

21 October 2008

An open letter to tenants and tenant organisations



Dear all

CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF HOUSING'S IDEAS ON HOUSING REFORM

You may be worried about some recent stories claiming that the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) wants an end to secure tenancies and eviction for people who start work. On behalf of CIH we would like to apologise for any distress these stories may have caused but we would also like to ask you to take a few moments to read, in our own words, what our comments actually are – and, in particular, what they are not.

Our comments on tenancy (part of a much wider debate about improving the way the housing system works in this country) stem from a desire to see housing as much more than just 'bricks and mortar'.

As practitioners who all work in social housing we have always believed that our work is about much more than simply building new homes or managing those we've already got. Instead, we want to make sure that the offer of a decent home in a safe neighbourhood and at an affordable rent is something that supports individuals (many of whom you will know are vulnerable) to improve their life chances as well as the physical condition of their homes.

We simply don't think it's right to hand over the keys of a flat to an unemployed 17 year old and never talk to them again (whether it's about getting some training, claiming the right benefits, getting a job, opening a bank account – or moving on if their circumstances change) – safe in the knowledge that we gave them a secure tenancy for life. That just doesn't feel right – or good enough to us.

We want landlords to accept that, being good at their job means supporting those tenants who want and need it - to get on – to find work, to get some qualifications, to learn to save, to move on etc. Of course, many won't want or need this help but we don't want those who do to be left in their rented flat with no support. We are committed to making sure that social housing is a step up in life rather than something that traps you in a life of poverty – and, this isn't the same thing at all as forcing everyone to give up their secure tenancy.

We have also said that it might be appropriate for some people in social housing to pay more for that housing if their circumstances change significantly. To go back to the 17 year old unemployed tenant above – if, in 20 years time, he/she earns enough to pay the higher rate of income tax then isn't there an argument for suggesting that they might pay more for their rent? It's true that mortgages don't go up if you earn more but the key difference is that mortgages aren't subsidised – and this isn't at all the same thing as saying you will be evicted if you start work! We don't have enough social housing to go round and we need to make sure it goes to those who need it most. If someone can easily afford to pay more for their rent then shouldn't we think about asking them to do so – especially if this means we could use the extra income to make someone else's rent cheaper.

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INVESTORS IN PEOPLE

To be clear - **our paper doesn't call for the end of security of tenure, or for people to be evicted if they start work – or for housing officers to be able to force people into a job or a shared ownership house against their will – and any changes that were made would apply only to future tenancies and not to any already in place.** It does suggest that tenants should meet with their landlord to discuss their tenancy (perhaps every few years) but our key point is really nothing to do with security of tenure at all – it's actually about our role as housing professionals in doing what we can to improve opportunities for people – in making sure that social housing is a force for good and doesn't end up trapping people in poverty. Incidentally, our paper also covers reform of the private rented sector and of housing benefit – both of which are particularly important to young single people starting out on their housing career.

The paper from which the rather narrow and misleading stories have come is about reform of the whole housing system – and is available free to download from our website ([Rethinking Housing](#)). We were asked to present some challenges to the current system ahead of the Government's housing reform green paper (expected before the end of the year) and decided that this debate should be held in public rather than behind closed doors. The complete paper is a long document but, if you have time, we would encourage you to read it, to discuss it and to join the live debate that is already happening on our [Housing Reform discussion website](#).

You may also be interested to know that, under our new Chief Executive, Sarah Webb, (someone that some of you will already know as a champion on tenants' rights and empowerment) CIH has strengthened its work in support of tenants. We have, for example, already introduced a number of new ideas aimed at championing tenant empowerment including:

- a new Active Learning for Residents programme that offers tenants and residents qualifications in recognition of the voluntary work they do in the housing sector;
- a new discounted tenant membership rate that encourages landlords to pay for their tenants to join CIH and have access to our information and support;
- on-going support for the National Tenants' Voice (NTV) as part of its Project Board;
- campaigning to secure 'domain' regulation by the new Tenant Services Authority (TSA) so that all social housing tenants get the same protection from the new regulator;
- work to develop the idea of 'resident-led self regulation' in which tenants rather than national agencies determine what an excellent service is;
- a practical toolkit to help landlords tackle worklessness among tenants;
- work on 'customer insight' which encourages landlords to find out more about the needs and wants of their tenants so they can improve the services they provide;
- proactive support for the Community Gateway model that promotes tenant empowerment with transfers and ALMOs;
- a good practice guide for landlords on promoting community engagement in regeneration; and
- work that encourages landlords to support the financial inclusion and capability of tenants – for example, helping them to open bank accounts and claim the correct benefits.

And this is all in addition to the lead role we played in persuading the government to put more money into social housing in the last Spending Review in order to build more homes for rent – alongside our work to create and fund a decent homes standard for tenants already in social housing.

As the most senior people involved in running CIH we all remain committed to this kind of work, to promoting meaningful tenant empowerment, to the fundamentals of social housing and to getting landlords to provide the best possible standard of services to their tenants. But, we are also committed to improving the housing system – and, in particular, to making sure that no one is trapped in poverty because of the way social housing is provided.

Our challenges are simply that – challenges to the current system for debate. These reform discussions are happening in private and we would rather they were out in the open for debate and discussion across the whole sector – including with tenants and groups representing them. If, having heard our comments direct from us, you think we are wrong to raise the issues then please join in the discussion with us and others. We will always be happy to listen and reflect on what we hear so please get in touch direct and we can continue the debate.

We very much look forward to hearing from you.


Yours faithfully



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CIH President



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CIH Vice President



Robin Lawler
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Helen Collins
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CC: Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
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