

Social Housing We Can All Be Proud Of

ARCH's views on the future of social housing

Introduction

1. The Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH) represents councils in England and Wales that own and manage housing. There are 165 councils in England owning over 1.6 million homes. Around three quarters of these councils manage these homes directly; in the others the stock is managed by an ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation).
2. One important and necessary consequence of the Grenfell Tower tragedy has been a widening public debate on the future of social housing. The Government has announced the forthcoming publication of a Social Housing Green Paper. The Labour Party has launched its own review of social housing policy, as have Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing. This paper is ARCH's initial contribution to the debate.
3. In announcing the Social Housing Green Paper in a speech on 19 September 2017 Secretary of State Sajid Javid referred back to the 1950s, when:

“Living in social housing carried no stigma, no shame, quite the opposite, in fact. For many, it was seen the gold standard for accommodation, not a final safety net for the desperate and destitute but something you could genuinely aspire to, housing you would actively choose to live in; and as a country we were all rightly proud of it”,

and he said:

“We need to return to the time, not so very long ago, when social housing was valued. It was treasured. Something we could all be proud of whether we lived in it or not. I know that's exactly what many of you in the sector have been trying to achieve for many, many years. Well, I'm proud to stand here today and say that you have a Secretary of State who's totally committed to the cause.”

4. Social housing we can all be proud of is an ambition ARCH is proud to share and we want to work with this and any future government to make it a reality. In this paper we set out how we think it can be achieved.

Key Points and Recommendations

The need for social housing

- The housing market is broken. Not enough new homes have been built for too many years. The Government's ambition of 300,000 new homes a year, announced in the 2017 Budget, should be regarded as a minimum requirement.
- There is a particular need for more social rented homes open to households on lower incomes who cannot afford to buy or rent privately. At least 100,000 new homes a year should be for social rent.
- Current definitions of affordable housing include both intermediate housing such as starter homes, shared ownership or rent-to-buy as well as housing provided at below-market "affordable" or social rents. "Intermediate" housing provided by councils and housing associations should be treated as additional to the target of 100,000 homes for social rent.
- The mix of market, intermediate and housing for social or affordable rent required in different areas varies widely; local authorities should be tasked to plan for the right mix to meet local needs.
- In areas where market rents are high, "affordable" rents (i.e. defined as up to 80% of market rates) are not affordable by the majority of those in need of social housing; each local authority should be tasked to ensure that the rents charged on social housing in their area are genuinely affordable by the tenants it is provided for.

Backing councils to build

- The target of at least 300,000 new homes a year will not be reached without councils taking the lead in enabling development and, more importantly, by taking a much bigger role in direct provision than they have done since the 1980s.
- Councils are responsible for ensuring that all housing needs in their areas are met, not only the need for social housing. Consequently, council involvement in house-building is not confined to the provision of homes for social rent; increasingly, they are involved, normally through partnerships of various kinds, or through local housing companies, in the provision of new homes for sale, shared ownership and market rent.
- The number of local housing companies, including partnerships and wholly-owned companies, has risen rapidly over the past 5 years, and around 200 are now thought to be operation. However, most are, as yet, operating on a relatively small scale and have completed relatively few new homes. The Smith Institute estimates that they could have the capacity, once fully operational, to deliver 10-15,000 homes a year.
- Councils that have retained their council housing have, in addition, unique potential to expand house-building using the financial strength of their Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs).
- The HRA self-financing settlement, which took effect in April 2012 with broad cross party support should have enabled the 165 councils with housing to maintain their existing stock to Decent Homes standard and build around 20,000 new homes a year for 30 years. These reforms were intended to endure for the long term, enabling council landlords to plan for the long term through the development of robust and sustainable 30 year housing business

plans. However this potential has been undermined by subsequent Government decisions.

