

The Housing Times

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CHRISTMAS 2019 ISSUE

WANT TO KNOW
WHY THERE ARE SO
MANY YOUNG SINGLE
HOMELESS PEOPLE IN
LONDON NOT JUST AT
CHRISTMAS TIME BUT
ALSO DURING THE REST
OF THE YEAR?

A LETTER FROM TOWER
HAMLETS COUNCIL
PROVIDES THE ANSWER

LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN LONDON BY CLOSING THEIR HOUSING WAITING LISTS TO YOUNG SINGLE PEOPLE ARE TO BLAME FOR THE RISE IN HOMELESSNESS THIS CHRISTMAS

In 2010 two young, single journalists, Ed Howker and Shiv Malik, the former working for the Spectator magazine and the latter for the Guardian, both under 30 at the time, wrote a book titled *Jilted Generation: how Britain has bankrupted its youth*. Drawing on their own experiences they began to realise through their research that they were part of a generation that was in stark contrast to the post-war generation – the baby boomers – and that millions of their contemporaries were facing the most uncertain future since the 1930s. The book looked at four specific areas that formed the foundation to how young single people progress to being adults after they finish their education at whatever level. They were jobs, inheritance, politics and housing. They wanted to know whether the disparate problems were linked and were getting worse and “what if the forces that shape their lives and their hardships have been gathering pace and power for several decades so subtly that they are almost imperceptible today?” They admitted that they didn’t have a particular qualification for investigating the subject, apart from being part of the generation born after September 1979. They are aware of the coincidence of the date as it was just a few months after the election of a Conservative government headed by Margaret Thatcher who adopted a different approach to economics and society than had been the norm since 1945.

Whilst the 1980s were marked by boom and excess, signs began to appear towards the end of the decade of an incipient new recession which saw the veneer of ‘good times’ begin to wear thin and expose what lay beneath the surface of the new social order, as Alwyn Turner writes in his book, *Rejoice, Rejoice about the 1980s*. This feeling, he writes “was encapsulated in the increased numbers of visibly homeless people on the streets, ‘the sort of people you step on when you come out of the opera’ as Conservative minister Sir George Young ill-advisedly put it. (He was a former housing minister) Another Conservative politician, Sir Ian Gilmour, remarked, “At the beginning of the (Second World) war beggars vanished and were not seen for forty years. Then in the 1980s they reappeared on the streets of London.”

By 1989, according to the Salvation Army, there were 75,000 homeless people in the capital, the majority of them living in temporary accommodation, either in hostels or bed and breakfast hotels. Such were the extent of the number of homeless people that the term ‘sleeping rough’ and the areas where they congregated – ‘cardboard cities’ – became part of the language. Although in 1976 an Act of Parliament was passed to give homeless people access to housing provided by local authorities the situation was exacerbated in the late 1980s by the house-price bubble and the policy of care in the community which saw thousands of long-stay patients discharged from mental health institutions without sufficient resources being provided for their welfare. As Alwyn Turner writes, “The problem of homelessness hadn’t been so visible in living memory, and it added to a feeling that the fabric of the nation was fraying.”

If it was fraying for people at the bottom of the pile in society, Howker and Malik tell how it was also beginning to fray for young people trying to make their way in life – by getting a job, getting somewhere to live and planning for their long term future. Howker and Malik write that the most pernicious aspect of young people’s losing out is not material loss it is the spin-off problems that are created that are of much more disturbing nature. “In the first place, they write, these early imbalances create a kind of engine of inequality within our own generation. There is another effect. Quite simply, young people aren’t allowed to mature. The postponement of adulthood ... encompasses much more basic ideas: family, savings, community, realising ambitions and ideas, stability, even having children.” All of those aspects of reaching maturity have an interconnected narrative.

Housing, they see, as society’s fundamental building block. “It’s completely defining. Housing is not just a traded commodity, not a mere space in which reside, but a focal point for the narrative of their lives, providing shelter, security, a bedrock of certainty in an uncertain world” In an uncertain world people look for scapegoats and someone to blame. For Howker and Malik it is the politicians. For the past four decades the emphasis has been getting on the property ladder. At the beginning of the chapter on housing Howker and Malik quote Tony Blair’s speech to the Labour Party conference in 2005 about how his aim was to increase home ownership by one million and in particular help young families struggling to be first-time buyers. Three times during Labour’s tenure in power the Labour Party conference voted to allow local authorities to renew their council building programme and three times their conference motion fell on deaf ears. Howker and Malik end by rejecting the ideology promoting such an objective. Howker and Malik weren’t the only ones to recognise the importance of young people being able to make their way in life and how the difficult of finding a place to which they can build their futures. David Willetts, former Conservative cabinet member and now chairman of the Resolution Foundation, a think-tank that monitors how policies affect the middle-classes, highlighted the problems young people face due to the dearth of housing they can afford. David Willetts in his book *The Pinch* writes, “The hidden social problem in Britain today is the sheer difficulty of getting decent affordable accommodation anywhere in the South-East or in many of our great cities. Many young people now live in desperately cramped conditions.” He adds that getting started on the housing ladder is getting more and more difficult. It is a key stage in the route of adulthood.

