

**WRITTEN SUBMISSION BY UNISON
APRIL 2020**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNISON is calling on the Government to introduce stronger measures to improve welfare support and protections for renters and vulnerable people affected by Covid-19, now and in the long-term, to ensure that no one is left on the street homeless, and that no one loses their home due to the pandemic.

Key measures UNISON is calling for:

- Suspend all evictions for the duration of the pandemic, and move to ban Section 21 no-fault evictions by introducing indefinite, permanent tenancies, in line with Scotland
- Suspend rent liability for struggling renters, similar to measures provided for struggling homeowners who now have recourse to a three-month mortgage holiday
- Put in place clear guidance on how rent arrears can be minimised, through clearer guidance to landlords on the operation of voluntary arrangements
- Remove the cap on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to allow local authorities to support households affected by Covid-19
- Lift the caps on property size restrictions on housing benefit for private renters
- Provide councils with adequate funding to house the vulnerable during and after the pandemic
- Improve welfare support for renters by raising Local Housing Allowance (housing benefit) to cover average rents in local areas; by scrapping the bedroom tax and repealing the two-child limit; by ending the Benefit Cap; and by ending the five-week wait for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit
- In the longer-term provide grant funding to councils and housing associations to enable them to build 150,000 social rented homes per year to house vulnerable and low-paid households

1. INTRODUCTION

UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK, with 1.3 million members. It is also the largest trade union in the UK that represents people who work in housing. Approximately 100,000 members are employed by councils and private registered providers (housing associations) delivering a range of services for people living in a variety of tenures, for people in housing need. Many of our members are affected directly by policies on housing as tenants or residents. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's Inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the Private Rented Sector.

2. BACKGROUND

An increasing number of our members are privately renting because of the high costs of homeownership and under-supply of social rented homes. Many are putting up with high rents – which is the largest single demand on household incomes - poor quality housing and insecurity. This has been brought into sharp focus by the coronavirus pandemic, which continues to affect private renters and the vulnerable, impacting on their ability to access and sustain a roof over their heads at a time when we are required to stay at home to be safe and help stop the spread of the serious disease.

The public health emergency has highlighted the urgent need for a significant supply of low cost social rent homes for the low paid and the vulnerable, including the homeless, as called for in [UNISON's housing manifesto](#). A summary of the manifesto's recommendations can be found at the end of this submission.

UNISON has welcomed the UK Government's measures to protect renters and vulnerable people during the pandemic. However, they do not go far enough. More support is needed now and in the long-term to ease the financial hardship faced by renters and to shield vulnerable people who "fall

through the gap” of support the Government is providing to mitigate against the social and economic impact of Covid-19. There are also concerns about those who may still face eviction after the current ban expires.

3. SECURITY OF TENURE, RENT ARREARS AND THE IMPACT ON HOMELESSNESS

The pandemic has exposed renters to financial hardship with many losing their jobs or seeing their incomes reduced, even if they have been furloughed by their employer at up to 80% of wages. Growing numbers have accrued rent arrears, are unable to cover shortfalls in rent payments and meet their living costs. They are at risk of poverty and eviction.

The Government’s guidance for private tenants, giving them the option to defer rent payments and to suspend evictions through the pandemic, underlines a key failure of the current market, the lack of basic protections these tenants face. In comparison to their owner-occupier counterparts, private tenants will be expected to pay a debt they have accrued as a result of the pandemic in addition to their normal rent in a much shorter time period than households who are able to spread repayments over the lifetime of their mortgage. UNISON is concerned that post-lockdown, a significant number of people will face homelessness if as expected the wider economy enters recession and employment becomes even less secure.

With the end of an Assured Short-term Tenancy (AST) being the primary driver of homelessness, the problem remains a fear that at the end of the fixed term and post-lockdown, an increased number of landlords will terminate existing tenancies, which in turn will increase the number of statutorily homeless households.

UNISON’s manifesto calls for Section 21 no-fault evictions to be scrapped – we are urging the Government to implement this measure to give renters greater security and protect them from eviction. We are also calling for more protections for those affected by Covid-19, including increasing welfare support for renters to ease the financial hardship they are facing to meet rent liabilities, as well as support for vulnerable people regardless of their immigration status. This will in the long term be beneficial to private tenants and local authorities, who have a duty to provide accommodation for homeless households but cannot do so due to lack of supply:

Key measures UNISON is calling for:

Private Rented Sector – Overhaul the Sector to Make Renting Stable and Affordable

- Suspend all evictions for the duration of the pandemic, and move to ban Section 21 no-fault evictions by introducing indefinite, permanent tenancies, in line with Scotland
- Suspend rent liability for struggling renters, similar to measures provided for struggling homeowners who now have recourse to a three-month mortgage holiday
- Put in place clear guidance on how rent arrears can be minimised, through clearer guidance to landlords on the operation of voluntary arrangements
- Remove the cap on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to allow local authorities to support households affected by covid-19
- Lift the caps on property size restrictions on housing benefit for private renters

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping - Invest in More New Quality and Social Rented Homes

- Provide councils with adequate funding to support and provide permanent accommodation to rough sleepers and the homeless during and after the pandemic to prevent them from ending back on the streets
- Lift restrictions that prevent homeless people from accessing accommodation because of their immigration status

Overhaul the Welfare System and provide families with support

- Raise Local Housing Allowance (housing benefit) to cover average rents in local areas
- End the bedroom tax and repeal the two-child limit

The Impact of Covid-19 (Coronavirus) on homelessness and the private rented sector

- End the Benefit Cap, which impacts on families with high housing costs
- End the bedroom tax and repeal the two-child limit
- End the five-week wait for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit

4. SUPPLY AND PERMANENT SECURE HOUSING

Post-Covid-19, UNISON would welcome action on tackling the housing crisis, brought into sharp focus when the lockdown was announced, and funding was provided to local authorities to ensure rough sleepers were provided accommodation in order that they could self-isolate. There is an immediate short-term question over what will happen to these rough sleepers post-lockdown, that is will they be expected to return to the streets.

