

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
2nd floor NW, Fry Building
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LONDON
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12 October 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to express grave concerns over government policy that dictates how local authorities manage housing stock for our residents. In light of Covid19, it is clearer than ever that safe and secure housing is both a right and a crucial aspect of public health. I am therefore asking you to build on the foundation laid by the previous administration in allowing greater borrowing for local authorities and to increase grant funding so that we can build the homes that are so desperately needed. Additionally, I am urging you to reconsider the Right to Buy, which is a huge contributor to the current housing crisis. Local authorities, like Newham, are keen to work with government to bring housing policy up to scratch and to tackle the scale of the housing crisis facing us.

This week Newham Council starts the consultation process on our new housing allocations strategy, which forms part of our new Housing Delivery Strategy, to tackle the housing challenge presented in our borough. I am proud of the way my administration has led on housing, from delivering genuinely affordable homes through our council owned housing delivery company, Populo Living, or keeping on track to build 1,000 new social rent homes by 2022. These achievements remain on target, despite the huge disruptions our borough has faced as a result of the Covid19 pandemic.

The new housing allocation strategy being consulted on is a significant move to prioritising those in greatest need, specifically looking at severe overcrowding. It has been designed to ensure that our most acutely vulnerable residents are given the homes they deserve. However, as my Deputy Mayor Cllr John Gray said recently, we are at the sharp end of the housing crisis here in Newham. Even with one of the most ambitious housing delivery plans in the capital, with ongoing support from the GLA, we have 27,000 people on our housing waiting list and 5,000 more in temporary accommodation. We urgently need policy change from government to be able to provide the secure and sustainable housing that all of our residents deserve.

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Government must give local authorities the tools we need in order to deliver for our residents, instead of expecting us to work with both hands tied behind our back. Whilst the lifting of the HRA borrowing cap announced under the previous Conservative administration was a step in the right direction, there needs to be reassurances to local authorities that the interest rate hike on Public Works Loans Board borrowing will not apply to infrastructure projects that include desperately needed housing. Additionally, government must increase grant funding so that local authorities can build – additional funding under the previous Conservative administration was again, welcome but inadequate.

Even with increased borrowing ability, local authorities are seeing desperately needed council housing stock slip away under the Right to Buy. With so few restrictions surrounding the sale of council homes, in Newham alone we have lost 9,000 homes over the past 25 years, with 47% of these 'flipped' to be rented out in the private rental sector. It cannot be right that local authorities are having to rent back homes they used to own at exorbitant rates in order to provide temporary accommodation for some of the most vulnerable in our society. Right to Buy has been abolished in both Scotland and Wales in the last four years, and the question of why it remains in place in England remains unanswered. The legislation is not fit for purpose, and I call on the government to undertake a thorough look at the Right to Buy legislation and how it is hamstringing local authorities in our desire to build better homes and better futures for our residents.

Covid19 has made all of us take stock of the weaknesses in our current system, for we are all only as protected as the most vulnerable in our society. In my borough, the mortality rate has been devastating, contributed to in large part by the housing crisis, including severe overcrowding and large houses in multiple occupation in our private rental sector. We have worked tirelessly with government to support the measures taken to protect our residents, and have used the opportunities such as, Everyone In, to assess the multiple needs our homeless and rough sleeping populations and put sustainable plans in place for their housing requirements.

There is another opportunity that emerges from the tragedy of this pandemic – an opportunity for government to reassess how local authorities can deliver housing, and work with us to deliver homes for all. Investment made now will pay for itself many times over, in housing and welfare benefits, but also in the health and wellbeing of our communities. Policy change will deliver far better value than our current system, which has resulted in generating huge amounts of private wealth, and not enough homes for those in need.

I do hope these concerns are taken under consideration and look forward to your response. I am sending a copy of this to the members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rokhsana Fiaz".

Rokhsana Fiaz OBE
Mayor of Newham
People at the heart of everything we do

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