

Housing and Covid-19: Recommendations

“We have to start treating housing as a fundamental human right.” – Keir Starmer, December 2019

*During the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of housing is more apparent than ever. Housing policy needs to be developed with the participation of those most affected by it. **It is time to rethink exactly how we view housing.** We need to see it shift from being viewed as a commodity to a human right. The right to adequate housing has the following criteria: security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, safety, and accessibility.*

Short term recommendations:

- 1. Suspend or reduce rents for those whose incomes are affected by Covid-19,** to ensure no-one pays more than 30% of their income on housing. Ensure no-one carries forward any housing debt that would threaten their standard of living, in line with human rights standards. [1]
- 2. Suspend all evictions.** Protection against forced evictions is a key element of the right to adequate housing. The government’s proposal to scrap Section 21 ‘no-fault’ evictions needs to be brought forward immediately. All other evictions should be frozen for 12 months including under Section 8 which allows for evictions due to rent arrears.
- 3. Ensure homes are habitable.** Habitability is a crucial part of the right to adequate housing. Houses must guarantee physical safety, provide adequate space, as well as protection from the elements. Emergency funding should be available for urgent repairs to sub-standard accommodation; in order to fix safety concerns or issues such as damp.
- 4. Expand homelessness outreach services.** Provide funding to local authorities to permanently house more rough sleepers who are at increased risk of contracting the virus.
- 5. Amend the benefits system.** Immediately scrap the five-week wait for Universal Credit payments which is a key cause of people falling into debt. Also, increase the housing element of Universal Credit to cover at least the average rent and scrap the bedroom tax.

Long term recommendations:

- 1. Recognise housing as a human right.** The right to adequate housing should be recognised and enshrined into domestic law along with our other internationally recognised economic, social and cultural rights.
- 2. Enact a significant social housebuilding programme.** We need at least 100,000 council homes to be built every year. These should be zero-carbon, affordable, sustainably sited, and energy-efficient homes.
- 3. Rent Controls.** Implement rent controls in UK cities to help with spiraling costs. Rent controls could sustainably bring down costs by capping rent at 30% of people’s income.
- 4. Address the issue of empty properties.** Take steps to tackle the problem of the multitude of long-term vacant properties, especially in cities while there are record numbers of people who are either in temporary accommodation or homeless.
- 5. End homelessness and rough sleeping.** Adopt a ‘Housing First’ policy to get rough sleepers off the streets and into permanent housing, as a starting point for them to rebuild their lives.

[1] Covid-19 Guidance Note: Protecting Renters and Mortgage Payers, Special Rapporteur on the right to Adequate Housing, United Nations, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_rent_and_mortgage_payers.pdf