

The hidden history of tenants

The tenants movement has a radical history. It led the development of social housing and has fought to improve living conditions for working people.

Tenants have changed social policy in Britain and across the world. But their achievements are often unrecorded and their history is hidden.

The tenants movement is still engaged in a struggle for change. This section uncovers its radical past and looks at the major issues that the tenants movement is engaged in today.



A short history of the tenants movement

19th century

Tenants organisations protest against high rents imposed by private landlords. A rent strike in London's East End helps win the Dockers Strike of 1891. Mining and agricultural trade unions campaign around housing issues. Socialist and labour movement groups organise tenant action against high rent and rates and in favour of municipal housing. Private landlords and charitable trusts were the target of tenant action.

1912 - 1915

Tenants organise a wave of rent strikes across the country against high rents. The Labour Party leads the protests in a campaign for public housing. The protests end in the ferocious Glasgow rent strike of 1915 which forces the government for the first time to introduce rent controls for the private sector.

After 1918

Legislation is passed to enable subsidised council house building. New estates are built and tenants associations form immediately, often campaigning against high rents and calling for representation for tenants in housing issues.

1920 - 1930

Tenants associations form city-wide Federations and lobby Councils for representation and involvement in rent setting. A National Tenants Federation is formed. Tenants associations campaign for community facilities and organise community activities.

1934

Leeds tenants federation leads a rent strike against the divisive first rent rebate scheme.

Late 1930s

Unemployed workers' organisations campaign on housing issues, with rent strikes and action against evictions. Private tenants wage a prolonged rent strike in the East End of London against high rents.

1945 - 1946

Over 40,000 families occupy former army camps and empty homes from Yorkshire to the South Coast in a wave of squatting. Squatters' groups form federations, calling for more affordable housing. A major council house building programme is launched.

Late 1940s

Tenants associations develop on the new council estates and new towns. National Association of Tenants & Residents formed (NATR) in 1948.

1950s

Glasgow tenants campaign against rent increases and sell-offs. The Association of London Estates is formed in 1957.

1960

Councils plan to raise rents to market levels and introduce rebate schemes. In the London borough of St Pancras, 35 tenants associations join to form the United Tenants Association and 1400 tenants go on rent strike. Evictions led to protests outside the Town Hall in which 50 people were arrested and the Home Secretary banned marches in the area for three months. Other London tenants groups go on rent strike against private "Rachmanite" landlords.

1968/1969

The new Conservative GLC brings in market rents and new tenants federations are set up across London with a United Tenants Action Committee formed. A national demonstration of tenants is held in Trafalgar Square against rent increases. In Tower Hamlets, 2000 tenants lobby the council meeting. By November, 11,000 London households are withholding rent. A demonstration of 3000 tenants outside the Housing Minister's home in Hampstead is held. An Anti-Eviction Committee organises a 700-strong flying squad to act on threats of eviction. In the face of this action, in November 1969, the government passes legislation limiting rent rises.

1968 - 1973

A wave of tenant activity takes place across the country in response to new market rents, with rent strikes and new organisations set up from Exeter to Glasgow. In Liverpool a rent strike lasts six months and wins a small reduction in the rent. The Conservative government passes the 1972 Housing Finance Act with its "fair" rents and rebates, to build on action already taken by local councils. The National Association of Tenants & Residents organises protests against it. Over 80 rent strikes and tenant protests take place across the country. Three Labour councils refuse to implement the act and are surcharged.

1975 - 1976

Estimates of 10,000 to 50,000 organised squatters living in abandoned private and public housing. Housing is a major issue for the "underground press". Housing co-operatives formed. Homeless Persons Act (1977) passed after long campaigns about homelessness.

Late 1970s

The National Tenants Organisations (NTO) is formed along with tenants organisations in Scotland and Wales, federations in the North East and South Wales. Security of tenure for council tenants is included in the Labour Housing Bill. Community workers from Community Development Projects support the development of radical tenants groups. Tenants Charters are negotiated in some areas. Anti-damp campaigns and other tenant protests around high-rise and system-built housing.

1980

Rent strikes in Walsall and Kirklees against large rent increases. A Conservative government brings in the secure tenancy and the Right to Buy. Tenants organisations go into decline and a national march and rally in Walsall draws only 2000 people.

1988

Flood of tenant protests against Tenants Choice legislation. Anti-sell off and anti-Housing Action Trust protests lead to formation of new tenants organisations. Strong tenants federations (e.g. Sandwell and Kirklees) and tenant management organisations (e.g. Belle Isle North in Leeds) developed. Tenants in Waltherton & Elgin use the Tenants Choice legislation to prevent Conservative Westminster council from demolishing and privatising their estate.

