

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Private Rented Sector - Follow up report to the themed October debate.	
REPORT OF Cabinet Member for Better Homes	
FOR SUBMISSION TO Housing Scrutiny Committee	DATE 10 December 2024
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT</p> <p>This report provides an overview of the Full Council themed debate on 14th October 2024.</p> <p>The report summarises the key points made by the 5 speakers, and subsequent debate at Full Council. The report highlights the next steps from the discussion and implementing recommendations of the Council's next steps with the private rented sector.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</p> <p>The following reports were used to produce this report:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Private rented sector – Themed debate report 2. Appendix 1 – Private rented sector housing standards key data <p>Contact Officer: Darren Wilsher, Private Sector Housing Service Manager, 5 Pancras Square, London N1C 4AG, telephone 020 79742797, email: darren.wilsher@camden.gov.uk</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>The meeting be asked to note the report.</p>	

Signed:



Councillor Sagal Abdi-Wali, Cabinet Member for Better Homes

1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1. This report provides an update to Full Council further to the themed debate on the private rented sector on 14th October 2024. The report summarises the debate and provides an update on how Camden, working with partners and communities, will respond and continue to work to improve standards within the private rented sector.
- 1.2. The Council was grateful to have five external speakers join the debate with a range of professional and personal experiences of the private rented sector:
 - Robert Taylor – Organiser, Camden Federation of Private Tenants
 - Gabriela Tocu– Head of Advice, Citizens Advice Camden
 - Ben Reeves-Lewis – Co-founder, Safer Renting
 - Matt Sedlow – Private renter
 - Conor O’Shea – Head of Campaigns, Generation Rent

2. SUMMARY OF THE FULL COUNCIL DEBATE

- 1.1. The debate was introduced by Councillor Abdi-Wali, Cabinet Member for Better Homes.
- 1.2. Councillor Abdi-Wali introduced the Private Rented Sector report, which was published to provide background information on the various issues concerning the private rented sector. The sector had increased dramatically over the last few decades, with 36% of Camden residents now living in private rented accommodation, with average monthly rents at £2,000, the sector is increasingly being seen to be unaffordable alongside sub-standard living conditions. Over the last 15-years there has been a 73% increase in property prices, leading to a net loss in social housing and driving residents into the private rented sector. Cllr Abdi-Wali stated that over 9,000 council properties have been lost via Right to Buy, with over half of these now estimated as being sub-let as private rented accommodation.
- 1.3. Councillor Abdi-Wali highlighted that homelessness approaches to the Council have doubled since 2021, with over 900 households now in temporary accommodation at the time of the debate. The Council had historically relied on the private rented sector to provide housing solutions for those residents facing homelessness, however only 2.3% of rental listings are now affordable to those under a Local Housing Allowance, when the figure had been 18.9% just three years ago.

- 1.4. Labour administration considers housing a fundamental right and wants to champion the cause of private renters. Councillor Abdi-Wali stated that the proposals under the Renters' Rights Bill to end no fault evictions and improve standards is a critical first step and that the Council is ready to collaborate with the newly elected Labour Government as they introduce the bill and ensure that these reforms translate into real change for Camden residents. The Council's goal is to work with responsible landlords to create a sustainable rental market that prioritises the welfare of Camden's communities.
- 1.5. Robert Taylor spoke about the private rented sector, quoting the English Housing Survey which states that the private rented sector is the most diverse in the country and the [Cowan report](#) stating that it is the sector where the poorest people now live. Robert outlined the findings of a report by the Nationwide Foundation, which identified 6 groups that are "vulnerable to harm" that are living in the private rented sector, which are those households with dependent children, older residents, disabled, those in receipt of benefits, migrants and low income households not in receipt of benefits. Robert outlined that private renters are different to council tenants in that their first response to issues with their landlord and accommodation is not to call the council and secondly, do not have a first point of contact such as a housing officer or neighbourhood manager to contact to assist, they are on their own. He further explained that private renters contacting the Council have been told that we are only able to assist council tenants, reinforcing the perception that the council is only here for council tenants. Robert suggested that considering the increase in the private rented sector and its links with other housing provision in the borough, that there is an urgent need for a new housing strategy and dedicated private rented sector strategy. He then stated that many elements of the Renters' Rights Bill will require some form of local authority enforcement and understanding of the need to be properly resourced from central government.
- 1.6. Gabriela Tocu outlined that Citizen's Advice Camden advised 10,000 individuals on social welfare issues, with housing being the second highest area of advice, with lack of affordability the main concern for private renters. Gabriela outlined the financial challenges and decisions that private renters must make, with many claiming benefits, having to decide whether to pay their rent, heating or food. Gabriela stated that securing properties to rent is also challenging, with many being rejected as they are in receipt of benefits and when attempting to find a property, they will often sign a tenancy agreement without seeing the property, and only seeing disrepair issues once they move in. She stated that the majority of tenants will not report issues to their landlord as they will seek retaliatory eviction, attempt to charge them for the repairs, or put rents up to cover repair costs. Citizen's Advice Camden received calls from tenants concerning illegal eviction and harassment and noted that Camden supports renters with these issues; unfortunately, it is only when Citizen's Advice contacts landlords that they realise what responsibilities they have as a landlord.
- 1.7. Ben Reeves-Lewis spoke about the Renters' Rights Bill, which covers a range of proposals to improve the private rented sector. The Bill proposes that local authorities will be responsible for policing the sector and that the Government has stated there will be no new money to assist, requiring local authorities to

think smarter about how to deliver services. Ben outlined that Camden are a lead authority on enforcement and will ensure that Civil Penalty Notices issued are paid by landlords, with any recovered fines being reinvested in additional enforcement resourcing. He advised that with the further duties on local authorities being introduced under the Renters' Rights Bill, failure to enforce could result in judicial reviews. Ben outlined the work of Safer Renting, responding to over 300 cases of illegal eviction and harassment every year, providing a service for 12 London borough's, including Camden.

