

The Tories and their housing policies

National Tory Housing Policies

Social housing

At the Conservative party conference last year, Shadow Housing Minister Grant Shapps said that *"as compassionate Conservatives, we recognise the importance of social housing and the security it provides. We will protect and respect the rights of social tenants."*

But a gathering last year of influential Tories – at the ‘Localis’ conference, supported by Hammersmith and Fulham and attended by Council Leader, Stephen Greenhaulgh (also head of the Tory Local Govt Innovation Unit), Kit Malthouse (then Deputy Mayor to Boris Johnson) and the Chief of Staff to Grant Shapps - produced the following ideas on housing;

- End rent-capping for social tenants. They want to end the difference between social-rented and private-rented tenures by creating "an equal market between the private and social rental sectors by lifting rent controls". This would cost tenants up to hundreds of extra pounds a week. For example, under the exposed Hammersmith and Fulham plans, a two-bed council flat currently costing £85 a week would go up to £360 a week.
- Security of tenure would be eroded. New tenants of social housing would be given short term contracts – ending the security of tenure that social housing tenants currently enjoy.

Green housing

Cameron’s “green housing” plans involve wanting to scrap grant payments for improved heating and insulation – the only means by which disadvantaged households can access assistance to achieve a warm and healthy living environment. The impact will be higher bills, damage to the environment and will leave swathes of people without warm homes.

The Tories block new house building

Caroline Spellman recently unveiled the Conservative green paper on planning. This included revoking the regional planning systems and ‘Regional Spatial Strategies’ and abolishing national targets for house building. At the moment, government has often sought to impose significantly higher house building targets on regional areas to meet projected housing demand. The chasm between national housing policy and local plans is vast in some regions. Given the choice, councils in the South East would allow the building of 15% fewer homes to buy between now and 2026 than the government wants.

Roger Humber, policy advisor at the House Builders Association said in response *"We know the regional spatial strategy consultation is a big headache and we agree with the Tory criticisms of the current framework. No one is saying it is right as it stands, but they have gone too far in the other direction now."*

Catriona Riddell, cabinet member of the Planning Officers Society, said implementation of the Conservative’s plans would be *"the end of effective strategic planning"*.

This follows Taylor Wimpey chief executive Pete Redfern describing Conservative housing plans as *"scary as hell"* last October.

Spellman wrote to Tory local councils last year saying *"I would encourage councils to say ‘no’ when the Government attempts to force the council to act at a speed which is not a binding legal necessity."*

Local jobs and apprenticeship opportunities

The Prime Minister's Housing Pledge, announced in June 2009 provided another £1.5bn, on top of the existing £6bn already allocated to build new affordable homes. In total, it will mean Labour builds 112,000 new affordable homes in 2009-10. Part of this money was allocated to councils on the condition that they gave local jobs and local apprenticeship opportunities to local people. The Tories have opposed the apprenticeships in place as part of the governments 'Housing Pledge'. Shadow Housing Minister Grant Shapps has labelled as "ridiculous" the criteria Labour is placing on developers to use apprentices for publicly funded housing projects. The Tories have shown disregard for jobs for hard hit local communities and the opportunities for young people that are desperately needed.

Local Examples

Birmingham

At the moment Birmingham has a council house waiting list of over 35,000. They are building new houses after pressure from tenants and Unite, and with Labour government money – but it will only meet 1% of demand.

The Labour group at Birmingham council have been arguing that the council needs to step up its actions towards the people living in the 81,000 private houses in Birmingham that do not come up to the decent homes standard. The Tory council is committed to helping 1,100 every single year at an average cost of £2,700, so it will be 2080 before they bring all the houses up to scratch.

This will leave Birmingham's vulnerable elderly and low-income homeowners not brought up to 21st Century standards for 70 years – many will never receive help to fit double glazing and central heating at the current rate.

London

Since Boris Johnson became Mayor of London, he has ended the policy that 50% of all new housing should be affordable homes that existed under Ken Livingstone, has ended pressure from the Mayor's office for social rented housing in the capital and has ditched the target of 50,000 new affordable homes by 2011 that Ken Livingstone laid down.

Barnet

Tory-run Barnet Council's plans for "no frills" services have been ruled illegal by the High Court in January this year. The planned cuts included cutting the number of live-in wardens in sheltered housing. The council outlined their no frills approach last August, voting to implement it in October. The scheme would have seen provision of key services slashed, with wealthy residents able to jump the queue for planning applications and rubbish collections.

Hammersmith and Fulham

Stephen Greenhaulgh, Conservative leader of Hammersmith and Fulham council and leader of David Cameron's Council Innovation Unit, drew up secret plans that were exposed which involved the demolition of 3400 Council homes and jettisoning security of tenure, combined with a steep hike in rents.

Southampton

The Tory leader proudly announced that for 'ideological reasons we are going for outsourcing, externalisation, privatisation, wherever possible and sensible' blogging on ConservativeHome that Southampton Conservatives do not in principle favour "free this and free that".¹ Housing services have been particularly hard hit.

¹ Labour Local Government Leading the Way, page 20