survey found around 14 percent of the population in England, around six million people feared homelessness because of big reductions in incomes and job losses following on from the pandemic.

Shelter predicted, "With people's incomes slashed, job losses mounting and people hanging onto their homes by a thread, the charity expects the pressure on its frontline services to grow."

The poll showed those renting privately were those most concerned about becoming homeless, with more than one in four (27 percent) expressing such fears. Nearly half (47 percent) of private renters were depressed or anxious about the housing situation compared to 26 percent of the general population.

A quarter of private renters (2 million people) have suffered a cut in their incomes over the last six months leading to problems paying their rent. Over the last month, the survey showed, 24 percent of private renters have had to borrow money to meet their rent, while 18 percent had

© World Socialist Web Site

missed meals or cut back on food and 12 percent had cut back on heating in order to cover rent costs.

Over the last year, said Shelter, around two-thirds of calls to its emergency helpline were from those homeless or under risk of becoming homeless.

These findings were echoed in a report by debt charity StepChange. It highlighted that 150,000 private renters were at risk of eviction due to the financial hardships of the Covid-19 pandemic leading to rent arrears. The report noted, “Renters are in need of urgent help to avert a crisis of widespread housing insecurity, homelessness and long-term problem debt.”

StepChange’s research showed half of private renters (3.7 million people) have seen a fall in their income since March last year—the beginning of the pandemic. Over the same period, the number of those who have fallen behind with their rent has doubled to 460,000.

The report noted, “our research reveals £25bn of arrears and borrowing directly attributable to Covid has been built up since the start of the pandemic, with more than 19 million people (38% of British adults) having faced a loss of income in this period. Meanwhile, the number of people in severe problem debt stands at 1.8 million, up from 1.4 million in September.”

StepChange called for “a further extension to give renters more chance to get back on their feet,” while noting, “however the report finds this alone would not be enough to hold back the rising tide of debt many private renters are battling—one in five expects it to take at least six months until they can even afford all their household bills again.”

Speaking to the report’s findings, StepChange CEO Phil Andrew said, “The pandemic has taken an enormous financial toll on many households, but renters have been particularly badly hit: they are more likely to work in sectors affected by Covid, more likely to have lost income and more likely to have suffered mental ill-health. At the outset of the pandemic the Housing Secretary stated that no-one should lose their home because of the pandemic, but a year on this is a very real prospect for hundreds of thousands of people.

“The Government’s continued suspension of rental evictions until the end of May is a positive step, but this alone will only serve as a stay of execution for those with unmanageable rent arrears.”

Many MPs benefit from extortionate rents in the private sector, with much of the government’s personnel landlords themselves. Compared to the figure of five percent of the general population estimated to be landlords, for Parliament the figure is around 20 percent. For government ministers the figure is around 25 percent. The percentage of landlord MPs is highest for the Tories at 24 percent, followed by the Lib Dems (18 percent), Scottish National Party (9 percent) and Labour (8 percent).

The pandemic has also revealed the staggering level of people rough sleeping. A parliamentary Public Accounts Committee reviewed the impact of the Everyone In initiative, in which local authorities were given £3.2 million to offer accommodation to rough sleepers to help them to self-isolate in hotels or hostels at the start of the first national lockdown in March 2020. Rough sleepers were accommodated because to leave them on the streets would add to the risk of spreading Covid-19 at a time when it was feared that the pandemic could overwhelm the National Health Service.

The report found that over 37,000 rough sleepers had been offered accommodation up to January this year. This figure for rough sleepers was around nine times more than previous estimates of rough sleepers obtained by carrying out snapshot surveys in autumn each year.

Jenrick has recently pledged an extra £212 million to house 6,000 rough sleepers by the end of the current parliament but this should be judged by his previous pledges. In October last year, he announced that 3,300 homes would be ready to house people by March this year, but they have failed to materialise. Responding to the broken promise co-founder of the Museum of Homelessness, Jessica Turtle said, “The picture could not be more grim. Our Dying Homeless Project showed the awful results of people stuck in inadequate emergency accommodation for far too long with a 37-percentage increase in deaths of homeless people who are indoors, not on the streets.

“It’s pure negligence not to develop proper solutions to homelessness so people no longer have to choose between horrible, possibly fatal, emergency accommodation or the streets.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site