



Creating a National Housing Union

Introduction

If we don't create a national tenants and residents union, we are consigned to be forever firefighting without ever putting out the fire.

Throughout this document, we have referred to tenants and residents to encompass full renters, shared owners, and leaseholders. In the eyes of the law, all are different forms of tenancy, but our members often identify themselves using one or other of these terms.

We are keenly aware that a deep and devastating housing crisis has developed in Britain. Tenants and residents are outflanked when trying to challenge large, powerful corporate landlords who have seemingly endless resources and superior access to decision makers in local and national government, and in the press.

Alongside the disadvantage created to tenants and residents against the might of landlords, the regulated environment is soft and malleable, being based on the premise that landlords are generally compliant even when the evidence suggests otherwise. There is little within the regime that imposes meaningful sanction when landlords transgress.

This has created an environment in which the landlord narrative is dominant, and alternative perspectives are efficiently, sometimes brutally, silenced. And while some legislation exists - designed to protect tenants and residents - the disparity between access to time, resources and expertise available to landlords, the barriers faced by tenants and residents means that in reality enforcement of this legislation is a pipe dream for most of our members.

There are many community and campaign groups carrying out excellent work to help tenants and residents self-organise, but there is currently no national tenant and resident union of sufficient scale to redress this power imbalance. We are all kept busy trying to mitigate the worst of the symptoms, without addressing the underlying 'disease'.



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It is within this context that we see:-

- Estates left with life-threatening disrepairs;
- Rising rents, service charge abuse;
- Race and disability discrimination, and a failure to provide accessible housing;
- Antisocial behaviour;
- A loss of low-cost rental housing;
- The cladding scandal and the cost of remediation passed to residents;
- The stigmatisation of renters and the concept of social housing;
- The failure to change leasehold into commonhold;
- Lack of access to legal remedy for housing issues; and
- Revenge evictions and landlord harassment.

Impact on Working Lives

These trends have a direct impact in our workplaces. Pay rises that have been won by trade union activists are immediately siphoned off to landlords. Workers lose too many days to sickness caused by unhealthy homes, the psychological strain of persistent antisocial behaviour, and the cumulative stress of defending themselves against a landlord's war of attrition.

At the start of 2025, SHAC conducted a [Housing Crisis in the Workplace Impact Survey](#). Although the sample size is still small, initial results showed that:-

- **76%** of respondents said that housing problems had a negative impact on their attendance or performance at work.
- **50%** of all respondents reported that they had taken off work specifically to deal with a housing problem.
- **45%** of respondents said that they had taken sickness leave because of a housing stress.
- **25%** of respondents said that they had suffered sickness due to disrepairs, leading to absence from work.
- **Almost 10%** of respondents said that they had suffered a physical injury due to disrepairs, leading to absence from work.



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- **60%** of respondents said housing costs were contributing to household debt.
- **14%** of respondents had been evicted or forced to move home at least once over the last three years.
- **53%** of respondents had been forced to move home once, but **22%** of respondents had been forced to move on 3 or more occasions.

As ever, the impact disproportionately affected disabled people. 33% of respondents reporting problems considered themselves disabled.

The survey results also underscore the view of housing campaigners that housing is a mainstream trade union issue, albeit one that is masked by the presenting symptoms rather than the underlying poor housing that is causing the problems. For example, trade union members might approach their union for representation over action by the employer for extended sickness absence. They may report that the absence was caused by asthma, and this would be on record. What is not visible is the damp and mould that has caused their breathing problems.

For trade unions, while there is some acknowledgement of the impact of the housing crisis on workers, it is not generally viewed as something that they can address. Yet the extreme housing affordability crisis means that many workers, especially young workers and those in the private rented sector are paying the majority of their wages to their landlords. This is therefore another reason for the NHU to engage with the trade union movement not just to generate policy statements on housing, but to combine forces to influence economic policy.

In summary, maintaining stable employment is almost impossible when workers are forced to relocate regularly or even end up homeless due to unjustified evictions and the lack of genuinely affordable housing. By extension, a stable economy is impossible in the context of a housing crisis.

Previous Tenant Voice Iterations

The establishment of a tenants' voice has been attempted several times, but all have failed, primarily because they were top-down approaches, funded and controlled by government or charities.



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Crucially, such organisations aimed to offer a means of consulting tenants and residents, rather than enabling the tenant and resident self-organisation which forms the core vision for SHAC, London Renters, Greater Manchester Tenants Union and similar grass-roots organisations.

Recent calls by the Housing Ombudsman and Baroness Taylor are once again policy focussed. Baroness Taylor said in the House of Lords in July 2025:-

“The new [tenant] body should work with ministers to drive national policy, and this was particularly important, given the government’s recent commitment to spend £39bn on social and affordable housing.”

These organisations aim to give the appearance of listening to tenants and residents without fundamentally altering the UK housing landscape. They also seek to act as a pressure valve, diffusing the anger which gives rise to radical protest movements including occupations, rent, and service charge strikes.

An Alternative Vision

This does not however mean that a tenants and residents union will inevitably end in failure. Instead, the initiative needs to emerge from the labour movement and be grounded in the principles of self-organisation, democracy, and developing a layer of activists able to empower member self-advocacy.

The primary aim and most productive efforts of the NHU would be to mobilise, support and empower tenants and residents to influence housing policy at national, regional, and local levels. This would include supporting the use of radical tactics such as rent and service charge strikes, eviction resistance, and the occupation of empty homes.

