



# Briefings

Policy Update April 2024



# Introduction

A few bits of general news, before we get into specific topics:

## Rents are up, but landlords are still concerned about their finances

We've just started a new financial year, and most tenants' rent will have gone up by up to 7%. However London Councils, representing local authorities in London, have shown in their [new analysis](#) that social rent levels in coming years will add up to a £700m shortfall in their Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets. The gap comes about because the Government's recent reductions in rents and restricted rent increases have come at the same time as substantial increases in costs due to high inflation. This particularly affects maintenance costs, as building cost increases have outstripped 'normal' CPI inflation, and other pressures, such as building safety and raising standards haven't helped. Without any extra funding, or bigger rent increases (which would obviously be a problem for tenants), there's a risk that HRAs could struggle to stay afloat. Meanwhile, Hyde Housing Association's Chief Executive is [arguing](#) for a longer-term rent settlement, describing it as 'madness' that rents are agreed by the government year to year. He's pushing for a longer-term settlement, to allow for better financial planning. It's been announced today that the current rent formula (CPI+1%) will be rolled over to 2025/26. It's towards the end of this [media release](#) about regulation.

## Places for People takes over failed for-profit

Members who remain concerned about the role of for-profit landlords in social housing may be reassured by Places For People's [recent takeover](#) of failing for-profit Rosewood Housing. The change follows a [Regulatory Notice](#) in November 2023, triggered by the financial failure of the developer that had set up Rosewood Housing. Places for People is one of the country's largest social landlords, managing 'more than 240,000 homes', while Rosewood's 61 homes, including 'Affordable' rent and shared ownership, meant it was one of the smallest. In this case, Rosewood's tenancies have been seamlessly added to Places for People's homes, with no effect on tenancies and full integration planned for the future. As for-profit social landlords get bigger, it's not clear how straightforward such rescues will be.

## UK Housing Review published

Every year, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) publishes the UK Housing Review. It's the only publication that brings together information about housing from across the UK, together with relevant commentary, and the latest edition was launched on 20<sup>th</sup> March. Most of the Review's content can be found on its [open access website](#), but CIH members can [get the full publication](#) which also includes four essays on contemporary issues, including the [eye-catching demonstration](#) that building 90,000 social rent homes a year is both possible and desirable.



### Prince William and Homewards initiative

During a pretty troubling month for the royal family, Prince William has taken the time to promote their Homewards initiative at an event in Sheffield. Homewards looks to access long-term family homes in six locations across the UK: Lambeth; Aberdeen; Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole; Northern Ireland; Sheffield; and Newport. The scheme involves seed funding for local initiatives, developed in collaboration with 'local coalitions of committed people, organisations and businesses', a local lead, and a research partner to evaluate the initiative through its five years of life.

As well as gaining access to homes, the local initiatives will deliver support packages for landlords and tenants to help make sure the tenancies are sustainable. The hope is that these demonstration projects can contribute to making homelessness 'rare, brief and unrepeatable', not least by including the voices of people who have experienced homelessness themselves.

While it's easy to dismiss the involvement of the royals in social issues, their visibility and influence can be a helpful catalyst, helping to create coalitions and drive agendas forwards. We shouldn't forget that the Duke of Edinburgh's Inquiry into British Housing was a key prompt for the establishment of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service in 1988. There's a link [here](#) to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's follow up report in 1991, which briefly outlines progress on key recommendations.

## From Westminster

The budget in March didn't include much news for housing, although it was confirmed that [LHA rates would be going up from 1 April](#), which was actually announced back in the Autumn. We don't know whether this is a one-off, and it won't have a direct effect on current social housing tenants, although it may give some private renters a bit of breathing space. However, some social landlords cap new 'Affordable' Rents at LHA levels, so they may decide to review rents for any new properties. They will need to bear in mind that the household benefit cap is still frozen and will still deprive many people of the full value of LHA or housing benefit. Based on the new LHA rates, it will affect out of work families in [over 80% of local areas](#).

At the time of writing, parliament was having a two-week recess, meaning that progress has stalled again on the long-awaited Renters' Reform Bill. This Bill, which was introduced in May 2023 has already been [watered down](#) quite a bit. While the Bill - when it eventually becomes law - won't affect council tenants it will have an [impact on housing associations](#), and the extra security it offers private tenants may help reduce homelessness. The current uncertainty is unhelpful for all.



### Local elections – don't lose your vote

On 2 May, every area in England and Wales will have at least one election: for councillors, an elected mayor, or a Police and Crime Commissioner. Local Authorities that are holding elections are already in the '[pre-election period](#)' with restrictions on what officers can say and do. You can find out [here](#) what's going on in your area. The elections to housing authorities (either the district council or a unitary/metropolitan council) are likely to be of most interest to Tpas members, but this round of local elections is also being [seen as an indicator](#) of what could happen in a general election.

Tenants are less likely to vote than home owners, with almost one in four social housing tenants saying they don't plan to vote in this [article](#) from YouGov. So with tenants' voices going unheard, it's maybe not that surprising that political parties have tended to favour home ownership.

