

## Social housing concerns over Housing and Planning Bill

The Government's Housing and Planning Bill has reached the report stage and was debated in the House of Commons late on Tuesday 5 January 2016 amid protests and concerns raised about the long term effects on the social housing sector.

Due to the late start of the debate, the opposition tried to postpone the debate until a later date but MPs voted by a majority of 303 to 195 in favour of going ahead with the session to scrutinize the proposed legislation. Discussions went on into the early hours.

### **A focus on home ownership**

There is a clear focus on home ownership contained in the Bill with measures designed to facilitate the building of Starter Homes, self-build housing and an extension of the Right-to-Buy scheme offered to housing association tenants following a voluntary agreement with the National Housing Federation in 2015.

The Bill will put into legislation the Government's commitment to provide a number of Starter Homes for first time buyers under the age of 40, which will be offered at a discount. The Government said, on publication of the Bill, it wanted to kick-start a "national crusade to get 1 million homes built by 2020" and transform "generation rent into generation buy".

### **Extension of the Right-to- Buy for housing association tenants**

One of the most controversial measures contained in the Bill is to extend the Right-to-Buy scheme offered to housing association tenants in England. Presently this Right is only available to secure council tenants of local authorities, but if passed the Housing Bill will offer a discount of up to £102,700 in London and £77,000 in the rest of England to tenants renting from housing associations.

The policy will be partly funded by councils selling the top third of their most valuable council homes from remaining stock. Some commentators have expressed concern that this measure will force the sale of council housing in areas where it is most needed with no guarantee that local authorities will be able to genuinely replace their housing stock. [Click here](#) to view a recent piece of press coverage concerning the Bill.

### **Other measures affecting social tenants**

The Bill will also make provision for 'high income' social tenants (expected to be earning more than £40,000 per annum in London and £30,000 elsewhere) to pay a market rent as opposed to a controlled social rent. The Chartered Institute of Housing has previously given evidence to the select committee stating that the policy (known as 'pay to stay') could deter social tenants from increasing their earnings or finding work. It has therefore been agreed that, if passed, the scheme will be implemented on a voluntary rather than a mandatory basis by housing associations.

However, the Government also tabled in a late amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill which would set the maximum of a five-year term for new secure council tenancies. If passed, this could end long term security of tenure for some council tenants.

### **Tackling 'rogue' landlords**

The Bill will give local authorities additional powers to tackle rogue landlords in the private rental sector. Authorities will be able to apply for banning orders against suspected 'rogue' landlords. A database of rogue landlords and agents will assist authorities in England in carrying out enforcement work.

### **Speeding up the planning process**

The Bill contains a number of reforms to the planning system with the aim of speeding up the system and allowing it to deliver more housing. Powers will be given to the Secretary of State to intervene in the local and neighbourhood planning process and there will be a new duty to keep a register of Brownfield land within a local authority's area.

Ruth Davidson of the National Housing Federation told *The Guardian*, "We welcome the proposals to reform the planning system and provide more land to build homes on." However she added, "We have some areas of concern – such as the plans around starter homes – and we hope that government will ensure that these come in addition to, not at the expense of, affordable rented and shared ownership housing."

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