



12th November 2012

Submission to United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing: Study on Security of Tenure and Informal Settlements

Defend Council Housing (DCH) was formed in 1995/96 and is a non-party political, voluntary organisation that campaigns to defend the rights of the UK's 1.5 million council tenants. DCH is led by independent, local tenant organisations, supported by Members of Parliament and national trade unions. DCH also works with other housing and welfare-rights campaigns to defend the interests of all tenants, the homeless, those threatened with eviction and all people in need of better housing. For more information, please see our website:

<http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/dch/index.cfm>

DCH welcomes the Special Rapporteur's study and recognition that security of tenure is 'a central component of the right to adequate housing'. We recognise that housing conditions in many parts of the world are significantly worse than those we experience in the UK. However, we make this submission based on three key arguments:

1. The security of tenure of UK council tenants is currently under attack.
2. This attack comes in the context of a more general weakening of housing security across all tenures in the UK.
3. Council housing Secure Tenancies offer a model for decent, secure and affordable housing for all.

The security of tenure of UK council tenants is currently under attack.

Most existing UK council tenants have protection from wanton or capricious eviction under the terms of their Secure Tenancies, a right that was won in 1979 after a determined campaign. Effectively, this means that council tenants can live in their homes for life, provided they do not break their tenancy conditions. However, in the wake of massive cuts in public spending (Inside Housing 19th Oct 2010), the current government has introduced plans to time-limit new council tenancies down to a minimum of two years, with five years being 'the norm' (DCLG 2011).

DCH argues that reducing security of tenure will intensify a pattern of housing transience that will undermine social stability and community cohesion and that this will disproportionately affect those who are most vulnerable. We support the position of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 25(1)) that decent, secure housing should be treated as a right, not a financial asset.

This attack comes in the context of a more general weakening of housing security across all tenures in the UK

Recent UK government legislation poses a more general threat to security of tenure for tenants of Councils, Registered Social Landlords and private landlords. Reforms have been introduced to 'cap' the amount of Housing Benefit received by low-income households to enable them to pay their rent. A housing and homeless charity has warned:

'We are very concerned about the impact these changes will have on people's ability to meet their rents. It is likely that significant numbers of households will find themselves needing to move homes, with some households left facing homelessness.' (Crisis 2012, p4)

Alongside cuts in rent subsidies, the government is also seeking to drive up rents for council and housing association housing by introducing a new form of 'Affordable Rent' tenancy that will mean tenants paying up to 80% of the market rent (BBC 2011).

The reduction of Housing Benefit, alongside an increase in rents and weakening of security of tenure will create a 'triple whammy' for hundreds of thousands of people in the UK, particularly in large cities where there are already signs that low-income households are being priced out of their homes (Shelter 2012). These changes take place at a time of acute shortages in really-affordable housing, when some homeless families are being made to move hundreds of miles in order to find a home (The Guardian 2012).

Those unable to afford to buy a home or gain access to council or housing association housing are increasingly reliant on an unregulated private rented sector, where there is no security of tenure but only a six months tenancy. DCH agrees with the housing charity Shelter that 'private tenants do not have the security they need to call their house a home', but we believe this problem is now extending to confront tenants in all tenures.

Council housing Secure Tenancies offer a model for decent, secure and affordable housing for all.

DCH argues that council housing offers a model that could benefit millions of people, not just in the UK, but internationally. The essential principle of council housing is that it is provided by democratically controlled public authorities and thus not exposed to the volatility and profiteering of the market. Investment in de-marketised housing not only produces wider economic benefits (Chartered Institute of Housing 2012), but empowers local communities to have a direct role in shaping housing services. Above all however, taking housing out of the market and treating it as a civic asset, not a private investment commodity, enables rents to genuinely reflect costs, not the search for profit and therefore, tenants can enjoy security of tenure that enables them and their families to play a full part in society, without the constant threat of eviction.

References

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Shelter (2012) *Families priced out by benefits cap*, Press Release (4th July 2012)

The Guardian (2012) *Send families to Stoke? It reflects a broken housing policy*, (25th April 2012)