

# Reforms and resistance: how tenants can influence housing policy



*With successive governments having failed to alleviate England's housing crisis, can tenants ever hope to influence housing policy? [Stewart Smyth](#) explains how this can be done. He explores the nature of the dynamic between government reforms and grassroots resistance across housing tenures.*

As the extent of the housing crisis in England has become apparent, the government's policy failures are not only being exposed but also quietly removed from the agenda for 2018. In December 2017, for example, the department responsible for housing in England released an updated [departmental plan](#) setting out their priorities for the coming period. The plan had two noticeable absences: [Starter Homes](#) and the extension of the [Right to Buy to housing associations tenants](#); both policies were manifesto commitments in 2015.

Yet, after many years of relatively little activity there has been a noticeable growth in grassroots resistance on housing issues. Much of the academic work on housing does not portray tenants as active agents who can influence or even change their living conditions. The analysis tends to focus on the nature, history and potential impact of particular policies and processes in housing. But historically, grassroots campaigning has had a significant influence on the nature of housing at both local and national levels. Furthermore in the current environment housing campaigns are being sparked by the failing policies of successive governments.

An example of this reform-resistance dynamic is the campaigning, over the past two decades, by [Defend Council Housing](#) (DCH). DCH was formed when campaigners who had been opposing the emerging large-scale voluntary stock transfers of council housing to housing associations, recognised the need to fight at both the estate (local) level and the national government level. Over the intervening period, DCH has had a greater impact than is often recognised, supporting tenants to secure anti-transfer (privatisation) votes in approximately a quarter of all proposals in England. These votes resulted in very real benefits with council tenants retaining their accountable, secure tenancies. At a national level, the early DCH successes forced the New Labour government to develop an alternative policy of [Arm's Length Management Organisations](#).

Today we can see this dynamic of government reform-grassroots resistance being played out in local housing campaigns. The private rented sector has seen a positive development with the emergence of [ACORN](#) as a tenants' union. Starting in Bristol in 2013, ACORN combines the provision of housing advice with campaigning and direct action to defend the rights of tenants. For example, in the summer of 2017 a local ACORN group organised a protest to stop an illegal [eviction in Sheffield](#). In this respect, ACORN is drawing on a longstanding tactic employed by tenants when faced with evictions. Dave Burn, in his pamphlet *Rent Strike: St Pancras 1960*, describes how tenants organised to stop the eviction of two strikers:

...tenants and trade unionists were to be involved in a 24-hour picket of both flats so that in an eviction attempt, defence and warning could be simultaneous ... On hearing or seeing the warning, workers from all over the borough were prepared to down tools and rush to the assistance of the two beleaguered tenants.

In the council housing sector, the current highest profile example of grassroots resistance has been the campaign in Haringey, North London. While the media has focused on the selection of Labour candidates for the 2018 local elections as a battle between left and right, the underlying cause of the resistance is local opposition to council plans to demolish several thousand of council homes and redevelop swathes of the borough.

This redevelopment, planned in partnership with a multinational developer through the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), is based on higher house prices and rents which will bring economic social exclusion of many locals. The [Stop HDV](#) group has generated an impressive campaign of raising awareness in the local community, lobbying councillors, and organising protests. Crucially the foundations for *Stop HDV* were built over many years, through a series of local campaigns by [Haringey DCH](#).

Meanwhile, in West London since mid-2017, housing association tenants have campaigned against the merger of their landlords – *Genesis* and *Notting Hill*. The anti-merger tenant groups – [Listen NHH](#) and [Genesis Residents](#) – have faced the daunting task of fighting against well-resourced organisations. In 2015, the CEO of *Genesis* announced they would [no longer build housing at social rent levels](#), stating low-income households “won’t be my problem”. This is an expression of the impact of government reforms which seek to commercialise the sector through dramatic cuts in public funding and sales at full market value, with the promise that any profits made will be used to cross-subsidise below market-level operations. In the process, housing at affordable levels disappears.

The tenants in West London saw the merger as part of these broader processes and feared what would happen to their communities as rent levels increase. It looks like their campaign will not be successful ([a recent shareholders meeting](#) of both housing associations voted in favour of the merger). But the example highlights the ‘government reforms – grassroots resistance dynamic’. Further, the examples above have not mentioned the Grenfell Tower disaster which is likely to dominate future discussions about housing as the victims campaign to get justice.

The West London anti-merger campaign also illustrates some of the weaknesses of such resistance; with the exception of a few academics and other activists, the campaigners were left isolated, with very few resources. This is where other civil society groups, especially trade unions, can play an important part by helping tenants with technical skills, developing alternative plans, and with providing access to other resources (such as meeting rooms/photocopiers etc.).

Local campaigns are vital in opposing the direct impact of government policies on local communities. But in order to change the overall direction of housing policy, a national focus is required: one that joins these local campaigns together and pressurises the government directly. In the Republic of Ireland, where there is a housing crisis every bit as acute as that in England, a range of civil society groups, housing campaigners, trade unions, and political parties are supporting [a national day of action](#) on 7 April, 2018.

Where campaigners in Ireland are leading civil society groups, trade unions and others in England can follow by creating a national focus to demand housing as a human right, creating an awareness of the housing problems and generating resistance at local levels. If this happens, then 2018 could mark a turning point towards a housing system that is based on the need for secure, decent shelter – not the priorities of finance or the market.

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