



# MANCHESTER SOCIAL HOUSING COMMISSION

## POLICY BRIEF 3

# EMPOWERING TENANTS TO UNLOCK DECENT, HEALTHY AND SAFE HOMES

November 2025



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## FOREWORD FROM THIRZA AMINA ASANGA-RAE

Organiser, Greater Manchester Tenants Union

Living in a home that's supposed to provide safety and comfort, but instead brings stress and danger, takes a heavy toll. When mould spreads, infestations appear or leaks go unrepaired, it's not just the property that deteriorates — it's your health, dignity, and sense of security. As a social housing tenant in Manchester, I have experienced all of this and worse, and faced a literal brick wall when trying to make my voice heard. I feared that one of us — either me or one of my children — would die in that house. After so many emails and phone calls, we were eventually moved into another property while repairs took place, only for the ceiling to partially collapse on my head when we returned. Many tenants in social and private rental housing find themselves in similar situations: overcrowded conditions, unresponsive landlords, endless delays or temporary fixes by cowboy contractors rather than lasting solutions. Reporting problems often leads to silence, blame and retaliation. This is why Grenfell happened and why Awaab Ishak died, and is where tenant organising becomes vital.



As tenant-led organisations like Greater Manchester Tenants Union have shown, collective action changes the balance of power between landlords and tenants and can win repairs, stop evictions, and push landlords to take their legal and social responsibilities seriously. When people speak out about unsafe homes, they break the silence that allows neglect to continue. But we shouldn't have to fight for basic rights — that's why we need tougher standards and enforcement, and support for tenant-led organisations at the local and national scale.

## FOREWORD FROM JOHN RYAN

Strategic Lead Greater Manchester, Shelter

Shelter was founded in 1966 with the aim of creating one organisation to speak for the millions of 'hidden homeless' living in overcrowded slums. In the same year, the BBC screened Ken Loach's film, *Cathy Come Home*, about a young family pulled apart by worsening housing conditions. Nearly sixty years on, we face another housing crisis, due in part to the rolling back of many progressive policies that housing activism won. One of the most disastrous u-turns has been the restriction, since 2012, of civil legal aid for housing disrepair cases to only those presenting serious risk to health and safety. This is forcing thousands of families in Manchester to persevere in worsening housing conditions. The wider deregulation of social housing after 2010 was also a major contributor to the death, in December 2020, of two year old Awaab Ishak from a respiratory condition caused by severe mould exposure in his social rented home in Rochdale. The public outcry that ensued resulted in the implementation of



Awaab's Law, which came into effect on 27 October 2025, giving social landlords new legal requirements to urgently address serious damp and mould and other health-threatening hazards. Shelter's Manchester's advice Hub currently helps over 2500 people a year, with many reporting severe damp and mould, blown double glazing, dirty flooring and in some severe cases, infestations of rats, bed bugs and fleas. That is why the promised extension of Awaab's Law to the private sector, and the recommendations set out in this new policy brief, cannot come soon enough.

## SUMMARY

Our first two policy briefs detailed key policies and financing solutions for urgently increasing the delivery of sustainable homes for social rent to address the housing, cost of living, and climate crises. This third policy brief focuses on poor housing conditions across social and private rental sectors and how to empower tenants to live in decent, healthy and safe homes.

**1.46  
million**



rental homes fail a basic decency standard in England



**71%**

in private sector where  
1 in 5 homes are non-decent



**10%**

of social homes are  
non-decent

tenants' health and safety.

Poor quality rental housing is more likely to affect those with a long-term illness or disability, and racialised communities. Energy inefficient homes not only drive up carbon emissions and global warming but also feed fuel poverty, which causes over 25,000 deaths a year due to living in cold temperatures, whilst health issues directly linked to damp and cold homes cost the NHS £2.5 billion a year.<sup>1</sup>

**673,000**



rental homes contain  
serious health and  
safety hazards



**74%**

in private rental  
sector



**26%**

in social rented  
sector

Source: English Housing Survey 2024<sup>2</sup>

Everyone should be able to live in a home that is free of cold, damp and mould, fire risks, trip hazards and disrepair. However, across England, despite decades of improvement, this basic human right is still being denied to over 1.4 million households living in rental accommodation. In Manchester, the worst conditions are concentrated in the Private Rental Sector (PRS) where 1 in 4 households are denied a basic decency standard.

The crisis of poor quality housing is particularly acute for the most vulnerable households living in temporary accommodation. However, it is of deep concern that around 1 in 10 social rented homes are also non-decent and include life-threatening hazards that pose a serious and immediate risk to

Pushed into action following the 2017 Grenfell Tower disaster and the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020, successive governments have introduced stronger housing safety laws, soon to be boosted by the Renters Rights Act 2025 and a new Decent Homes Standard. These are important steps forward and should lift standards in the social and private rental sectors. However, the new emerging landscape of housing regulations and rights falls well short of addressing the key lesson of recent housing tragedies – **no one listened to the tenants**. Whichever institution they turned to for help, they met indifference to their plight and hostility for daring to hold their landlord to account. Making rental homes safe to live in now and fit for the future, therefore, ultimately means empowering and equipping tenants to make their voices heard.

## OUR FIVE PROPOSALS

As the government finalises its new Decent Homes Standard for the social and private rental sectors, we propose five measures that would strengthen regulation, rights and enforcement in relation to rental housing conditions, and transform the power of tenants to not only gain improvements to their homes and environments, but to influence the wider politics of decent, safe, secure and affordable housing.

### 1 Re-empower tenants through a new deal of individual and collective rights and representation enshrined in a National Tenants Charter

Tenants of all tenures need a single set of fundamental and enforceable rights, **including the right to be heard**, local access to affordable legal representation through legal aid reform, funding to help build new tenants' organisations, and an independent, tenant-led national organisation to represent their interests in policy and regulatory circles.

