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Security of Tenure in Social Housing in England

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Security of Tenure in Social Housing in England

The Localism Act 2011 granted social landlords in England the right to award fixed term (flexible) tenancies, thereby ending the right of new tenants to a secure tenancy. Reform was justified via reference to a revisionist critique of social housing, which accused security of tenure of promoting dependency, undercutting social mobility and preventing the effective operation of the sector as a welfare service. This paper draws on empirical evidence from qualitative interviews with more than 140 social tenants to explore the legitimacy of these claims and consider the potential impact of ending security of tenure on the well-being of tenants. Analysis reveals security of tenure to be a source of stability that helps mediate the precariousness of life on low incomes. In conclusion, it is argued that policy should be looking to extend, rather than curtail, these benefits through an improved rental housing offer.

Key words: social housing; security of tenure; Localism Act; England.

Introduction

Security of tenure has been a feature of social housing in England for more than 30 years. The 1980 Housing Act established for the first time a clear set of legal rights for social tenants, including the right of council tenants to stay in their accommodation for as long as they kept to the terms of the tenancy agreement with their landlord. The Housing Act 1988 introduced assured tenancies for housing association and housing cooperative tenants, which grant similar rights to secure tenancies. The right of a social tenant to a secure tenancy remained largely intact until the Localism Act 2011 granted social landlords the right to award fixed term ('flexible') tenancies. These will normally be for a minimum of five years, but can be granted for as little as two years in certain circumstances.

Various arguments have been put forward to justify ending security of tenure. It has been accused of being a corrupting influence, undercutting personal responsibility and promoting welfare dependency, and blamed for serving as a brake on social mobility by thwarting residential mobility. It has also been criticised for preventing the effective operation of social housing as a welfare service, by allowing people to remain in the sector regardless of whether or not they have an on-going need for the help and support that the sector provides.

This paper draws on empirical data from qualitative interviews with more than 140 social tenants in England to consider the legitimacy of these claims. It also explores the largely ignored role that security of tenure can play as a social good. Discussion begins with a review of the criticisms levelled at security of tenure and the reforms introduced by the Localism Act 2011. Attention then turns to focus on the significance of security of tenure to the experiences, opportunities and well-being of a sample of social tenants. A final section considers the implications of the findings for policy. Throughout the paper, social housing is the term used to refer to publically funded housing owned by either a local authority (council housing) or a housing association, managed by a local authority, Arm's Length Management Company or a housing association and which is typically let at sub-market rents to people in housing need.

The Revisionist Agenda and Security of Tenure

In recent years, discussion and debate about the role and purpose of social housing in England has been dominated by a 'revisionist' perspective, rooted in the opinion that it is time to say goodbye to the sector as we know it (Cole, 2007). Revisionist analysis accuses social housing of failing to fulfil its potential as a support mechanism for the poor and vulnerable and of being a destination, rather than a launch pad (Stroud, 2010). This perspective is consistent with the dominant logic framing welfare policy in England, which demonises public welfare as a major factor underpinning the reproduction of poverty (Mooney, 2007). Its roots can also be traced back to the New Right critique of public

provision of housing in the 1980s, which criticised the design, ownership, management and control of council housing (Coleman, 1985) and adjudged the public sector to be inefficient, wasteful, and costly and to undermine the life chances of tenants by limiting mobility (Adam Smith Institute, 1983).

Articulated in a series of opinion pieces and think-tank reports (CIH, 2008; Dwelly, 2006; Greenhalgh and Moss, 2009; Housing and Dependency Working Group, 2008; Public Services Improvement Group, 2007; Stroud, 2010), the revisionist critique of social housing has championed a reduction in tenant rights and increase in conditionality. The stated ambition is the creation of a sector that increasingly serves as respite provision for people who have fallen on hard times and need help 'turning around' their lives, rather than a destination tenure (Robinson, 2013). Central to this is an end to security of tenure.

Three particular criticisms have been levelled at security of tenure. First, it is presumed to create dependency on the state and undercut personal responsibility. Reliant on the state, tenants have no experience of the consequences of their behaviour or financial actions.

Security of tenure is argued to even allow "*tenants to continue with a poor payment record and anti-social behaviour*" (Public Services Improvement Group, 2007: 138). Second, security of tenure represents one of the few assets that many tenants possess and they cling to it with grim determination. Unable to move within the sector because of the difficulties securing a transfer and unwilling to move outside the sector and forego this asset, residential mobility and, consequently, social mobility are presumed to be thwarted. As a result, some of the poorest in society become concentrated on social housing estates where positive role models are few and far between. Living in these "*dead-end ghettos*", tenants and their families become "*trapped into a vicious cycle of deprivation and corresponding poor educational attainment and ill health*" (Public Services Improvement Policy Group, 2007: 122).

