

Bristol
**FAIR
RENTING**
MANIFESTO



In partnership with

Shelter

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We need a fair renting system

There are around 134,000 people renting privately in Bristol, which is almost one third of the population of the city. We are a large community of people who are all being impacted by a renting system which is not fair, stable or safe – private renting needs to be fixed.

Local rents are out of control and disproportionate to people's incomes.

This situation has only been made worse by the pandemic, as many people face uncertainty in their employment. Growing numbers of us can't afford these rising rents.

Disrepair and poor, unsafe conditions are a common issue for renters in our city. And we are not able to challenge landlords or letting agents who refuse or fail to make repairs or keep our homes safe, because we are at risk of rent increases and retaliatory eviction.

Many of us are locked out of private renting, due to the discrimination we face based on our age, sex, race, disability, type of employment or type of income.

The insecurity, unaffordability and discrimination of Bristol's private renting system is causing homelessness. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the ending of a private rented tenancy was one of the leading triggers of homelessness in Bristol, and private renting was one of the most common types of housing situation from which people apply for homelessness assistance locally.

But it doesn't need to be like this. Renters across Bristol have come together to expose – to the wider community and to those in power – the reality of private renting. We are campaigning for changes that are urgently needed to make our local renting system fair, safe, secure, affordable, and accessible for those who are otherwise at risk of poor housing and homelessness.

Here is our vision and manifesto for a fair renting system in Bristol. It sets out how private renting locally is negatively impacting our communities and what changes we urgently need.

Our manifesto demands are based on hundreds of conversations and survey responses, where renters shared the 'Home Truths' of renting in this city. This manifesto reflects what people across Bristol have come together to call for in order to fix private renting – working out shared problems, and what we think needs to be done about it. Read more about the Home Truths campaign here: blog.shelter.org.uk/2021/03/what-do-locals-think-about-housing-in-bristol-2/.

Please read and sign our manifesto, to stand with us in solidarity and demand a fair renting system for Bristol.

