

UNISON Briefing – Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: Reforms to the National Planning Policy Forum

March 2023

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

UNISON is the largest public service trade union in the UK, with over 1.3 million members. Our members include frontline staff and managers working full or part-time in public services and for private contractors providing public services. They provide a range of essential public services working in local authorities, the NHS, colleges and schools, the police service, the utilities (electricity, gas and water industries), transport and the community and voluntary sector, including housing associations.

UNISON is keen to engage with parliamentarians on: “The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which seeks to reduce geographical disparities between different parts of the UK and spread opportunity equally. UNISON supports the intentions of this bill and believes that reforms or changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which are being considered alongside the bill, will help improve the current planning system, help drive growth and empower local leaders to regenerate their areas for the benefit of communities. However, we are concerned that proposed reforms to developer contributions to new housing may lead to a reduction in the number of new social homes and make it more difficult for councils to ensure an adequate supply of such homes to meet growing demand, unless an amendment is made in the bill to ensure that every development includes social housing, at social rent rates, to ensure that there is a significant increase in the supply of genuinely affordable social rented homes.

The recent NPPF consultation was understandably very technical in nature, therefore UNISON has chosen to engage directly with members to raise our specific issues of interest as the regulatory framework around planning is reviewed. We believe the implementation of the following points will help improve the NPPF; and respectfully urge you to raise these matters at the appropriate opportunity:

LEVELLING UP WITH SOCIAL HOUSING

UNISON believes that levelling up and “building back better” must include social housing to meet growing demand.

UNISON’S KEY ASKS

1. Deliver More Social Housing

Housing costs continue to rise faster than wages while not enough good quality homes, especially social rented homes, have been built or are available to rent or buy. The result is that both home-ownership and social housing have become inaccessible for growing numbers of UNISON members, who are public sector workers, and citizens alike. With over a million people on the social housing waiting list in England, and more than 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation, there is an increased demand for social housing. This demand will likely grow as more people are affected by the cost-of-living crisis, which has led to rising rent, energy, fuel and other household costs. However, Government policy continues to focus on promoting homeownership, such as the Right to Buy, which has decimated council stock at the expense of social rented housing. Government data shows that only four in every 100 homes funded

through the Government's Affordable Housing Programme (AHP) since 2016 were for social rent - which is disappointingly low - with the majority of funding allocated for "affordable homeownership or shared homeownership".

UNISON wants to see:

- Investment in 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 to give everyone access to a decent and affordable home. These new homes should support the climate emergency we now face. Local councils must be empowered to deliver green growth opportunities and support residents wellbeing at the local level as opposed to extractive market-based economic models.
- Restoration of direct investment in public housing through upfront capital grants from government to enable the building of a new generation of genuinely affordable social rented homes
- Any replacement of Section 106 planning agreements, the primary way of securing social rented homes (through developer contributions), with the proposed new Infrastructure Levy, should be ringfenced to ensure more social homes at social rent rates are built, and such homes are prioritised over other types of "so called affordable housing" to meet demand
- Allow councils to retain 100% of capital receipts so that they are able to make their own decisions about how they are deployed and whether they are invested in existing stock, acquiring homes or building new ones.

A detailed case for social housing is made in our [Report](#) "*A decent place to live: Homes fit for key workers*" and in our [Housing Manifesto](#).

2. Deliver new social housing to high quality standards

A new development stands as the lasting legacy of the planning process in a community, therefore the homes we build must be of a high standard in terms of design, construction and sustainability. The pandemic highlighted issues where the standard of housing was inadequate, where properties could be extremely overcrowded and in many cases the accessibility for disabled residents very poor. Standards should be upheld at the point of planning consent through tight conditions, post-consent monitoring, with the track record of the developer being referenced when considering future applications, both to reward good practise and to proactively protect communities from substandard development.

UNISON wants to see:

- **'Healthy Homes' and for this reason adoption of the Healthy Homes Act** advocated by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA). This offers a powerful way for national governments and local councils to promote and secure good place-making. Enshrined in law, healthy homes principles would protect communities from poor quality housing, securing such simple but often ignored design principles of access to light, public realm, and quality and space standards.

3. Re-Empower Local Councils

Deregulation of planning and austerity has left councils feeling powerless to act in creating safe, strong, healthy and wealthy sustainable local communities – this must be reversed. Change of use applications are often abused and undermine the concept of communities. Councils must be given the powers necessary to truly shape the development of their communities in a fair and ethical way as they have the expertise and knowledge to know what works best for their area. For more information, please [read our Housing Manifesto](#) and [our Report](#) "*A decent place to live: Homes fit for key workers*".

4. Acquisition of cheaper, public sector land for housebuilding

The high cost of land continues to be a barrier for housing development. UNISON wants to see land reform in the planning system, including land compensation rules that release land at lower prices for councils and housing associations on which to build new social rent homes. This should include measures which allow councils to purchase land at its existing use value (EUV) and then capture any uplift in the value of land if it is invested in new social homes and supporting infrastructure.

5. A new definition of affordable housing for key workers

UNISON wishes to see an amendment to the definition of “*affordable housing for rent for key workers*” in the national planning policy. The current definition is restrictive and is not reflective of the breadth of public sector workers as it primarily relates to professional staff such as nurses and teachers and not to other roles such as healthcare assistants who contribute to the effective running of public services. UNISON has long called for the use of ‘public service workers’ to cover the broad economic group of workers on low to middle incomes who need assistance with their housing. For more information on this point, please see point 2.3 on page 18-19 of our [APSE/UNISON housing report](#).

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

UNISON Briefing: White Paper – A fairer private rented sector

<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2022/09/UNISON-Briefing-White-Paper-A-fairer-private-rented-sector-Final.pdf>

UNISON Report: A decent place to live: Homes fit for key workers:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/07/A-decent-place-to-live-updated.pdf>

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