

# Bodmin Town Council



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Date: 3 October 2018

Our Ref:  
SMF/Cons/NDfSH/2018

Your Ref:

Dear Sir / Madam

## **A New Deal for Social Housing**

Bodmin Town Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 'A New Deal for Social Housing' paper which was presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. I can advise that this matter was considered by Bodmin Town Council's Planning Committee when it met on 19 September and again on 3 October 2018 and I have been instructed to write making the following response:

These comments are made from the perspective that Bodmin Town Council is one of the largest and most proactive town councils in Cornwall. The Town Council provides a range of high quality services and facilities throughout the town and has a budgeted operational expenditure of £1.5 Million in the financial year 2018/19.

Bodmin Town Council considers that there needs to be a step change in the way social housing is designed, built, maintained and managed. Core values and principles around housing being provided to meet the needs and expectations of residents seems to have been replaced with a consideration based on the long-term investment forecast that property rentals can yield rather than utilising any rental returns to better maintain the property and any concomitant facilities into the future. The current situation with the social housing system has been the result of long-term policy neglect and it is questioned whether the proposals in this paper will only add to the layers of bureaucracy making the social housing landscape more confusing and diverting much

needed cash to additional administrative functions rather than being utilised to maintain and enhance basic accommodation requirements for many tenants.

In terms of the complaint procedure and process, Bodmin Town Council would recommend the removal of the democratic filter as it would cause unnecessary delays for a complainant. The requirement for a tenant to exhaust the local complaints procedure prior to contacting a designated person (who may or may not agree to refer to the Housing Ombudsman) places a restriction on an individual's access to justice and could be seen to undermine the complainant. This situation might add more fuel to the perception of stigma. Complainants will be looking for a swift resolution to any problem and for this reason the process needs to reflect that desire, particularly for issues where safety is a concern or there is a risk of a resident being exposed to harm. The process needs accelerating and for any barriers / hurdles, such as the democratic filter, to be removed.

Residents must be able to access the right support and advice when making a complaint. Organisations such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau and Shelter are identified by Cornwall Council as being able to provide support, however it was recently announced that Shelter's only branch in Cornwall has closed and funding cuts were being considered by Cornwall Council (2018/19) for the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) due to the ongoing implications of austerity. Support services are limited in Cornwall and if a decision is made regarding CAB in the future it would be detrimental to tenants wishing to access support to make a complaint about housing. There is a need for a stronger representation for residents at a national level, for example with the introduction of a programme similar to the National Tenant Voice to ensure that social housing tenants have a say in shaping national policy on housing issues. It is imperative that people with life experience of being a tenant have an input into the policy drafting process, as this will achieve a fairer, inclusive deal.

Bodmin Town Council considers that in order to ensure that funding is targeted to address existing problems with poorly maintained housing stock, which would be much welcomed by tenants and assist with addressing the perception felt by a number of social housing residents evidenced in the paper around stigma, there would appear to be a need to consider a meaningful redress and overhaul in the process through streamlined and clear policy. The Town Council is of the view that there are currently too many layers of bureaucracy which makes the social housing landscape confusing and which leads to many tenants feeling not listened to and ignored. Whilst a review of the system, the way in which complaints are managed and the role of the regulator are applauded, there perhaps need to be a period of reflection through that process to explore whether a more traditional approach, based on a core set of values and principles could be the bedrock for long-term improvements.

The Decent Homes Standard is a good example of where guiding principles can lead to cross sector (private and social landlord) improvements in property maintenance and safety. This will assist with addressing the stigma residents feel around not being listened to and that their voice does not count when it comes to issues relating to their home. Whilst social landlords should have clearer and more transparent complaints procedures with some redress through the democratic process, some private landlords

can feel beyond reproach and this juxtaposition needs to be addressed to make a fairer system for tenants.

The governments focus has been on expanding the affordable housing programme to meet the diverse housing needs of the country. However, for many, they are still living in existing, older style housing stock that is in need of an investment programme. It will be a challenge to align government thinking with improvement works to properties, as there will be a large number of landlords in control of aging housing stock who will face large costs implementing any recommendations from the Decent Homes Standard. The concern would be that costs get passed on to tenants through increased rents. Bodmin Town Council considers it imperative that landlords are open to engaging with their tenants and listening to their concerns on matters of safety. It is therefore recommended that through any reform, landlords be required to rectify faults relating to fire safety or carbon monoxide issues within clear and constrained time limits.

Bodmin Town Council would support the new safety measures in the private rented sector being applicable to social housing so that there is a clear strategy irrespective of whether landlords are operating in the private or social sector.

An additional barrier that government needs to be cognisant of is the shrinking funding cake across all sectors, which continues to reduce through annual and / or concomitant cuts at alarming rates. To truly deliver social housing reform, there needs to be a shift change in the ethos of rental (income) generation and cash return, to providing a quality service based on the customer first. This should be a much higher priority as it is at the centre of the stigma issues identified in the paper i.e. a fairly basic right for tenants to live in a decent, warm and safe home.

Bodmin Town Council does however consider that there are steps being taken by some principal authorities to provide better homes for the future, both to rent and to buy. Cornwall Council's Contemporary Cornish Living is setting the tone with building attractive homes with lower running costs and with more generous space when compared with some other housing provides in the private sector. This project, with a development currently in the final build stages in Bodmin, is a step in the right direction and which is focussed on the community by offering stability through long-term tenancies and includes good design and consideration to space standards which fair better than some private developers where high density is based on profit. The Contemporary Cornish Living project, and the amount of thought and detail that has been given to future residents, appears to be paving the way to provide quality homes for the future. This project may address issues of stigma and should be an opportunity to assess this type of scheme, with any future review, as it is considered locally to be a positive development which might help inform any 'best practice' guidance within a policy setting.

Bodmin Town Council considers it an imperative undertaking that through the planning process and the Decent Homes Standard, safety systems such as fire alarms, sprinklers, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are installed as a basic standard requirement with any new builds, but particularly for any homes of multiple occupation. There would of course be a requirement for landlords to implement regular maintenance

inspections given the range of replacement dates with carbon monoxide alarms and annual tests of fire alarms.

Bodmin Town Council does not consider it appropriate that landlords or developers are rewarded for work, as this is commercially motivated (not altruistic) and from which their primary driver is profit margin. On the contrary, the Town Council is of the firm view that those that fail their tenants and / or cut corners to maximise profits whilst putting the health and wellbeing of tenants at risk, should be penalised and any criminal offence and conviction pursued by the appropriate authorities (Police, Health and Safety Executive etc).

Your kind assistance in this matter is much appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S.M. Facer'.

S M Facer  
**Town Clerk**