Bristol Fair Renting Campaign

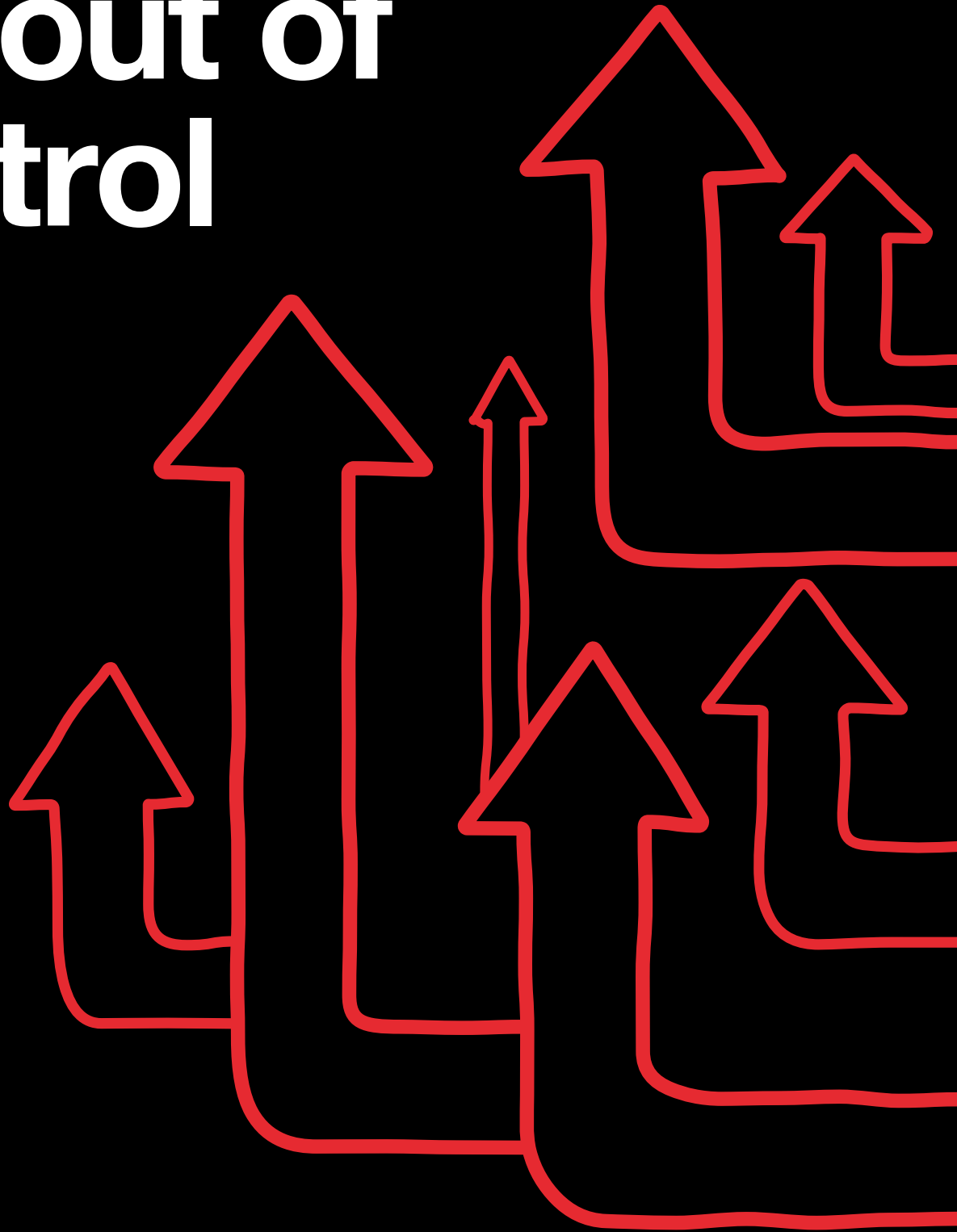


“When you're private renting, there is a real feeling of powerlessness... Your agent decides to put your rent up, refuses to return your deposit for the wrong reasons, or never comes round and does repairs. It's a broken system that allows those who have power to take the wrong decision, or exploit, or discriminate. And as renters, we feel: 'that's how it is, what can I do?'”

Owain Astles, private renter, on Held in Common 'Home Truths' podcast
Listen here: buzzsprout.com/1053694

ISSUE 01

Private rents are out of control



Our context

16,426

private renting households in Bristol claim housing benefit as of August 2020

64%

how much that figure has increased since February 2020

52%

how much rents have increased in Bristol since 2011

Private renters in Bristol are struggling to pay their rent, bills and make ends meet, and things have only gotten harder over the last year. There were 16,426 private renting households claiming housing benefits in Bristol in August 2020 (a 64% increase since February 2020), and an estimated 34% of private renting households in Bristol are now claiming housing benefits.¹

Local rents are too expensive and are disproportionately high in relation to local wages. Almost half of the private renters who took part in the Home Truths campaign said that the cost of rent was an issue they were facing, with many spending nearly half their income on rent.

Private renters who spoke out during the campaign said they aren't able to save for the future, and are having to make sacrifices to rent somewhere they can afford – such as having to rent smaller rooms and properties, moving away from friends and family and further out of the city.

There is also uncertainty and worry among private renters in Bristol about if, when, and by how much, their rent is going to increase. People have told us that rent increases mean they have to move around a lot, and are at growing risk of not being able to afford to rent anywhere in our city. High and rising rents are forcing people on lower incomes out of certain neighbourhoods, and out of the city altogether, breaking up support networks and driving up inequality.

The cost of an average private rent in Bristol is too high, and it's rising at an unsustainable rate.

The average monthly rent for a two-bed private rented property in Bristol in 2020 was £1,105, compared to £729 in 2011. The average full-time wage in Bristol in April 2020 was £3,016 per month, compared with £2,432 in 2011.

This means that rents have risen by more than twice the rate of wages over the last nine years. Since 2011, rents have increased by 52%, whereas wages have lagged behind on 24%.

1. All statistics used outside of the Home Truths campaign findings are from official sources and are available upon request.

Our voices

“Rent has doubled in last five years. We live further out of the city (cheaper), so it’s further to travel to work... I expect she will increase the rent again this April.”

Private renter, Redfield

“Struggling to pay my rent. Struggling to pay for school activity fees and transportation. Lack of food and can’t pay some of my bills.”

Private renter, Horfield

“I spend nearly half my income on rent, and that was when I was working full time rather than as a student!”

Private renter, Bristol

“If these are the conditions of a house, then I don’t think the rent should be so extortionate! I would make it mandatory to have a certain standard of living and a cap on how much landlords can charge.”

