

**Response to the Social Housing Green Paper from the tenants and residents of Nottingham City Homes**

**See the Person**

**Please do not look at me, like I'm something on your shoe  
So, I live in social housing, am I inferior to you?  
You know nothing of my life, so who are you to Judge?  
Do you see me as unworthy? And so, you hold a grudge?**

**Please do not approach me, as if you are my friend  
When deep down in your psyche, you know it's all pretend  
I'm tired of your assumptions, your negativity is rife,  
Would it shock you if I told you, Social Housing saved my life?**

**Please do not attempt, to make me feel ashamed,  
I'm proud of my estate, I refuse to be defamed  
Why can't you see the person, behind your cruel perception?  
I can thoroughly assure you, it's a widespread misconception!**

**Please do not believe, all you witness on the news,  
'Sink Estates' and 'ASB', you let this form your views?  
Have you the ability, to see the woods for the trees?  
It's merely all a ploy, to bring social housing to its knees!**

**Please do not berate me, because I haven't bought my home  
I still have aspirations, and dreams all of my own  
I live my life for others, and helping is my high  
Although I'm not a homeowner, some things you cannot buy!**

**Please do not fear me, I will not steal your phone  
I'd rather help my neighbour or decorate my home  
Talk to me, I'm human I won't give you a fright  
You might just come to like me, I swear I do not bite!**

**Please just see the person, behind your social stigma  
I'm human just like you, not some strange enigma**

**The sooner you accept that, and then learn not to judge  
You might just *see the person* and lose that silly grudge!!**

**By**

**Sarita-Marie Rehman-Wall**

***Nottingham City Homes Tenant, and Vice-Chair of the Nottingham City Homes Board***

**‘See the Person’ video link**

[https://youtu.be/KRj\\_NgZEHXg](https://youtu.be/KRj_NgZEHXg)

### **Introduction**

Nottingham City Homes Tenants have engaged with the Government’s Green paper on Social Housing – A new deal for social housing. This submission is made on behalf of the 55,000 Nottingham residents, tenants, leaseholders and their families.

We have proactively consulted fellow tenants and residents and held a major event where people could give their views on social housing and over 1,600 residents from council homes came along. We invited views and opinions on line and we brought together over seventy five of our most involved tenants and leaseholders to talk about the Green Paper in detail, and what we wanted to say about it in this response. We had a ‘Big Conversation’ and we’ve made a short film about what people said. I sincerely hope that you will take time to watch the video:

<https://youtu.be/fwMTcc94J00>

I am sure you will agree it is a powerful message, with people speaking passionately about their council homes and why they are proud to be social housing tenants.

It was important that the Government started to listen more closely to tenants and residents after the tragic events of the fire at Grenfell Tower. Tenants from Nottingham, alongside so many others from across the country, took time to go and speak to the Minister. It is important that people had the chance to have their say. It is just as important that Government now takes appropriate and effective action on the messages that tenants have so passionately conveyed through these Ministerial Consultations.

I and my fellow Council tenants in Nottingham are immensely proud people, proud of our homes, our neighbourhoods, our city, our friends and families and proud of the enormous contributions we make to our society as a whole. As council tenants we all share a sense of pride and belonging in where we all live. Places where we raise and nurture our children, and support our loved ones and friends, wanting only the very best for them, often, going over and beyond the realms of caring, to support our neighbours and community counterparts. Places where we share our experiences of the good times,

and the bad, free from the fear of judgement and rejection because we all have a story to tell and a contribution to make.

By and large we want the same things everyone else wants – a decent home in a safe and pleasant neighbourhood, a place that can be a secure foundation for our lives. A great place for their family and for their friends and community counterparts. Of course, not everything is perfect in every neighbourhood, it would not be realistic to pretend that it was – just like every other neighbourhood across the country, whatever the tenure of the homes, there are good things and not such good things. But with the right resources and genuine proactive support, we can solve the problems, working together, and working with our landlord and other public services. We respectfully ask for Government to give us the support we need to help solve those problems. Working together and in unison, we know we can definitely make things better.

Tenants are passionate, but sometimes, unfortunately, we do get frustrated – frustrated by the way we are treated by some people, as if we are second class citizens. With this in mind, my fellow residents asked me to include the poem I had written in this submission because they all personally identified with such heartfelt words. We want Government to promote social housing and support it – this is the best way to at long last tackle the cruel stigma that the Government heard about when it listened to tenants.