### 2 Strengthen and consolidate all housing standards in the new Decent Homes Standard

Simplify an increasingly complex legal landscape by bringing all housing standards and regulations (fire, electrical and gas) into the DHS, address its gaps and weaknesses, extend it to all rental and temporary accommodation including asylum housing, embed climate resiliency, thermal comfort and accessibility at its core, and impose more urgent timescales for addressing the worst quality homes that underpin the inequalities of poor housing.

### 3 Combine new funding with tougher conditions to help landlords raise their game

Improving standards requires a package of grants, loans and tax relief for social and private landlords with failing providers ultimately losing their right to let homes, a national training and job creation scheme to boost housing maintenance and retrofit capacity, financial and legal support for public bodies to compulsorily acquire and retrofit homes

from recalcitrant PRS landlords to expand the supply of decent and sustainable social housing, and the return of area renewal schemes.

### 4 Revolutionise regulatory enforcement through a new national Housing Standards Agency

Address the weaknesses, fragmentation and inaccessibility of the existing system by moving housing enforcement to a new, properly-funded national body that will run a registration and licensing scheme for all landlords, with a direct complaints route for tenants and their representatives to ensure their voices are heard, and powers to carry out emergency repairs, issue fines, make repair and compensation orders, and revoke non-compliant landlords' licenses.

### 5 Reform the welfare system to enable low-income tenants to afford to heat, furnish and stay in their homes

Strengthening standards and enforcement will not help impoverished tenants keep their homes warm in winter and stop mould growth, or afford essential furniture and adaptations for a decent standard of living, or even pay the rent and stay in their homes, unless the high cost of energy is addressed and the welfare system is reformed by scrapping punitive measures like the bedroom tax and benefit cap, and unfreezing and uprating benefits to match the real cost of living.



By Loz Pycock from London, UK - Grenfell Tower

# THE SCANDAL OF INDECENT RENTAL HOUSING

Access to a decent, safe and healthy home should be a basic human right, especially in the world's sixth richest country, but instead amounts to a tenure and postcode lottery. 3.5 million homes in England – around 15% of the overall housing stock – fail the government's current Decent Homes Standard (DHS). Substandard housing is particularly concentrated in the PRS where 21% are non-decent compared to 14% in owner occupation and 10% in the social rented sector.<sup>3</sup>

There has been improvement over time - in 2006, 37% of all homes failed, including 50% of the PRS and 34% of social rent.<sup>4</sup> However, the DHS is widely acknowledged to be too basic and outdated. Modelling of the government's proposed new standard, which also has limitations, forecasts that a minimum of 1.77 million additional rental homes would be non-decent, pushing up failure rates to 46% in the PRS and 41% in the social sector.<sup>5</sup>

## The Decent Homes Standard (DHS)

The DHS is the main official measure of housing standards for all UK tenures except Scotland, which has its own standard. Introduced in 2000, and last updated in 2006, it is only required in social housing at present.

- Homes should meet the statutory minimum standard for housing by being free of any Category 1 hazards identified by the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) that pose a serious and immediate risk to a person's health and safety e.g. electrical shocks, fires, burns and scalds.
- Homes should be in a reasonable state of repair e.g. no key building components are old and, because of their condition, need replacing or major repair
- Homes should have reasonably modern facilities and services e.g. kitchen is 20 years old or less with adequate space and layout
- Homes should provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort i.e. efficient heating, effective insulation, SAP rating 35+ (EPC F), primary heating system must provide heat to two or more rooms

## DANGEROUS HAZARDS

55% of all accidental deaths in England are due to an accident in the home, totalling 7,751 deaths in 2019.<sup>6</sup> Many are caused by hazards in the home. Some 673,000 rental homes pose a serious and immediate risk to their occupiers' health and safety, affecting 1 in 10 PRS homes compared to 1 in 24 social rent.<sup>7</sup> The most common problem relates to falls in the home caused by trip hazards or faulty or missing handrails. An estimated 262,000 rental households experienced a fall on the stairs in 2023, disproportionately affecting older and disabled people. Since 2019, falls from windows in their rented or temporary accommodation in England have killed 13 children.<sup>8</sup> The other most common hazards for renters are excess cold (129,000 homes) and damp (106,000 homes) - both primarily in the PRS. Old and damp homes were linked to 4,950 excess winter deaths during 2022/23.<sup>9</sup>

## DAMP AND MOULD

The health dangers of damp and mouldy homes were brought to national attention in 2020 with the death of two-year old Awaab Ishak in Rochdale from prolonged exposure to mould spores in his housing association home. Mould can cause serious respiratory, eye and skin symptoms and infections, and is especially dangerous for those with pre-existing health conditions, pregnant women and their unborn babies, children, older people, and mobility-affected people unable to access fresh air.<sup>10</sup> The English Housing Survey reveals levels of damp, mould or condensation are significant and rising, officially affecting 9% of PRS and 7% of social rent homes, but with self-reported levels reaching 44% and 39% respectively.<sup>11</sup> While the problem is more widespread in private rentals, it appears to be getting rapidly worse in local authority housing - nearly doubling between 2019 and 2023 (from 5% to 9%). In 2021, the Housing Ombudsman reported high levels of maladministration relating to social landlords' response to damp and mould, which currently dominates around half of its casework, and in 2024 named and shamed some of the largest social landlords.<sup>12</sup>

