

A private rented sector that works for everyone

Year one a call for change



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Creating change together



In recent years we have seen dramatic changes in the housing market in Camden with nearly a third of residents now living in private rented housing. Contrary to popular belief these are not just single people. Increasingly working

families are using private renting as a long-term solution due to a lack of affordable housing in London, raising their children in private rented homes.

With growth only set to continue, we want to do all we can to make sure that private renting works for everyone – tenants and landlords. This policy sets out a range of measures we will take to help us face the challenges in the private rented sector as it has such an important role in meeting housing need. There is no single solution - improvements in the sector need a diverse set of interventions.

Camden shouldn't just be a place for the very rich or the very poor, we have to take action to preserve what we all love so much about the borough - its unique social mix. The recently commissioned Equality Taskforce identified that there is a crucial need to ensure the right housing is available for Camden's diverse communities.

Property prices and rents in Camden continue to rise and, although we have one of the largest social housing building programmes in the country, this is far outweighed by the thousands of people who need affordable homes. Welfare benefit changes will have a particular impact on low-income families in inner London and this poses a growing risk of increasing child poverty. Some people are living in property conditions that fall well below minimum standards and some landlords are taking advantage of vulnerable tenants who are afraid to speak out against them. In the absence of regulation, letting agents are getting away with a lack of transparency and poor practices such as signing-on fees and double charging.

It's important to be clear that the private rented sector in Camden is not dominated by criminal or ineffective landlords. We have already led the way nationally in delivering the UK Landlord Accreditation Scheme (incorporating the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme), where we train and accredit landlords, and we will be campaigning regionally and nationally for more regulation in the sector.

I believe that we need to take action together - authorities, tenants and landlords - to drive up standards, improve affordability and stamp out criminal behaviour. All families in private rented housing should be entitled to homes which are safe, warm and secure in which to raise their children.

I look forward to working with tenants and landlords during the year ahead and beyond to create a better private rented sector for everyone.

**Councillor Sarah Hayward,
Leader of Camden Council**

Introduction

Camden sits at the heart of the world's most vibrant city and as such is a popular place to live. With house prices beyond the reach of many, the private rented sector has grown rapidly in recent years to meet the demand for housing. A third of households now live in the sector and it is our ambition that those households don't get left behind and are able to enjoy security, decent living conditions and feel empowered to assert their rights when things are not up to standard.

In our Camden Plan, a five-year vision for Camden, we committed to improve standards and affordability in the private rented sector. We also said that we will explore a new relationship and new business models with landlords.

Our recently commissioned Equality Taskforce explored how local public services can help address inequality in the borough - taking a fresh look at what influences inequality locally and exploring how it can best be tackled. One of its key recommendations is that the Council, local partners and the Government work to ensure the right housing for Camden's diverse communities.

This policy sets out our long-term goals and what we will be doing in year one to work towards them.

Camden, with the largest accreditation scheme in London and the South East of England, can act as a leading voice to influence change and drive up standards, improve security and make homes more affordable in the private rented sector. We will work with tenants, landlords, regional and national partners, and Government to raise awareness of the issues and develop innovative solutions. Throughout this policy we flag up the issues we want to campaign on, and provide our solutions to create positive change.

Our ambition:

> Improved property standards

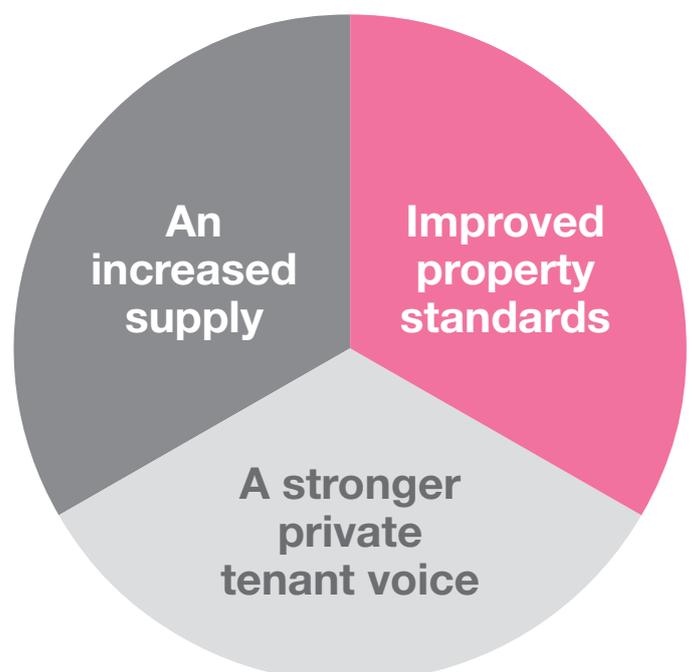
- Better homes for private tenants
- Faster action on enforcement
- Energy efficient homes
- A new relationship with private landlords empowered to provide a quality service

> A stronger private tenant voice

- More security and better rights and conditions for private tenants
- A partnership to tackle rogue landlords

> An increased supply

- Action on empty properties
- A greater number of affordable private rentals



Improved property standards

Better homes for private tenants

A third of private sector housing in Camden does not meet the Government's decent homes standard, which sets out the minimum standard for housing conditions. We believe everyone should be entitled to a home that meets these basic standards whether they live in the social or private rented sector.

Year one

Camden licenses 300 Homes in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). From this experience, we know licensing helps to tackle poor property conditions and we will be exploring a wider licencing scheme to raise the standard of private rentals.

