How can we increase the number of affordable homes to rent and buy?

The Challenge
Getting to grips with the spiralling cost of housing is a Labour priority. Millions of people now struggle week-to-week because of this country’s housing crisis. The Tories’ record on housing during the last Parliament was one of five years of failure, with rapidly rising rents, more homelessness, higher housing benefit spending and fewer homes built than in any peacetime period since the 1920s.

Home ownership is down sharply over the last five years – there are over 200,000 fewer homeowners since 2010, with young people hit hardest of all. There are also challenges in the rental sector with 900,000 additional families renting privately in England since 2010 and they are paying £1,600 more on average every year in rent.

The Government has failed to build the affordable homes we need to buy or rent. Social home building is at its lowest level for over two decades and the Tories have broken their promise to replace homes one-for-one through the Right to Buy, only replacing one for every eight sold. The Conservatives have failed those who are most at need and desperate – rough sleeping has doubled and statutory homelessness has risen by a third since 2010.

Far too many people are struggling with high housing costs. From young people forced to stay at home with parents and families stuck renting privately, to young couples with no hope of ever buying a home together and older people who can’t find homes fit to meet their needs.

An affordable home is not just something that’s nice to have, it’s the bedrock for the lives and futures of individuals and families throughout the country.

The Issues
The Tory failure on housing on all fronts means it falls to Labour to lead the fresh thinking and a wide public debate about how to tackle the country’s housing crisis.

We want to find the answers to the lack of affordable homes to rent and buy. We have to think bigger and be bolder as part of a new debate about how to tackle the country’s housing crisis. This means drawing on the best of what Labour did in government and our policy work in the last five years including the Lyons review, as well as coming up with fresh thinking. Private house builders play an important role, but strong leadership and action from housing associations and local and national government is needed too. Tackling the housing crisis means getting to grips with the issues that hold back the building of affordable homes including; the skills shortage, lack of finance, and concerns around local planning.

We are also concerned by the condition of some housing. We must make sure that no one has to live in substandard accommodation or accept unfair charges or unscrupulous letting practices.
Labour’s record
With Labour in government, we built two million homes, a million more households became home-owners, council and housing association homes received much-needed investment to bring them up to a decent standard, and towards the end of our time in government we made the biggest investment in affordable homes for a generation, including setting up the local authority new build programme to get councils building homes again.

Making home-ownership more affordable
The number of people who own their own home has decreased by over 200,000 since 2010. This crisis is particularly affecting young people, with the number of under-35s who own their home failing by a fifth since David Cameron came to power. Labour is committed to dealing with this problem head on.

Questions
What are the best achievements of Labour in government on housing that we should draw on when thinking about fresh ideas for the future?
What are the areas of housing where Labour in government should have done more?
In your view which housing policies and key messages in the last manifesto most resonated with voters? Which policies did not resonate so well? Was there anything missing from our policy offer to voters on this issue?

Improving the rental sector
The number of families living in the private rented sector has increased by 900,000 since 2010. Private rents recently hit a record average high of £803 per month, an increase of 20 per cent since 2010. In addition to high rents, insecurity is a big concern. There are 1.6 million families with children living in the private rented sector where their landlord can evict them with just two months’ notice.

Meanwhile there are now over 100,000 fewer council homes than in 2010, and the number of social rented homes being built has fallen to the lowest level in a generation.

Questions
How can we ensure a greater supply of affordable social housing to rent?
How can we change perceptions around social housing?
What role can local authorities play?
How can we drive up standards in the private rented sector?
How can we put more power in the hands of tenants to ensure affordable properties are of a decent standard?

Building more high quality affordable homes by tackling the skills shortage
The UK faces a severe skills shortage which is affecting the type, quality and number of homes that can be built. In a recent survey 53 per cent of construction companies reported a difficulty sourcing labour.

This is compounded by the 19 per cent of the construction workforce that are set to retire in the next five to ten years. This all leads to serious concerns about the Government’s lack of response to this skills shortage.

Questions
What is affordable housing?
How can we help more young people and families on ordinary incomes buy a home?
What role is there for shared ownership or discounted homes to buy?
What measures could support young people in particular to find an affordable home to buy?
What role can local authorities and co-operatives play?
We must ensure that through the construction sector we can help create quality jobs and apprenticeships. With a skills shortage, people are rightly concerned about whether the homes that are being built are of a sufficient high quality, fit for a family to live in.

We need to carefully consider how best to make homes meet a high environmental standard with an ambition towards zero-carbon homes.

Questions
What more can we do to encourage people, in particular under-represented groups such as women, into the construction industry, including in green construction jobs, and tackle the growing skills shortage?

What can be done to ensure those new homes that are being built are to a sufficient size, high quality and environmental standard?

This paper has been produced by the Communities Policy Commission responsible for developing Labour Party policy on Housing, Local Government, Energy and Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs and Culture, Media and Sport. We want to hear your views on affordable housing, these can be submitted via yourbritain.org.uk.

So your view on this document can be heard at the National Policy Forum meeting this summer initial submissions are invited by 8 June 2016.