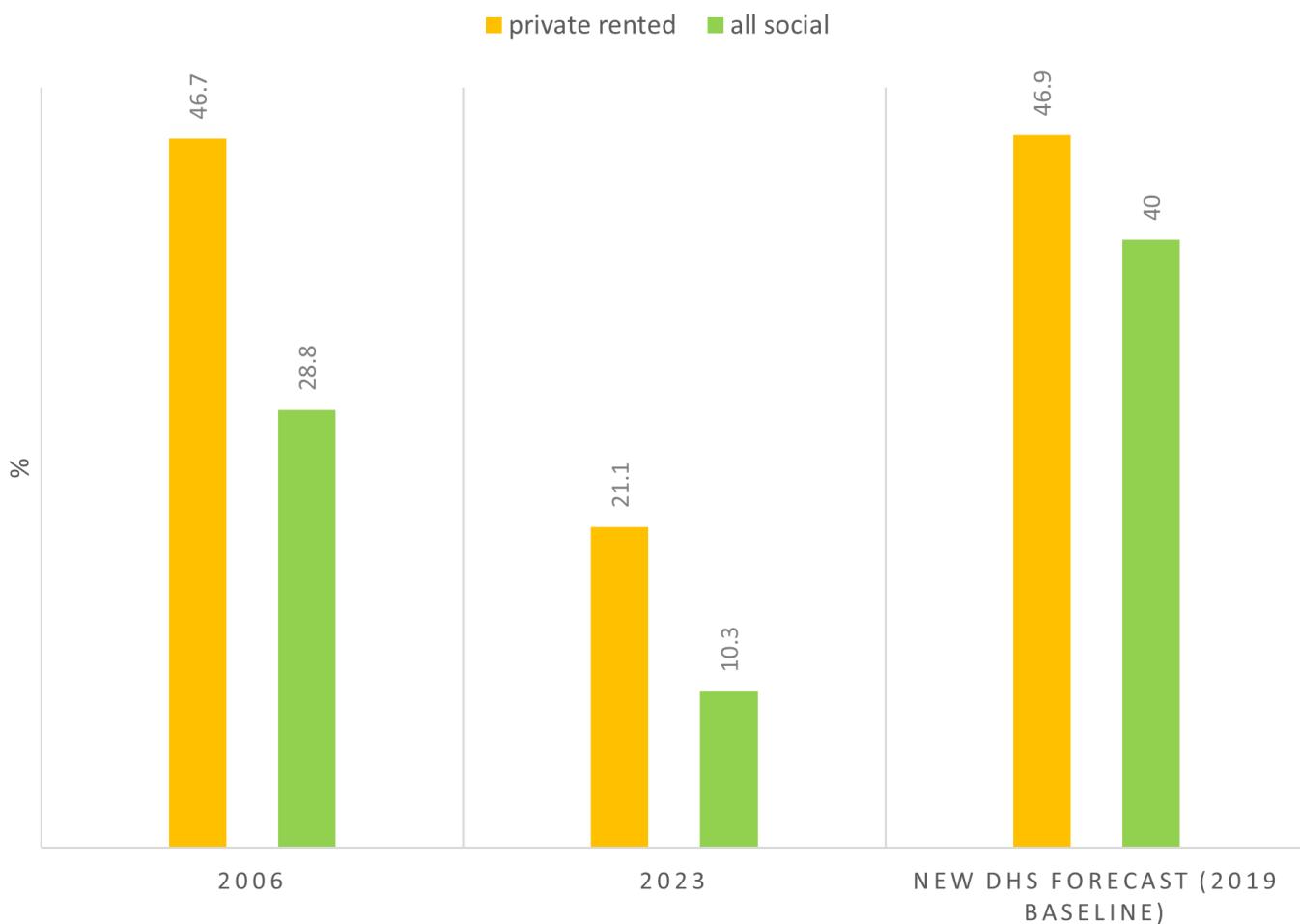
## FIRE SAFETY

More than eight years since the 2017 Grenfell disaster, there is still flammable cladding on 1901 social housing blocks over 11 metres high.<sup>14</sup> Nearly 1 in 10 PRS homes still do not have a working smoke alarm (compared to 1 in 33 social homes), and 30% of PRS homes have never had their smoke alarms tested. Meanwhile, social renters in high-rise flats are less likely to have a working smoke alarm than other forms of social housing. Since Grenfell, the fear of fire among tenants living in medium and high-rise buildings has increased compared to other dwellings, which has knock-on consequences for mental health and wellbeing.<sup>15</sup>

## INDOOR AIR TOXICITY

Poor indoor air quality is another silent killer. More than 1 in 3 PRS homes and nearly 1 in 5 social rent homes with a solid fuel burning appliance lack a carbon monoxide detector - which is illegal. There are around 40 deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning each year, most caused by faulty piped gas appliances with inadequate ventilation.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, overall UK indoor air quality was judged poorer than outdoor air quality for 11 out of 12 months<sup>17</sup> reflecting a growing recognition that our homes contain a vast number of complex pollutants – including so-called ‘forever chemicals’ – present in building materials, furniture, cleaning products, carpets and even non-stick pans that are currently not subject to consumer labelling schemes or sufficient regulation.<sup>18</sup>

## RENTAL HOMES THAT FAIL THE CURRENT AND PROPOSED DECENT HOMES STANDARD IN ENGLAND



Source: English Housing Survey<sup>13</sup>

## TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION AND ASYLUM HOUSING

By far the worst conditions are in the temporary accommodation sector for homelessness, which hosts almost 133,000 homeless households (June 2025) and over 172,400 children across England.<sup>19</sup> According to Shelter<sup>20</sup>, in 2022:

- 75% of households live in poor conditions
- 68% lack basic facilities such as cooking or laundry facilities
- 35% of children do not have their own bed

