

Labour conference votes for 90,000 social rent homes a year, ending Right to Buy and cancelling council housing debt

At this year's Labour conference the Labour Campaign for Council Housing's [resolution](#), sent in by at least 10 CLPs, was kept off the agenda by a decision of the Conference Arrangements Committee¹. It was judged not to be a 'contemporary motion' because, we were told, the National Policy Forum report had 'substantially' covered the issues in it. That was nonsense. There was only a single paragraph on housing. It was a political exclusion. The CAC has used a new rule on 'contemporary motions' to keep off the agenda² resolutions of which the party machine does not want debated. I'll write separately on this travesty of democracy.

However, we are pleased to report that much of the content of our resolution was included in one by the union UNITE (see the text below). This resolution was incorporated into a composite motion which the conference passed. Therefore, **the conference has called for**

- funding 90,000 social rent council homes a year;
- ending Right to Buy;
- cancelling council housing debt³;
- a publicly funded retrofitting programme, and;
- caps on service charges and above inflation rent increase.

This stands in stark contrast to the government's *actual* housing policy. Its Social and Affordable Homes Programme is [a flawed programme which will not resolve the housing crisis](#). The SAHP

- Only funds 18,000 social rent homes a year;
- Has no funding ringfenced for council housing. Councils have to compete for grant from Homes England with housing associations, 'for profit providers, and builders/developers;
- Keeps the Tory definition of "affordable housing" which includes the unaffordable to many, "affordable rent" (up to 80% of market rents); £60 a week higher than social rent, in England, £90 a week higher in London.
- Has failed to end the hated 'bedroom tax';
- Has only funded three councils (£392.2 million for 2,811 homes over 10 years) in the first tranche of funding for "Strategic Partners". Of the 73,617 homes which will be funded by this, [only 3.8% will be built by councils](#), and they are not necessarily council homes;
- An overwhelming majority of the funding will go to housing associations. In addition, a 'for profit provider', SAGE, is being given £350 million and the large volume builder Vistry, the same amount.

In Andy Burnham's speech in the Manchester People's History Museum, when he became Labour leader, he said that a government led by him would carry out "the biggest council house building programme since the post-war period" (see Note below). **That aspiration cannot be delivered by the SAHP as currently constituted.**

The SAHP is the child of the Keir Starmer government, largely drawn up before Any Burnham became Leader. It was fashioned by Steve Reed, until recently, Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government. He opposed funding a large scale council house building programme. He explained why in his response to an ITV journalist's question: "why doesn't the government just do what the Attlee government did, build council housing?". Reed said that people have different aspirations today; most want to become home owners. The government, apparently, had to respond to that aspiration. That's why there is no funding ringfenced for council housing, and why the SAHP only funds 18,000 social rent homes a year; **just 6% of its 300,000 annual target.**

The UNITE resolution, which the conference voted for, as part of a composite resolution, contains the outlines of the programme the government needs to implement if it is to begin to resolve the housing crisis. It should be picked up by campaigners to build pressure on the government.

1 126 CLP resolutions were deemed not 'contemporary'. Only 90 CLP resolutions made it on the agenda. The resolutions that are ruled out are not published, so the CAC is not accountable for its decisions.

2 This was done last year in a brazenly cynical fashion which was explained here: ["The lack of housing is such a fertile source of human misery" – Labour Campaign for Council Housing](#). Also see ["Here's why we need to talk about council housing at this Labour Party conference."](#)

3 Our campaign has explained [the case for cancelling council housing debt](#). Shelter is also [calling for councils to be relieved of this debt](#).

In contradiction with Andy Burnham's expressed views, the government's housing programme looks to the market to resolve the housing crisis. Unfortunately, that approach has been reinforced by the new version of the Tories Help to Buy scheme just announced⁴. The large volume private builders were demanding it, in order to revive a flagging market. The government has given what is effectively a subsidy for the house building oligopoly, maintaining prices at their extortionate levels, by providing a 20% loan to the buyer, in addition to their mortgage.

The £39 billion SAHP funding, over 10 years, is completely insufficient. Shelter and others are right that at least 90,000 social rent homes a year are needed. In its recent report Shelter estimated grant of £177,000 per social rent property is needed; more than £15 billion a year to fund 90,000 social rent homes. If the Attlee government could fund the building of 800,000 council homes under far worse conditions than we face today, this government can fund 90,000 a year. It is a question of priorities. As Andy Burnham has said, council housing will save the government money on the housing benefit bill. It will also save the NHS money by taking people out of poor housing which will ruin their health. Shelter has explained [the costs of government failing to build social rent housing](#).

Having had its resolution passed, UNITE should make council housing a campaigning priority. It can bring together other unions and housing campaigners to demand the change of course which the government needs to make. For its and other union members, who are renters, the biggest component of the 'cost of living crisis', is high rents. Rent controls are needed to stop the exploitation of private tenants and the policy of giving council and housing association tenants [a decade of above inflation increases should be abandoned](#). Yet ultimately, only a large scale social rent council housing building and acquisitions⁵ programme will rescue hundreds of thousands from the private rented sector, temporary accommodation and the housing waiting lists.

Martin Wicks

October 3rd 2026

Note

What number of council homes would be required to achieve "the biggest council house programme since the post-war years"? In England there have been six years when 300,000 or more homes have been built; all in the 1960s under the two Wilson governments. The average council house component of those totals was 41%, the average number was 135,555 a year. In the UK overall, just over 1 million council homes were built during the Wilson governments from October 1964 to June 1970.

UNITE resolution

On 25 August, the Government announced £10 billion for 70,000 social and affordable homes. A welcome start, but Conference believes investment should drive reindustrialisation, support British manufacturing and create unionised jobs.

Britain's housing crisis is a national emergency. Too many homes are poorly insulated; freezing in winter, overheating in summer. Nearly all our 29 million homes need improvement. Clearing social housing waiting lists at the current rate would take over a century, whilst housing costs drive poverty and leave young people living longer with parents. Conference believes public investment in building and retrofitting homes can tackle this crisis, strengthen domestic supply chains, support British manufacturing, create good, unionised jobs, rebuild Britain's industrial base and deliver economic growth.

Conference resolves to campaign for:

1. A large-scale council house building programme, with guaranteed funding to build or acquire at least 90,000 social rent homes each year, using direct employment.
2. A publicly funded national retrofitting programme to upgrade homes, learning from the UK's ECO4 issues to create good jobs and upskill workers across the construction and retrofit sectors, under

⁴ Reports in the media suggest that Reed and Matthew Pennycook had been trying to get agreement for a revamped Help to Buy, but Rachel Reeves was resisting. New Chancellor John Healey, who has given it the green light, was previously Secretary of State responsible for housing, and then Shadow Secretary of State. He supported a reformed Help to Buy, and included it in the 2019 Manifesto.

⁵ Over the last six years, in England, 41% of additional council homes have been bought, rather than built; often ex-council homes lost to Right to Buy.

the relevant National Working Rule Agreements.

3. Procurement prioritising British-based providers, supporting domestic manufacturing, good jobs and unionised supply chains, maximising public investment benefits.
4. Increasing bona fide apprenticeships and deliver new training facilities.
5. Ending Right to Buy and cancelling council housing debt, freeing resources for building and maintenance.
6. Greater tenant rights, stronger regulation, secure tenancies, social rents and caps on service charges and above-inflation rent rises.