- To restore the full potential of the original settlement the Government should:
 - Lift HRA debt caps to give all councils the scope to borrow up to the level they can safely expect to repay from rental income (the prudential limit);
 - Allow councils to retain the receipts from selling any of their housing assets, including those sold under the statutory Right to Buy, in order to re-invest them in improving the existing stock or building new homes;
 - Scrap the mandatory 1% rent cuts planned for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and extend the period covered by the new rent policy of CPI + 1% to ten years from 2018;
 - Consider whether to reimburse councils for the loss of rental income since April 2016 by a one-off payment to reduce HRA debt, or freedom for councils to increase rents by more than CPI + 1% to the level they would have reached but for the rent cuts;
 - Give councils explicit powers to build for sale and market rent within the HRA, to help cross-subsidise the provision of homes for social rent;
 - Scrap plans to introduce a levy on Higher Value Assets;
 - Review the statutory Right to Buy and the arrangements for “one for one” replacement of homes sold under the Right to Buy.

Investing in council housing

- The original self-financing settlement was designed to ensure that all councils would be able to bring their stock up to the Decent Homes standard and keep it there, allowing for planned replacement of key elements such as windows and roofs. Many councils planned to do more, often to improve thermal insulation and reduce energy consumption, adopting and planning to meet locally agreed standards higher than the Decent Homes Standard. In many cases, the rent cuts have forced these plans to be cut back or deferred.
- The findings of the Grenfell Public Inquiry and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, when published, are likely to point to the need for significant investment both within dwellings and in common parts to provide an absolute guarantee of fire safety. In parallel, substantial improvement to the energy efficiency of the stock is essential if the UK is to meet its targets for reducing carbon emissions and provide affordable warmth for tenants. In returning to the original principles of the HRA self-financing settlement, the Government should be expected to ensure that councils have the resources to meet all these needs for investment in the existing council stock.

Review of the statutory Right to Buy

- In announcing the Social Housing Green Paper the Secretary of State promised that the Green Paper “would be the most substantial report of its kind for a generation” and promised “a wide-ranging, top-to-bottom review of the issues facing the sector”. Many ARCH member councils support the Right to Buy; others don’t. However, it would be wrong to conduct a “wide ranging, top to bottom review” of social housing without including a comprehensive review of the Right to Buy and its impact, particularly at a time when other devolved governments in the United Kingdom in Wales and Scotland have undertaken

similar reviews. All ARCH members can agree that the review should ensure workable arrangements for at least one-for-one replacement of homes sold.

Giving tenants a stronger voice

- Social housing tenants need a stronger voice in how their homes are managed, both in shaping policy and planned maintenance or improvements, and, when they complain when things go wrong, in getting prompt and effective responses & redress from their landlord.
- Councils are expected to follow the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment (TIE) Standard set by the Social Housing Regulator. The requirements of the Standard are clear and comprehensive, and describe well what a good landlord should strive to do, but there is no systematic evidence to show how well landlords are performing against the Standard or allow tenants and their landlords to compare their performance with others across the sector.
- ARCH remains committed to the principles of co-regulation. We do not see a major extension of the powers of the Regulator as the answer but would like to see steps that will improve transparency and strengthen the capacity of landlords to compare their performance with others and encourage sharing of experience and exchange of good practice, and enable tenants and their representatives to do the same. These should include investment in developing good practice in handling and responding to complaints and in particular in the use of complaints procedures to identifying service failures and improving services would bring dividends. There is a potential role for an appropriately funded regulator in promoting, disseminating and monitoring such good practice.
- Consideration should be given to a requirement on all social landlords to undertake and publish the outcome of an annual survey of tenant satisfaction along the lines of the HouseMark “Star” survey and to report the outcome of such surveys to the Regulator for national publication.
- A renewed focus on the landlord’s responsibility under the TIE Standard (paragraph 2.1.2) to report publicly on the number and nature of complaints received, and how they have been used to improve performance, may help improve organisational focus on learning from complaints. A requirement on all landlords to report annually to the housing regulator on the issues raised by tenants and how their landlord has responded might also be useful and would enable the regulator to identify issues of concern and consider support and intervention where necessary.
- ARCH supports the call from the major national tenant organisations for reinstatement of a “National Tenant Voice” at the heart of government policy making; the form & nature of which should be subject to wide consultation with tenants and social landlords.

