

Turning the tide



Birmingham Tenants vote decisively against transfer

On 11 April tenants in Birmingham rejected transfer and put a big obstacle in the way of government policy on privatising council housing. By a resounding two to one majority, tenants rejected all the arm twisting of the council's £43 million propaganda campaign.

This means the government's 200,000 a year target for selling off council housing will not be met. It shows that we can win on a big scale, even when the council throws every trick at us, backed to the hilt by DTLR and the Community Housing Task Force. Experts are desperately trying to work out why we won, and coming up with some ludicrous explanations.

The real lessons of Birmingham are that a bold campaign that's based on the estates and wins political support will convince tenants we are serious and there is an alternative. We do not

have to trade secure, affordable, accountable housing for a new sink or bathroom - we should demand both!

Lessons of the Birmingham campaign:
✓ Tenants and trade unions united from the beginning to stop transfer and defend council housing

"We do not have to trade secure, affordable, accountable housing for a new sink or bathroom. We should demand both!"

- ✓ Getting out on estates with meetings, posters and leaflets
- ✓ Building support from - and pressure on - councillors and MPs
- ✓ Unions backing tenants with practical resources and money

✓ Challenging every council argument
Defeating transfer and demolition of 88,000 homes was the first part of the battle. Birmingham DCH have now launched a 'People's Petition' demanding investment in the city's council housing, using the £650 million offered by government to subsidise privatisation.

Byers responds to pressure

A new 'right to borrow' and 'decency' standard for every home

Successive governments have discriminated against council housing. Subsidy has been cut and councils prevented from borrowing to carry out improvements like other landlords can.

Cynics said we would never change government policy but last October Secretary of State, Stephen Byers, bowed to pressure and promised to "introduce legislation to change the capital rules and allow

councils to raise additional finance... as an alternative to going into the private sector".

New rights are contained in the Local Government Finance White Paper - to become a Bill this autumn.

On January 16th Byers showed further signs of pressure when he gave MPs on the Transport, Local Government & the Regions Select Committee a clear

promise that regardless of how tenants vote on transfer all homes will be brought up to the new 'decency' standard by 2010.

He said "It is a commitment that will be met irrespective of any decisions which are taken by tenants."

Neither announcement gives council housing anything like the investment it requires but it does show that the campaign is having an effect!

CAMPAIGN DIARY

- October 2001 Byers announces councils will have a new 'right to borrow' to fund investment
- December 2001 Dudley and Aylesbury vote NO to transfer and shock Ministers
- Jan 16th Byers tells Select Committee votes against transfer won't jeopardise 'decency' standard
- Feb 9th DCH national conference develops campaign
- April 11th Birmingham tenants vote 2:1 against transfer and now demand £650 million of direct investment
- April 16th 200 attend 'Case for Council Housing' briefing at Parliament. 45 MPs have already signed Early Day Motion 1094 backing the campaign (see over).

Putting the 'Case for Council Housing' at Parliament

More than 200 tenants and trade unionists from all over the country came to Parliament on April 16th to meet their MPs and put the 'Case for Council Housing' at a briefing meeting organised by DCH. A printed briefing has been sent to every MP.

Over the afternoon MPs, tenants activists, trade unionists and academics queued up to argue why the government should invest in council housing with no strings attached.

MPs Austin Mitchell, Lynne Jones, Bob Wareing, Kelvin Hopkins and others contributed. Clive Betts MP, a member of the Transport, Local Government & Regions Committee, offered his help to make sure the 'Case for Council Housing' is put to the Select Committee.

DCH national conference strengthens campaign

DCH national conference on 9 February was another step forward for tenants.

201 delegates and around 80 local tenants from Birmingham participated.

Resolution, adopted unanimously by the conference, contained clear proposals for the campaign:

1 Ensure that in every area where councils are blackmailing tenants with transfers, ALMOs and PFI schemes there is an effective, well resourced and broad-based campaign to organise opposition.

2 Endorse the document "Response to the Local Government Finance White Paper" and campaign through the tenants, trade union and wider movement to urge other organisations to adopt it.

