



Chartered
Institute of
Housing

What you need to know about the Social Housing White Paper



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Introduction

In August 2018, government published the social housing green paper '[A New Deal for Social Housing](#)'. The green paper was a direct response to the fire at Grenfell Tower and set out five principles to underpin safe and decent housing, ensure that residents are treated with dignity and respect and that we have the social housing we need for the future.

Two years after the green paper consultation period ended, government has published its social housing white paper '[The Charter for Social Housing Tenants](#)'. The charter sets out the government's proposals for ensuring that social homes are safe and secure; that social housing tenants receive adequate information about their homes and landlords; and that they have a robust redress system when things do go wrong. Many of the measures outlined in the charter will require primary legislation and so will not come into effect for some time.

The charter speaks directly to tenants. This is because it is a direct response to the shortcomings in safety regulation, condition of some homes and treatment of tenants highlighted by the Grenfell Tower fire and the subsequent inquiries.

The charter applies to England only. Separate measures will apply in each of the devolved nations.

The charter

The charter is structured around seven core areas that sets out what every social housing resident should be able to expect. These are:

1. **To be safe in your home** – Setting out how the government will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure
2. **To know how your landlord is performing** – including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account
3. **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly** – access to a strong Ombudsman who will give you swift and fair redress when needed
4. **To be treated with respect** – backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants
5. **To have your voice heard by your landlord** – for example through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on your landlord's board. Government will provide help, if tenants want it, to provide the tools to ensure landlords listen
6. **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in** – with landlords keeping homes in good repair
7. **To be supported to take your first step to ownership** – so social housing is a ladder to other opportunities, should tenant circumstances allow.

Ensuring the charter is met

Government will be working with the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) to create a strong, proactive, consumer focused, regulatory regime that strengthens the formal standards. Relationships between regulatory agencies will also be placed on a more formal footing for example between the RSH, Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Building Safety Regulator (BSR). To play their part, social landlords will be required to:

- be transparent about their performance and decision-making so that tenants and the regulator can hold them to account
- put things right when they go wrong
- listen to tenants through effective engagement.

The policy measures in the charter

The charter contains a number of policy proposals to deliver its objectives. These are summarised here.

1. To be safe in your home

Government has acknowledged feedback from both tenants and the wider sector that building and fire safety are of paramount concern. The charter sets down the following measures government will take to raise safety standards and ensure that tenants and residents feel safe in their homes:

- Legislate to strengthen the RSH's consumer regulation objectives to explicitly include safety
- Legislate to require social landlords to identify a nominated person responsible for complying with health and safety requirements
- Expect the RSH to prepare a 'memorandum of understanding' with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to ensure effective sharing of information with the Building Safety Regulator (BSR)
- Consult on requiring smoke alarms in social housing and introducing new expectations for carbon monoxide alarms (mirroring requirements in the private rented sector)
- Consult on measures to ensure that social housing residents are protected from harm caused by poor electrical safety
- Continue to work with the Social Sector (Building Safety) Engagement Best Practice Group and the BSR to ensure that residents' voices are heard.

2. To know how your landlord is performing

Tenants should have the information to, and ability to hold their landlords to account. They need to know how their landlord is performing and what decisions are being made, and how to enable them to challenge their landlord when things are not working as they should, and to compare their landlord's performance with that of other social landlords. The charter commits government to:

- Creating a set of tenant satisfaction measures for landlords on things that matter to tenants

- Introducing a new 'access to information scheme' for social housing tenants of housing associations and other private registered providers of social housing, to make information relating to landlords easily available
- Ensuring landlords provide a clear breakdown of how their income is being spent
- Requiring landlords to identify a senior person in their organisation who is responsible for ensuring they comply with the consumer standards set by the RSH.

3. To have complaints dealt with promptly and fairly

To ensure that residents can get swift and effective resolution of complaints, government has already:

- Sped up access to the Housing Ombudsman service by removing the requirement for residents to go to an 'independent person' or wait eight weeks to approach the Housing Ombudsman directly (the so-called 'democratic filter')
- Expanded the Housing Ombudsman service and expanded its powers to speed up decision making and ensure stronger action can be taken where needed.

In addition to these measures, the charter says government will do more to:

- Provide residents with consistency across landlord complaint handling by ensuring landlords self-assess against the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code by 31 December 2020
- Ensure tenants and residents know how to raise a complaint and have confidence in the system by running a communications campaign. Landlords, the Housing Ombudsman and BSR will be expected to ensure residents have clear and up to date information on how to make a complaint
- Ensure clear co-operation between the Housing Ombudsman and the RSH (via legislation) so that they can hold landlords to account more effectively when things go wrong
- Make landlords more accountable for their actions by publishing details of cases determined and published by the Housing Ombudsman.

4. To be treated fairly and with respect (backed by strong consumer regulation)

Government wants to transform consumer regulation to drive the right behaviours from landlords and enable the regulator to hold them to account. The charter sets out the government's commitments to:

- Transforming the consumer regulation role of the RSH so it can proactively monitor and drive landlord compliance with the improved consumer standards
- Remove the 'serious detriment test' and introduce routine inspections for the largest landlords (those with over 1,000 homes) every four years
- Change the RSH's objectives to explicitly cover safety and transparency, and work with it to review its consumer standards to ensure they are up to date and deliver its revised objectives
- Give the RSH the power to publish a code of practice on the consumer standards to make clear what landlords are required to deliver
- Strengthen the RSH's enforcement powers to tackle failing landlords and to respond to the new challenges facing the sector
- Hold local authorities to account as landlords, including how they manage Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and Tenant Management Organisations (TMO's), to ensure they deliver a good service to tenants
- Require the RSH to set up an 'advisory committee' to provide independent and unbiased advice on discharging its functions.