The Need for Social Housing

5. The Government's Housing White Paper acknowledges that the housing market is broken and no-one disagrees. Not enough new homes have been built for too many years. This chronic shortage of housing has helped to drive up house prices and market rents across the country, putting home ownership out of reach for four out of five newly forming households. Rising homelessness is further evidence of a particular lack of secure and affordable accommodation.
6. The Government's 2012 housing strategy said that current household projections showed a demand for 232,000 extra homes each year over the next 20 years. Respected forecaster Alan Holmans carried out an appraisal of housing need that took account of these projections, loss of stock and other factors¹. He concluded that an average output of 252,000 new homes would be needed annually over the period of 2026, of which 169,000 should be market housing (both for sale and rent) and 83,000 should be for social rent. A 2008 appraisal for the then Government suggested a minimum annual target of 231,000 with a possible need to build up to 297,000². However, the failure of housing supply to come anywhere close to these numbers for more than a decade is evidence of a growing backlog in unmet need. In the four years from 2009 to 2013, average annual completions in England were only 111,000 compared with an average of 152,000 in the previous four years. Output has slowly increased since 2013 and is now averaging between 150,000 and 160,000 a year, but taking the last decade as a whole, over a million fewer new homes were built than were needed. Against this background, the target of 300,000 homes a year announced by the Government in the 2017 Budget should be regarded as a minimum requirement.
7. There is a particular shortage of social rented housing. The number of council-owned homes has declined by over 2million from 3.67million homes in 1994 to 1.6 million in 2017. Despite a parallel growth in the number of homes owned by housing associations, the overall stock of social housing has decreased from 4.39 million in 1997 to 4.12 million.
8. The total number of social lettings by local authorities and housing associations reached its lowest level for 10 years in 2016/17. Annual lettings by local authorities declined by 9% on the previous year to 103,000 and housing association lettings declined by 11% to 231,000. Partly in consequence, there were 1.16 million households on local authority waiting lists in April 2017, and as at 30 September 2017 there were 79,190 homeless households living in temporary accommodation – including 121,360 children or expected children.
9. There is a strong economic case for investing in social housing. Research commissioned from Capital Economics by a coalition of housing organisations including ARCH in 2015, updated in 2016 to reflect the potential impact of Brexit, shows that investment in social housing would bring substantial long-term savings to the Exchequer in reduced spending on benefits³.
10. Holmans estimated that around a third of the new homes provided should be social rented housing, by which he meant homes provided by council or housing associations at rents set in accordance with the formula adopted by the Labour government in 2001, now often referred to as "social rent" and typically ranging from 50% to 70% of market rent, but with marked regional and local variation. He did not attempt to estimate what fraction of the households for whom these homes were intended could afford the higher "affordable" rents, of up to 80% of market rents, charged on new homes provided through the Affordable Housing Programme since 2010, although it is likely to be a minority. This implies that, of the 300,000 new homes we aim to provide each year, 100,000 should be provided by councils or housing associations for social or affordable rent.
11. Holmans made no separate estimate of the demand for "intermediate" housing, such as shared ownership, for households with incomes high enough to pay market rents but with an inability to raise a deposit to buy outright. If, as at present, councils and housing associations build for shared ownership or other low-cost home ownership initiatives, or for market sale or rent, these homes should be counted as additional to the supply of social rented homes that are needed.

The number of affordable homes needed, in the broad sense of “affordable” used in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, and elsewhere, which embraces starter homes for discounted sale, shared ownership and rent-to-buy alongside homes for social and affordable rent, is more than a third of the annual requirement – more than 100,000 a year.