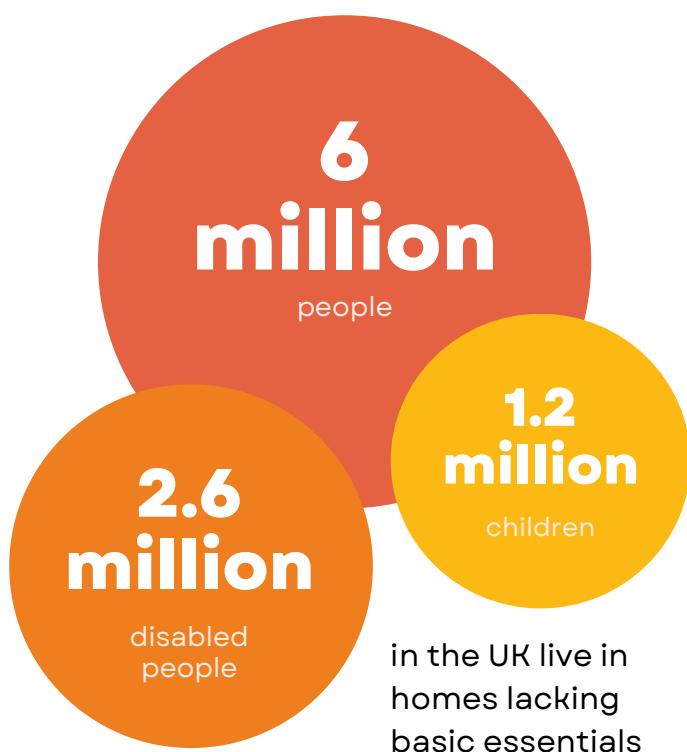
Two-thirds (67%) of nightly paid accommodation in London inspected between 2020 and 2024 contained Category 1 or 2 hazards.<sup>21</sup> There is also emerging evidence of the harmful impact on women and children, including being placed in unsafe converted office blocks<sup>22</sup>; 74 child deaths in 2023-24 were linked to the poor quality of their temporary accommodation.<sup>23</sup> Similar conditions can be found across the dispersed accommodation for asylum seekers, including low-demand housing leased from private landlords by Home Office for-profit contractors, and now contingency accommodation due to a shortage of beds in hotels and large-scale facilities and water-based vessels.<sup>24</sup>

## OVERHEATING AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

The impact of global warming on our traditionally temperate climate is highlighting just how inadequate parts of our housing stock are for dealing with excess heat. Modelling suggests that around 55% of the current UK housing stock is already overheating in summer months (15.7 million homes) and around 90% of existing homes will overheat by 2080 under a 2°C global warming scenario.<sup>25</sup> In the 2018 summer heatwave, night-time bedroom temperatures in 10% of flats exceeded 29°C on seven or more nights. Such conditions will contribute to an estimated 5,000 excess deaths a year unless homes are adapted with young children and older people most at risk.<sup>26</sup>

## ACCESSIBILITY AND ADAPTATIONS

Around 87% of all homes are not accessible, meaning they lack a toilet at entrance level, steps between the pavement and the entrance, sufficiently wide doorways and circulation space, and a main entrance door free of obstructions higher than 15mm.<sup>27</sup> Only 1 in 5 social rent homes are accessible, but this compares favourably to just 14% of the PRS. **The older a household, the more likely they are to live in an inaccessible home.** Home adaptations, such as grab rails and ramps, accessible shower rooms and stair lifts, can make homes safer and promote independent living. The English Housing Survey (2019-20) found that of households requiring adaptations, 25% of PRS renters and 23% of social tenants reported their home was not suitable for their needs, compared to 17% of owner occupiers.<sup>28</sup>



## THE INEQUALITIES OF POOR QUALITY HOMES

Low-income, racialised and vulnerable populations are over-represented in damp, mouldy and overcrowded homes, in the worst temporary accommodation, and in households in fuel poverty. The 1.3 million damp homes recorded in the English Housing Survey (2023-24) contained 1 million dependent children and 324,000 people aged 65 or over. Recent research from the Centre for Ageing Better shows that more than a third of the 8 million people living in a dangerous home are aged 55 and over, and they account for over half of the NHS spending related to non-decent homes.<sup>29</sup>

Those with a long-term illness or disability are more likely to live in non-decent homes (26%) compared to households without (19%). Black households are more than three times likely to



Just in 1 in 5 social rented homes and 1 in 7 PRS homes in England are accessible

live with and experience worse health outcomes from damp than white households, while households from a minority ethnic background have a 2.5 times higher incidence of asthma or lower respiratory infections from exposure to damp or mould.<sup>30</sup>



Image Credit: Ben Clay, GMTU

## KEY DRIVERS OF INDECENT RENTAL HOUSING

Poor quality, unsafe and unhealthy rental housing is a complex problem, but rests on six main interlocking factors.

### 1 Old, ageing and structurally deficient stock

England has the oldest housing stock in Europe with 1 in 5 homes (5.1m) built before 1919.<sup>31</sup> Lacking insulation, proper foundations and damp-proofing, these older homes are more likely to be damp and energy inefficient, feeding fuel poverty and excess cold - the perfect conditions for excessive humidity and mould growth.<sup>32</sup> Almost a third of these pre-1919 homes are non-decent compared to 1 in 6 between 1919 and 1990, with the highest concentration in the PRS affecting 1 in 3 renters.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the vast majority of social rented housing was built after 1945.<sup>34</sup> However, many social tenants are living in defective and unsafe homes constructed using flawed and badly maintained prefabricated concrete systems.<sup>35</sup>