1989

National Tenants & Residents Federation (NTRF) set up.

1992

Mass tenant rallies against compulsory competitive tendering of housing management.

1997

Tenant demonstrations against Conservative plans to speed up transfers.

1998

Tenants & Residents Organisation of England (TAROE) formed from merger of NTRF and NTO. The new organisation wins a place on a government sounding board.

1999

TAROE links with the trade union-led Defend Council Housing group to campaign against large scale voluntary transfers. It also launches the Daylight Robbery campaign against subsidy claw-back.

2000

Tenant Participation Compacts come into force regulating tenant involvement in council housing. A Housing Inspectorate is set up and acts to ensure compliance with minimum standards of tenant participation across social housing. The numbers of tenants associations rise, although many landlords favour market research methods to consult their "customers". At the same time, the housing transfer programme speeds up under government incentives.

2000 - 2006

Tenants organisations and the trade union-backed Defend Council Housing win some high profile anti-transfer battles. New Labour launches Arms Length Management Organisations as an alternative to transfer. These win the support of many tenants federations but transfers also continue to win tenant backing. By 2006, the amount of housing managed by Registered Social Landlords, including transfer organisations, out-numbers council homes for the first time. Some major tenants federations lose their funding as landlords switch to the less problematic option of involving customers through market research. Regional tenants federations are set up to mirror the government's new regional structure of housing strategy and investment. TAROE begins work on a National Tenants Assembly to unite tenants organisations.

2007 - 2009

Social housing comes under increasing pressure as the supply continues to fall and government housing policy aims to encourage home ownership and asset-based welfare on the back of economic growth. Regeneration programmes adopt gentrification as a strategy to create mixed communities. Half of all social housing grants goes to build low cost home ownership, while housing associations have to cross-subsidise new social rented housing by selling homes on the private market. A report by Prof. John Hills questions the current aims of social housing, while the increased rationing caused by shortage of supply leads to concentrations of poverty on estates. The housing market crash reaffirms the role of social housing as a safety net for home ownership and as a Keynesian supply side subsidy but the attack continues and the inequalities of home ownership go unscrutinised. The Tenants Services Authority is set up as the new regulator for social housing and profit-making companies are allowed to access a government grant and become regulated landlords. In keeping with this drive towards greater market involvement, the tenant as consumer becomes central to regulation, and a National Tenants Voice to champion tenant interests is set up.



The birth of social housing

Social housing is the name given to public sector council housing or homes provided by housing associations or registered social landlords.



Social housing was developed because housing is a basic human need. Everyone needs a home - but most people can't afford one. Homes are expensive. But if everyone pools their resources, everyone can have a home.

This is a model of collective provision. Social housing is a public service - provided by the community - usually the local authority - for the use of all, paid for by all.

The idea of social housing - like many of the ideas behind the welfare state - has been under attack for many years. Successive governments have preferred an alternative model of social housing. They believe that everyone should provide for themselves - by buying their own house - and social housing should only exist to prevent serious hardship at times when some people cannot cater for themselves.

What do you think? Which model do you agree with?

The early history of social housing is the story of a fight between these two models.

While the early tenants movement and the labour movement campaigned for general needs social housing - decent homes for all, paid for by all - the health reformers, and benevolent employers saw social housing as a stop-gap measure to prevent serious health problems and to ensure a well-disciplined workforce.

These two models of social housing are still argued over today.

The state we are in today

No more council housing

In the housing finance system introduced by the Conservatives in 1988, local authorities were prevented from building new homes. Instead the role of developing social housing was passed to the Housing Associations. Councils retained the right to nominate tenants to new housing association homes.



Housing associations are regulated by a government quango (a non-elected body) called the Housing Corporation, and receive a development grant. This grant was cut in 1988 and housing associations were forced to borrow more money from the banks and private lenders. This led to smaller and therefore cheaper house standards, and higher rents to pay off the higher interest. Housing associations - now called Registered Social Landlords - began building and managing much bigger estates, sometimes joining up with other associations, so that one estate had many landlords.

Under - investment

Investment in council housing has fallen drastically in the last 30 years, from £13 billion in the early 1970s to £2 billion in 1996. In the 1988 Housing Act, development grants to Housing Associations were cut, leaving them to raise money from the private sector and increase rents. During the 1990s investment in Housing Associations continued to fall. Under New Labour, gross social housing investment carried on going down, despite the new Major Repairs Allowance for council housing and the Decent Homes programme, and housing association development also plummeted. In 2004, only £1.4 billion was invested in social housing. The Decent Homes programme set a target for improvements to public sector housing stock by 2010 and put the responsibility on councils to find the investment to carry out the work. Councils were required to carry out an options appraisal of the future of their stock and this fueled the already-growing large scale voluntary transfer programme. New building of social rented homes slowed almost to a standstill. In 2005 the Barker Review of Housing Supply concluded that the government needed to invest between £1.2 and £1.6 billion a year into new social housing to meet the need.

