

## **The Charter for social housing residents: Social housing White Paper.**

**To:** All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England,

**For information:** Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### **Key Points**

On 17 November 2020, the government published the Charter for Social housing residents. The White Paper sets out seven things that tenants should be able to expect from their housing.

### **1.0 Background**

On 17 November 2020, the government published the Charter for social housing residents. The White Paper sets out seven things that tenants should be able to expect from their housing.

In introducing the Charter, the government state that a home should always be more than just four walls and a roof and that everyone has the expectation that a home should provide safety, security and dignity but for some social housing residents these expectations have not always been met.

In 2018, the government published a Call for Evidence and a social housing Green Paper – [A new deal for social housing](#) that sought views on a wide range of changes. In addition, to the responses to Call for Evidence and the Green Paper, it is acknowledged that the tragedy of Grenfell Tower and the COVID-19 pandemic have reinforced the importance of people’s homes, communities and neighbourhoods.

Therefore, it is commented that the White Paper seeks to change the current situation and establish a new Charter for social housing residents.

This briefing provides an overview of the White Paper. A full copy of the Charter can be accessed via the link below: -

[The charter for social housing tenants: a social housing white paper](#)

### **2.0 A new Charter for Social Housing tenants**

The new Charter sets out seven things that every social housing resident should be able to expect:

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1. To be safe in your home
2. To know how your landlord is performing
3. To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
4. To be treated with respect
5. To have your voice heard by your landlord
6. To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
7. To be supported to take your first step to ownership

The White Paper also sets out what the government is intending to do to live up to the new measures in the Charter. It is stated that the most important step will be to work with the Regulator of Social Housing (“the regulator”) to create a strong, proactive consumer regulatory regime, strengthening the formal standards against which landlords are regulated and requiring them 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

### **To be safe in your home**

The government highlight that building and fire safety is a paramount concern for residents. Therefore, it is committed to ensuring that all homes are safe to live in, and have identified ways both to raise safety standards and to help residents feel safer in their homes. Chapter 1 of the White Paper sets out what the government are intending to do to ensure homes are safe to live in, which include: -

- Legislate to strengthen the Regulator of Social Housing’s consumer regulation objectives to explicitly include safety.
- Legislate to require social landlords to identify a nominated person responsible for complying with their health and safety requirements.
- Expect the Regulator of Social Housing to prepare a Memorandum of Understanding with the Health and Safety Executive to ensure effective sharing of information with the Building Safety Regulator.
- Launch a consultation on requiring smoke alarms in social housing and introducing new expectations for carbon monoxide alarms.
- 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 Building Safety Regulator to ensure resident voices are heard.

### **To know how your landlord is performing**

The government states that if tenants are to be able to hold their landlord to account, they need to know how the landlord is performing and what decisions they are making. This aspect of the Charter aims to allow tenants to challenge their landlord when things are not working as they should and to compare its performance with that of other social landlords. Chapter 2 of the White Paper sets out the governments intentions which include: -

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

- Introduce a new access to information scheme for social housing tenants of housing associations and other private registered providers of social housing, so that information relating to landlords is easily available.
- Ensure landlords provide a clear breakdown of how their income is being spent.
- Require landlords to identify a senior person in their organisation who is responsible for ensuring they comply with the consumer standards set by the Regulator of Social Housing.

### **To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly**

The government believes that residents should get a swift and effective resolution of complaints. However, they have heard from some residents that making a complaint can be difficult and take too long – and that it can sometimes take months for the complaint to be resolved, or for the resident to be able to access the Housing Ombudsman. Chapter 3 of the White Paper sets out details of what the government have done recently in this area: -

- Acted to speed up access to the Housing Ombudsman by removing (through the Building Safety Bill) the need for residents to either go to a ‘designated person’ or wait eight weeks before approaching the Ombudsman directly.
- Expanded the Housing Ombudsman service, and increased its powers, so it will make decisions more quickly and can take stronger action against landlords where needed.

In addition, Chapter 3 sets out what things the government are proposing to do including the following: -

- 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 know how to raise complaints and have confidence in the system by launching a communications campaign. We will expect landlords, the Housing Ombudsman and the Building Safety Regulator to ensure residents have clear and up to date information on how to complain.
- Legislate to ensure clear co-operation between the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing to hold landlords to account more effectively when things go wrong.
- Make landlords more accountable for their actions by publicising the details of cases determined and published by the Housing Ombudsman.