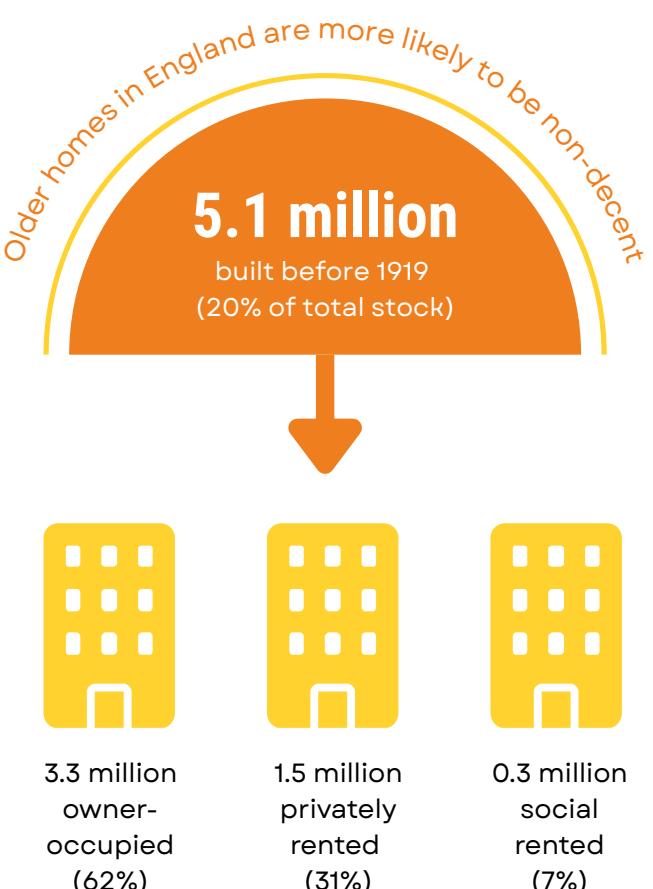
### 2 Weak regulations and even weaker enforcement

From the outset, the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) was criticised by MPs for being “set at too basic a level”.<sup>36</sup> Limitations include its failure to prevent major disrepair and serious hazards like damp and mould, plus its overly-technical thresholds and loopholes, outdated energy efficiency requirements, and weaknesses in relation to modern fittings, accessibility, thermal comfort and security.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, backed by £22bn of government funding under the Decent Homes programme (2000-2010), the DHS still helped to improve millions of social homes.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, **private landlords have never been required to meet the DHS**, which includes more than half of all temporary accommodation.

Weak housing standards have been reinforced by even weaker enforcement systems. The 2012 abolition of the Tenant Services Authority after just two years led to a period of effective self-regulation of local authority and housing association landlords that undoubtedly

contributed to the Grenfell Tower disaster, the death of Awaab Ishak and diminished the role that tenants played in the regulation process. Social landlord compliance with the DHS has only recently been made a regulatory requirement and is still mainly based on self-reporting. Social tenants can go to the Housing Ombudsman as a last resort to resolve complaints about poor housing conditions, but the Ombudsman is primarily a mediator of tenant-landlord disputes, has long wait times, and despite recent reforms to strengthen its role, its enforcement and compensation powers remain weak.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, local authorities are supposed to enforce against Category 1 hazards under the Housing Act 2004, but they cannot legally enforce on their own housing, and austerity has hollowed out their capacity to act. Following a 44% reduction in net expenditure on enforcement (2009/10 to 2018/19)<sup>40</sup>, in 2023, there was **an average of just one local authority enforcement officer for every 3300 PRS properties across England**.<sup>41</sup> Cuts, legal complexity, fear of upsetting landlords, and difficulties gathering evidence<sup>42</sup> explain why just 135 housing inspections take place each year on average per local authority, with the majority in only 9% of local authorities.<sup>43</sup>



# 3

## Historic under-investment

After decades of underfunding, social landlords – and particularly councils – have faced real barriers to improve and maintain their existing stock over the past 15 years. The original DHS was intended to be achieved by 2010 and government made no financial provision for further stock improvements. Local authority housing budgets are today in financial crisis, with a third in deficit this financial year (total shortfall £201m) and all flailing under an unsustainable debt of £17bn.<sup>44</sup> Key drivers of this crisis are: the end of the government's decent homes funding programme in 2010, the outdated assumptions underpinning the 2012 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) self-financing settlement that placed an additional £13bn in debt on councils housing budgets, the 2016-2020 annual 1% rent cut and 2023/24 rent cap that cumulatively reduced rental income by 17%, sustained higher-than-expected inflation, loss of stock through right to buy, new fire building safety standards, increased borrowing costs and higher insurance premiums. Housing associations are in slightly better financial health but have faced similar challenges.<sup>45</sup>

# 4

## Deregulation and profiteering

Since deregulation under the Housing Act 1988, private landlords have effectively been empowered to let substandard homes at full market value.<sup>46</sup> Set against a wider housing crisis and the era of "state sanctioned discrimination" against both welfare claimants and racialised communities (the latter under the Immigration Act 2014 that introduced landlord immigration checks as part of the hostile environment), many tenants have been too afraid to even make a repair request for fear of 'revenge evictions'.<sup>47</sup> The Deregulation Act 2015 belatedly provided private tenants with six months protection from retaliatory eviction for reporting their landlord to the local authority, but only if a formal enforcement notice is issued, which goes against the practice of local authorities and landlords informally resolving issues where possible.<sup>48</sup> The roll-out of self-regulation combined with profiteering by the building industry has also had a detrimental impact on housing safety as seen at Grenfell with most electrical, plumbing and

construction work being conducted by companies in people's homes no longer subject to any external inspection.<sup>49</sup>

