

The Local Government Information Unit

NEWS RELEASE

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The Right to Choose in housing

Local democracy thinktank the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) is demanding more choice for council tenants and their local authorities over the regeneration and building of social housing in a new pamphlet launched on Tuesday (29 June).

The publication, *The Right to Choose*, argues that present government policy restricts the choice available to the six million people who live in council housing and to their local authorities by offering funding for only the three options of transferring council homes to non-local authority registered social landlords (RSLs); Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs); or the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

By denying those who reject these three options the chance of investment, the government will fail to meet its objective of Decent Homes by 2010. The publication also questions the record of the government's favoured options in improving housing management performance, on increasing resident participation, on whether some of the options generate sufficient investment to meet the large repairs bills that some councils face and on value for money.

The Right to Choose explores the history of council housing to put the current debate about choice and investment into context and looks at a possible future where councils can provide some social housing as well as having a strategic role in regeneration.

The main points made in *The Right to Choose* are:

- * Measures are needed to enable a 'fourth option' of direct funding to councils for the major repair and improvement of council housing where tenants reject the government's three options. This should include local authorities being able to borrow capital on an equivalent basis to housing associations.

- * There should be a single form of secure social tenancy that guarantees all tenants of social housing the same rights that council tenants currently have, irrespective of whether they remain council tenants or transfer to a non-council social landlord (see note 5 below).

- * Councils should also have a role, alongside other social landlords, in building new social housing as part of a strategy for meeting the shortage of affordable housing in some areas.

- * New council house-building must be about quality rather than quantity. It would not mean building high-density housing estates on a mass scale or risking the repetition of the design, construction and other mistakes of the past. Councils should also be involved in acquiring homes as much as building them.

* Council housing must break free from the reputation of being basic accommodation that only meets the needs of the most deprived and should promote housing choice, mobility, aspiration and more diverse neighbourhoods in terms of both tenure and social mix.

Dennis Reed, Chief Executive of the LGIU, said: "The government and the political parties have adopted choice as the new mantra for public services. However, under present Whitehall policy many local authorities and their tenants are denied investment if they make a choice of which ministers disapproves. As a result, never have so many been denied so much by the decisions of so few.

"In The Right to Choose the LGIU argues that tenants should be given real freedom to choose. Choice must not be a flag of convenience. This choice should not be restricted by dogma, intransigence or vested interests and tenants should never have to decide their future in a climate of fear about being denied a decent home or of losing rights that they have as council tenants.

"If the government wants to achieve its Decent Homes Standard by 2010, and is so confident that tenants will choose its three favoured options, what have ministers got to lose by allowing a fourth option of direct investment in a renewal of council housing that helps meet the pressing needs of modern Britain?"

ENDS

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Notes to Editors

1. Founded in 1983, originally to campaign against ratecapping, the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) is Britain's foremost independent local democracy think tank, campaigning to extend local authority best practice, freedoms and responsibilities. The LGIU works to influence the debate on local government modernisation. The LGIU and its sister organisations The Education Network (TEN) and the Democratic Health Network (DHN) provide research, policy briefings, information, advice, training and lobbying services to local authority and trade union affiliates. Previous LGIU news releases and statements can be viewed at www.lgiu.gov.uk/.

2. Copies of The Right to Choose are on sale at £5 each from Central Books on 0845 458 9910, 0845 458 9912 (fax) or e-mail mo@centralbooks.com.

3. A PDF version of The Right to Choose is available to journalists by contacting Kevin Morton at kevin.morton@lgiu.org.uk <<mailto:kevin.morton@lgiu.org.uk>>. Kevin Morton should also be contacted regarding requests for articles or interviews about this publication.

4. The launch of The Right to Choose takes place in the Grimond Room of Portcullis House, House of Commons, Westminster, from 11am, on Tuesday 29 June. Clive Betts MP, a member of the Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, will chair the event. Other speakers are Austin Mitchell MP; Cllr Dame Jane Robert, Leader of the London Borough of Camden; Cllr Richard Kemp, Acting Chair of the Local Government Association (LGA) Housing Executive and Liverpool City councillor; alongside spokespeople from Unison.

5. Although being social housing in terms of security of tenure, rents and other basic rights, unless guarantees are made by an individual social landlord, the tenants of local housing companies and housing associations with charitable status have 'assured tenancies'. These do not automatically guarantee the same rights that council tenants have in their secure tenancies. Under their secure tenancies, council tenants have the statutory right to:

- * Take in lodgers
- * Exchange homes or assign the tenancy
- * Pass on the succession of their home
- * The right to repair
- * The right to carry out improvements
- * The Right to Buy