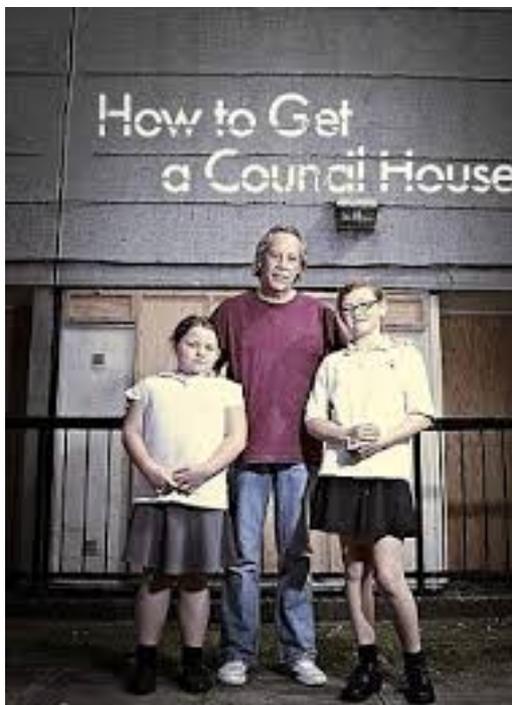


## #HowToGetACouncilHouse – An Unfair Representation

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Source: <http://next-episode.net/how-to-get-a-council-house>

Social housing as we know it is on a steady decline in the UK, with house prices in London increasing by 222% (Shelter, 2016). This, as well as the privatisation of the NHS, is one of the biggest threats and worries facing people. During a time of anger, hostility and worry in austerity Britain, Channel 4's programme 'How To Get a Council House' returns tonight at 9pm. In this blog, I will ask you **not** to watch this programme, for three reasons: it's misrepresentation of the people residing in social housing, it's unfair attacking of particular groups, and it's perpetuation of myths.

This television programme, much like Benefits Street, portrayed working-class communities in a particular light. I.e. the stereotypical 'chav', or 'underclass'. Much like Benefits Street, when How to Get a Council House was first aired in 2014, conversation on Twitter was very much divided. One side using words such as 'scum' and 'filth', posting memes of television characters such as Vicky Pollard and Bianca Butcher from Eastenders, the other from people residing in council housing and working in housing associations, saying 'the stigma needs to be removed'. In order to explain this further, some myths need to be dispelled.

1. A person in receipt of housing benefits is not necessarily out of work. Housing benefits is for people whose income is not enough to pay for rent and utilities. In particular, I refer to unstable zero-hours contracts for people in full-time employment, and people working for minimum wage.
2. Estate agents have the power to turn people away in receipt of these housing benefits for private rent. This means that, as well as a decline in council properties, people with low pay are even more insecure if estate agents can turn them away. Similarly to the 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish', landlords and agents can say 'No DSS', referring to benefits, in their advertisements for private properties.
3. The 'affordable housing' 'regeneration' projects you have heard about is certainly not affordable- the average house price in Tower Hamlets, for instance, is now £496,619. This prices out particular groups, and has been argued to be social cleansing. There is evidence to support this argument, where government data has shown that **there are less families with a child in receipt of free school meals** in London.

4. Councils *do not* give priority to people that have children. The idea that women have children simply to move up on council waiting lists is a myth. According to the council housing bands system, 'you're likely to be offered housing first if you: are homeless, live in cramped conditions, have a medical condition made worse by your current home'. Empirical research has also dispelled this classist, misogynistic discourse, concluding that mothers *do not* have children to attain housing (Allen and Dowling, 1998; Mawer, 1999).
5. Another key debate was raised in the first airing of How To Get A Council House- immigration. One individual in the documentary was criticised on social media for saying 'you'd rather give all the housing away to immigrants'. Immigration is a persistently debated conversation, particularly associated with 'overcrowding', with some newspapers declaring 'we will have to build nearly 4,000 new houses a week just to meet the additional demand' whilst actual statistics suggest that 'migrants demand less housing than UK-born people', with 60% residing in privately rented housing.

This programme is responsible for the fragmentation, demonization and stigmatisation of particular communities, and should be boycotted for it's blaming and shaming of the wrong groups. As an individual residing in a council property on what used to be the world's biggest council estate, this issue is something personal to myself and others around me. The 2014 programme depicted those residing in social housing in a classed, negative light, and omitted the impact that councils and estate agents are having in pricing out disadvantaged communities.

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## References

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Mawer, C. (1999) 'Preventing teenage pregnancies, supporting teenage mothers'. *British Medical Journal Publishing Group*, 318 (7200) p1713.

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