At the same time the whole zeitgeist of how housing was seen was undergoing a long process of deconstruction as a social good and its transformation into a commodity and a financial asset. The ideology of homeownership and the motives behind it receive a pounding from Raquel Rolnik in her book *Urban Warfare*. Raquel Rolnik writes, “The promotion of the ideology of homeownership has been a central element of the new paradigm of housing. The change in the paradigm of housing policy was summarised in an influential World Bank report – *Housing: Enabling Markets to Work* was published in 1993.” The report contained not only arguments about how important the housing sector would be to the economy, but also directives to governments on how best to formulate their policies.

The mercantilisation of housing, writes Rolnik, “deeply undermined the right to adequate housing around the world. The belief that markets could regulate the allocation of housing led to the abandonment of public policies that regarded housing as part of the social commons. In the new political economy, centred on housing as a means of access to wealth, the home becomes a fixed capital asset whose value resides in its expectation of generating more value in the future.”

It was clear when the Conservative government came to power in 2010 that they agreed with the previous government’s outlook as regards its housing policy despite the fact it was the emphasis on homeownership which was a factor in the financial crash of 2008. As Duncan Bowie writes in his booklet *Radical Solutions to the Housing Supply Crisis* “the government’s response to the recession of 2008 is that they, the government, could not really have got it much more wrong.” Their belief that house prices would go on rising, that somehow this was good for everyone – all boats would be lifted – and that it would somehow provide more affordable housing was not just based on the wrong ideology, but on a complete lack of logic or analysis.

The Conservative government decided to stop grant funding social housing which had been the means since the post-war years of allocating money to local authorities to build council housing and instead switched funding to an affordable rented programme except for a residential programme for supported housing. It was only when the Conservative government won a surprised overall majority in the 2015 general election that it set out to complete the abolition of social housing begun by Margaret Thatcher. As city planner turned academic Duncan Bowie writes, “The Housing and Planning Act 2016 represents a fundamental shift from the post-war consensus. It is a more significant than the Conservative government’s Housing Act. The 2016 legislation, radical in its content and wide-ranging in its impacts, was rushed through Parliament in the final hours of the parliamentary session in April 2016. Those who were watching the legislation process through the parliamentary process or actively trying to change it were conscious that it was a bad law. Overall, the Act presented a further attack on social housing in terms of both reducing existing housing supply and constraining the provision of further social housing.”

One indirect impact of the 2016 Housing Act was that local authorities began to rationalise their housing

waiting lists. Young single people with no children were the first people that were removed from the list. Families with children were given priority as well as families living in overcrowded conditions. They saw it as being realistic about the chances of people with little or no priority being allocated a home as much as reducing their costs in administering the lists as central government cut the budgets of local government in the years after 2010 making them function on less capital funding during the years of austerity imposed by the Conservative government after 2010.

“Many, many councils have closed their waiting lists to people who have low priority”, said the guy who was part of the consultation team – he worked for Poplar HARCA – put together by Tower Hamlets Council and other social housing providers during one of the ‘drop-in’ sessions to explain the changes they were proposing to the Common Housing Register. In the booklet published to accompany the proposals it states that the council wants to make the best use of homes that become available to let and ensure applicants in greatest need of housing are helped. Need is defined against a number of factors including disability, homelessness, medical needs and situations where tenants have been decanted to allow for the demolition of their homes. All these competing factors, it states, have to be considered on a case by case basis. Difficult decisions need to be made about who should be offered the limited number of homes that become available each year. Tower Hamlets, the booklet informs, has an acute shortage of social housing with 20,000 in its waiting list. In 2018/9 there were just 1,329 homes that became available to rent. This was a 40 per cent reduction in total vacancies compared to 2015/6 when 2,207 homes were re-let. The explanation ends by saying that the proposed changes to the system will ensure the policy complies with current legislation. That may be the case but young single people will be the losers.

A list of the five proposed changes to the system is outlined. The proposal on homelessness and the future of Band 3 are given separate pages in the booklet whereas the other three proposals are explained on one page. It is hard not to get the impression that Tower Hamlets Council is, if not getting its retaliation in first, seeing how the implications of the Homeless Reduction Act 2018 will affect their ability to meet its responsibilities to people in greatest need have taken pre-emptive action to do so. The Homeless Reduction Act, sponsored by Bob Blackman, MP, gave people who were threatened with eviction the right to approach their local authority to seek help rather than wait until they were on the street.