12. These are national estimates; it is clear that the proportion of affordable homes needed varies widely in different parts of England, and within the different categories of affordable homes the relative demand for social and affordable rent and for intermediate products such as shared ownership will vary. In Greater Manchester the councils have estimated that, although the social housing stock needs substantial investment to improve its quality, there is no need for a net increase in the number of social rented homes. In parts of the Midlands and North of England, where market rents are lower, social and affordable rents are not far apart, and either is accessible by prospective tenants on low incomes. In London, the position is again different, the gap between “affordable” rents at up to 80% of market rates, and social rents can easily be £100 per week, putting Affordable Rents far out of the reach of many lower income working households. We would argue that each local housing authority should be tasked to base its plan for new housing in the area on an assessment that treats the demand for each of the relevant types of affordable housing separately, recognizing that they are not interchangeable categories.

Backing councils to build

13. New home completions have not exceeded 300,000 in any year since 1972/73, when 300,250 were completed, of which 90,550 were built by local authorities. The fall in output since that time is largely attributable to the decline of council house-building. Annual construction of private homes for sale has not passed 200,000 a year since the 1960s, and has averaged around 120,000 a year since the 1970s. Housing association output has never passed 40,000 homes a year. This strongly suggests that the new target of 300,000 new homes will not be achieved without councils playing a much larger role – a conclusion that is reflected both in the Government’s Housing White Paper of 2017 and by the Labour Party in its proposal for a new programme of council house-building.
14. Councils can do more both by taking the lead in enabling development and by taking a much bigger role in direct provision than they have done since the 1980s. There is a case for all councils to start building again; there are particularly strong arguments for the 165 English councils which still own council housing to do more. Many are already building on a small scale or have begun to develop the skills and capacity needed to run new-build programmes and there is significant scope to provide additional homes by making more intensive use or redevelopment of land already occupied by council housing. Most importantly, the national stock of 1.6 million council homes yields an annual rental income of £9.5 billion, which provides an important resource that could be made available to support part of the cost of providing new council housing, supplemented of course by the additional rental income from any new council housing. But there are obstacles, in part created by Government policy and legislation, which need to be removed if councils are to fulfil their full potential.
15. Councils are not only responsible for meeting the need for social housing in their areas, but for ensuring that all housing needs in their areas are met. Consequently, council involvement in house-building is not confined to the provision of homes for social rent. Increasingly, councils are involved, normally through partnerships of various kinds, or local housing companies, in the provision of new homes for sale, shared ownership and market rent.