### **To be treated fairly and with respect, backed by a strong consumer regulator for tenants**

The government state that the transformation of consumer regulation is needed to further drive the right behaviours and hold landlords to account when they fail. It is commented that the measures set out in the Charter will complement the robust economic regulation already in place and this will be maintained. Chapter 4 sets out the government’s commitment to: -

- Transform the consumer regulation role of the Regulator of Social Housing (“the regulator”) so it proactively monitors and drives landlords’ compliance with 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 regulator’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 regulator the power to publish a Code of Practice on the consumer standards to be clear what landlords are required to deliver.
- Strengthen the regulator’s enforcement powers to tackle failing landlords and to respond to new challenges facing the sector.
- Hold local authorities to account as landlords, including how they manage Arm’s Length Management Organisations and Tenant Management Organisations, to make sure they deliver a good service to tenants.
- Require the regulator to set up an Advisory Committee to provide independent and unbiased advice on discharging its functions.

### **To have your voice heard by your landlord**

It is commented in the White Paper that stronger resident engagement by landlords will give residents a clearer voice so that they can hold landlords to account. Chapter 5 sets out that the government will: -

- Expect the regulator 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.

### **To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in**

The government reports that it has heard that tenants are proud of their communities and want greater investment in them. Therefore, they want to ensure social tenants have good quality, decent homes and neighbourhoods, including access to green space and support for wellbeing. Chapter 6 of the Charter sets out what the government proposes to do, which includes:

- Review the Decent Homes Standard, including access to and the quality of green spaces.
- Tackle anti-social behaviour by enabling tenants to know who is responsible for action and who can support and assist them if they are faced with anti-social behaviour.
- Consider the results of the allocations evidence collection exercise findings to ensure that housing is allocated in the fairest way possible and achieves the best outcomes for local places and communities.

### **To be supported to take your first step to ownership**

It is stated that the government are continuing to increase the supply of good quality social homes, and are working to give as many residents as possible the right to purchase their own home. Chapter 7 explains that the government are:

- Investing £11.5 billion to build up to 180,000 affordable homes – the highest single funding commitment to affordable housing in a decade. Around half of these new homes will be for affordable home ownership.
- Implementing a new, fairer and more accessible model for Shared Ownership.

- Implementing 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.
- Emphasising through our new National Design Guide the importance of building beautiful and well-designed social homes.
- Introducing a new Affordable Homes Guarantee Scheme.
- Encouraging local authorities to take advantage of the removal of the borrowing cap to build more council homes.

The measures outlined in the White Paper are applicable to social housing landlords and residents in England. Separate arrangements apply in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## **APSE Comment**

As stated in the Charter, the tragedy of Grenfell Tower and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the importance of good quality, genuinely affordable social housing and the role that this can play in fostering strong communities and the economic sustainability of an area.

Over the last six years, the APSE / TCPA housing research has gained a strong evidence base regarding the role housing plays in the wider community. The latest research published in September 2020, [At a crossroads-building foundation for healthy communities](#) highlights the linkage between high-quality places and the health and wellbeing of communities.

APSE welcomes the aim of the White Paper and the proposed measures to ensure that residents in social housing are safe, are listened to, live in good quality homes, and have access to redress when things go wrong.

Consultation and further detail are required to gain an understanding of the full implications of the proposals. However, as set out they appear to provide greater clarity regarding the regulatory position and what is required from social housing providers, which goes some way to repairing aspects of the sector that are not functioning as they should be.

In July 2020, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (HCLG) published a report following an inquiry into social housing - [Building more social housing](#). It was stated that 7,000 social homes were being built in England a year but there was compelling evidence that 90,000 social rent homes were required a year for the next 15 years.

The Charter rightly focuses on tenants' expectations when they hold a social housing tenancy. However, the number of people classed as homeless and registered on council waiting lists for housing demonstrates that there also needs to be a strong emphasis on the supply of available social housing.

APSE would like to see further commitment from the government to invest in new social housing and allow councils to build housing that meets the needs of their communities.

On a final point, APSE is pleased to see that the government is looking to review the Decent Homes Standard to consider if it should be updated, including how it can better support the decarbonisation and energy efficiency of social homes, and improve communal and green spaces. The review represents the opportunity to seek out innovative approaches to meeting 'Net Zero' and provide policy and financial support to be bold and ensure social housing in England is high quality and sustainable for the future.

**Vickie Hacking**  
**Principal Advisor**