

A HOUSING CHARTER FOR FAIRER RENTS AND AFFORDABLE HOMES IN BRIGHTON PAVILION

Caroline Lucas MP

BETTER QUALITY IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR *Housing that can be called home*

While many good landlords exist in Brighton and Hove, stories of substandard housing are rife, so I am calling for:

1. A national register of landlords, linked to a mandatory licensing scheme to improve housing standards

Mandatory registration linked to a licensing scheme would ensure the application of clear standards across the sector, for example, landlords could be required to address Category 1 and 2 hazards, tackle fuel poverty and reduce energy consumption. I support proposals by Brighton and Hove City Council's Housing Committee to extend licensing of Houses of Multiple Occupation, to help pull up standards; and I welcome support in the Council's Housing Strategy's support for a register of landlords.

2. Letting agent fees to be scrapped and a licensing system for letting agents to be introduced, including an end to discrimination against those on benefits

Many constituents have told me of the extortionate amount they are being asked to pay for letting fees, and I led on Parliamentary moves to scrap the fees. Hidden fees and poor practice by letting agents are far from uncommon and have been highlighted by local student unions. A licensing system, similar to that proposed for landlords, would introduce standards and allow for a licence to be revoked in cases of malpractice, including discrimination.

3. Action to protect tenants' deposits

The effectiveness of insurance-based schemes in protecting tenants' deposits is very questionable and tenants may still unfairly lose their deposits. To fully protect tenants' deposits, we need mandatory custodial schemes.

4. Local authorities to set up not-for-profit ethical letting agencies

I am calling for the establishment of ethical letting agencies that will lead the way in improving standards within the sector. Operating on a not-for-profit basis, such a model offers private sector tenants, including students, a professional service with no hidden charges and access to housing within Local Housing Allowance rates. Landlords benefit from local authorities' experience in letting and maintaining housing – the agency offer could include guaranteed rental income and a full repairs service. The housing will be used by the authority to help meet demand for affordable housing within the local area.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING
Housing that doesn't bust budgets

House prices and rent levels in Brighton and Hove are around double the national average, so I am calling for:

1. Smart Rent Controls linked to the establishment of a Living Rent Commission to explore ways of bringing rent levels in line with the basic cost of living

I'm campaigning for smart rent controls where rent can't rise faster than inflation, guaranteeing fairness and predictability for tenants and landlords. I'm also proposing the establishment of a Living Rent Commission, modelled along the lines of the Living Wage Commission, to go further and establish what a Living Rent should be and how to get there. This would take account of a range of factors, including lack of housing supply and the relationship between rent levels and landlords' ability to cover essential costs.

2. Abolition of the Bedroom Tax

Nationally, the Coalition Government's Bedroom Tax is leading to evictions, homelessness, disruption and despair, and takes no account of real people's circumstances. For example, many of those affected are people with disabilities, for whom an extra room is not "spare". It doesn't work: not only are there insufficient smaller properties for families to move to, but the measure is more likely to cost money, than save it.

3. Avoiding repossessions - working with lenders on a right to rent and other help for those struggling with mortgage payments to stay in their home

I am calling for work with lenders to have a plan in place to address the possible increase in repossessions if interest rates rise. We must encourage lenders to have creative mechanisms and options to help people who may have borrowed heavily against their income, because of extremely high house prices, whilst interest rates have been at an historic low. Lenders should be encouraged to offer people a right to rent at a fair price, as one alternative to being forced to leave.

4. The phasing out of existing property taxes, and replacement in the longer term with a progressive Land Value Tax

There is a strong case to gradually replace Council Tax and business rates with something fairer. One option is a Land Value Tax (LVT) - this would address the problem of sites that are left derelict. An LVT would be levied solely on the unimproved site value of the property, which is affected by its location and community efforts around it, making it expensive for owners to leave properties empty.