**We all think that our strong and united message is straightforward and clear-cut – PLEASE support social housing, INVEST in it, ENSURE our landlords have the resources and commitment to make homes safe and decent, and most of all, BUILD MORE SOCIAL HOUSING** so that people stuck in insecure private rented homes, or who are homeless, can share the same benefits that we have as existing social housing tenants share. We want such people to experience the security and stability we are afforded by our Landlords, and the very important role they play in providing affordable, good quality homes, for people who need it the most. We want such people to experience the safety and security we experience, safe in the knowledge that their house **really is their home**, where they are able to lay their foundations, and further build upon them for the rest of their lives, without the fear of being uprooted from a community that they will come to know and cherish!

What follows are our views about the topics covered in each chapter in the Green Paper, drawn together from the discussions we have had as tenants and residents.

### **Chapter 1: Ensuring homes are safe and decent**

Our most important message to Government is to make sure the funds are available to do the work!

**Safety:** Safety must be everyone's priority – especially in high rise housing, but people want to feel safe in their homes from threats other than fire too – crime proof doors and windows are very important for example. Other public services like the Police and Anti-Social Behaviour teams need resources too, so they can work with our landlord and provide the levels of policing in our neighbourhoods that people expect to see.

**Decent Homes:** The original Decent Homes standard was a good thing, it made landlords address the backlog of improvements needed that had built up in the 1980s and 1990s. The basic standard is quite modest (a 30 year old bathroom is quite an old bathroom) and it is good that our landlord works to a

better standard locally for certain things. Improvements have helped people feel safe in their homes and ongoing maintenance and safety checks carried out by our landlord are an important part of that. However, expectations have changed over time so we believe Government should revise the standard to meet these changing expectations.

Tenants have said they would like to see things included in the standard like:

- Improved standards of insulation throughout the home to help cut energy bills
- Improved soundproofing in flats so that people who live different lifestyles do not disturb each other
- Showers for people who want them fitted
- Doors and windows that are resistant to crime, and offer good insulation
- Carbon monoxide and smoke detectors at least to the same standards as private rented homes require
- Facilities to allow people to connect to the internet at lower or no cost
- Sprinkler systems in tall buildings.

**Estates & Communal Areas:** The Decent Home Standard focusses on the ‘home’, but an equally important thing for the majority of residents includes the condition of communal facilities (particularly in blocks of flats) or the condition of the neighbourhood where it is the responsibility of the landlord to maintain it. Some minimum standards that relate to these would be of value. We would like to see Government give some thought to this. Standards of this nature can also help improve the way people who don’t live in social housing think about it, helping to move away from out of date views on what estates look like.

Appropriate public bodies, most likely to be the local authority, need effective powers to deal with homes on estates that let down the neighbourhood. Often these are former council houses, sold under the Right to Buy, and now in the ownership of private landlords who do not seem to wish to invest in their homes, seem to neglect their maintenance and do not manage them well – for example allowing the gardens and property boundaries to become neglected.

## **Chapter 2: Effective Resolution of complaints**

We think our landlord does a good job, in general, in dealing with complaints, but there will always be scope for improvement. Some residents had experiences of private landlords where by contrast, there was no such thing as a ‘complaints process’ and a ‘take it or leave it’ attitude from the landlord was not uncommon. Moreover tenants in that sector are often reluctant to complain because they fear that they will not have their tenancy renewed.

It may be a good approach for the Government, the Regulator, and social landlord organisations to get together with tenant and residents’ representative bodies to work to define the minimum expectations that tenants should expect with regard to complaint handling. For example, how to find out how to complain, how complaints are dealt with, and ways to prevent landlords making it unduly difficult for residents to lodge complaints. Tenants should not have to wait for artificial time periods before complaints can be escalated to outside bodies. Landlords could publish time frames in which complaints

should expect to be resolved, depending on their seriousness, so they don't drag on, and figures published about how many complaints are or are not resolved within such time frames.

Resources need to be available to local independent organisations (like advice services) who can help tenants complain, if they do not have the skills to do it themselves. These organisations often rely on grants to fund them and have been severely cut back as a result of funding cuts. Government cannot expect such organisations to take on the role if they do not have the resources to do that.

If complaints relate to safety matters, they should be taken very seriously.