People, the booklet states, who are homeless, or who are at risk of becoming homeless, are sometimes able to secure private housing outside Tower Hamlets to get a roof over their heads. At the March 2019 meeting of the Tower Hamlets Housing Committee meeting a report was presented to the meeting by officers in response to the Homeless Reduction Act. It proposed to work with private housing providers to house homeless people. I spoke out against the plan at the meeting as it would put homeless people in an isolated environment where they would become more vulnerable. (Anita Brookner, author of the Booker Prize novel *Hotel Du Lac*, wrote that it is single people whom she admires most for it is they who have to survive the dramas and tragedies of life on their own without the support of a family of their own around them.) Also was it just a coincidence that Tower Hamlets Council bought a block of flats in Willesden last year to house homeless people in preparation for the Act becoming law?

The change in the proposal would make the connection to return to Tower Hamlets potentially more tenuous. Currently homeless people from Tower Hamlets housed outside the borough would not be penalised by NOT being taken off the register. The change would mean that they would be allowed to remain or join the register for three years only. As it states, “Then, if they were not rehoused during that time, they would be removed from the register.” In effect Tower Hamlets Council is trying to ‘export’ its homeless. That is morally reprehensible.

The future of Band 3 has caused equal uproar. A testimony of the outrage it has caused was evident a few days after the consultation was announced in a post by Mark Baynes on his website Love Wapping. The stark headline states that that the hopes of an entire generation were being destroyed as 8,000 households cut from housing waiting list by the proposals. He writes, “The cold facts do not express the rage and fury of borough residents who have been unceremoniously kicked off the waiting for a council tenancy. One resident told Love Wapping that his daughter had been bidding for twelve years before being told she was being removed from the list. Another angry contacted Love Wapping saying that every one of her grandchildren had also had the bad news.” Mark Baynes ends by saying that their angry is fuelled by the knowledge that there are many abuses of the current housing list as it is managed by Tower Hamlets Council. He proceeds to outline specific cases. He wants a forensic audit of the occupancy of every single council home in Tower Hamlets to be undertaken by an outside agency and the results published. This audit should be completed before honest residents who have lived in the borough all their lives are denied any chance of obtaining a council tenancy.

The timing of the proposed changes – just weeks before Christmas – has highlighted the plight of homelessness people. Shelter, the homeless charity, in a new report – *This is England: a picture of homelessness in 2019* – believes that that the number of homeless people in London is 170,000. The charity’s review of government data has exposed also that more than 45,500 people in London were threatened with eviction in the past year. (Tower Hamlets has the third highest number – 8,245 – of homeless people in London after Newham and Westminster)

“Homelessness is the creation of public policies”, writes academic Susan Hutson in the introduction to the book of essays she edited on homelessness by herself and other academics. Isobel Anderson, senior lecturer at the University of Stirling, in her essay about the non-access to social housing for young single homeless people, writes, “Successive central government policy and legislative statements since 1971, have emphasised the state’s responsibility to families in housing need – rather than to all citizens. Trends in housing and homelessness reflect both patterns of household formation and opportunities to gain access to suitable accommodation. The significant rise in single homeless and street homelessness, which occurred in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s, took place after a long period of growth in the formation of single-person households. During the same period, the procedure by which low-income groups gained access to social housing tended to discriminate against single people.”

This is particularly true in Tower Hamlets. The council’s flagship development of 148 flats at Watts Grove in Poplar contained no studio flats which would have been eminently suitable for single people. It is the same for the £300 million redevelopment of Chriss Street Market redevelopment. Such is the demand for homes that even homes which were designed when built for single age-old pensioners have been allocated to couples rather than single people.

Isobel Anderson writes, “The perception that the needs of single people for independent housing were, somehow, less than those of couples or families remained(s) widespread. Anderson concludes her essay thus, “Housing policies and the housing system, play an important role in creating and sustaining the conditions whereby certain groups are excluded from fundamental aspects of well-being. The impact of prevailing ideologies, which priorities the housing needs of nuclear families, retired people and those deemed ‘vulnerable’ has resulted in discrimination against most single people in the social housing system. The problem of single homelessness needs to be understood in the wider context of this sustained discrimination against lower income single people applying for social housing, combined with the growth in single person households. As there is only limited evidence that access policies are changing, while household formation among single people is expected to continue expanding, the problem of single homelessness is unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.”

As far as Tower Hamlets Council is concerned that is undoubtedly true; young, single people, homeless or not, are still being excluded from access to social housing. It is also true for the rest of the London and elsewhere since the book of essays on homelessness, edited by Susan Hutson and David Clapham, was written over twenty years ago.

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