

Lewisham: a place to call home

Paul Bell / a people's housing policy

PAUL
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a people's
mayor for
lewisham

Housing as a right, not a privilege

Lewisham's Labour council has fought long and hard for more affordable homes in our borough. We can blame the chronic shortage of housing on seven years of Tory underfunding and misrule in government.



However, we are now living through the worst housing crisis since the 1940s and the only solution is for the rampant marketisation of property in our borough to end.

That has always been my belief. It is why, in 2011, I was the only Councillor to vote against the ill-fated attempt to redevelop the land around the Millwall stadium.

Thousands in Lewisham are forced to live in poverty while our rents and living costs increase but wages stagnate. Even fire fighters at Lewisham station tell me that there are only two left who can still afford to live in our borough. This simply cannot continue, and as Mayor I'd make sure the Council's housing policy serves the many, not the few.

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BUILDING A PLACE TO CALL HOME

- I will build 800 new Council homes, that is social housing the Council owns. I will also introduce a new scheme of 800 homes owned by the Council which will be let at a living rent to generate income. They will provide longer, more secure tenancies¹. These will be let in the first instance to key workers like fire fighters, paramedics, home care workers and nurses.
- I will fight against lifeless new-build, high-rent developments that push up market rents: where existing Council housing can be renovated, we will provide good high quality homes rather than demolition.

TAKING BACK CONTROL OF LOCAL HOUSING

- Lewisham has 500 families in expensive unsatisfactory bed & breakfast accommodation, yet there are 813 long-term empty dwellings in the borough, 250 of which have been empty for 2 years or more. I will increase the Council's use of compulsory purchase orders with a targeted programme focusing on long-term empty and derelict properties, as other councils have done².
- I pledge never to sell off Council land to private developers, and will instead see it is developed in-house in the interests of the community.

¹ A percentage of the total rent will be paid back to the tenants when the tenancy ends.

² This would target 20 of the worst long-term empty or unused properties in the borough and funding for these properties can be drawn from the New Homes Bonus.

- There will be no compulsory purchase in or around Millwall, or anywhere else in the borough, unless it is for the benefit of the community.
- I will look again at any current development which does not provide a suitable number of council homes, or where building work has not yet taken place.
- As Mayor I will explore alternatives to private ownership through community land trusts, self-build and co-operatives on private land, but council homes are the priority.
- I am not convinced of the argument by planners which since 2014 has prevented conversion of larger homes. This position is not sustainable in the current housing crisis. I will seek to reintroduce the previous position of planners allowing the conversion of larger homes at the threshold of 130 square metres.

TACKLING HOMES ‘LEFT EMPTY’

“No-one in Lewisham should need an empty second home.”

- I would draw on the experience of neighbouring Bromley in tackling empty homes, who despite being Conservative-held have also been the leading London borough on tackling empty homes³.

³ I will also be utilising powers contained within the Housing Act 2004 (Section 133), stepping up our existing work on empty dwelling management orders – working with owners to reach agreement on bringing their empty homes back into good repair, but where agreement cannot be reached with an owner, the council will use its controlling powers, as a last resort, to initiate an interim empty dwelling management order seeking a hearing at the Residential Property Tribunal. Many owners will respond and concentrate their minds on tackling their problematic empty property – but where they fail the Council will step in and take control of that dwelling for 7 years, repair it and house a family in

- I propose to introduce a step change in our work to tackle long-term empty homes. I will recruit a new team of officers from inside the Council to deal with the appalling waste of properties standing empty while families go homeless. Currently there is only one dedicated officer in Lewisham filling this role⁴.
- Where good relationships do exist, I will offer partnerships with landlords offering them empty home loans and to use the Lewisham Homes DLO to do the repair works and bring homes in disrepair back up to standard.

A DEDICATED HOUSING RIGHTS TEAM

- Reinstate the five council officers who assist illegally evicted tenants back into their homes⁵. They would also be authorised to investigate and organise a new wave of tenants' unions, to help renters organise and protect their vital interests.
- I will name and shame any housing association for failing to provide acceptable housing management services, including publishing case studies and will see the Council investigate reports of ill practice.

housing need. If the council are not satisfied that that home will remain occupied it will extend its control for a further 7 years.

⁴ I would allow the use of additional delegated authority powers to add to the 'tool box' of tackling empty homes, including the serving of Section 215 notices under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990 – on owners of land causing a “blight on the local amenity” of an area.

⁵ By using the Protection from Eviction Act 1977.

A FIRM GRIP ON THE PRIVATE SECTOR

- I will establish a licence scheme under which private landlords must be registered that will assist the Council in rigorously pursuing negligent landlords who leave tenants living in unacceptable conditions.
- I will step up Lewisham's licensing of HMOs in the borough⁶.
- I will devote more resources to carrying out works in default where landlords have been served notice to effect repairs but have failed to do so. Other boroughs like Newham have been leading the way on this and we should be following their example. We need to more actively use the Law of Property Act 1925 to take possession of property where the council has been forced to take action and the cost of this action remains outstanding.

FIRE, HEALTH & SAFETY

- The safety of residents is an absolute priority after the appalling tragedy at Grenfell Tower. That is why I will – in partnership with Lewisham Homes – fit sprinklers in all council tower blocks, and campaign to see them installed in private blocks.
- I will work with the Mayor of London on advocating for a hotel tax to be reinvested in the London Fire Brigade and its personnel.

⁶ The council has recently introduced HMO licensing of HMO space above commercial property – together we must do more. I propose to follow the example shown by Newham to introduce licensing of all private tenancies in the borough. This will raise standards for tenants and offer training and accreditation to all landlords.

RENTAL DEPOSIT BONDS & COUNCIL MORTGAGES

“Every young resident should have the right to live and work in the community they call home.”

Accessing private rented accommodation is becoming increasingly unaffordable even for those in well paid work. I will explore the establishment of a South-East London rental deposit bond scheme with other boroughs to:

- Help make the private rental sector more accessible
- Look at how we could re-introduce council mortgages to first time buyers in partnership with our local credit union
- Lobby government, the Mayor of London, the GLA and London Councils to argue for the introduction of rent controls on private sector property.