# 5

## Poverty, inequality and welfare

More than a decade of welfare reform amid a cost of living crisis is creating a growing mismatch between policies aimed at improving housing standards and those impoverishing low-income tenants that undermine the benefits of a decent home. These policies include cuts to Local Housing Allowance rates for private renters, the Benefit Cap, the Two-Child Limit for certain benefits, and the Under-occupancy Charge - better known as the 'bedroom tax' - which restricts housing benefit for social housing tenants who occupy homes deemed too large for their needs without in most cases providing an alternative. These policies, along with rising energy prices, have contributed to 1 in 5 households in Manchester in fuel poverty, resulting in cold, damp and mouldy homes and the exacerbation of health inequalities.<sup>50</sup> Poverty also means that six million people in the UK, including 1.2m children and 2.6m disabled people, live without essential items of furniture, furnishings or appliances such as having a bed to sleep in or cooker to provide meals or washing machines for clean clothes, all of which undermine a decent home.<sup>51</sup>

# 6

## The erosion of tenants' individual rights and collective power

Tenants' legal rights to repair on paper have been severely eroded in practice. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2013 (LASPO) decimated the legal aid budget and narrowed the scope of eligible housing disrepair cases to only those presenting serious health and safety risks.<sup>52</sup> More than 50% of civil legal aid solicitors have subsequently disappeared from this loss-making sector, while most commercial solicitors focus on claims against social landlords due to their higher success rate, leaving the vast majority of private tenants unable to access legal representation.<sup>53</sup> For non-tenant occupiers, including asylum seekers and licensees in temporary accommodation, there is no legal right to repair, leaving them dependent on the lottery of local authority enforcement, which has also been criticised for its lack of "accessible reporting

systems... for those who speak English as a second language or are 'non-internet users'".<sup>54</sup>

Tenants' collective power has also been undermined as successive governments have sought to relegate the traditional tenants' and residents' associations representing tenants' class interests in favour of a more consumerist, and individualised approach. By the late 2000s, more than 10,000 neighbourhood tenants' associations existed alongside borough-wide or landlord-wide federations, as well as six regional federations and the national Tenants and Residents Organisation of England (TAROE).<sup>55</sup> In addition, 140,000 council residents on 130 estates had taken on the direct management of their homes through Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs). Today, funding cuts have decimated the number of tenants' organisations and effectively ended tenants' right to manage their own estates.<sup>56</sup> There has also been a significant decline in social tenants' involvement in decision-making and scrutiny of the management and maintenance of their homes, reinforcing a paternalistic and stigmatising stance by some social landlords.<sup>57</sup> One of the biggest gaps is the absence of an independent, tenant-led national representative body since the Coalition Government's 2012 abolition of the Tenant Services Authority after just two years, which had included a National Tenants Voice body.



Image Credit: Ben Clay, GMTU

## THE GOVERNMENT'S REFORM AGENDA: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

It took the preventable deaths of 72 people at Grenfell Tower in 2017, and Awaab Ishak in 2020, for successive governments to finally address the problem of unsafe rental housing, unaccountable and negligent landlords, and the stigmatisation of tenants. This has led to a flurry of positive new legislation, funding and policy initiatives summarised below that should help to improve housing conditions for renters in social and private housing.

### **Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018**

Requires all rental homes to be fit for human habitation; new legal rights for tenants to take landlords to court to reduce / remove hazards; several major repair orders and compensation payouts already for tenants of both private and social landlords

### **Building Safety Act 2023 and wider funding**

Tougher regulatory system for high-rise buildings with new direct routes for residents to engage with, and be consulted by, the Building Safety Regulator, and abolished previous 'democratic filter' on accessing the Housing Ombudsman

### **Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023**

New powers for Regulator of Social Housing to require stronger consumer standards, act on safety issues, periodically inspect local authority housing and take advice from tenants; strengthens Housing Ombudsman's enforcement powers, introduces new statutory Complaint Handling Code on landlords that includes increasing resident scrutiny of complaint handling; will introduce new access-to-information rights for housing association tenants

### Awaab's Law - since 27 October 2025



Social landlords must take urgent action on all emergency hazards within 24 hours, and significant hazards and serious damp and mould and emergency disrepair to strict timeframes; will be extended to private landlords in 2026, and to all hazards with significant risk of harm by 2027; tenants can now sue landlords for breach of contract

### Renter's Rights Act 2025



PRS tenants to get greater security of tenure through abolition of assured shorthold tenancies and Section 21 evictions; sets up a new PRS Landlord Ombudsman and national landlord register; will strengthen local authorities' enforcement powers and rent repayment orders; makes it illegal for landlords and agents to discriminate against prospective tenants

### New Decent Homes Standard (DHS) proposal



DHS to be extended to PRS, Temporary Accommodation and Supported Housing; new expanded, less technical definition of disrepair; landlords will have to provide floor coverings, child-resistant window restrictors; higher standards of heating and new minimum energy efficiency standards (MEES) moving from EPC E to EPC C by 2030; homes to be free of mould and damp

### Remediation and Retrofitting



Various funding pots for remediation of unsafe high-buildings, Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, £13.2bn Warm Homes Plan aimed at lifting more than 1m households out of fuel poverty by 2030

### Legal aid



The government is proposing a significant increase to the legal aid hourly rates for housing and debt, last uprated in 1996, which will amount to 21% increase in funding<sup>58</sup>

Modelling suggests the new Decent Homes Standard could improve conditions for 9 million people in approximately 4.2m rental homes - 60% in the PRS, the rest in the social sector.<sup>59</sup> In anticipation of Awaab's Law, many social landlords have been building up their capacity to address serious damp and mould. The Renters Rights Act promises to give private tenants greater security of tenure, meaning that on paper they should feel more empowered to assert their rights to repair without fearing retaliatory eviction.<sup>60</sup> And the reforms to social housing governance with the Regulator and Ombudsman working closely on improving consumer standards for tenants are forcing social landlords to take disrepair, complaints, safety and tenant engagement more seriously.