Private renter, Easton

“Control rent – it’s shocking what people are asked to pay in comparison to mortgage.”

Private renter, St Werburghs

“Need to live close to work and kids’ school, but area is too expensive for me. Current rental under risk of being sold and I can’t afford to stay in area as prices have risen so much since I moved here five years ago. My status as part time/freelance co-parent to two young kids means I can’t get on property ladder, meanwhile all my years renting mean I’ve spent enough money to have put down a deposit by now, but the reality of that is unlikely... We live in the present always, never able to make future plans.”

Private renter, Horfield

What needs to change

In theory, private renters have a legal right to:

1. challenge their landlord if they increase the rent significantly above the market rent level;
2. challenge a rent, if they move into a new property and find out it has been set too high.

Unfortunately, we have little evidence about how successful these controls are because they are rarely enforced. Due to the lack of protections private renters have, renters who wish to challenge their rent risk being served a section 21 'no fault' eviction notice by their landlord. There is an intention in housing law to guard against unfair rent levels, but these protections don't work because of a lack of protection for renters.

Whatever these protections are meant to achieve, they do not address the issue that market rent in Bristol is too high in the first place.

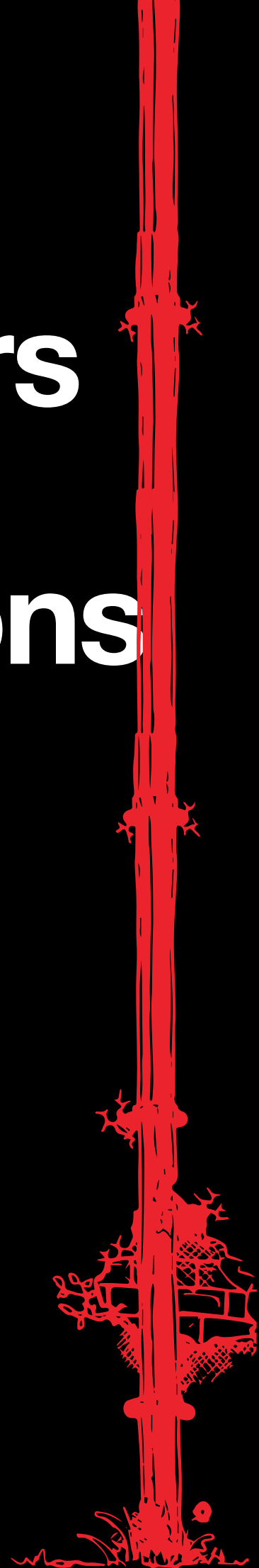
Those living in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) experience this unfair rent-setting system in particular. Local renters in HMOs have told us that landlords often increase the rent when new tenants move in, meaning people are paying different amounts for similar-sized rooms.

The system of the market providing a fair level of rent is not working, and local rents are out of control. We need local rents to be affordable to ensure people can access and stay in safe and secure homes. Through the Home Truths campaign, the most common suggestion Bristol residents made for what needs to change was controlling rents. Landlords should be able to generate income, but not to the detriment of their tenants.

We need balance to be restored to the renting system, so that private renters are paying a fair rent for the service they receive.

ISSUE 02

Private renters are living in poor conditions and are at risk of losing their homes



Our context



During the campaign, renters across the city told us they are living in properties with a range of disrepair issues, many of which are unsafe, hazardous and affecting people's health and quality of life. Almost half the private renters who took part reported living with leaks, damp and mould, humidity, poor insulation, drafts, cold homes, noise due to poor soundproofing, rats or pests, and broken boilers, cookers, showers, washing machines, and windows.

Many renters shared that they don't have enough space and are living in overcrowded conditions, and that properties are not suitable or accessible for people with a physical impairment.

49% of the private renters we spoke with told us that their landlord or letting agent has been uncooperative and slow to respond, refusing to maintain properties, or carrying out poor or illegal works. Many renters also shared that they have experienced harassment and hostile behaviour, including landlords and letting agents entering properties without asking or giving any notice.

There are several reasons why poor housing conditions continue to be a common issue for Bristol renters. One barrier is that renters often don't know what rights they do have, or where they can get help. We know that Bristol City Council's Environmental Health team already has a waiting list of those in need of help, and yet a lot of renters we've spoken with aren't aware that this local support exists.