5. To have your voice heard by your landlord

Government expects landlords to have much stronger engagement with tenants and that residents will have a clearer voice and be able to hold landlords to account. To support this, government will:

- Expect RSH to require landlords to seek out best practice and consider how they can continually improve the way they engage with social housing tenants
- Deliver a 'new opportunities and empowerment programme' for social housing residents, to support more effective engagement between landlords and residents, and to give residents tools to

influence their landlords and hold them to account

- Review professional training and development to ensure residents receive a high standard of customer service.

6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in

In the charter, government acknowledges that social tenants are proud of their communities and want greater investment in them. To ensure social tenants have good quality, decent homes, and neighbourhoods, including access to green space and support for wellbeing, government will:

- Review the decent homes standard (DHS) - including access to and the quality of green spaces
- Tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB) by enabling tenants to know who is responsible for action and who can support and assist them if they are faced with ASB
- Consider the results of MHCLG's allocations evidence collection exercise to ensure that housing is allocated in the fairest way possible and achieves the best outcomes for local places and communities.

7. To be supported to take your first step to ownership

Government is increasing the supply of good quality social homes, but also wants to give as many residents as possible the right to purchase their own home. To support this, government will:

- Invest £11.5 billion to build up to 180,000 affordable homes - around half of these new homes will be for 'affordable home ownership'
- Implement a new, fairer and more accessible model for shared ownership
- Implement a new 'Right to Shared Ownership' for tenants of housing associations and other private registered providers who live in new grant funded homes for rent
- Emphasise through the new 'National Design Guide' the importance of building beautiful and well-designed social homes.
- Introduce a new 'Affordable Homes Guarantee Scheme'
- Encourage local authorities to take advantage of the removal of the borrowing cap to build more council homes.

Key themes in the charter

Professionalisation and stigma

Feedback to the green paper (and other consultations) stated repeatedly that residents did not feel listened to when they raised concerns and complaints and had not been treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. The charter responds to these concerns by stating clearly that landlords treat their residents with fairness and respect, and that the interests and perspectives of tenants are given greater prominence in service delivery and decision making. Taken together, the measures in the charter aim to create a regime and culture of transparency, accountability and decency backed by a strong regulatory regime to give tenants and residents redress when things do go wrong.

Government also accepts that social housing residents sometimes feel stigmatised and that this is unacceptable. [CIH and See the Person's guide on tackling stigma in social housing](#) highlights the issues social housing tenants can face as well as making recommendations for how landlords can improve. Picking up on this research, government commits to improving training and development for front line staff in working with tenants and driving changes in the culture of organisations to ensure tenants are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. CIH is developing a professional standards framework which provide a foundation for professionals and housing organisations to build on.

Tenant engagement

Throughout the charter it is made clear that landlords will be expected to engage much more effectively with tenants and to provide them with the information that they need to hold them to account. This is also reflected in measures set forward in the charter to convene consultation and engagement groups across several of the charter requirements. Landlords should therefore be prepared to engage much more with tenants and respond to complaints and other matters more pro-actively.

The charter makes specific reference to working with tenants experiencing mental health issues, this is a welcome inclusion. [CIH recently produced a guide with MIND](#) on working with tenants experiencing mental health issues.

Consumer regulation

The charter is clear that landlords should expect to be regulated more pro-actively and robustly in the future. For landlords over 1,000 units this will mean being subject to an inspection at least once every four years. These inspections are likely to consist of a desktop review and a site visit. Outside these regular visits, consumer regulation will sit alongside the financial regulatory regime and mimic its 'risk-based' approach. There will also be a new set of KPIs that landlords will be required to report against.

Further legislation and consultations

Many of the measures set out in the charter will require primary legislation or other action to implement. This will be a mix of amending existing legislation and new legislation. Throughout the charter it is made clear that legislative changes will be made as parliamentary time allows.

There will also be a number of standalone consultations to support some of the measures.

There are currently two such consultations open. [One on extending the requirement for smoke and carbon monoxide detectors](#) and one on the [technical requirements for the new model of shared ownership](#). CIH will be responding to the shared ownership consultation, if you have any feedback on this please contact Sarah Davies at sarah.davies@cih.org.

What CIH thinks

We are pleased that the long-promised white paper has been published. We welcome the commitment to raise standards, the focus on increased transparency and the desire to give tenants a real opportunity to shape and influence the decisions that impact on their lives. We look forward to working with the government and the social housing regulator to shape a proactive approach to consumer regulation which focuses on the importance of the professionalism of our sector. We want to ensure that the changes needed apply across the whole sector and benefit all tenants.

We hope that the white paper sets a new vision for the sector which reflects the positive

contribution that our profession has made to build trust and engagement with residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The white paper's emphasis on tenants' safety is vitally important. As well as the measures proposed, we are looking to government to continue to work with the sector so there is a full understanding of what is required to ensure building safety, and that government recognises landlords' need for resources to ensure that all homes are safe.

CIH is also pleased that the government has responded to calls to review the Decent Homes Standard, which is due a fundamental refresh. In addition to enhanced building safety requirements, CIH urges the government to set energy efficiency standards consistent with

its 'net zero carbon' goals and to work with the sector to develop a plan to meet them.

Our chief executive Gavin Smart said:

"We welcome the intention of the white paper, which puts tenants front and centre and aims to address the stigmatisation of social housing and people who live in social housing. Our work to recognise and enhance the professionalism of the housing sector very much complements the themes set out in the paper and we look forward to working with government and the Regulator of Social Housing to embed these across the sector."

CIH's director of policy and external affairs, James Prestwich, wrote [this comment piece](#) on the charter for Inside Housing.