Homelessness

In 1980 76,471 people were accepted as homeless and in priority need. By 1990 169,526 people were accepted as homeless and in priority need. Homelessness more than doubled in ten years. After a drop in the mid 1990s, the numbers accepted as homeless started to rise again to reach over 170,000 by 2003.

Right to Buy

In 1980 there were 6.5 million council homes. By 2004 there were less than 4 million. Between 1981 - 2004 2.2 million council homes were sold to tenants - one third of all council stock. It was the biggest privatisation of the Thatcher government and it continued even faster under New Labour. Right To Buy skimmed off the best housing and the best-off tenants leaving the oldest and the poorest in the worst housing. The Government recognised that Right to Buy has led to a shortage of affordable homes and limited discounts in the areas of highest demand like London and the South East. In 2005, New Labour unveiled a range of new schemes to encourage home ownership.

Shortage of affordable rented housing

House building in the social rented sector had fallen from around 43,000 homes built in 1995 to 21,000 in 2003. In 2003 the Barker Report said that the supply of social rented housing must increase by between 17,000 to 23,000 homes a year to keep pace with housing need. Despite this, social house building has almost collapsed due to a mixture of lack of government investment and to high land prices. Housing charity Shelter argued in 2005 that 60,000 new social rented homes were needed before 2011.

The oldest and the poorest

As a result of Right to Buy and decades of under-investment, social housing organisations have been left with the worst housing and the poorest tenants. "The oldest and the poorest are being housed in the worst property" (Forrest and Murie "Selling the Welfare State"). Large numbers of people in poverty are concentrated on social housing estates. Council rents have been rising under Government direction and many Housing association tenants are already trapped in the poverty trap by high rents and Housing Benefit rules. Almost 50% of tenants in social housing today are aged 65 or over. But nearly all new tenants getting tenancies are aged 16-29 and have young children. The younger age group of tenants are far more mobile. Those families with two wage earners are likely to buy their own home. Many families move from social housing to private housing and back again. A small number move over and over again. 80% of households in social housing have a weekly income of less than £200 and 70% of heads of these households are not in paid work. 73% of new Housing Association tenants are on Housing Benefit. 21% of new Housing Association tenants are lone parents.

Low demand

In the late 1990s social housing landlords woke up to the fact that there were large areas of housing in the North and Midlands that no one wanted to live in. Parts of some estates were un-lettable - mostly because of the reputation they have gained for harassment and crime. Some property types were un-lettable because there was no demand on the housing register for them. The problem was not confined to social housing. Large tracts of private sector homes in inner city areas lay derelict and could be bought for knock-down prices. Social landlords responded by adopting estate agent-type marketing campaigns, however the main response has been to demolish. Nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders were set up in 2003, charged with solving the problem of low demand in the inner cities. Their plans to demolish over 200,000 homes were met with protests from residents and in many places were out of touch with the situation on the ground.

Anti-Social Behaviour

One result of the concentration of poverty and deprivation in social housing estates was a huge increase in anti-social behaviour. Ranging from crime, harassment, alcohol related disorder to nuisance from noise and pets, anti-social behaviour proved to be a low priority for the police and social landlords were equally slow to respond. Pressure from tenants led first landlords and then Government to respond and a flow of legislation, which has increased to a deluge under New Labour, was directed to deal with it. Many tenants organisations voluntarily sacrificed their rights to a secure tenancy in order to support introductory tenancies - part of the Housing Act 1996 - which supposedly would stop new tenants causing anti-social behaviour. In practice landlords have used the one year introductory tenancy to evict tenants for rent arrears and it is rare for it to be used to deal with nuisance. Under New Labour, the Anti-Social Behaviour Order became a popular tool for dealing with the serious intimidation and harassment that plagued some communities. Along with youth curfews, this legislation could be seen as a further exclusion of already deprived groups. Preventative work, like the successful Dundee Families Project, has been rare.