There is also a high demand for privately rented homes in our city (due to a lack of social housing), and combined with expensive rents, a lot of renters have no choice but to keep renting non-decent properties.

But Bristol renters face an even bigger issue – they are often not able to challenge landlords who are slow or refusing to make repairs, because of the risk of a rent increase or being evicted and losing their home.

Bristol renters' concerns about being evicted are valid fears, and many have shared that being served a section 21 eviction notice is a common occurrence and means they have to move house regularly.

Landlords can serve renters a section 21 at any time during a rolling contract, or if there's a break clause in a fixed term tenancy, and this legislation allows landlords to evict renters for any reason they like.

This puts tenants at risk of losing their home if they ask for repairs that the landlord refuses to make, or can't afford a rent increase.

The government has taken steps to temporarily halt most evictions taking place during the pandemic:

- all possession proceedings were suspended for six months;
- a section 21 notice served between 29 August 2020 and 31 May 2021 must give at least six months' notice;
- and the bailiff ban has repeatedly been extended since it was introduced during the tier system, most recently until 31 May 2021 (note: evictions by bailiffs may still go ahead if a renter has at least six months' rent arrears, or there has been anti-social behaviour).

These measures have been put in place because renters are at growing risk of losing their homes. But they are short-term fixes and do not resolve the wider issue: private renters are at constant risk of eviction and this is driving poor living conditions, insecurity, and homelessness.

1/2

almost half of private renters reported disrepair issues in their home

49%

of private renters said their landlord or letting agent has been uncooperative or slow to respond to maintenance requests

Our voices

“They would not change the rings on the electric hob claiming it was “aesthetics” but it can barely heat and smells very badly. The toilet flush has been broken since we moved in – we told the letting agent and he laughed and said it’s been on his to-do list for years.”

Private renter, Whitehall

“Damp and rain leaking inside the house. An oven we turn on with pliers (no knobs). Mouldy and warped kitchen cabinets.”

Private renter, Easton

“Landlord has previously attempted to clear us out at short notice, then changed mind. Since then have not been able to feel settled in house.”

Private renter, Eastville

“Oven doesn’t work properly. Too scared to say anything. After repairs last year, my rent went up considerably.”

Private renter,
Westbury-on-Trym

“Can’t ask for repairs as he wants us out.”

Private renter, Redland

“Illegal gas works have been carried out. Landlady does not care for the safety of her tenants.”

Private renter, Cotham

“Landlord enforcement whilst protecting tenancy and safeguarding the rent to ensure rent is not raised to pay for repairs.”

Private renter, Redfield

“Agencies using the fear factor/threats/urgency tactics. I’ve felt like we can’t ask questions and figure things out properly, we just have to agree to something or else.”

Private renter, Bristol

“Implement mandatory timeframes for certain types of maintenance to be completed. Stronger protection for renters to challenge issues such as damp and make a clear minimum standard for a rental property.”

Private renter, St Werburghs

“Require landlords to pass a qualification making sure they know what their obligations are and they understand how their actions affect the human rights of their tenants. Introduce more regulations requiring landlords to take issues like ventilation and wiring more seriously and fix them before they get to crisis point.”

Private renter, Bedminster

What needs to change

Private renters shouldn't have to live in poor conditions just so they can keep a roof over their heads. Renters have a right to live in decent and safe homes, and we need those renting out properties to be held to account to provide decent housing.

Many private renters who spoke out during the campaign feel that they are paying high rents for a poor service.

We need stricter guidelines and enforcement from the council to ensure that landlords are held to account to maintain decent homes, and a system whereby renters are informed about the standard of the property they rent.

ISSUE 03
People
are facing
discrimination,
which stops
them from
renting
and causes
homelessness



Our context

34%

of private rent households claim housing benefit

1/3

Over 1/3 of renters said discrimination affected them

Many people trying to find somewhere to rent privately in Bristol are facing discrimination based on their age, sex, race, disability, type of employment or type of income. During the campaign, over one third of people who we spoke with raised barriers to renting and discrimination as issues affecting them personally.

People on lower incomes, and those who do not have a guarantor, face discrimination from landlords and letting agents who are refusing to rent to them. Migrants, students from low income families, and those without a sufficiently wealthy support network are those most affected.

