

Should social housing tenures be for life?

The Government has proposed introducing fixed-term council house contracts. We seek opinions

Yes

Adam Sampson
Chief executive
of Shelter

In the past 18 months the notion that social housing tenancies should have a lifetime guarantee has come under repeated attack from politicians and some practitioners. The former housing minister, Caroline Flint, floated the suggestion that social housing tenancies should be made conditional on people showing that they are seeking work as a way of combating what are perceived to be unreasonably high levels of unemployment among social housing residents.

For government grappling with a massive social housing shortage coupled with rising demand for housing the notion of ending security is undoubtedly attractive. It is also attractive for housing associations, which would see the value of their stock rise sharply if they no longer had sitting tenants. But, for social housing tenants, and I would argue for society overall, the proposition would be disastrous. Those who argue that social housing should merely be there to provide short-term safety net for individuals going through particular crises — who, once their lives have stabilised, would be required to return to the private market — fundamentally misunderstand the real nature of the lives of most people who live in social housing.

The problems we are seeing in social housing are not the result of us nannying the poor or the result of a



No

Kate Davies
Chief executive
of Notting Hill Housing

I don't think all social homes should be given out on the same basis because people who come to the council for help all have different needs. A tenancy for life might be right for someone who is elderly or disabled, where the chance of them getting a job and being able to look after themselves could be nil, but to write off someone as a teenager, I think, is really sad. A third of all social lettings are to people under the age of 25. We are determining someone's housing career at a really early age.

In London, for every home available there can be 200 people applying. There are a lot of people who want the accommodation because it is low-cost and secure. But the question we have to answer is "If you have a shortage of it, how do you make the best use of it?" I believe it is better to use it for shorter periods and help more people.

For example, we could say to a couple at the start of their housing career: "While you are setting yourself up you can have this tenancy for five years. But if your circumstances change and you have children, maybe we will give it to you for longer. Or you may need to move from a one-bed to a larger place, but once your kids grow up we would like the home back for another family." Today when someone is given a family-sized home, they are entitled to keep the house for ever, even if the children have left. There



'The problems we see stem from the failure to build sufficient homes'

growth in fecklessness among social housing tenants. The problems of social housing stem from the failures of successive governments to build sufficient social housing stock. Consequently our estates have become almost ghettoised, housing some of the most socially excluded in our society.

The key issues were the advent of the right to buy, which has reduced the available stock of social housing by a third, and the gradual withdrawal of state investment in new social house building. The vast majority of people in social housing are very poor, the aver-

age income for those in social housing is just over £12,000 a year. Many of the households have other issues with which they are grappling. Many are not available for work because they are old or sick or are single parents with dependent children. Many come from troubled backgrounds. To say that during the lifetime of a one, three or five-year tenancy they need to solve all their problems and establish themselves economically or socially to such a point they can reasonably be expected to survive in private rented housing or indeed own their own homes, is frankly nonsense.

There are three key things we could do to resolve the social housing problems: Create incentives for people who can, to leave social housing — for example encourage elderly people whose children have left home to move from housing which is now too large for them. Reform of the private rented sector. More people might be willing to move to private rented housing if the security in private rented accommodation were longer than the current minimum six months. Build more social housing.

'We need greater diversity of options in the sector'

could be a family in B&B accommodation or in a tiny flat, but we can't move them because we can't get that family home back.

It's not about going in every year and saying, "You are entitled" or "You are not entitled". We need to understand people's needs — it is rarely simply about not having a home. I think the council, rather than giving you the keys for life, needs to ask: "Why do you have this problem? How can we help?"

If people are poor, their housing costs will be paid by the state. That's what housing benefit is for. If people

are doing well, then they need encouragement to start meeting their own housing needs once they can afford to. We have done some research that suggests that between 10 and 15 per cent of all our social tenants could afford to meet their needs today. It's about helping them to know the opportunities.

The current situation, of giving permanent tenancy to all, whatever their circumstances, has the effect of silting up the housing supply, particularly in areas like London. Families are overcrowded and quite a lot of people have a home bigger than they need. In our own stock only two out of 100 people move each year, so hardly anything becomes available.

We need greater diversity of options in the social sector. For example, maybe some accommodation rented at almost market price where you can stay as long as you want, some short-term temporary housing, which might be subsidised, long-term cheap housing for elderly people or large houses for young people to share. As well as tenure reform, I would prefer to see greater flexibility in the housing available and who it is offered to.

The week

Monday

Cheap drink promotions such as happy hours could be banned, because police forces are diverting resources into alcohol-related crime to the detriment of combating other offences, the Commons Home Affairs Select Committee said. Changes to licensing laws in 2005 have resulted in a 25 per cent increase in serious violent crimes between 3am and 6am, the report on policing found.

Up to four households in ten are on waiting lists for council housing in some parts of England, according to a survey by the Local Government Association. An increase in people applying for social housing over the past five years is partly caused by demographic changes, immigration and more people living alone.

Tuesday

Nine areas in England are to become "healthy towns" under a plan by ministers to combat obesity. Councils in Dudley, Halifax, Sheffield, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Thetford, Tewkesbury, Portsmouth and the London borough of Tower Hamlets will share a total of £30 million to help to improve the health of their local populations, through schemes related to cycling, walking, healthy eating and green spaces.

Wednesday

A nationwide review of child protection was ordered after the case of Baby P, who endured a series of brutal injuries despite 60 visits by health professionals. Social workers at Haringey Council were duped by the child's mother into believing that his injuries were accidental. A two-week inquiry into the council's failings has also been ordered.

White, working-class children need more attention and resources at school because they perform worse academically than almost any other group, research by the National Union of Teachers and the National College for School Leadership found. Only travellers' children fare worse.

Thursday

Students could be able to enrol in universities at any time of the year, after a radical review of higher education ordered by the Government. Under the proposals, students' performances would also receive "report cards" as an alternative to the current classification of first, 2.1 or 2.2 degrees and they would be offered more flexible teaching via the internet.

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