Sustainable communities

New Labour's housing policy is driven by a belief that the private market should provide for most people's housing needs and that government should intervene only to protect the most vulnerable. The guiding principle for New Labour is their belief in sustainable communities. This theory justifies the continued break-up of council housing, the demolition of large areas of working class housing and the prioritising of private house building. At the heart of the idea of sustainable communities is a right wing theory pioneered in the United States by Charles Murray. This is the theory that there is an underclass of people who have never worked and never want to work. This "underclass" theory was used to justify reforms of the welfare system in America. In Britain it led to attacks by Tories like John Redwood in 1993 on single parent families on welfare. The "underclass" theory lurks underneath much of New Labour's declarations on rights and responsibilities and "respect". These communitarian ideas - again popularised in the United States - are the basis for much of the government's policy on anti-social behaviour and explain its support for tenant participation. New Labour believes that people owe a duty of citizenship and should take an active part in society, helping government to govern.

An end to social housing?

Social housing is in an identity crisis. It has sustained a near mortal wound under the political and financial policies of recent governments. The problems of residualisation have given it a stigmatised label. Current Government policy is to increase home ownership to 75% of households and to continue to marginalise social housing. Consumerist ideas are being introduced into the sector - ideas like Choice Based Lettings - which do nothing to deal with the real problems of housing shortage, lack of choice, deprivation and poverty.

The ideals of social housing are in danger of being swept away. Can the tenants movement breathe new life into the ideal they first created?

The development of tenant participation

Tenant participation has developed in Britain as a result of two conflicting forces - on the one hand, the tenants movement with their belief in participatory democracy and empowerment - on the other hand, the government agenda of consumer choice, set within the context of a belief in the free market and the withdrawal of the welfare state.



These two models - collective empowerment or consumer involvement - have created the tenant participation structures and processes we see today. The consumer model has been advocated by both Conservative and Labour governments and has developed in a series of legislation.

The Housing Act 1988 Tenants Choice legislation introduced the idea that tenants could change their landlord if they were not satisfied with their performance. The Local Government Act 1994 brought in compulsory competitive tendering of housing management services which gave tenants their first collective rights to be consulted about standards of service, and to be involved in monitoring the housing manager's performance, in return for the loss of their rights to be consulted on changes to management.

In 1986 funding was provided by the government to enable tenants to set up their own management organisations: either Estate Management Boards or Tenant Management Co-ops. Tenants had been able to ask the council to allow them to set up tenant management co-ops since the 1975 Housing Act but this gave a boost to tenant management. By 1994 there were 74 established tenant management organisations and a further 88 in the planning stage. In April 1994 the government set out the Right to Manage making it much clearer how tenants can set up a tenant management organisation.

In 2000 New Labour brought in Tenant Participation Compacts and a Housing Inspectorate as part of the Best Value regime. The Inspectorate, which became part of the Audit Commission and currently polices both councils and housing associations, was charged with ensuring that "resident involvement", as it is now called, was delivered by housing organisations.

The Audit Commission imposes a consumer model of tenant participation on housing organisations. Its inspection framework does not value collective participation through tenants associations and federations and stresses market research methods such as focus groups. Landlords and housing organisations are encouraged to involve residents because it improves services and makes them more cost effective. The inspectors do not encourage empowerment.

This quote from Charles Cooper & Murray Hawtin's; "Housing, Community and Conflict" 1997 is a useful view on the way tenant participation has developed.

"Community involvement in housing projects can be understood in relation to the wider goals of reducing public expenditure and withdrawing state intervention in the provision of rented housing.

"Tenant participation practice in Britain has therefore become a fragmented version...It has become service oriented and concerned primarily with customer satisfaction and improving the housing service. Empowerment now means little more than tenants or communities having a say over parts of service delivery, which itself has become fragmented through privatisation, while basic social relationships and inequalities remain unchallenged"

Rent strikes

The rent strike was a form of direct action used - sometimes very effectively - by the tenants movement from the 1890s to the 1970s. The Glasgow rent strike of 1915 won the first ever rent freeze in the private sector. Other rent strikes secured rent cuts or influenced legislation. But more often rent strikes ended in mass evictions and defeat. The introduction of rent rebates and housing benefit doomed this form of protest to failure.



This page features local studies into rent strikes.

It provides access to published research into rent strikes in London in the 1930s, the St Pancras rent strike in 1960, and the rent strikes and protests against the Housing Finance Act in the early 1970s.

It also features original research into rent strikes in Leeds. The 1914 rent strike in Leeds was part of the wave of national tenant protest against rent rises in the private sector that led to the famous Glasgow action of 1915. In 1934 Leeds tenants again used the rent strike, this time against a Labour council and the introduction of market rents and means tested rent rebates. These two rent strikes illustrate key moments in the formation of a distinct social movement, the tenants movement.



[Leeds rent strike 1914](#)



[Leeds rent strike 1934](#)