The third key criticism of security of tenure is that it prevents social housing from serving as an effective and efficient support mechanism for poor and vulnerable households. The scarce resource that is social housing is allocated on a secure, long-term basis, based on an assessment of need undertaken at one particular moment in a person's life. Some vulnerabilities might be permanent or long term, but others can reduce in severity or even disappear with time. There is little opportunity for the system to take account of such changes in a tenant's situation. The sector therefore becomes 'silted up' with households whose housing needs and personal vulnerabilities may no longer warrant the support of social housing. Meanwhile, people in 'genuine need' struggle to access the sector, resulting in a growing waiting list.

The revisionist solution is to recast the role and function of the social rented sector, creating a more 'flexible', 'responsive' and 'effective' social housing sector. Central to this is the move to a more time limited system of support targeted at those in immediate need. This might involve social landlords making an offer of housing until a tenant's "*crisis is resolved and they are well on the pathway to independence*" (Housing and Dependency Working Group, 2008: 54). Support and training could be provided alongside positive incentives for people to work and behave (Greenhalgh and Moss, 2009). The sector could then serve as a springboard for social mobility, promoting a "virtuous circle of independence" (Greenhalgh and Moss, 2009: 53), which will serve to turn people's lives around and propel them along a pathway to self-sufficiency; a "*dynamic resource, helping people to get on their feet and on with their lives*", which provides a "*temporary home before private renting, moving on when possible to shared equity, or outright ownership*" (Stroud, 2010: 7).

The Localism Act

The Conservative Party policy paper 'Nurturing Responsibility' (The Conservative Party, 2010) drew directly on the rationales of the revisionist agenda to argue that living in social housing promotes dependency, dampens aspirations and hampers mobility. In response, it

called for action to *"tackle the effect that long-term residence in social housing has on the prospects of tenants"* and to ensure they *"are not trapped into a cycle of deprivation with no 'exit' opportunities."* (The Conservative Party, 2010: 7 & 19). Liberating tenants from this 'trap' would, it was argued, serve to recast social housing as a *"stepping stone to owner occupancy"* (The Conservative Party, 2010: 19). Following the formation of the Coalition government in 2010, this logic was mainstreamed into housing policy in England.

Shortly after the election, the Prime Minister raised the possibility of an end to security of tenure, observing *"There is a question mark about whether, in future, we should be asking when you are given a council home, is it for a fixed period? Because maybe in five or ten years you will be doing a different job and be better paid and you won't need that home, you will be able to go into the private sector."*(Wintour, 2010). The Minister for Housing expanded on this theme, referring to social housing as *"a byword for failure"* offering a *"home for life in a dead end street"* and expressing the desire to *"restore pride to social housing, so that a social tenancy is once again seen as a launchpad to fulfil aspirations"* (DCLG, 2011). The Localism Act 2011 sought to deliver on this ambition.

The Localism Act introduced major reforms to social housing, limiting the rights of tenants and increasing the freedom of landlords to manage their stock as they see fit. These included restrictions on who can access social housing and limits on the rights of new tenants. Access to the sector was restricted by granting local authorities greater discretion over who is allowed onto the waiting list for social housing. The stated aim was to prevent people with no 'need' of social housing from joining the waiting list, thereby rationing access to a resource for which demand outstrips supply; estimates suggest that 4.5 million people - one in every 13 people in England - are on a social housing waiting list (National Housing Federation, 2010). In addition, the Act introduced reforms limiting access to social housing for homeless people, by allowing local authorities to meet their statutory duty to homeless

people by placing them in private rented accommodation, rather than allowing homeless people in priority need to exercise a preference for a secure social tenancy.

The Localism Act also granted social landlords the right to award fixed-term (flexible) tenancies for a minimum period of two years, although it is suggested that the tenancies will typically be for five years other than in 'exceptional circumstances'. New rules also permit landlords to charge 'affordable rents' at 80 per cent of the local market rent on these new tenancies. The circumstances in which flexible tenancies will be used should be set out in a new tenancy strategy, which local authorities are required to publish. The expectation is that the decision to renew a flexible tenancy for another fixed term will be informed by a review of a tenant's situation. For example, if a tenant's financial situation has improved or if children have grown up and left home and the tenant is deemed to be under occupying the property, the decision might be taken not to renew the tenancy. In this event, the landlord must inform the tenant six months before the term is due to end and provide appropriate advice and assistance to help the tenant find alternative accommodation.