16. Partnership arrangements come in a variety of forms, usually involving a partnership or joint venture between a council and one or more partners, typically a developer and often a housing association, sometimes an institutional investor. These arrangements involve a formal long-term partnership or the establishment of a company in which the council is normally a minority shareholder. This enables the risks and rewards of development to be shared appropriately among the partners, so that the council benefits from any planning gain associated with the development and does not need to rely on s106 or similar arrangements. Homes may be provided for sale, including shared ownership, or letting at market or sub-market rents. If let, they are let on assured tenancies and the right to buy does not apply.
17. The application of this approach is, however, limited by the willingness of private partners to invest in housing development and the rate of return they expect on their investment. Set-up and governance costs associated with special purpose vehicles can be substantial, and the associated legal issues are complex and require specialist advice and support.
18. In an increasingly popular alternative approach, councils have set up arms-length companies they wholly own or control to develop housing for sale or rent, sometimes in conjunction with the development of commercial property. Alternatively, councils with ALMOs have extended their remit to include development of new homes. Housing provided through such arrangements is outside the HRA and, if let, is let on assured tenancies and not subject to the Right to Buy. Such housing development is classed as a trading activity, which means that councils can only do it through a company. However, the set-up and operating costs of such companies can be much lower than a joint venture with a private partner, particularly where the council is the only shareholder. While borrowing by the company counts as public borrowing, and is, in effect, part of the council's borrowing and subject to prudential guidelines, it is not subject to the debt caps imposed on HRA borrowing.
19. The number of local housing companies, including partnerships and wholly-owned companies, has risen rapidly over the past 5 years, and around 200 are now thought to be operation. However, most are, as yet, operating on a relatively small scale and have completed relatively few new homes. The Smith Institute estimate that they have the capacity, once fully operational, to deliver 10-15,000 homes a year. However, these homes should not be seen as replacing the provision of housing for social rent through council HRAs. Only around a third of them are estimated to be for social or "affordable" rent, the rest being a mix of homes for sale and shared ownership, for letting at market rents and for use as temporary accommodation for homeless people. This is partly because companies have been set up in response to a range of housing needs, not only the need for housing at social rent, and partly because most companies are operating without access to grant assistance through the Affordable Housing Programme. This means that the deliverable amount of housing for social rent is limited by the cross-subsidy available from homes for sale or market rent. A few companies have registered as social landlords in order to access the AHP, but many have not wanted to be subject to the requirement to charge affordable rents.
20. Council HRAs provide an additional resource that can be tapped to support the provision of new homes. The self-financing system introduced by the Localism Act in 2012, with the support of Government and Opposition parties in Parliament, gave councils with housing the opportunity to make a substantial contribution to new house-building. As enacted, it devolved long-term planning and investment to councils with housing, whether managed directly or through an ALMO, and, by allowing them to retain rent income in full, provided sufficient resources to bring all homes up to the Decent Homes Standard and build a significant number of new council homes.
21. The settlement incorporated limits on HRA borrowing ("debt caps"), restricting overall local authority housing debt to £29.8 billion. The formula used to calculate each authority's debt cap left most authorities with some "headroom" for new borrowing, although in three out of four authorities this was less than £20 million. 28 authorities had no headroom at all. An ARCH survey in summer 2012 suggested that councils were planning to invest an average of £9000

per unit in their existing stock and build 25,000 new homes by 2018, but could potentially increase output by a further 60,000 homes if borrowing limits were lifted.

22. These reforms were intended to endure for the long term, allowing councils to plan for the long term through robust and sustainable 30-year HRA business plans. However, they have been undermined by subsequent policy decisions by successive governments. The original settlement was premised on the assumption, used by the Government in deciding how much debt each council could afford to take on as part of the settlement, that rents would rise annually by 0.5% above inflation, as measured by the Retail Prices Index, throughout the business plan period of 30 years. However, since April 2012 successive Government decisions have significantly reduced the rental income expected to be available to councils, with corresponding impact on investment, both in the existing stock, and in construction of new homes:

- From April 2012, “reinvigoration” of the Right to Buy with significantly increased discounts led to a sharp increase in Right to Buy sales, currently running at around 15,000 a year; the loss of rent income from homes sold is only partially offset by savings in management and maintenance spending, and arrangements for replacement are not working.
- In June 2013, the Government announced that from April 2015 the rent increase formula would be based, not on the Retail Price Index, but on the Consumer Prices Index plus 1%, and the allowance of an additional £2 per week per unit to achieve convergence with housing association rents ended.
- In July 2015, the Government announced plans, later enacted in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, to reduce council and housing association rents by 1% a year for four years from April 2016. By April 2020 rents will be 10% lower than they were in April 2016
- In October 2017, the Government announced that, from April 2020, local authorities will once again be able to raise rents by CPI + 1% for at least 5 years; however, this implies that rents will remain 10% below where they would have been before the rent reductions were applied.
- Since 2012, successive welfare reforms – the under-occupation charge, benefit cap, and roll-out of Universal Credit – have made it more difficult to collect rent from growing numbers of council tenants. Continuing roll-out of Universal Credit is likely to exacerbate this position.
- The Housing and Planning Act 2016 included provision for a levy to be raised from councils with housing to pay for discounts to housing association tenants exercising their proposed right to buy; the levy would be calculated by reference to the “higher value” stock owned by each council. While no levy will be payable before April 2019 at the earliest, uncertainty about future liabilities continues to blight councils’ investment planning.