For those who are self-employed, freelance or in precarious employment, demand for projected incomes or employment checks are preventing them from being able to find homes they can rent. And high moving costs, deposits, and up-front payments are a further barrier for those who are already struggling to afford our city's expensive rents.

The raft of barriers and discrimination that people face trying to rent privately in Bristol means that many are forced to rent in informal, sometimes precarious, situations, where they do not have even the basic protections that assured shorthold tenants do, while others are being made homeless.

Renters who we spoke with raised that, for those who receive benefits, there is a shrinking pool of properties they are able to rent in Bristol, due to 'No DSS' and age discrimination, coupled with the high cost of rents.

Due to the pandemic, growing numbers of people are facing redundancy, or unstable employment, and are in need of extra financial support. As we said earlier, an estimated 34% of private renting households in Bristol are now claiming housing benefits, so benefits discrimination is a potential issue for around 45,000 people who need to rent in our city.

Common reasons that are given for not renting to people who receive benefits include:

Reason #1: The terms of my mortgage mean I can't rent my property to tenants who receive housing benefit.

But in reality? 99% of the buy-to-let mortgage market is now 'No DSS'-free, according to Mortgages for Business research. And nearly half (48%) of landlords have no outstanding mortgages on the homes they let out.

Reason #2: My landlord insurance doesn't cover me if I rent to people who receive housing benefit.

But in reality? Insurance policies that cover landlords who rent to housing benefit tenants are easily available. It's a good idea for landlords to get insurance that covers tenants who receive housing benefit anyway, as anyone who starts a tenancy in employment may later find that their employment or personal circumstances change.

Reason #3: I'm concerned I won't get my rent payments.

But in reality? All renters have an obligation to pay rent for their property, whether they receive housing benefit or not. Landlords and letting agents are making blanket judgements and refusing to rent to people purely based on the fact that they receive benefits, not that they can't afford the rent. We also know that letting agents use affordability assessments, as part of referencing checks, that exclude housing benefit as a form of income.

While guarantors might be one way that can be useful or accessible for some, there are lots of great tenants who aren't able to access a guarantor because they don't have wealthy family or friends. There are lots of other ways to check a tenant's reliability with paying rent, including credit checks, work references, or requesting a reference from a previous landlord.

Our voices

“Being unable to move despite mistreatment from housemates. I can’t afford my own place and am too old for nearly all room rentals. Many have an upper age limit of 35, some even lower. Only one or two out of 100 don’t mind. It is impossible to find a place cheap enough, willing to take DSS and willing to have someone over 50.”

Private renter, Brislington

“My housemate couldn’t leave his family home due to benefits discrimination. I’d been furloughed, so we were both being refused. Had to offer six months’ rent up front and worried that we’ll have to pay up front again.”

Private renter, Bristol

“I need to move as I’m pregnant, so need a bigger place. Agencies want to do employment checks and I could be facing redundancy.”

Private renter, Kingswood

“Landlords should have to provide references from previous tenants, not just tenants needing to provide references from previous landlords.”

Person who is homeless, Withywood

“Cannot rent privately via a lettings agent, as I don’t have a guarantor – have to rent directly from landlords. I recently moved to the UK and those for whom English is not their first language may struggle with renting.”

Private renter, St Pauls

“Acknowledgement that Bristol thrives on self-employed and freelance people, and estate agents cannot discriminate against these people from being able to apply for housing.”

Private renter, Clifton

“There are ‘No DSS’ ads everywhere. Where are people supposed to live?”

Private renter, Bristol

“[You should be able to] prove your past history of rent payments as evidence for paying the rent on the property you are applying for.”

Private renter, Whitchurch

What needs to change

Last year, with support from Shelter, two renters who had experienced benefit discrimination took letting agents to court – and they won. The judges ruled that refusing to rent to someone because they receive housing benefit is unlawful discrimination.

Shelter has also created a template letter which people who experience benefit discrimination can use to write to landlords and letting agents, challenging them that they're putting themselves at risk of a legal challenge if they refuse to rent to people because they receive benefits.

But benefit and wider income discrimination is still widespread across our local renting system, stopping people from finding somewhere to live, and breaking up our communities. These practices are driven by prejudice and they need to be exposed and stopped.

We need our local renting system to protect renters against these unlawful practices, and together, we need to stamp them out for good.