Yet, overall, this reform package is still far short of what is needed.

## Higher standards but less resources to achieve them

A key barrier to change is the financial crisis affecting parts of the social housing sector, local authority housing enforcement, and legal aid. The government is bringing in a lot of new responsibilities on landlords and local authorities, and new legal rights for tenants, but these are not matched by sufficient new resources to achieve them. The huge scale of investment needs and new regulatory requirements for existing homes creates competing pressures on social housing providers' finances, with many scaling back the output of new homes, whilst others are bringing forward demolition plans for their more challenging stock, which will worsen the existing housing crisis and be disastrous for the environment.<sup>61</sup>

## An overly complex and inconsistent regulatory system that still lacks tenants' voice

The proposed increase to legal aid rates is welcome and will make such work more commercially viable for solicitors, but without restoring the wider scope of eligible housing disrepair cases to beyond the most serious risk of harm to health or

safety, the vast majority of tenants will still be unable to enjoy their new legal rights in practice.

The government has also further complicated housing enforcement for tenants by effectively creating three different enforcement systems - social landlords answer to the Regulator of Social Housing and the Housing Ombudsman, but will still largely be regulated on the basis of self-reporting performance; local authority enforcement will be primarily focused on PRS landlords including Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs); and Purpose-Built Student Accommodation providers will be subject to voluntary self-regulation if they sign up to a government-approved code of conduct. Council tenants are still not protected by local authority hazards enforcement, and housing association tenants will still be excluded from stronger access-to-information rights under FOI Act 2000.

While individual tenants are represented in various advisory groups, including the Social Housing Resident Panel advising government, the government has so far done nothing to address the crisis of tenant and residents associations, TMOs and national tenants representation

## A better but still flawed Decent Homes Standard

Despite improvements, the proposed DHS contains significant inconsistencies and anomalies. For example, a home can be classed decent whilst lacking essential facilities because only items that already exist must be in good repair. Meeting EPC C remains inadequate for meeting climate targets and ending fuel poverty, and does not address overheating due to climate change. Vital accessibility components such as handrails will not be required nor classed as 'key', meaning less incentive to provide or keep in good repair. PRS landlords will be excused from meeting external public realm requirements. Without new protections and flexibility, new standards could increase the risk of homelessness, instability or unaffordability for renters as private landlords push for higher rents, or as new standards reduce the supply of temporary accommodation.<sup>62</sup> All landlords will be given at least 10 years to comply with the full standard, which is far too late, when they need to be given urgent targets now for the worst conditions.



Memorial for Awaab Ishak in Rochdale  
Image Credit: Ben Clay, GMTU

## POLICY SOLUTIONS

As the government finalises its new Decent Homes Standard for the social and private rental sectors, we propose a package of measures that would address the current weaknesses of regulation, rights and enforcement in relation to rental housing conditions. The investment needed will pay for itself over the long-term, as improving the quality of rented housing will cut the cost of living, improve health outcomes, support educational attainment, strengthen the economy and tackle climate change

### 1. Re-empower tenants through a new deal of individual and collective rights and representation enshrined in a National Tenants Charter

Effective enforcement of housing standards under the current legislative framework ultimately relies on tenants holding their landlords to

account.<sup>63</sup> Recent reforms have created an unnecessarily complex legal and regulatory landscape for tenants who are further undermined by inadequate funding for legal aid, advice and representation. With the Renters Rights Act 2025 extending the Decent Homes Standard and Awaab's Law to private tenants, and strengthening tenancy protections, there is now a very clear basis for a single set of basic standards and rights for all tenants, as well as occupiers of temporary forms of accommodation. But tenants also need new rights and resources for collective organising and representation at local, regional and national scales.

We urge government to:

- Work with tenants' organisations to co-create a **National Tenants Charter** that sets out tenants' fundamental rights to decency, dignity, health and safety in their homes, their landlords' obligations around property conditions, and the systems of scrutiny and redress, and publish it on a user-friendly website and 'app' in multiple languages
- Overhaul the **housing justice system** by restoring the pre-LASPO 2013 legal aid scope and funding local Law Centres to ensure that all tenants have access to affordable legal representation, reducing the fear of eviction that deters many from making repair requests or complaints
- Strengthen tenants' rights to **reasonable adjustment** and communication preferences during the repairs process, particularly for vulnerable people heavily impacted by disruptive works
- Put tenants' rights to be individually and collectively consulted and represented on a stronger and clearer legal footing, and build on the Four Million Homes programme<sup>64</sup> by creating a **National Tenant Empowerment Fund** – part-funded by landlord licensing – to support new tenants' organisations, including an independent, national organisation elected and run by tenants to represent their interests in policy and regulatory circles

## 2. Strengthen and consolidate all housing health and safety standards in the Decent Homes Standard

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The government's current proposal contains serious limitations that must be addressed before it becomes the minimum standard governing rental homes for the next decade or more. At the same time, we agree with the Fabian Society that the new DHS is an opportunity to consolidate into one super standard all existing housing repair, health and safety standards and requirements spread across different legal frameworks.<sup>65</sup>

We urge government to:

- Address the concerns of many housing organisations<sup>66</sup> expressed during the Decent Homes consultation to **iron out inconsistencies, contradictions, and loopholes** in the proposed new standard and clarify unambiguously what terms like 'adequate' mean for standards of repair
- Ensure that removing 'age' as a condition for disrepair will not incentivise landlords to stop modernising their homes by making **periodic modernisation a requirement** with tenants having the right to waive replacement elements if they are happy with them
- **Consolidate** all existing and proposed housing standards and legal safety requirements, including **fire, gas and electrical safety**, into the new DHS and extend this super standard to all forms of rental and temporary accommodation including asylum seeker housing
- Strengthen requirements for landlords to **provide accessible and adaptable housing** for disabled and older people, and place much greater emphasis on **climate resiliency and thermal comfort** by requiring that rental homes can be maintained at between 18°C to 21°C at a reasonable cost to the occupier all year round, which means raising the proposed Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) from EPC C to EPC B in line with commercial real estate