- 1.8. Matt Sedlow spoke about his experience of being a private renter in Camden. He moved to London to study at the London School of Economics, initially in student halls and then moving into rented accommodation in Kings Cross. Matt outlined the challenges with his flat ranging from damp and mould and that towards the end of his tenancy his landlord advising him that it was going to be re-let at £700 more per month than he was currently paying, which he could not afford. Matt advised that he was then homeless for the next 6-months despite actively searching for alternative accommodation, not knowing where he would be sleeping from one night to the next, resorting to sleeping on couches and floors. He outlined the additional challenges faced as a student with securing rented accommodation, with agents not returning calls, the need to bid way above asking rent, paying 6-months' rent upfront and the need to secure guarantors. Matt summarised, that unless there was change, many residents will need to leave Camden, London or the UK.
- 1.9. Conor O'Shea started by thanking the Council for discussing the private rented sector, particularly in a local authority that is doing better than most others. Generation Rent was setup 10-years ago as nobody was talking about the issues with the private rented sector and now these types of debates are taking place. Conor wanted to talk about beyond the Renters' Rights Bill being introduced by the new Labour Government, and what the local authority can do. He stated how important that Rent Repayment Orders are moving forward, providing justice for tenants and enabling renters to be more confident about reporting sub-standard accommodation; "we need to harness the power of those affected moving forward". Conor also raised energy efficiency in the sector and the death of Awaab Ishak; Awaab's Law will be extended to the private rented sector, requiring landlords to take prompt action when damp and mould is reported by tenants and therefore an opportunity for local authorities to support this via an awareness campaign.
- 1.10. Councillors made a range of contributions to the debate, and thanked officers and Council colleagues for their work in supporting private rented sector tenants. Many Councillors who have been or are private renters recounted their experiences of living in the sector, ranging from rent hikes, facing eviction, damp and mould and challenges getting repairs completed by their landlord.
- 1.11. There was a question from Councillor Frondigoun around the loss of dignity for private renters and whether the Renter's Rights Bill goes far enough to support them.

- 1.12. The topic of raising awareness was raised by Councillor Simon and Councillor Wright on how the Council can support private renters. Keen to explore ideas on how to achieve this, particularly in relation to proposed new protections afforded by the Bill. ~~Cllr Wright stated~~ That private renters are the least well connected to draw on the support they need and that the Council needs to do a better job to reach out.
- 1.13. Councillor Kirk outlined the recent meeting he hosted in Belsize for the Camden Federation of Private Tenants and Camden officers talking about benefit support, enforcement and licensing of houses in multiple occupation. The majority of attendees assumed that the Council could only assist with social housing, reinforced by the Camden website, although acknowledged the dedicated Camden Private Renters website.
- 1.14. On the topic of enforcement, Councillor Simon queried what plans were being considered for enforcement around the new powers under the bill and how this would take shape. Councillor McNamara queried how best they can support private renters that contact them with issues concerning their property.
- 1.15. Councillor Cooper queried on how the Council can maintain mixed communities against the challenge of affordability for families to rent in Camden. With many properties being converted into small flats, there are fewer homes suitable for families to start and grow in Camden.
- 1.16. Councillor Filer queried what the Council was doing to prepare for the introduction of the Renter's Rights Bill.
- 1.17. Councillor Harrison had heard many negative stories from tenants of registered social landlords and wanted to understand what the Council's experience is of them.
- 1.18. Councillor Abdi-Wali closed by thanking the speakers for their time and contribution to the debate. She acknowledged that the Council was doing a lot of good work to support the sector, however there was always room for improvement.

2. NEXT STEPS

- 2.1. Camden Council is committed to continue its support for the private rented sector, ensuring that residents will have a decent, safe, warm home.
- 2.2. The Council will continue its proactive work to improve standards within the private rented sector with a view to renewing the discretionary borough wide additional HMO licensing scheme.
- 2.3. The Council is committed to raise awareness and improve engagement with private renters by working with members to hold a series of private renter's ward-

based surgeries. The aim of the surgeries will be to ensure that renters develop a better understanding of their rights as well as understanding what support there is from the Council.

- 2.4. The Council will continue the work to improve the Camden website to ensure that private renters are directed to support effectively and ensuring that relevant services are aware of the support the council can provide.
- 2.5. The Council will continue to prepare for the new duties and enforcement powers that are due to come into force via the Renters' Rights Bill, ensuring that both renters and landlords are aware of new protections and responsibilities moving forward, including enforcement action that will be taken where appropriate.
- 2.6. The Council has been an active campaigner on homelessness issues in recent years, especially as the numbers presenting as homeless have increased so dramatically. The change of government presents an opportunity to address some of the barriers the Council currently faces in meeting our homelessness obligations, especially in the private rented sector. The Council calls for change that will help combat homelessness by making the private rented sector meet residents' needs such as; Local Housing Allowance linked to private rents, government to incentivise landlords to work with boroughs to prevent and relieve homelessness via access to grant or loan funding for net zero improvements and to buy into a cross-cabinet homelessness strategy across key players such as the Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. Meeting the housing challenge is a top priority for the Council and we will be working on a range of requests to national government to increase the quantity and quality of housing, ensuring that everyone has a place to call home that is safe, warm and dry.

3. Legal Implications

- 3.1. The Borough Solicitor has been consulted and has no comments to add.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1. The Executive Director of Corporate Services has been consulted and has no comments to add.

5. Environmental Implications

- 5.1 There are no specific environmental implications.