Early reports suggested that as many as three quarters of housing professionals were opposed to fixed term tenancies (Bury, 2010) and a Tenant Participation Advisory Service survey revealed that 77 per cent of members surveyed were opposed to the ending of lifetime tenancies (Duxbury, 2011). Legal experts also warned that flexible tenancies will be vulnerable to legal challenge and difficult and resource intensive to enforce (Duxbury, 2011). However, 18 of the largest twenty five housing associations in England surveyed in 2011 shortly after the introduction of the Localism Act indicated an intention to implement flexible tenancies (Duxbury, 2011). The rationale cited by these 18 landlords was that fixed term tenancies will afford them the flexibility they need to tackle an escalating waiting list.

Among local authorities, there appears to be a split in attitudes to flexible tenancies along political lines. In one survey, of the 29 local authorities rejecting fixed term tenancies, 25

were Labour controlled, while 12 of the 16 reported as supporting fixed tenancies were Conservative controlled (Brown, 2013). In London, for example, Conservative controlled Hammersmith and Fulham was among the first local authorities to announce their intention to adopt flexible tenancies and issued proposals suggesting that most tenancies will be granted for five years, although certain groups, including tenants between 18 and 25 years old, will be offered fixed term tenancies for as little as two years. Outlining the authority's rationale, a senior officer drew on revisionist rhetoric, stating that "*We want to give people a hand up, not a hand out. We want to incentivise residents to make the most of their lives*" and claiming that "*the current system does not promote personal aspiration or provide tenants with any incentive to try to move into home ownership and does not make the best use of the housing we have.*" (Ramesh, 2012). In contrast, Labour controlled Islington and Camden councils have declared that they have no intention of introducing fixed term tenancies, the executive member for housing in Islington stating that such a move "*tends to suggest that social housing is a transitory tenure*" but that "*in Islington we want to offer people a home for life.*" (Merrick, 2012). It might be expected that this divergence would be championed by government as evidence of localism in action and an inevitable consequence of rolling back central government involvement, enabling local authorities to drive local priorities and freeing social landlords to manage as they see fit. However, the Minister for Housing has called for local authorities to make better use of the 'flexibilities' they have been granted by the Localism Act when developing their tenancy strategy and to grant fixed term tenancies (Brown, 2013). Discussion below considers the potential consequences for social tenants of the government's promotion of these new 'flexibilities'.

Data

This paper explores the legitimacy of the revisionist case against security of tenure and considers the potential costs of ending security of tenure through the analysis of qualitative data collected during a major programme of research exploring reasons for the relatively

high levels of worklessness within the social rented sector (Bashir et al., 2011; Fletcher et al., 2008;). Data were collected during two rounds of qualitative interviewing. The first round involved in-depth interviews with 107 social tenants living in concentrated and pepper-potted areas of social housing in four locations (Derby, Islington, Peterborough and Sheffield) and 30 interviews with private rented tenants in the same areas, to provide a point of contrast and comparison. The second round of interviews focused on the work-related situations and experiences of social tenants with dependent children and involved repeat interviews with 12 respondents from the first phase of the study and additional interviews with 38 new respondents in Derby and Islington.

Access was secured through housing and employment related service providers and the use of snowballing techniques. Particular attention was paid to ensuring the inclusion of key groups known to experience higher levels of worklessness - single young people, lone parents, couples with children - and to ensure ethnic diversity within the sample. Wherever possible, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed into verbatim text. The interviews focused on exploring the relationship between social housing and work. However, the security associated with living in social housing emerged as a recurrent theme in the reflections, comments and observations of social tenants. It is these insights that are analysed in this paper.

Experiences of Security of Tenure

Many respondents talked explicitly about security of tenure when asked about any benefits associated with living in social housing . This was a consistent finding across the sample (men and women; young and old; in and out of employment; people from different ethnicities). The benefits of security of tenure were frequently explained through reference to the very different situation in the private rented sector. The Housing Act 1996 made assured short hold tenancies the default tenancy in the private rented sector. Assured short hold tenancies are fixed-term lettings of at least six months, at the end of which the landlord

can regain possession unless they renew the tenancy. If a new tenancy is not signed the landlord can regain possession at any time after six months after giving a minimum period of two months' notice. The Chartered Institute of Housing (2008) has argued that all the conditions that allow social housing to provide a secure platform from which people can look to access greater opportunity and improve their lives can apply to people living on insecure tenancies in the private rented sector. Findings from this research suggest otherwise.

