

Shelter Briefing: General debate on Grenfell

Shelter is the UK's largest housing and homelessness charity. Last year we gave information, support and advice to millions of people experiencing bad housing and homelessness.

It is now nearly two years and five months since 72 people lost their lives and 210 families lost their homes in the Grenfell Tower fire. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, Shelter worked on the ground to support those directly affected and the wider community in North Kensington – offering free legal support and advice.

While almost all the residents of Grenfell Tower and Walkways have now accepted permanent housing offers, not everyone has been able to move into their new home and the Government are yet to tackle some of the root causes behind the tragedy.

Shelter's priority is to ensure that the Government takes action to address the current system of social housing regulation that neglected residents and failed to listen to their concerns, in the time leading up to the fire. Following on from this, Shelter is campaigning for proper investment in social housing; after 40 years of neglect, it is crucial that we invest to provide the highest quality social homes possible to address the housing emergency and ensure that health and safety standards are met.

Action taken since the Grenfell Tower fire

It is positive that the Government has now committed to funding the remediation of both social and private sector high-rise buildings fitted with unsafe ACM cladding systems. However, the Building Safety Programme's September data release¹ illustrates that the pace of remediation is still too slow;

- 97 buildings within the social housing sector have been identified as yet to be remediated (81 of these have work ongoing);
- Only 13 (of the 181) private sector buildings have been remediated, with 144 buildings not even having begun the remediation process.

Problems and solutions: social housing regulation

It is important to note that the causes of the Grenfell Tower fire run deeper than the issues with unfit cladding. Grenfell was the result of a system of regulation that neglected residents and consistently failed to listen to their concerns.

The upcoming general debate on Wednesday presents an opportunity to ensure that this Government, along with those in the future, does more to protect the health, safety, and well-being of all social tenants. **To ensure that this happens, there needs to be a level of oversight and scrutiny on social housing standards that can only be delivered through an effective regulator:**

- Currently, almost three-quarters (72%) of social tenants have never heard of the Regulator of Social Housing;

¹ MHCLG, *Building Safety Programme: Monthly Data Release*, figure 1. 10 October 2019.

- 42% of social housing tenants say that they would not know who to report a problem to, if it was still unresolved after complaining to their landlord;
- Almost 420,000 (417,826) social tenants say they have experienced a fire safety issue with their social home in the last 3 years and more than two-fifths of these (43%) say their neighbours have also experienced this;
- Almost a third (28%) of social tenants who have had a problem in their social home in the last 3 years reported their most recent problem 5 or more times and 1 in 10 social tenants reported their most recent problem more than 10 times;
- Half of social tenants (49%) say they trust the Government less, to keep social tenants safe in their homes, following the government's response to the Grenfell fire.

The current social housing regulator exists to proactively inspect the *economic* standards of social housing; however, it does not proactively protect the health and safety of social housing tenants. In addition, having one regulator that is responsible for both the economic viability and safety standards of social housing could lead to a conflict of interest.

This is why Shelter are calling for a new system of regulation - one which is tenant-focused. We have seen similar developments in the regulation of the food industry, following food-related deaths, and the financial sector, after the banking crash.

At present, social housing tenants do not believe that the existing regulator is user-friendly or exists to protect them. As a result, simply 'beefing up' or restoring the existing regulator does not nearly go far enough to restore faith in the current regulatory system – tenants want and deserve a new purpose-built social housing regulator.

Therefore, **Shelter are calling on the Government to create a new consumer regulator for social housing, with significant powers for effective monitoring and enforcement.**

The new regulator needs to be proactive, able to investigate systemic problems, as well as accessible and responsive. Alongside tightening social housing regulation, this will further allow for faith to be restored in social housing for both tenants and governments.

The scope of the proposed social housing regulator

A new social housing regulator needs the powers to ensure that a disaster like Grenfell can never happen again. The regulator should develop new, clearer consumer standards. Tenants should be consulted in this process, but we expect that the regulator would cover:

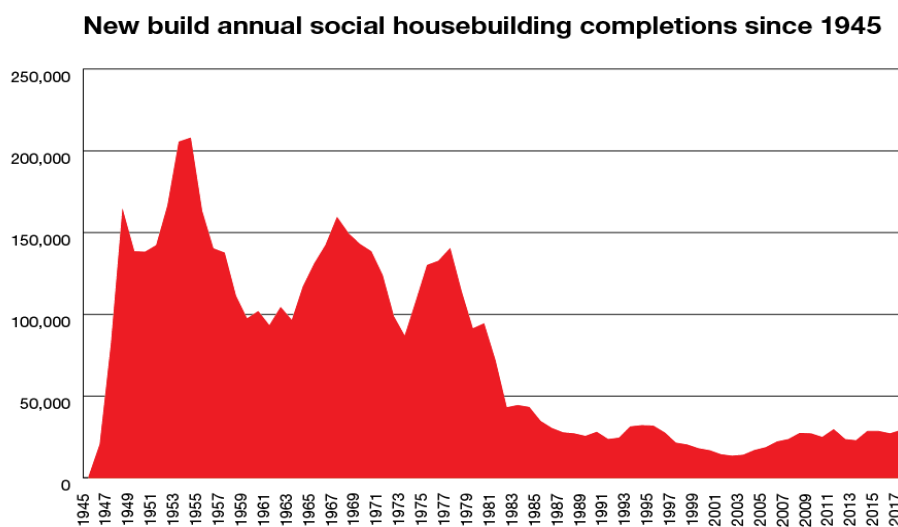
- *The condition of homes*, such as:
 - Decent homes standard;
 - Disrepair issues, e.g. broken fire doors, etc.
 - Electrical safety concerns;
 - Fire safety concerns;
 - Vermin infestations;
 - Damp and mould.
- *Tenancy management*, such as:
 - The allocation of homes;
 - Social housing transfers;

- Rent collection and rent disputes;
- Neighbourhood management, e.g. neighbour disputes, anti-social behaviour, etc.
- Tenant involvement.

Delivering the social homes we need

A new social housing regulator is an important step that should be taken to ensure that the health and safety of social tenants is protected and ensured. However, we need further structural change to improve social housing moving forward, to end the housing emergency.

The most significant of these changes surrounds the lack of proper investment, made by successive governments over the past 40 years, in building new social homes. On this issue, recent history stands in stark contrast with the three and a half decades after the end of the Second World War, when local authorities and housing associations built 4.4 million social homes at an average rate of more than 126,000 a year.²



As well as delivering more homes for those in need of them, we must also seize the opportunity that social housebuilding provides in terms of investing in new technologies, new designs, and in delivering the highest quality social homes possible. This *is* possible, as illustrated by the recent Stirling Prize-winning Goldsmith Street social housing development in Norwich. The Goldsmith Street development shows us how ambitious and successful social housing can be and should be - an example of social housing at it's very best.

To make this a reality Shelter – alongside CPRE, the National Housing Federation, Crisis and the Chartered Institute of Housing - are calling for £12.8 billion to be invested annually in the delivery of social housing and other affordable tenures.

We are also calling on all parties to commit to deliver at least 90,000 social homes a year over the next parliament. The first instalment for the 3 million more social homes to solve the housing emergency for good.

If you would like any more information, then please contact public_affairs@shelter.org.uk.

² MHCLG, House building: permanent dwellings started and completed, by tenure, Live Table 244