

An End to Britain's Housing Disaster? –

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As polling day gets closer, housing remains a fundamental issue for many people, especially in Southern England where housing is most unaffordable, but also across the UK where rents are often unreasonably high and housing quality is low by normal European standards.

Homelessness has spiralled; and the UK now appears to have the highest rate of people living on the streets to be found in all of Europe. Over 1.15 million households are on the social housing waiting list. Tenants' rights are weaker in England than almost anywhere else in Europe¹. The UK's surge in housing costs for the poorest has been the 'worst in western Europe'². In several parts of even otherwise affluent cities, such as Oxford, the most common way to die young is now to die

¹ Shelter (2016) *Time for Reform: How our neighbours with mature private renting markets guarantee stability for private renters*.

² "UK surge in housing costs for poorest 'worst in western Europe'"

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/mar/21/uk-europe-housing-cost-rise-lowest-earners-report>

homeless³. This is a new trend. This crisis of affordability and security is the backdrop for all the political parties' bids on housing. While the Conservatives have put forward new funding for social housing and scrapped the cap on local authorities borrowing to fund council housing, social housebuilding stills remains at a fraction of the level needed – and much of this will not be let at social rent. Further, when the Conservatives have been in office their promises to build more houses have tended to be chimaera (other than their 1950-1964 governments).

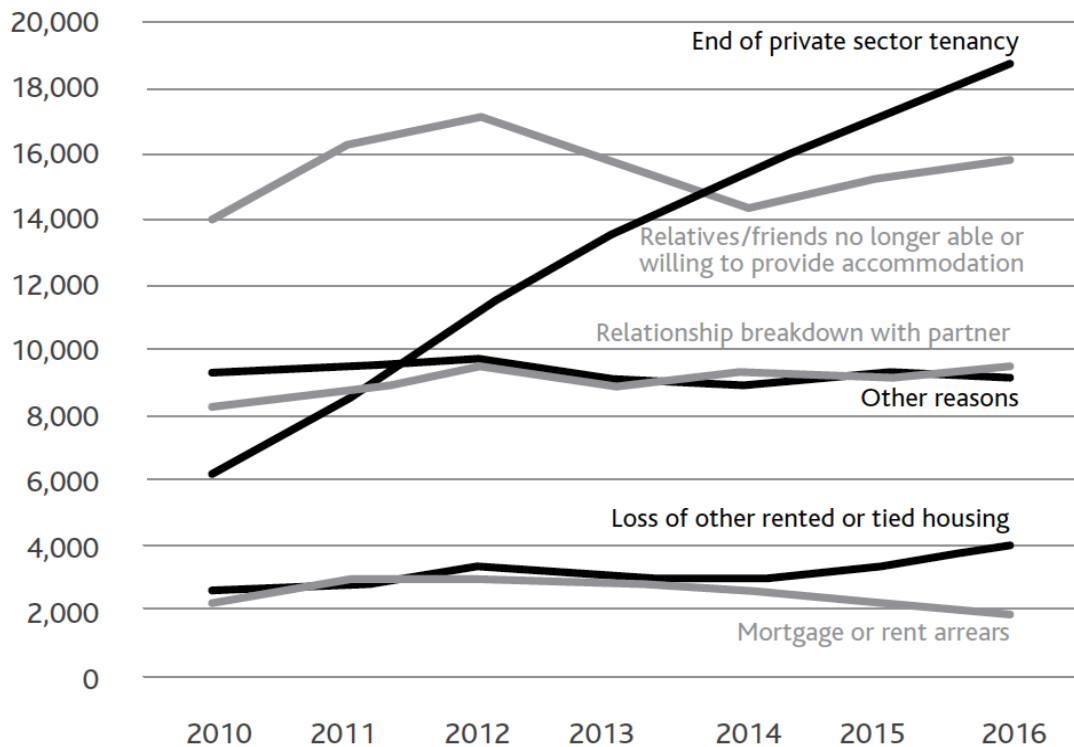
This is borne out by recent history. Out of the 200,000 'affordable' Starter Homes the Conservatives pledged to build in 2015, zero have been built. In 2017-18 just over 6000 new social rented homes were built⁴. While in June 2019, Homes England reported that the number of new starts that would be for social rent had declined on the previous year⁵.