Respondents were not necessarily clear about the legal rights and responsibilities of a private tenant, but the general consensus was that private renting represents a more insecure housing tenure. Respondents often reported that private landlords frequently exercise their right to terminate or to not renew assured short hold tenancies, promoting a sense of uncertainty and insecurity:

You see the thing with private housing is sometimes they say that someone else wants to have a look or someone else wants to rent, just let us come at short notice, then they want you to leave the house. When they give you this sort of trouble then in my mind I'm thinking 'well I'm going to have to run from place to place' and you see with the company [social landlord] now they're not like that because as long as you continue to give them the rent they're not going to throw you out, they'll leave you there for as long as you carry on paying the rent. You see with the private landlords it's all about their own choice; whenever they want to they can ask you to leave. I don't think it's very safe having a private landlord.
(36 year old unemployed man, married with one dependent child, Derby)

with the Council and stuff they give you a long-term contract. With a private landlord, the most you ever get out of them is twelve months. But mine was always a six-month contract. After six months he'd renew the contract, if he was satisfied ... after six months he could turn round and say, 'Get out, I ain't

renewing it,' and you're stuck. (36 year old unemployed man, married with one dependent child, Derby)

Some respondents pointed out that not even 'good tenants' who keep up with rental payments are free from these insecurities in the private rented sector, in contrast to the reported situation in social housing:

Yeah I think when you're living in a council house rather than a private rented house, I would feel more secure in the council house because it is a long term contract you have with them whereas in a private one I wouldn't feel secure because you don't own that house and your landlord at any moment might want to sell it whereas I think with the council tenancy you've got that security and so long as you keep up with your rent payments I don't think you would have any problem. (51 year old woman, lone parent, unemployed, with one dependent child, Derby).

Social tenants with more detailed knowledge of the private rented sector (from lived experience or second-hand accounts) also reported that private landlords were far more likely to evict tenants when faced with late payment of rent or accumulation of rent arrears:

private rent they could charge you over I don't know £100, £200 a week and expect his money there and if there was no money there he'd have the bailiffs come along and chuck you out the property if you rent privately you know you don't have a house because they can kick you out any time but with social they, you know you've got longer term. (27 year old woman, lone parent, Austin, Derby)

Life as a private tenant was therefore characterised as being full of uncertainty, making it difficult to plan for the future. In contrast, renting from a social landlord was presented as providing tenants with security and control, which emerged as a particular concern for tenants with young children:

I know that you can buy a council house and you can live pretty safely and securely and you get lots of other support facilities with it, my children are young and what if something goes wrong, and also the council doesn't force you out. I mean if you're renting privately then they can just throw you out any time, they just have to give you a bit of notice and ask you to leave, that's the thing with council house, they don't do that, I mean they don't do they. I always needed to feel secure because of the children, not somewhere where you've got six months and then you've got to get out and then I've got my children and I've got to find somewhere to live. I know that if I'm in a council house it's a secure tenancy. (27 year old woman, lone parent, Derby)

Interviewer: Do you think there's any particular benefit to Council housing over private housing?

Respondent: Yeh, it's fifty per cent cheaper at least, and you've just got no landlord, no-one's gonna come in your house and say this, that. It's your place effectively until you mess it up, basically. It's not somebody else's flat that you're looking after, it's like you're looking after somebody else's flat if you're renting it from a [private] landlord. After the six months is up he could say, "I don't want you there no more", you've gotta change flat. It's like owning it really [living in social housing], except you've just gotta pay the rent. After a couple of years you can buy at a discounted rate. (23 year old single man, Islington)

This security and control was reported to have introduced a degree of stability into housing pathways that had previously been characterised by turbulence and uncertainty. This observation is consistent with evidence of the stability inherent within the social rented sector; 62 per cent of all social tenants in England have been resident in their current accommodation for more than five years, compared to only 20 per cent of private renters (DCLG, 2009). This stability has been problematised by the proponents of reform, who presume residential mobility increases access to work and facilitates social mobility. Our respondents spoke positively about the stability provided by social housing.