5. Strong energy efficiency standards to tackle high energy bills and fuel poverty

We need housing that people can afford to run. Home energy efficiency must be a top UK infrastructure priority – with funding to match. All low income households must have their homes improved up to an Energy Performance Certificate Band C by 2025. One million homes per year across the socio-economic spectrum need to be upgraded with 'deep' retrofits by 2020.

SECURE HOUSING IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR
Housing that lets people put down roots

In Brighton Pavilion, the private rented sector is roughly double the national average, so I am calling for:

1. Stable renting - shorter tenancies by agreement but five-year tenancies as the legal default

A five-year tenancy as the default is a key demand of the housing charity Shelter as part of its proposed Stable Rental Contract. Improving security of tenure would be of benefit to landlords, who would have a more predictable income, as well as renters, who would be able to make their house or flat a proper home. Shorter tenancies would still be possible, for example for students or landlords who only want to rent on a temporary basis. Consideration should also be given to measures that link notice periods given by landlords to how long a tenant has been in their home, providing extra notice for long-term tenants whilst taking account of the reasons why a landlord may need a tenant to move.

2. Written tenancy agreements to be compulsory

A plain English tenancy agreement is an essential requirement for clarifying expectations and responsibilities between tenant and landlord.

3. More help for people who want to 'Rent a Room' so they can stay in their homes

The tax-free amount should be increased to £7,250 and increased in line with RPI thereafter. This would release supply in people's homes and would be likely to yield a net gain despite the cost to the Exchequer, given the high costs of lack of housing for single people.

4. Other measures

Other measures I have campaigned for include the abolition of Section 21 "revenge evictions"; reinstating the shared accommodation rate to apply only to those under 25; reforming the Local Housing Allowance to take account of actual housing costs; and restoring the option of direct rent payments to (good) landlords to tackle discrimination by letting agents and landlords against those on benefits. Housing affordability through price stability should be a key aim for housing policy - for house prices to remain flat in nominal terms so that incomes can gradually catch up.

ENOUGH HOUSING
Housing that meets the need for new homes

20,000 households are on the housing register for Brighton and Hove, so I am calling for:

1. Local authorities to be allowed to invest in a mass programme of sustainable council and social housing

Done well, council housing works. It gives affordability and security of tenure. The Green Party proposes 500,000 sustainably built council and social homes over the course of the next Parliament, deliverable through incremental increases to the social housing budget, full removal of the borrowing cap on councils, and the devolution of housing benefit to councils so they can use it more flexibly. Government investment in training and job creation associated with this programme would help put people of all ages back to work. This house-building programme should reflect findings by the Leonard Cheshire Disability charity on the growing need for disabled-friendly homes.

2. An end to Right to Buy - money from current sales should be invested back into new council housing; homes lost because of Right To Buy should be replaced to meet local need

Selling off our desperately needed housing stock on the cheap does not make sense. Not only are public assets being sold off for less than they are worth, even more public money is wasted as ex council properties are often then let to people who need housing benefit to cover very high market rents. We must move from subsidising high housing benefit bills to subsidising bricks and mortar.

3. Action on empty homes to bring them back into use

I am calling for restoration of the position where local authorities could apply for Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) where a property has been empty for six months (reversing the current position of two years, brought in by the Coalition). EDMOs give authorities the power to bring long-term empty properties back into use by taking over management, improving them and securing their use by households in need.

4. Seed funding to expand Community Land Trusts and self-build; support for housing co-ops

Housing solutions that incorporate mutuality should be supported. For example, potential housing sites on public land should be put into Community Land Trusts rather than the freehold being sold on the open market, with local authorities retaining nomination rights for new housing. Housing co-ops can provide housing for under-resourced groups (including young people, older non-owner-occupiers) and these should be actively supported in purchasing land or empty properties. This includes working with existing ethical funders to increase the financial pool from which new co-ops can draw loans and work to help long-standing co-ops to support new co-ops. The establishment of Housing Co-op Agencies would support new co-ops with matters such as business planning, acquisition of homes/land, and the planning process.