It should be realised that most residents do not want to get involved in long and complicated complaints processes, they simply want matters put right if they think they are wrong, for complaints to be taken seriously and for landlords to handle matters in a timely and professional way. The involvement of tenants in helping to investigate serious complaints, as happens with Nottingham City Homes Tenants Complaints Panel, is a good approach. Tenants have more confidence if they feel other tenants are part of the process of considering problems when matters are serious enough to justify it.

### **Chapter 3: Empowering residents and strengthening the Regulator**

**Performance Indicators:** It is good for landlords to publish their performance, and our landlord makes a lot of information available. Good social landlords will not have a concern about publishing information about how they perform, and they should be sharing this information with tenants and residents anyway. However, the Green Paper talks about things like 'league tables'. We want the Government to appreciate that we want quality services, not perverse incentives that result in social landlords chasing performance targets around a batch of nationally agreed sets of figures, that become all important to the landlord, but that are not especially meaningful to tenants! Getting the balance right will take a lot of time and trouble. We would not want, for example, situations that create an incentive for landlords not to house vulnerable tenants because it would adversely affect performance figures, as a way of the landlord trying to avoid slipping down the league tables.

We are also concerned that unless 'like is compared with like' landlords in large cities will find themselves being compared with landlords who rent homes in completely incomparable circumstances, such as rural areas or other regions where housing issues are very different. Even in the same region differences can be vast – a social landlord in inner city Nottingham will be helping residents tackle different issues than one that operates in the Peak District National Park, for example.

If Government wants to adopt an approach like this it will need to work hard to get it right so that everyone finds it useful, and it genuinely helps tenants understand more about how well (or not) their landlord is doing. There is no similar approach that would allow tenants to compare social landlords with private landlords. Such a thing would allow very useful comparisons to be made and might help challenge some stereotypes about both tenures!

#### **Role of the Regulator and 'consumer regulation'**

All tenants in social housing should benefit from the same levels of scrutiny from the Regulator, across the different sorts of provider, and there does need to be more examination of consumer standards to

investigate systematic examples of poor service. 'Serious Detriment' is a high bar and it seems a higher bar than we believe the public would expect to find in other areas of public service.

A more proactive approach to consumer standards would give tenants and residents the confidence that a central body / organisation took an overview and worked to ensure quality across all social housing, and that tenants had the confidence that there was a body they could raise more serious and systematic concerns with about their landlord, if they felt the need to do this. The regulator should be proactive in the consideration of standards of service, but also monitor Ombudsman investigations, as well as listen to the views of tenants. Such views may also be sent via tenant organisations, elected representatives like Councillors or Members of Parliament, or by local council housing authorities if they have concerns about social landlords operating in their areas. The Regulator should have appropriate powers of enforcement to use when there is genuine evidence of things going wrong, with particular regard to safety but also systematic poor performance, especially where there is no evidence of efforts to turn that around.

### **Stock Transfer and Choice of Landlord**

We are happy to be council tenants and believe that Nottingham City Homes, working with Nottingham City Council, provides a good service. In the discussions we have had to prepare our response to the Green Paper, we have not had tenants and residents argue that they want to transfer to other social landlords, or indeed take on the running of services ourselves. We think it is important that our landlord has meaningful discussions and consultation with us about the services we want to see, and how they are delivered and this should be where the main focus is.

Nottingham City Homes has won the 'Landlord of the Year' Award, this is not to say that some things cannot be improved, and we will work with our landlord to try and improve them, but we do not see a reason to engage in large scale stock transfer to a new, or another existing, landlord. We do note however, that some services that would have been developed, and investment that would have been carried out, has been put back because of the 1% rent cut in recent years. Things like a transfer of landlord would not have solved that problem.

### **Chapter 4: Tackling stigma and celebrating thriving communities**

We are pleased that Government has accepted that this is a major issue for tenants in social housing, and we want Government to help do everything it can to stop this pernicious problem. The reason why it was the issue most persistently raised by tenants is because tenants are sick and tired of it!

However, we think that Government needs to lead the way with a more bold approach than simply supporting and celebrating communities with best neighbourhood competitions and community celebrations, important those these are. We have examples of all the hard work many tenants do volunteering in their communities, helping to improve their neighbourhoods, and helping other residents less fortunate than themselves, to give a few examples. This all helps promote a positive image, but the problems of stigma are deep seated. When Government talks about social housing as a safety net, and makes it clear that it believes owner occupation is more desirable, and then backs this up with significant funds to help owner occupation (like Help to Buy for example), it adds to the stigma of social housing rather than addressing it.