Although there were examples of respondents keen to relocate to what they considered 'better areas', residential stability had allowed many social tenants to develop rich local social networks and a sense of community. As other studies have revealed, such networks can be important in helping tenants 'get by' (Crisp et al., 2009; Mullins and Western, 2001). Contrary to the portrayal of social housing estates as 'dead-end ghettos', respondents also talked positively about life in their neighbourhood. Sally, a 39 year old lone parent who was currently unemployed and looking for work in Islington, talked about valuing the local sense of community:

Interviewer: You're adamant that you wouldn't move?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: No? Okay. Why not?

Respondent: Because I feel safe and secure where I am, I love the people. I mean, like, two weeks ago – was it two weeks ago? – we had a big 40th anniversary party. It was amazing.

Interviewer: Was that somebody who lives on the –

Respondent: Yeh, because it was forty years old, the estate, and it was barbecue, all the kids round. I think we're so lucky in that sense, that where it's like years ago when everybody was friendly, community spirited, and

that's how it is round there. Everyone watches everyone else's back.

No, I wouldn't move.

The benefits perceived to be associated with security of tenure varied depending upon the personal situation, circumstances and priorities of respondents. A key distinction was between people in work or actively seeking employment and people more distant from the labour market. People more distant from the labour market often focused their comments on security of tenure as an important source of sustenance and support. This was particularly the case for people whose lives had been characterised by turbulence, uncertainty and associated difficulties 'getting by'. Turning their back on the challenges of securing and maintaining a safe, secure place to live, these respondents talked about putting down roots and being able to focus on managing other challenges in their life, such as coping with ill health or disability, caring for children, looking after a sick relative or seeking out training and education.

Tenants closer to the labour market reported that security of tenure served to render employment a more viable and realistic proposition. Indeed, social tenants frequently focused on the issue of security of tenure when asked whether living in different housing situations makes it harder or easier to think about working. A common refrain among tenants who had recently moved into the sector was that they were now settled and able to start thinking about work. This was particularly true for people who had previous experience of insecure housing situations or turbulent lifestyles:

Now I have my house here, I feel I can have more chance here than I have at the hostel. I have more chance here, if you put down either the hostel or the house, of course in my house I have more chance because you're more settled, not flitting off somewhere. (29 year old woman, lone parent, unemployed, Peterborough)

You can't do a job that kind of situation [homelessness].....I couldn't focus on a job while I had so much to sort out. It was too hectic.....It was only when I moved into my place that I could think about that [work]. (27 year old woman, lone parent, unemployed, Islington)

The more sympathetic and supportive attitude of social landlords when dealing with tenants facing financial problems during the move from benefits into work was also reported to be important in supporting the move into employment. This point was made by Hanna, a 25-34 year old lone parent in Islington who was currently not working because of long term health problems:

I definitely think that I'm in the right type of housing if I was to go back to work because I think if I was renting privately then I'd always be worried if I was behind on the rent or anything like that whereas I could have a meeting with my housing manager and say 'look I'm having a bit of trouble but I do intend to pay what I owe' and I think they'd be more lenient and more understanding.

In contrast, it was suggested that private landlords would not tolerate late or delayed payment of rent in such circumstances and concern was expressed about the speed with which private landlords move to evict tenants for rent arrears:

Interviewer: Would your situation then be different if you were living in social rented accommodation?

Respondent: Yeah I think I would definitely go for a full time job....the rent is a lot lower and you're still, it's the security, nobody's going to kick you out and even if you do fall behind with arrears you go to them, talk to them and a private landlord you can't do that because they've got to pay a

mortgage as well at the end of the day, it's not their fault but you've not got security with private. (35-44 year old woman, private tenant Derby)

The more understanding approach of social landlords was reported to allow tenants to consider insecure or casual work, where payment can sometimes be sporadic or delayed and which might be deemed too risky if they were living in the private rented sector.

Discussion

There is no doubting the relatively high levels of disadvantage, poor health and economic inactivity within the social rented sector (Hills, 2007). Longitudinal analysis exploring the role of social housing in the lives of people as they move from childhood to adulthood has also revealed powerful correlations between a social housing tenancy and various aspects of disadvantage (Feinstein et al., 2008; Lupton et al., 2009). Revisionist analysis presumes that these associations speak volumes about the damage wrought by social housing. This is to confuse correlation with causality. It is not possible to be sure that growing up in social housing caused the different social outcomes observed or that the alternatives (such as private renting) would have been any better (Lupton and Tunstall, 2009). Neither is it possible to be sure that high levels of disadvantage in social housing are nothing more than the consequence of access to the sector being rationed on the basis of vulnerability and housing 'need'. Furthermore, history tells us that negative correlations are not inevitable or inherent to the provision of housing by the public sector (Feinstein et al., 2008). In short, there is no reliable evidence that living in social housing is a *cause* of social disadvantage (Robinson, 2008). Meanwhile, the experiences highlighted above suggests that living in social housing can, in fact, help mediate the precariousness of life on low incomes.