23. The 2016 CIH and CIPFA Report *Investing in Council Housing*⁴ estimated the cumulative impact of these changes as follows:

“The original self-financing model showed potential capacity for authorities to build more than 550,000 units over 30 years. After taking into account the effects of inflationary changes (i.e. the switch from RPI to CPI) this capacity for building new units reduced to 160,000. ... The effects of the rent reduction mean that the capacity to build drops to just 45,000 units (or 8% of the capacity at the time of the settlement).”

24. Nevertheless, were the original principles of the 2012 self-financing settlement reinstated and councils given the long-term certainty needed to plan new investment, this analysis suggests that stock-owning councils have the potential to deliver around 20,000 new council homes a

year without external subsidy in the form of Affordable Housing Grant. To make this happen the Government should:

- Lift debt caps to give all councils the scope to borrow up to the level they can safely expect to repay from rental income (the prudential limit);
- Allow councils to retain the receipts from selling any of their housing assets, including those sold under the statutory Right to Buy, in order to re-invest them in improving the existing stock or building new homes;
- Scrap the rent cuts planned for 2018/19 and 2019/20 and extend the period covered by the new rent policy of CPI + 1% to ten years from 2018;
- Consider whether to reimburse councils for the loss of rent since April 2016 by a one-off payment to reduce HRA debt, or freedom for councils to increase rents by more than CPI + 1% to the level they would have reached but for the rent cuts;
- Give councils explicit powers to build for sale and market rent within the HRA, to help cross-subsidise the provision of homes for social rent;
- Scrap plans to introduce a levy on Higher Value Assets;
- Review the statutory Right to Buy and the arrangements for replacement of homes sold under the Right to Buy.

Investing in the existing stock of council housing

25. The Decent Homes programme initiated by the Government in 2003 was designed to ensure that all council homes met a basic decent standard within 10 years. It focused on replacing bathrooms, kitchens and windows but did not cover thermal insulation, common parts or the external environment. The original self-financing settlement was designed to ensure that all councils would be able to bring their stock up to the Decent Homes standard and keep it there, allowing for planned replacement of key elements such as windows and roofs. Many councils planned to do more, often to improve thermal insulation and reduce energy consumption, adopting and planning to meet local standards, developed and agreed with their tenants, that were higher than the basic Decent Homes Standard. In many cases, the rent cuts have forced these plans to be cut back or deferred.
26. The findings of the Grenfell Public Inquiry and the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety, when published, are likely to point to the need for significant investment both within dwellings and in common parts to provide a guarantee of fire safety. So far, the Government's policy has been to expect local authorities to fund the necessary investment from existing HRA resources. In parallel, substantial improvement to the energy efficiency of the stock is essential if the UK is to meet its targets for reducing carbon emissions. In returning to the original principles of the self-financing settlement, as argued above, the Government should be expected to ensure that councils have the resources to meet all these needs for investment in the council stock.

Review of the Right to Buy

27. Since its introduction in 1981 the Right to Buy has given hundreds of thousands of council tenants the opportunity to own a home they may not otherwise have been able to afford. But, because few of the homes sold have been replaced with new council or housing association homes, the social housing stock has fallen and the number of new lettings available to those on council housing waiting lists or the statutorily homeless has collapsed. Many households waiting for a council home are trapped in insecure, unsatisfactory and expensive

accommodation in the private rented sector. Meanwhile, as Right to Buy purchasers move or sell on, an estimated four out of ten ex-council homes are now let privately.