In the longer term, homeless households and rough sleepers will be helped by a refocused, comprehensive housing policy approach that seeks to meet existing need i.e. safe, secure and decent housing. This includes a return to capital subsidy so that genuinely affordable homes are built, both contributing to economic recovery and providing homes for thousands of homeless households and rough sleepers, as well as low-paid workers.

The pandemic has also highlighted the negative impacts of Right to Buy, which has depleted council's housing stock to the extent that people have had to be accommodated in hotels because of coronavirus, financially and socially an unsustainable measure. UNISON calls on Government to suspend Right to Buy immediately so that councils can permanently house homeless households and the vulnerable, addressing acute housing need.

Longer term, UNISON urges the Government and the Housing Communities and Local Government Committee to review the direction of travel on increasing housing supply. It is the Government's stated intention to repurpose Section 106 funding to include First Homes, homes for discount sale rather than rent, not dissimilar to the failed Starter Homes policy of the previous Government. Pursuing this policy will further exacerbate the ability of councils and housing associations to deliver new affordable homes for rent at a time when they are needed more than ever.

Last year just 6,287 social rented homes were built – 57% of which were funded by Section 106. This falls far short of what is needed to tackle the housing shortage. The Government needs to commit to a national house building programme, which puts quality social rented and truly affordable housing at its heart.

- UNISON calls for an initial target of 150,000 new social rent homes per year and welcomes the modelling undertaken by Capital Economics, [commissioned by Shelter for the Social Housing Commission](#).

5. HOUSING WORKFORCE

The Government's guidance on social distancing has impacted on council and housing association worker's ability to deliver services to households, in order to protect themselves as individuals. Overall the pandemic has highlighted the gap in those roles that the Government considers key and what in reality is a key worker. Frontline housing workers' roles, which involve going into people's homes regularly, or working directly with street homeless people and rough sleepers, should be considered for PPE as a matter of course, during and after the pandemic.

For more information: Contact: Sylvia Jones: s.jones@unison.co.uk

UNISON, public service trade union: <https://www.unison.org.uk>

UNISON Housing Website: <https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/community/key-issues/housing/>

SUMMARY OF UNISON'S MANIFESTO RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest in more new quality council and social rented homes for the people

- A national house-building programme of 340,000 new homes per year, 150,000 of which would be social rented homes, built by councils and housing associations
- Restore direct investment in public housing through upfront capital grants from government
- Require new social rented homes to meet the highest environmental, building and safety, space, energy efficiency and accessibility standards
- Provide long-term funding certainty for councils and housing associations
- Allow councils to retain 100% of capital receipts to invest in homes

2. Redefine "Affordable Housing" to make homes truly affordable

- End the use of so called "affordable rent" homes set at 80% of market rates
- Establish a new definition of "affordable housing" linked to the incomes of people in the lowest earnings quartile, not market prices

3. Protect existing social rented housing stock

- End the Right to Buy schemes in England, in line with Scotland and Wales
- End the conversion of social rented homes to so called "affordable rents" at 80% of market rates

4. Overhaul the Welfare System and provide families with adequate support

- Raise Local Housing Allowance (housing benefit) and the housing element of Universal Credit so they reflect the actual cost of private renting locally, and restore housing benefit rates to cover the cheapest third of local rents
- End the 5 week wait for the first payment under Universal Credit
- End the Benefit Cap, bedroom tax and repeal the two-child limit

5. Overhaul Regeneration Schemes to meet local housing needs

- Ensure estate regeneration schemes result in no net loss of social rented homes
- Ensure such schemes are conditional on a positive residents' ballot, if public funding is involved
- Allow full tenant and leaseholder participation in design of new homes
- Prevent developers exploiting viability assessments

6. Overhaul Standards and Consumer Redress, and give a voice to social tenants

- Establish a new consumer regulator for social housing to raise standards
- The new regulator would sit alongside the existing social housing regulator
- Empower tenants to have a strong voice at a local, landlord and national level

7. Overhaul the Private Rented Sector to make renting stable and affordable

- Abolish Section 21 "no-fault evictions" to protect tenants from evictions
- Legislate to create secure tenancies (permanent tenancies) in line with Scotland
- Introduce a system of rent controls to protect private tenants from unpredictable, extortionate rent increases
- Allow all councils to introduce borough wide licensing schemes setting out minimum standards of landlord accreditation, to ensure that both renters and landlords are aware of their rights and obligations, and to drive up standards in private renting
- Introduce a strategy for addressing the special housing needs of disadvantaged groups to help them meet their housing costs when they retire

8. Invest in the Housing Workforce

- Ensure the council and social rented housing service is well funded and well resourced
- Establish a national workforce strategy to deliver a major house-building programme
- Increase staffing levels, across a range of roles, including trading standards and environmental officers, to enable workers to do their jobs effectively and safely
- Encourage social housing employers to sign up to [UNISON's Violence at Work Charter](#) to prevent the abuse of housing workers

Full manifesto: <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/01/UNISON-Housing-Manifesto-JANUARY-2020-FINAL.pdf>