Call for change

We call for a change in Government legislation to make it easier for local authorities to take more action to licence the sector

Faster action on enforcement

When we take action to enforce improvements to properties it can take a long time for landlords to carry out the necessary work. Managing this process takes up a significant proportion of the available resources within the Council, reducing the total number of enforcement actions we are able to carry out at any one time.

Year one

For those properties with serious concerns, we have begun to use our powers more to take over the management of properties. Over the next year, we will explore options to provide a service to help landlords to find reputable contractors that get repairs done quickly and to a good standard.

We have begun to use our powers more to take over the management of properties.

Call for change

We call for greater powers to take enforcement action against poor performing Landlords that are based overseas

Energy efficient homes

Many homes in Camden have poor insulation; this is a particular issue for homes in the private rented sector and older properties. Grants are available for home insulation which can bring down fuel bills, carbon emissions and reduce winter deaths.

Year one

We will raise awareness of our affordable warmth services, grants and national programmes such as the Green Deal, and Energy Company Obligation to help tenants and landlords improve the energy efficiency of their properties

A new relationship with private landlords - empowered to provide a quality service

Camden's private rented sector is a competitive marketplace with a mix of landlords ranging from single property owners to those with large portfolios. Many landlords in Camden with a small number of properties do not have professional training or may not be aware of their legal responsibilities as landlords. We have found that helping landlords with training, support, grants and financial incentives can be an effective way to avoid enforcement action and improve stock conditions overall.

Year one

We will set up a Camden Landlord Forum to give landlords a chance to meet face to face, share their views and find out about developments that matter to them.

We will improve our website to promote an enhanced and comprehensive offer to landlords, which will include a range of advice and services.

Camden will continue to host and expand the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme. The scheme provides reassurance to tenants and valuable training, advice and support for landlords.

Call for change

We call on the Government to promote landlord and agent accreditation schemes

A stronger private tenant voice

More security and better rights and conditions for tenants

Security of tenure is a key concern and impacts on outcomes for children living in the private rented sector. Families living in the sector should have the same opportunities to a stable home, to raise complaints against their landlord and to be able to form tenant organisations, as social housing tenants do. There should be greater regulation of the buy-to-let mortgage market, and landlords should be enabled to offer longer tenancy lengths to good tenants where both parties wish to enter into a long-term agreement.

Year one

We will work more closely with landlords to stop unnecessary evictions. We are developing new offers to help tenants keep their tenancy during periods of change as well as supporting landlords so they allow a tenant to stay during property improvements.

Call for change

We call for an end to 'retaliatory' evictions when a tenant complains about poor living standards

We call on financial institutions to be more flexible about lengths of tenancies for buy-to-let properties

We call on the government to promote longer term tenancies across the private rented sector

We call for further legislation to regulate agent fees

A partnership to tackle rogue landlords

While the majority of landlords provide a good quality service, there are a small number who do not. These landlords often take advantage of vulnerable tenants who do not feel able to complain. Often they are breaking the law.

Year one

We will share information across the Council, and with other local authorities to help identify unacceptable landlord behaviour. This includes benefit fraud, harassment, overcrowding and illegal lets allowing us to identify repeat offenders. We will use publicity around any prosecutions as a deterrent to other criminal landlords.

We will work with our partners in health, social care, Age Concern, the police and the fire brigade to identify vulnerable private tenants with substandard housing conditions so we can target our support.

Call for change

We call on more local authorities to join the Shelter campaign 'Evict Rogue Landlords'

An increased supply

Action on empty properties

Empty properties are an eyesore to the local community and a wasted asset. Bringing them back into use means we are making the best use of all the homes available.

Year one

We will work closely with owners to advise and assist them with bringing their properties back into use through grants and information about access to finance. We will make full use of our enforcement powers such as compulsory purchase orders (CPO) to bring homes back into use where owners do not comply. Our ambition is that, if we provide financial help to owners to bring homes back into use, those properties should be for homeless households in Camden.

Many homes that may appear to be empty are not, but are instead second homes. We will carry out a survey of 1,200 second homes that have been empty for two years or more, to see if there are any opportunities for us to get them back in to use. We will publish our findings so that communities understand the impact of second homes in the area.

A greater number of affordable private rentals

Finding sufficient affordable housing in Camden is challenging as house prices and rents, already some of the highest in the UK, continue to rise. We are committed to maintaining our diverse communities and it is vital we have a mix of housing that meets a range of needs. In particular, we want to make sure that the most vulnerable families on lower incomes are able to remain close to their family or other support networks in the borough.

Year one

We will set up a pilot social lettings agency for Camden Council leaseholders to provide rental homes at Local Housing Allowance rates. If successful we will extend this service to other home owners.

Developing more affordable housing is also important. The Camden Equality Taskforce recommended that one potential way to provide homes at a lower cost is to make the best use of existing public land to subsidise costs. Large institutional investors such as housing associations may also be able to provide cost efficient management of homes and longer tenancies that provide greater security for families. We will discuss affordable and secure rentals with institutional land owners in Camden (Universities, NHS, Church, Housing Associations) as recommended by the Equality Taskforce.

Call for change

We call on the Government to continue to encourage institutional investment in the private rented sector

We call on the Government to explore ways to stabilise rents, taking into account local wages and economic conditions

Future years

Over this first year (2013/2014) we will develop an evidence base to inform our delivery plans for future years. In 2014 we will publish progress report and a review this policy.

Tell us what you think

We'd like to hear from you about our calls for change in the private rented sector. Send your views to:

hsu@camden.gov.uk

More information

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