You can register to vote until one minute to midnight on 16 April via [this gov.uk website](#). The site includes an 'easy read' step by step guide that's aimed at people with a learning disability but will be useful for everyone. You'll also need [photo ID](#) to vote, but if you don't have any you can get a [Voter Authority Certificate](#) up to 5pm on 24 April once you're registered to vote.

[If you're concerned about safety, all of this can be done anonymously](#), and you'll get a special voter ID that has your picture, but not your name or any other details about you. Your poll card will just have a number on it, to match up with your ID, and no other details.

## Building quality and Fire Safety

### Building Safety Regulator

The Building Safety Regulator (BSR) has launched a [new campaign](#) to tell high-rise tenants about the new building safety rules and how they can hold their landlord to account. It has also launched a new regular newsletter for tenants that you can sign up to [here](#). The campaign is aimed at all residents, rather than involved tenants, so it focuses on individual rights rather than the wider requirements (such as developing and evaluating a resident engagement strategy for each building). But it's very accessible and includes a video that could be linked into other materials.

### Guidance on second staircases

Although it won't affect existing buildings, members may be interested to know that the Government has issued its planned [requirements](#) regarding so-called 'second staircases' in residential buildings. Responding to consultation feedback, they have agreed that new residential buildings of 18m or more should require a second staircase, so that this will be in line with other safety requirements. The requirement is intended to 'facilitate



evacuation if a 'Stay Put' recommendation needs to be overridden'. The requirement will be fully live from October 2026, as explained in [this article](#) from Housing Today.

There's still no progress on [Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans](#) (PEEPs).

### **Regulatory Notices linked to safety**

Both the London Borough of [Lewisham](#) and [Kirklees](#) Metropolitan Borough Council have received regulatory notices in connection with tenant safety. Both notices were issued following self-referral and were linked to failures to complete remedial actions identified in fire safety assessments, together with their approach on damp and mould. Lewisham Council also had a high number of repairs uncompleted within timescale and problems with Decent Homes compliance.

Both councils have plans in place to address their failures, and the Regulator will monitor their improvement.

## **The Tenant's Voice in well-managed housing services**

With the proactive consumer regulation regime going live, there's plenty going on in the area of tenant engagement. So we're just adding a few bits and pieces about initiatives that may make a difference to housing services.

### **New energy for Stop Social Housing Stigma?**

With the consultation on [Competence and Conduct](#) standard still live, it's an important time for discussions about tackling stigma. So it's great timing for [Nic Bliss joining Stop Social Housing Stigma](#) as their first ever campaign director.

### **Clarion's stock rationalisation**

Huge national housing association Clarion, who have been strongly criticised as part of the media focus on housing standards, have been quietly working their way through plans to hand over homes to more local ownership and management. Their latest deals with [Grand Union](#) and [Portsmouth City Council](#) see almost 1,000 homes transferred. There will be little change for the new Grand Union tenants, as they've had management services from Grand Union since their homes were built. But in Portsmouth, the council and Clarion have been consulting extensively with tenants, shared owners, and leaseholders, and will be visiting each home to explain the changes and make sure tenants are aware of their rights.



**Genuinely affordable social rented housing**

Tpas is a long-standing supporter of genuinely affordable social housing, so it was interesting to see [this article](#) in Inside Housing about which landlords have built the most social rented homes in the last ten years, and why they haven't managed to build more. What really stands out is the role of some of the biggest housing associations who are often criticised for becoming more and more like commercial developers. Even though it's a small proportion of what they build, their overall development programmes are so big that they are still the biggest providers of new social rented homes.

**South Tyneside Council housing to be brought in-house**

After 18 years as an Arms-Length Management Organisation (ALMO), South Tyneside Council [has agreed](#) to return its council housing to direct management. The move is linked to the new regulatory regime but is also intended to save money and provide better links to other council services. Although only 11% of tenants voted in the ballot, 94% of those voting agreed to the change.

**Influencing opportunities**

This month, the Housing Ombudsman is full of influencing opportunities, including the opportunity to [join their Residents' Panel](#), which is taking applications up to 30 April. Their other opportunities are listed below.

And here's your regular reminder of what we're still waiting for:

- the (updated) Decent Homes Standard
- minimum energy efficiency standards (to be included in the new Decent Homes Standard)
- the Access to Information Scheme for housing association tenants

The Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities is also due to publish their consultation response on changes to electrical safety requirements in social housing.

<a href="#">Competence and Conduct Standard</a>	<p>This consultation proposes regulatory requirements for senior housing managers to have, or be working towards, a relevant qualification.</p> <p>The consultation closes at 11.59 on 2 April 2024</p>
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<a href="#"><u>Housing Ombudsman's approach to Good Practice</u></a>	<p>The Ombudsman is asking for views about how their Good Practice scheme should operate, and what topics should be included.</p> <p>The consultation closes on 21 May</p>
<a href="#"><u>Housing Ombudsman's Business Plan 2024-2025</u></a>	<p>There are a couple of days left to feed into this consultation, which sets out how the Ombudsman will step up into its statutory role.</p> <p>The consultation closes on 5 April</p>