The best way for Government to help tackle stigma associated with social housing is to actively support it, invest in it, help providers build new social housing, and accept that it is a tenure of choice for many people, and a tenure that many more people aspire to live in.

Beyond this, Government could support tenants in the efforts they make to improve neighbourhoods, and celebrate their communities. There could be an expectation that social landlords always help to support such initiatives up and down the country, and resources aimed at supporting initiatives like this provided by Government, and organisations like the National Lottery. Our landlord does this and we think most social landlords do, but perhaps there could be some clear expectations from Government.

We also think that discrimination against tenants based on their tenure should be illegal. When the media make unfair, negative stereotypes of tenants in social housing they should be challenged by senior Government figures.

We agree that good quality new social housing can help project a positive image. Resources need to be available to fund it. There are some very good examples of high quality new council housing in Nottingham that Government representatives can come to see for themselves. They are as good, if not better, than many private developments built in the City in recent years. The Government needs to change policies to prevent them being bought and then sold on to private landlords who then rent them out at much higher rents. Tenant involvement in design of new homes is important because tenants will know what the downsides of existing homes are, and social landlords can learn from this to help ensure that the next set of new homes are always an improvement on the last ones.

To help promote a positive image of housing estates, Government also needs to give support that makes sure that councils have adequate and straightforward powers to step in tackle neglected properties on estates owned by private owners, if they neglect their maintenance. This can be a particular problem with private landlords. People who do not know the facts then presume these neglected properties are 'council houses', when they are not, which then adds to any negative views they may already hold about 'council estates'.

Funding to keep communal areas on estates and in and around blocks of flats in good condition is also important, and to ensure that estate layouts can be adapted, where they need it, to meet modern expectations like the ability to park a car, if you have one, near your home. The investment Nottingham City Homes has made in older people's Independent Living Schemes, called Grander Designs, is a good example. This ensures that communal areas are improved, well designed, smart and attractive - helping to ensure people want to live in them, and are proud to live in them!

The professionalism of staff is important, this can be achieved by ensuring that they can work long term in the sector. Agency and short term contract staff, and sub-contracting of work, is not a good approach to achieving this.

## **Chapter 5: Expanding supply and supporting home ownership**

We would like to see significant resources placed behind expanding the supply of social housing. To be frank, we do not understand why a Green Paper about social housing needs to concern itself with 'supporting home ownership'. The Government already provides significant support for the home ownership sector, and having reinvigorated the Right to Buy has also supported the transfer of homes

into ownership at more generous levels of discount. This is another subsidy to ownership for those able to benefit from it, which has the effect of making things more difficult for those **unable** to benefit from it - such as those people on waiting lists for social housing. Without changes in the Right to Buy to make sure the money raised from sales ensures that more homes are built, major problems will build up. There needs to be a supply of social rented homes for future generations, so that they can benefit from the same secure places to live as current social housing tenants enjoy.

We think that the government should look at its objective to allow social housing to be replaced on a one for one basis for each home sold, which is not yet being achieved, and find a way for **more than the number of homes sold** to be replaced! This would start to help make inroads into the shortfall of social housing supply. All of the finance raised by such sales should be retained by the landlord to fund the building of new social housing. The period under which it is necessary to repay the discount awarded in the event of re-selling the property could be extended, and more effective routes for social landlords to be able to re-purchase them could be made available.

In terms of the design of new homes, social landlords need to make sure that new homes meet local needs, by working together and with local councils and tenants to provide the right product. We think this includes smaller homes for younger people currently only able to access the private rented sector, where rents are so high they cannot rent a home of their own but have to share with other people at ages where this is not a reasonable expectation. Smaller homes that allow people who are able to, to have the choice of downsizing to free up family sized homes is also important.

Homes that continue to allow people to live independently for longer are also important, especially as people are living longer, but often with issues that make it more difficult for them, such as mobility problems. Well-designed homes that consider these sorts of issues will be of increasing value. Beyond this, other standards are important: the space available in the home as well as the quality of construction and standards of insulation to help reduce fuel bills.

We firmly believe that Government should put in place financial measures and support to allow social landlords to deliver new, additional homes so that the large number of households on waiting lists can benefit from such homes.

*Tenants and residents at Nottingham City Homes hope the government can take all these points into account as part of this Green Paper consultation.*

**Submitted by:**

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