28. Since 2012, when the Right to Buy was “reinvigorated” with increased discounts and a national promotional campaign, Government policy has aimed at one-for-one replacement of homes sold (strictly, this applies only to the additional homes sold as a result of reinvigoration) by recycling a portion of the sales receipts, either through the HCA Affordable Housing Programme, or by giving councils the opportunity to invest receipts in new housing within three years. However there is no guarantee receipts handed to the HCA will be used in the local authority area they came from. These arrangements are not working. While Right to Buy sales have risen rapidly and are now running at around 15,000 a year, the number of replacements so far provided is only around a fifth of those sold. Many councils complain that restrictions on the use of receipts, in particular the timescale for spending the receipts and the requirement that they may contribute at most 30% of the cost of providing a replacement home makes it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to use them. Some have returned receipts to the Government unused after three years. A review of these arrangements is overdue.
29. In announcing the Social Housing Green Paper the Secretary of State promised that the Green Paper “would be the most substantial report of its kind for a generation” and promised “a wide-ranging, top-to-bottom review of the issues facing the sector”. Many ARCH member councils support the Right to Buy; others don’t. However, it would be wrong to conduct a “wide ranging, top to bottom review” of social housing without including a comprehensive review of the Right to Buy and its impact, particularly at a time when other devolved governments in the United Kingdom in Wales and Scotland have undertaken similar reviews. All ARCH members can agree that the review should ensure workable arrangements for at least one-for-one replacement of homes sold.

Giving tenants a stronger voice

30. The tragic and fatal fire at Grenfell Tower has renewed attention on how to give social housing tenants a stronger voice in how their homes are managed, both in shaping policy and planned maintenance or improvements, and, when they complain when things go wrong, in getting prompt and effective responses from their landlord.
31. The way forward on this issue should take full account of the findings of the Grenfell Public Inquiry, when published. The Independent Review of Building Regulations & Fire Safety is examining how tenants and residents can be better assured that there are effective systems in place to maintain safety in their homes and establish clear, quick and effective routes for residents’ concerns to be addressed. The final recommendations of the Independent Review, when available, should likewise be given urgent consideration and implemented as a matter of urgency. Meanwhile, ARCH believes the following points deserve consideration.
32. Both councils and housing associations are expected to follow the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment (TIE) Standard set by the Social Housing Regulator. This includes requirements for social landlords to make arrangements to enable tenants to be effectively involved in all significant decisions about their housing, to offer a range of ways for tenants to complain and have clear service standards for responding to complaints. The requirements of the Standard are clear and comprehensive, and describe well what a good landlord should strive to do. We do not see a case for amending them. However, there is no systematic evidence to show how well landlords, are performing against the Standard, hence no comparative data on which to benchmark performance or show whether it is improving or deteriorating over time. The evidence that is available, including the experience of Grenfell Tower tenants, suggests that

performance is variable, with some landlords falling well short of the requirements of the Standard.

33. ARCH remains committed to the principles of co-regulation; councils should treat the TIE standard as something they “own” not something imposed on them by the Regulator. The onus is on them to mobilise tenants locally to scrutinize performance against the Standard. We do not see a major extension of the powers of the Regulator as the answer, rather steps that will strengthen the capacity of landlords to compare their performance with others and encourage sharing of experience and exchange of good practice, and enable tenants and their representatives to do the same. These should include investment in developing good practice in handling and responding to complaints and in particular in the use of complaints procedures to identifying service failures and improving services would bring dividends. There is a potential role for an appropriately funded regulator in promoting, disseminating and monitoring and such good practice.
34. Consideration should be given to a requirement on all social landlords to undertake and publish the outcome of an annual survey of tenant satisfaction along the lines of the HouseMark “Star” survey and to report the outcome of such surveys to the Regulator for national publication. This would provide a common basis, albeit crude, for comparing performance, to act as a “can-opener” for further investigation.
35. A renewed focus on the landlord’s responsibility under the TIE Standard (paragraph 2.1.2) to report publicly on the number and nature of complaints received, and how they have been used to improve performance, may help improve organisational focus on learning from complaints. A requirement on all landlords to report annually to the housing regulator on the issues raised by tenants and how their landlord has responded might be useful and would enable the regulator to identify issues of concern and consider support and intervention where necessary
36. ARCH supports the call from the major national tenant organisations for reinstatement of a “National Tenant Voice” at the heart of government policy making; the form & nature of which should be subject to wide consultation with tenants and social landlords.