3 Demand a level playing field for council housing including an end to Daylight Robbery, a full and meaningful right to borrow and subsidy to all councils equivalent to the debt write-off on offer as a bribe to councils who privatise.

4 Step up pressure on the government in the run up to the budget and Public Spending Review by organising a meeting in Parliament in April with invitations to MPs as well as delegations of tenants, trade union reps and councillors from each area.

5 Consult other organisations over holding a Day of Action this autumn

6 Support tenants in areas where privatisation has taken place to publicise the negative experience; campaign to force RSLs to recognise independent tenants associations representing their tenants and to win a 'Right to Return' for tenants who want to go back to the council.

The spread of tenants organisations, campaigns and trade unions involved showed the broad base of support for the campaign.

Platform speakers included Birmingham MP Lynne Jones and local councillor David Williams, Deirdre Leonard from Newcastle tenants Fed, Mick Graham of GMB and Alan Walter from DCH.

Workshops on housing finance, the Case for Council Housing, How to fight privatisation, the experience post-transfer, and how globalisation hits us, all buzzed with tenants wanting to get hold of information and work out how to use it locally.

The final session heard first hand from old and new campaigners, in Peterborough, Harlow, Manchester, London, Yorkshire, Newcastle, Cornwall, Wales... Anger is growing at the con and the blackmail tenants face, and confidence is rising that we are part of a national campaign that can win.

DCH Briefing for MPs

<http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/resources/briefingMPs.pdf>

Byers response to Select Committee

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmtlgr/uc373iv/uc37302.htm> (para 671)

List of MPs supporting Austin Mitchell MP's Early Day Motion 1094

<http://edm.ais.co.uk/cache/printable/edm1094.html>

GET YOUR MP TO SIGN EARLY DAY MOTION 1094 'CASE FOR COUNCIL HOUSING'

"That this House recognises that council housing has provided generations with a decent, affordable, secure and accountable alternative to 'market forces' in housing and is an important part of a comprehensive welfare state; that nearly three million tenants in England and Wales want this to continue but that it requires major investment so that all council housing is first rate and available for future generations;

notes the breakthrough of a new 'right to borrow' for local authorities in the Local Government Finance White Paper, and the Secretary of State's assurance on 16 January 2002 that however tenants vote on privatisation their homes will be brought up to the 'decency' standard by 2010;

believes that real 'choice' for tenants depends on an end to government discrimination against council housing with the introduction of a 'level playing field' with other 'social' landlords, including a total end to the Daylight Robbery tax on housing revenue accounts, an equal 'right to borrow' and public subsidy equivalent to writing off 'overhanging debt' to all councils - not just those which privatise housing; and

welcomes the 'Case for Council Housing' briefing at the House of Commons on 16 April, the Manifesto for Council Housing and other initiatives to highlight this issue and persuade government to 'Stop Privatisation and invest in council housing with no strings attached'.

Proposals for the next phase of the campaign...

● Build support for 'Investment in Council Housing - with no strings attached' in every area now!

We defeated privatisation in Birmingham, Dudley and Aylesbury because tenants, trade unionists and other campaigners had been working long and hard to counter the council's propaganda and carefully explain the alternatives to tenants on the doorstep.

Too often tenants, trade unionists and others haven't cemented an alliance early enough and there aren't the resources to build a credible opposition.

Every council is being pushed by the government to adopt transfer, PFI or ALMOs. Get moving now to bring together tenants and trade union organisations along with sympathetic MPs, councillors in your area. Don't leave it too late!

● Lobby your MP to support amending the Local Government Finance Bill this autumn to create a level playing field

This autumn the proposals in the Local Government Finance White Paper will be debated in Parliament as a Bill.

Along with tenants and trade union organisations we plan to get the campaign's key demands for a 'level playing field' for council housing tabled as amendments to this Bill.

We need to start lobbying MPs now to support the demands for a full and equal right to borrow for councils, an end to Daylight Robbery and subsidy equivalent to writing off overhanging debt - the bribe offered to councils who privatise. Get your MP to sign the EDM (see above).

We plan a national lobby of Parliament to coincide with the Bill being debated. Details to follow...