In August 2020, renters collaborated with local artist Benoît Bennett and the People's Republic of Stokes Croft to create a mural exposing the reality of private renting in Bristol.





PROTECT RENTERS

Rights
VOICE
Action

Join Our Campaign!

Take Action
Join our fair renting action group to help
and to other renters. Identify groups we can
break renting fair and secure, and take
action together.
Email homeless@shelter.org.uk or call 0344 315
3420 to find out more.

Know Your Rights
Do your rent arrears in Bristol? Visit to find
out what rights you have as a tenant.
Sign up for one of Shelter's online rights work
shops on **Thursday 17 September 2020** or
29 October 2020 to get free housing advice.
Follow [@ShelterBristol](https://twitter.com/ShelterBristol) on Twitter to register.

#Home Truths

get
food
transport
clothes
bills
other

We call on our local mayoral candidates to recognise that the private renting system in Bristol is broken and causing homelessness. Endorse this manifesto and take responsibility for driving forwards a plan for urgent local change.

Our demands

#01

To tackle high and out of control rents

We call on our local mayoral candidates to:

- Acknowledge that private rents are out of control, and state what you will do to tackle high rents.

We call on our city’s political leaders to:

- Lobby national government to develop long-term solutions to make private rents more affordable, and to give our council more powers to make sure landlords charge fair rents for a good service.

#02

To tackle poor conditions and lack of protections for private renters

We call on Bristol City Council to:

- Raise awareness of existing private renters’ rights, and in what ways the Council is able to help protect these rights.
- Use your enforcement powers more proactively to ensure that the homes people are renting are decent and safe. Serve improvement notices promptly to landlords who are failing or refusing to maintain their properties.

We call on our city’s political leaders to lobby national government:

- For more specific timeframes within which repairs must be made, and for council powers to be expanded so that they can effectively ensure landlord compliance.
- To introduce a national landlord register, so that renters are able to make more informed decisions about who they rent from, and can ensure that the homes they rent meet essential safety standards.
- For the finance that our council needs to enforce decent conditions in privately rented homes, and to hold landlords fully to account.
- To build and deliver a robust Renters’ Reform Bill, which will permanently protect renters from retaliatory evictions by scrapping section 21 legislation.

#03

To tackle discrimination in private renting

We call on our local mayoral and council candidates to:

- Take a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination in the private rented sector, and, if elected, to make this a formal remit of Bristol City Council’s Rogue Landlord and Letting Agent Unit.

We call on Bristol City Council to:

- Raise awareness that benefits discrimination is unlawful, and create a local action plan to stamp out ‘No DSS’ practices, including developing a clear, proactive process for challenging and transforming the behaviour of those who discriminate.
- Support renters in challenging and reporting letting agents and landlords who are discriminating against them, and in taking those challenges to The Property Ombudsman/ Property Redress Scheme.

**Now that we've
decided how we
want to fix private
renting in Bristol,
we're taking action
to make change
happen.**

**But it's going
to take all of us,
and we need
your help.**

Sign the Manifesto!

#01

Sign the manifesto

Show your support for the Bristol Fair Renting Manifesto online:
campaigns.shelter.org.uk/demand-fair-renting-bristol.

#02

Share it

Share the manifesto with other Bristol residents and your local politicians, online via social media or email, or contact us to get paper copies to share in your local area.

Email: home@shelter.org.uk or call: 0344 515 1430 to request a copy of the manifesto or campaign poster.

#03

Know your rights

Before we can stand up for our rights, we need to know what they are. Shelter Bristol runs monthly online renters' rights workshops aimed at those who rent privately, or those who are about to start renting, in Bristol.

If you're a private renter, sign up for one of these workshops and come along to find out where you stand when it comes to eviction notices, joint tenancies, deposits and deductions, and getting repairs done, and to ask Shelter Bristol housing advisers any questions you have.

If you're not a private renter, please help us spread the word by sharing this information with Bristol renters you know.

Thursday 29 April

Register here: renters-rights-workshop-april.eventbrite.co.uk

Thursday 20 May

Register here: renters-rights-workshop-may.eventbrite.co.uk

Thursday 17 June

Register here: renters-rights-workshop-june.eventbrite.co.uk

If you need urgent housing advice, please call the Shelter Bristol Hub on 0344 515 1430.



The Bristol Fair Renting Manifesto is supported by:



Caring in Bristol