Social housing we can all be proud of

37. In his speech launching the Green Paper, Sajid Javid described the 1950s as a time when social housing was treasured, when living in it “carried no stigma, no shame, quite the opposite, in fact. For many it was the gold standard of accommodation, not a final safety net for the desperate and destitute but something you could genuinely aspire to, housing you would actively choose to live in; and as a country we were all rightly proud of it.” And he called for a return to a time when social housing is something we could all be proud of whether we lived in it or not.
38. In the 1950s, the Government’s primary objective was to build new homes to replace those lost or damaged in the war, and, increasingly as time went on, to replace slums. It did not see either the demand for new homes for sale nor the capacity of private builders to supply them as sufficient to deliver the number of new homes that were needed. Councils were given the job of ensuring the success of the housebuilding drive.
39. While there were some notorious examples of poor council housing – most notably the system-built high rise blocks exemplified by Ronan Point – the fact is that many more were of a quality of design and construction at least as good as those of the volume housebuilders. Standards were often higher, with private builders criticized for skimping on space standards and building uninspiring “little boxes”. Equally important to public perception of the new council homes was the difference from what they replaced. For many thousands, a new council home was their first experience of an indoor bathroom and toilet and a front and back garden.

40. From the 1950s to the 1970s, lettings were not restricted to the poorest families but made to a much broader range of households – in some cases, as the debate leading up to the passage of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act in 1977 illustrated, at the expense of those in most need of help. Council housing was thus seen, not as “social” or “welfare” housing - the province of the poorest alone - but a resource for the broad mass of the population, embracing skilled workers as well as unskilled, the “respectable” working class as much as those on the edges of society.
41. Much has changed. Because councils have built relatively few new homes since the 1980s, most of the council housing stock is now 30 years or more old. It has been depleted by over a million Right to Buy sales. During the 1980s and 1990s not enough was spent on maintaining it. And the demographic profile of council tenants has changed. According to the 2011 Census, only half of social tenants are either working (41%) or unemployed (8%); of the rest, 28% are over 65, and the remainder either full-time carers or have a long-term sickness or disability.
42. Nevertheless, council housing and council tenants have a poorer reputation than they deserve. Although it is seldom recognised, council housing is, on average, in a better state of repair than privately-owned homes; 93% of council homes meet the Decent Homes standard or better. Media comment and public debate about council tenants are too heavily dominated by unfair stereotypes based on ignorance and prejudice. Government, councils and policy-makers should do more to promote the value of social housing and the contributions that social housing tenants make to society. To this end ARCH is a supporter of the “Benefit to Society Campaign”.
43. The council housing drive of the 1950s was founded on the principle of that low income should not prevent a household from having a home meeting the same modern standards as everyone else; in other words, a rejection of the idea that poorer people deserve only poorer accommodation. That same principle should underpin the action we now take to make social housing once again something we can all be proud of.

¹ Holmans, A (2012) *Interim Revised Estimates of Future Demand and Need in England in 2006-2026*, Cambridge CCHPR

² NHPAU (2008) *Meeting the housing requirements of an aspiring and growing nation: taking the medium and long term view*, London: DCLG

³ Capital Economics (2016) *Building new social rent homes*, SHOUT
https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/4socialhousing/pages/1/attachments/original/1475255900/SHOUT_Building_New_Social_Rent_Homes_V3.pdf?1475255900

⁴ John Perry and Glenn Smith (2016) *Investing in Council Housing: the impact on council business plans*, London, CIPFA and CIH