³ Brimblecombe, N., Dorling, D., and Green, M. (2019) Who still dies young in a rich city? Revisiting the case of Oxford, *The Geographical Journal*, DOI:10.1111/geoj.12336, Accepted Article published online on 12 November, 2019

⁴ "Construction of homes for social rent drops 80% in a decade"
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/22/construction-of-homes-for-social-rent-down-80-percent-on-a-decade-ago-england-families-waiting-lists>

⁵ "New housing statistics show increase in affordable homes", Homes England (2019)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-housing-statistics-show-increase-in-affordable-homes>

Figure 3.12.1: Reasons for becoming homeless, England, 2010–2016



Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, Statutory Homelessness Statistics, Table 774, December 14th 2017

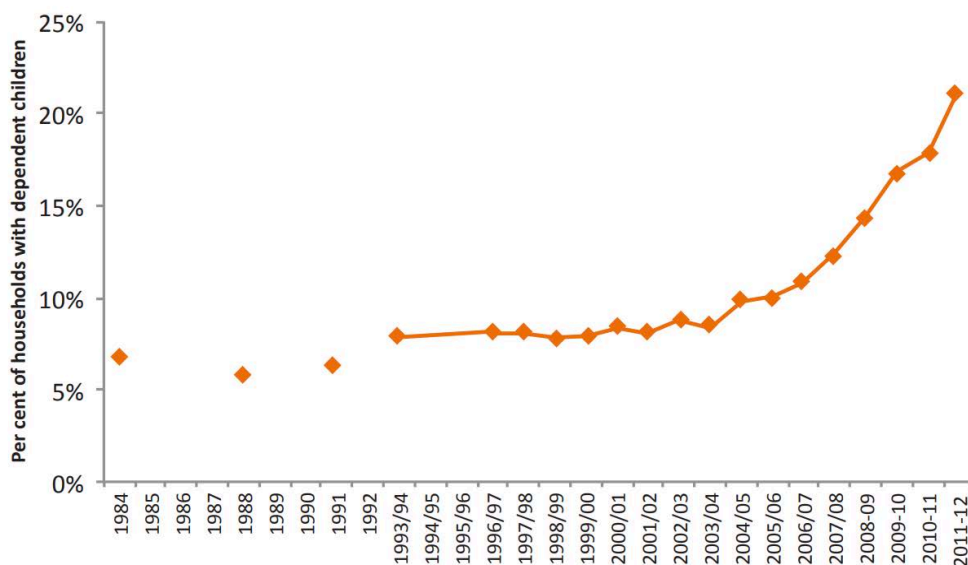
Figure from Dorling, D. (2018) *Peak Inequality*, Bristol: Policy Press

The Liberal Democrats are calling for 100,000 new homes for social rent per year, alongside a new ‘Rent to Own’ model for social housing – this would unfortunately encourage the depletion of the social housing stock. They are also calling for the introduction of loans to pay for deposits for renters under 30 – a stopgap measure which risks increasing private debt. That party also has a poor record on housing and homelessness. When it was in power with the Conservatives in 2010 the UK saw the greatest acceleration in homelessness, an issue caused by landlords more frequently evicting families partly because they knew they were safe to do so with little fear of government intervention.

Labour have put forward a plan to construct tens of thousands of council homes each year, going notably further than the two other parties in addressing the affordable housing shortage. These new homes would, on average, be more affordable than the broader category of social housing. Labour have also pledged to introduce long-term tenancies in the private sector, and for all newly constructed homes to be ‘zero carbon’ within 3 years – potentially saving an average of £200 per household – and they have suggested that now is the time to introduce rent caps.

Dorling, D. (2018) *Peak Inequality: Britain's ticking time bomb*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Figure 3.7.1: Households with children private renting, England 1984-2012



Note that Annex Table 1.5: Households with dependent children, by tenure, 2003-04 to 2015-16 gives the figures for the four years after this as being 21%, 24%, 24% and 25%, or 6,602,000 households in England by 2015/16 according to the 2015-16 English Housing Survey Headline Report.

Original source: Source: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) *State of the Nation* 2013 October 2013, London: The Stationery Office.

Figure from Dorling, D. (2018) *Peak Inequality*, Bristol: Policy Press

However, the most effective Labour policy of all is their aim to reducing income and wealth inequality, which is what taxing the top 5% partly achieves - alongside a serious desire to curb the rise in wealth inequality. The biggest waste of housing in England today is empty homes either being hoarded as an investment, or almost always empty as the second or third property of the very affluent. There are so many empty homes in the UK today as to be enough to house the homeless population 10 times over. Research from the University of York has demonstrated that is high income and wealth inequality that allows our housing stock to be so badly used. The current catastrophe began with the crash of 2008 but has been allowed to become so much worse since and was – all – unnecessary.