- Impose **more urgent timescales** for eliminating Category 1 and 2 hazards from rented accommodation by 2030 as this will help to tackle the stark inequalities of housing conditions

### 3. Combine new funding with tougher conditions to help landlords raise their game

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Despite increased government funding and an inflation-beating rent settlement, social landlords, particularly local authorities, face huge financial challenges just to maintain homes at current standards as well as a shortage of qualified trades to effect repairs and improvements. Private landlords, especially small landlords, may also find it difficult to access the capital needed to upgrade their homes. This presents an opportunity to use a carrot and stick approach to raising standards and to address skills shortages and youth unemployment in one go.

We urge government to:

- Match recent increases in grant funding for new social rent with a **similar funded programme for meeting Decent Homes and retrofitting for the future**, including a package of grants, loans and tax-breaks for social and private landlords, including abolishing VAT on green refurbishment, on the condition that they charge social rents on any homes that benefit from assistance for at least 15 years
- Revise the **2012 self-financing debt settlement** for local authority HRAs by transferring unsustainable debt to central government and building more realistic assumptions about long-term stock investment needs, climate change, ageing populations and inflation
- Rethink Homes England's rules for regeneration funding that require **net-additionality** so that social landlords can also address retrofitting needs without having to always increase supply
- Address the wider skills and capacity shortages in the supply chain, and the problem of youth unemployment, by **funding training programmes for unemployed people**

specifically linked to the new decent homes standard (decent homes, decent jobs)

- **Strengthen CPO powers** for local and combined authorities to acquire long-term empty or dilapidated homes, as well as PRS properties that persistently fail the decent homes standard, by further amending the 2023 Levelling-up and Regeneration Act (LURA 2023) to enable local authorities to remove "hope value" when acquiring existing structures in the public interest, including the provisions for social rent homes, without the need to obtain ministerial approval on a case-by-case basis if the public interest test is met
- Increase and expand the **Local Authority Housing Fund** to housing associations and community-led housing groups so they can purchase homes from landlords unable or unwilling to improve their properties and retrofit them for both social rent and temporary accommodation
- Bring fresh impetus and funding to **comprehensive housing renewal area-based schemes** where a combination of small grants and loans or group repairs for both owner-occupied and rental housing would help to address the vast swathes of non-decent pre-1919 terraced housing

### 4. Revolutionise regulatory enforcement through a new Housing Standards Agency

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New housing standards across the social and private rental sectors will fail unless the existing regulatory enforcement system is fundamentally reformed and resourced. Enforcement is spread across too many different bodies in a fragmented and confusing system that tenants find very difficult to navigate. We need a new approach to address the stark power and resource imbalances between landlords, tenants, and local authorities.

We urge government to:

- Move housing standards enforcement out of local authorities to a **new, properly-funded, national Housing Standards Agency (HSA)** that would assume the current role and

powers of local authority enforcement and the Ombudsman, have local teams working in partnership with, or out of, Combined or Strategic Authorities, and have a duty to cooperate with the Regulatory of Social Housing and the Building Safety Regulator

- Mandate the HSA to operate a **national registration and licensing scheme for all landlords and providers**, and powers to carry out routine and surprise inspections, emergency repairs, issue fines, make repair and compensation orders, name, shame and prosecute non-compliant landlords and revoke their licenses
- Make the HSA a **one-stop-shop for tenants** – and their representatives or advocates including GPs – to bring evidence of persistent non-compliance with the new DHS, as well as serious or urgent health and safety issues that have been ignored by landlords and other bodies, to ensure their voices are heard and immediate action taken where necessary

## 5. Reform the welfare system to enable low-income tenants to afford to heat, furnish and stay in their homes

Strengthening standards and enforcement will not help impoverished tenants to keep their homes warm in winter, to afford essential furniture that makes decent housing a reality, or even to pay the rent to stay in a decent home. To ensure that decent, health and safe housing becomes a right not a privilege, the government must take a fresh look at how the welfare system can support housing conditions where poverty and the cost-of-living crisis clash. It must also grasp the nettle of fuel poverty by ensuring that, irrespective of a household's circumstances, they should always be able to heat their homes to a minimum of 18°C during the cold winter months.

We urge government to:

- **Scrap** the bedroom tax, the benefit cap, and the two-child benefit cap, and **unfreeze and uprate all benefits**, including Local Housing Allowance rates for private tenants and temporary accommodation

- Adopt Fuel Poverty Action's **Energy for All proposal**<sup>67</sup> that would mean each household receiving, free of charge, enough energy to cover its basic needs, paid for by ending state subsidies for fossil fuels, higher taxes on energy corporations and the super-rich, ensuring wealthier households pay progressively more for using excess energy beyond their needs, and ending prepayment meters
- Follow the Fabian Society's proposal for reform of the **disabled facilities grant** by increasing the maximum amount available for each home to cover more complex adaptations, uprate it each year to account for rising construction costs, and simplify the system of support<sup>68</sup>
- Require, and fund, all local authorities to set up a **Local Welfare Assistance Scheme** that provides low-income households with access to essential items of furniture, fittings and fixtures



Image Credit: Ben Clay, GMTU

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Please also see the below webpage for further information: [www.socialhomes4mcr.org.uk/commission](http://www.socialhomes4mcr.org.uk/commission)

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