

UNISON Briefing for House of Lords Debate: “Ensuring that rents in the private rented sector are affordable”

Thursday, 27 February 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

UNISON, the UK's largest trade union representing over 1.3 million members, predominantly working in public services, private contractors, and charities, is committed to improving the lives of our members who are public servants. Many of UNISON's members are employed by local councils and housing associations, delivering essential services: administering housing benefits, managing homes, providing vital social care, offering housing advice, undertaking critical repairs, enforcing regulations, and providing administrative support.

The reality is that many of our members, disproportionately women and low-paid workers, are trapped in the Private Rented Sector (PRS), a system riddled with high costs, insecurity, and poor living conditions. This toxic combination directly undermines their well-being, stifles career development, and erodes productivity within the very public services they sustain. We therefore welcome this opportunity to address the critical intersection of housing affordability, worker welfare, and the systemic failures within the PRS. UNISON's goal is to campaign for solutions that not only improve housing conditions, but also empower our members and strengthen our public services.

2. POLICY CONTEXT: THE PRIVATE RENTAL CRISIS

Access to decent, secure and affordable housing is a fundamental human right, yet it remains tragically out of reach for millions. The decline of homeownership and the chronic underfunding of social housing have fuelled an explosive growth in the PRS, which has surged from 11% in 2004 to 19% in 2024. This expansion, however, has been accompanied by a devastating surge in unaffordability, with [average private rents skyrocketing by 9.1% in the 12 months leading to November 2024](#).

The PRS is a battleground of inadequate regulation, consisting of the highest concentration of substandard homes, exorbitant rents, unpredictable rent hikes, insecure tenancies, and the unchecked power of rogue landlords. UNISON has consistently campaigned for effective PRS regulation, demanding an end to insecurity, unaffordability, and appalling living conditions.

We [acknowledge](#) the Renters' Rights Bill as a step in the right direction. Its provisions, such as the ban on Section 21 no-fault evictions, protections against above-market rent increases, the establishment of a landlord register and property portal, and the creation of a Housing Ombudsman, reflect many of UNISON's long-standing recommendations and have the potential to improve protections for renters and transform their lives.

However, the Bill's failure to adequately address the core issue of affordability represents a critical oversight. The escalating cost of rent has devastating consequences for renters, crippling public service delivery, and undermining the very foundation of our workforce. Therefore, UNISON urgently calls for bolder measures, including a robust system of rent caps, to control rent increases and restore affordability to the PRS.

3. THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF THE RENTAL CRISIS

The private rental crisis, with its soaring rents, poor standards, and insecurity, is a systemic failure directly undermining the lives of our public service workers—the very backbone of our society.

UNISON's 2023 [report](#) revealed that 32% of our members in private rented accommodation spend 60% or more of their household income on housing, compared to a mere 19% of those with mortgages. This is not just a financial strain; it's a daily struggle for survival. Furthermore,

UNISON's recent joint [report](#) with Generation Rent exposed the challenges our renting members face in securing affordable private rented accommodation, forcing them to make difficult choices between basic needs and shelter:

Voices from the frontline:

- *“Part of the reason why we haven't moved out yet is because rents everywhere else have increased so high so much.” – Melinda*
- *“I look at the increasing shortage of properties where I live, if we had to move now, I'll probably be looking at an additional £400 a month between us just to move into a similar sized property.” – Julie*
- *“From what I've heard from one of my friends looking to move, they said they couldn't find anything for less than £1,000 per person, which is just insane. There's no way I could afford that.” – Eleanor*
- *“If we had to move, we will probably be paying twice as much for a similar size house, which we then sort of get into issues of affordability.” – Nina*
- *“I'm currently in major debt with my gas and electric, because I'm choosing to pay my rent over that. My mum is feeding me and my son because, otherwise, by the time all the other bills are paid, and there's diesel in the car to get to work, there's nothing left.” - Rebecca*

The above quotes are from **'Voices from the frontline'**, a 2024 UNISON and Generation rent report based on roundtable discussions with UNISON members detailing their private rental experiences.

Beyond affordability, tenants endure appalling housing conditions, including dangerous disrepair and a lack of landlord action, leading to fear of retaliation if they complain or request repairs.

The rental crisis directly undermines the very foundations of our public services. Unsustainable rents, exacerbated by inadequate public sector pay, are driving essential workers away, as they are unable to afford to live near their workplaces. This has resulted in critical staff shortages and increased stress in vital sectors like the NHS, where escalating elective care waits are directly jeopardising patient care. The resulting recruitment and retention crisis threatens the wellbeing of families and the stability of the economy. UNISON's 2023 research [report](#) revealed that 32% of public service workers are actively considering relocation due to excessive housing costs, a figure that skyrockets to 47% for those trapped in the PRS. These figures underscore the devastating impact of the rental crisis on our workforce, the catastrophic erosion of essential services, and government ambitions for reform, demanding urgent, substantial reforms within the Renters' Rights Bill.

Local councils, already burdened by years of austerity and ballooning costs, while struggling with a worsening homelessness crisis, are overwhelmed and lack the staffing and resources to effectively address the housing crisis, enforce regulations, maintain and build homes. [Government data](#) reveals that council enforcement teams are underfunded and lack the necessary capacity to effectively address poor standards in the PRS and hold exploitative landlords accountable. Furthermore, over 90% of councils report having recruitment and retention difficulties according to the latest Local Government Association (LGA) workforce survey. Therefore, substantial and sustained support is crucial for councils to meet expectations, especially regarding new PRS enforcement powers in the Renters' Rights Bill.

4. ENSURING AFFORDABILITY IN THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

The private rented sector, plagued by exploitation due to social housing shortages and unaffordable mortgages, requires urgent, robust regulation to stabilise rents and restore affordability. UNISON demands increased council funding to enforce regulations, build social housing, and alleviate pressure on the rental market. Our report, [“The Private Rental Crisis – Voices from the Frontline”](#), outlines a clear roadmap for a system built on decency and affordability, demanding stronger renter protections for millions of hard-working citizens, and effective regulation to eradicate exploitative landlords.

Specifically, we call for:

- Immediate Abolition of Section 21 No-Fault Evictions, providing genuine stability for tenants.
- Implementation of “a system of rent controls” - to tackle soaring rents and prevent disguised evictions through extortionate rent increases.
- Adequate funding and resources for local councils, empowering them to implement a tougher enforcement regime against rogue landlords and letting agents.
- A fair Benefits System that removes disincentives to work, and provides adequate support for renters to cover rent and essential living costs.
- An end to the Right to Buy in England and significant investment for the construction of high quality, energy efficient truly affordable housing, particularly council and social homes, to ensure housing availability for low to modest-income individuals, including retirees.

Resources/References:

- DLUHC (2022) [Local Authority Enforcement in the PRS: headline report](#)
- Generation Rent (2023) [Majority of private renters faced rent increase in past year](#)
- UNISON & Generation Rent (2024) [‘The private rental crisis: voices from the frontline’ – how can we fix private renting for England’s workers](#)
- UNISON (2023) [‘Through the Roof’ – Housing and the Cost-of-living crisis for public service workers](#)
- UNISON (2024) UNISON Briefing – [Renters’ Rights Bill - Committee Stage - October 2024 -Final.docx](#)

Contact Officers:

Sylvia Jones, Assistant Policy Officer and James Bull, Assistant National Officer
UNISON (public service trade union), 130 Euston Road, London, NW1 2AY Email: policy@unison.co.uk Website: <https://www.unison.org.uk>