The social tenants interviewed recognised and valued the stability, confidence and control provided by security of tenure. Better able to predict their housing future, respondents

reported being better placed to manage other challenges in their life. For some people, this included the challenge of finding work, a proposition rendered more realistic and realisable as a result of the stability afforded by security of tenure. Ending security of tenure risks undermining this positive work incentive. Increased mobility also risks disrupting local networks of friendship and association that can be so important in helping people to cope and get by in the context of deprivation and disadvantage (Crisp et al., 2010). This includes the informal support and assistance with childcare provided by family and friends that can serve to make work a viable option for some parents. There is also the risk that ending security of tenure will introduce perverse incentives into the system, which mediate against labour market engagement. As Hills (2007) points out, the threat that a tenancy might end if an individual's circumstances are deemed to have improved as result of securing and sustaining employment could serve as a disincentive to work. This is rendered all the more likely by the fact that the only realistic alternative for most people leaving the social rented sector is the private rented sector, where insecurity, low levels of decency and the cost of renting result in it containing the highest proportion of households of any tenure in England who want to live in another tenure (Scanlon and Whitehead, 2011).

The increased mobility and associated disruption caused by ending security of tenure is also likely to impact on the health and well-being of social tenants and, in particular, their children. Analysis has revealed residential mobility in childhood to have an adverse association with health outcomes through the life course, including: higher levels of behavioural and emotional problems; increased teenage pregnancy rates; accelerated initiation of illicit drug use; adolescent depression; and reduced continuity of healthcare (Jellyman and Spencer, 2008). Instability also appears to have a negative impact on the education of children, official statistics highlighting a gap in attainment at key stage 4 (aged 16) between mobile and non-mobile pupils (DCLG, 2006).

Fixed term tenancies are also likely to raise various management headaches for social landlords. The stable neighbourhoods that landlords strive to create and maintain will be disrupted by increased turnover, which can undercut social ties and community networks and threaten informal social control (Bailey et al., 2012). The likelihood that 'better off' tenants who are presumed to no longer be in need of social housing will be required to move out of the sector will also serve to increase polarisation (Hills, 2007) and cut against the grain of efforts to promote social mix in a bid to raise the social capital of residents and diminish social exclusion (Cole and Goodchild, 2000). In addition, there is the challenge of managing flexible tenancies, which is likely to be demanding on landlord resources (Duxbury, 2011).

Conclusion

Demand for social housing outstrips supply. The government response focuses on limiting demand. This involves restricting access to the sector and limiting the right of occupancy. Ending security of tenure is central to these efforts. The evidence presented here suggests that introducing fixed term tenancies in the social rented sector will risk undermining the social and economic well-being of tenants and their families. The resulting increase in turnover is also likely to impact on neighbourhood well-being, undercutting feelings of attachment and eroding social cohesion. The Coalition Government and some housing professionals have chosen to ignore these points. Wedded to the revisionist perspective, they plough on with reforms designed to limit the rights of tenants (the one notable exception being the enhanced inducements to tenants introduced in a bid to reinvigorate the Right to Buy programme).

Rather than limiting security of tenure, these findings suggest that policy should be seeking to extend the benefits of security and stability to greater numbers of households as part of a wider effort to provide a better rental housing offer. One response would be to increase the supply of social housing. This suggestion is not as fanciful as it might seem in an age of

austerity and public sector retrenchment, considering that during the four-year spending review period 2010-2014 £95bn will be spent on housing benefit (£30 billion of which will go to cover relatively high rents in the private rented sector), compared to just £4.5bn of capital investment in new affordable homes (Hull and Cooke, 2012). This imbalance reflects a shift in spending on housing over the last 30 years from the funding of bricks and mortar to the subsidising of rents. Reversing this trend could serve to facilitate a major increase in the supply of affordable social units. Meanwhile, reform of the private rented sector, focusing on increasing security, improving living conditions and regulating rents, could help transform the sector into a tenure of long term stability and choice. However, such reforms are unlikely to gain purchase within a policy debate dominated by the revisionist notion that tenant rights are part of the problem rather than the solution.

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