If the NHU is to change the housing landscape, it would need to challenge the UK’s dominant economic model and the way that it has played out through housing. It would therefore work with trade unions and other voluntary sector bodies challenging wider austerity, cuts to local authority funding and the removal of the checks and balances that should protect tenants and residents.



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In summary, like a trade union, such a body would:-

- Support tenants and residents with individual casework;
- Support and resource members to campaign collectively, either regionally or grouped by common concerns;
- Engage with the media to offer an alternative narrative to that of government and landlords, and raise awareness of emerging issues; and
- Engage with politicians at all constitutional levels to advocate for legislative and policy change that favours tenants and residents, not landlords.

A Union for All

The NHU will also be open to all, irrespective of the landlord type, whether council, housing association, or private developments, and even those in less traditional forms of housing such as almshouses, mobile homes, caravans, and boat dwellers, and would seek to address problems with managing agents.

The all-encompassing membership would allow the NHU to bring its members together wherever there is common cause, leveraging the power of the strongest to help the weakest, so that government is forced to hear all, not just those with the loudest voices. Smaller groupings within the union would nonetheless be able to focus their action according to specific locations or themes.

The scope of the NHU would overcome government endeavours to divide different categories of tenants and residents, applying legal protections to some but not others based on tenancy or landlord type. Divide and rule has allowed the housing crisis to flourish.

Having said the above, the NHU would not be open to, or campaign on behalf of, landlords or freeholders, even though, in some cases, there may be common interests. Freeholders in particular are sometimes affected by similar problems to those experienced by leaseholders. They may be under the control of estate management companies that can impose bye-laws and levy service charges.

Nonetheless, we consider that their position and level of power is markedly different to that of tenants and residents, and their interests will, all too often, conflict. While it would not therefore be appropriate



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to allow them to become members or affiliates, this does not preclude joint campaigning where the NHU believes that this would be beneficial.

Membership, Branch Formation, and Affiliation

NHU branches would be largely self-determining when it comes to campaigning. Branch formation would be a mix of localised and thematic options. For example, there could be an *NHU Bristol branch*, or an *NHU Leaseholders branch*. Members would be able to choose where they want to devote their time and energy.

The NHU has to allow individual membership; some people are not on estates where other tenants and residents are known to them, or they may not have a good relationship with their Tenants and Residents Association (TRA). Such individuals would be able to choose the branch that they feel works best for them, whether geographically or thematically.

Some people are already in an organised grouping such as a well-functioning TRA. Such organisations may wish to turn their organisation into a branch of the NHU. Others however may wish to retain their independence and identity, in which case they can opt to affiliate. We also want to offer an affiliation option to housing campaign groups.

Adding Value for Affiliated TRAs and Campaign Groups

The aim of the NHU would be to add support to the work of local TRAs or campaign groups like the London Renters Union and Greater Manchester Tenants Union who have an established profile and track record. Such groups would be able to affiliate to the NHU and then benefit from its resources. This might include for example:-

- Extending their reach to mobilise for action such as protests and occupations;
- Providing legal advice;
- Lobbying government with key messages;
- Press releases to publicise campaigns; and
- Funding leaflets, banners, flags and other resources for groups without sufficient funds.



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Legal Support and Influencing Landlord Behaviour

At present, even landmark legal wins by tenants or residents fail to change the behaviour of landlords, who are complacent in the knowledge that the majority of tenants and residents will not have the wherewithal to bring a legal case, whether to the First Tier Property Tribunal or county court.

Barriers to justice include:-

- **Time** – tenants and residents have to find time to prepare their legal bundle alongside their jobs and family commitments. By contrast, the big corporate and council landlords have paid staff to carry out this work. Even so, it is noteworthy that it is most often the landlords who ask for delays to hearings on the basis that they have not had sufficient time to make the necessary preparations.
- **Access to legal expertise** – tenants and residents cannot get Legal Aid for most types of housing complaints. Solicitors are willing to take on disrepairs cases on a No Win, No Fee basis because compensatory awards by courts cover their fees. Even this however is not available in relation to service charge cases as there is rarely a compensatory award if the tenant or resident wins, just an order for the landlord to refund some of the service charge payment. This means that tenants and residents often have to rely on their own research.
- **Intimidation** – landlords will often issue a threat to tenants or residents attempting to bring a case that they will seek a judgement ordering them to pay the landlord's legal cost if the tenant or resident loses their claim. In reality, judges do not grant this request, but it acts as a powerful deterrent. Tenants or residents are also unaware that they can make a request for a 'protective costs order' which limits the amount of costs a losing party in a legal case may have to pay, and which is designed to help people with limited means to pursue legal action without the fear of overwhelming financial loss if they lose their case.
- **Cultural barriers** – tenants and residents who do not speak English as a first language, who have mental ill-health or learning disabilities, or who have not had access to a high level of formal education, and sometimes face a combination of these factors, often feel overwhelmed by the bureaucracy involved in launching a legal claim, and do not even attempt it.



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Neither SHAC nor any of the grass-roots campaign groups are currently able to offer a legal advice and representation service as the costs are prohibitive. Shelter does provide this form of casework, but is a large charity with a substantial fundraising machine.

What this means for landlords is that even if they lose a major challenge in court, landlords continue their unlawful behaviour elsewhere, or even repeat the same behaviour with the same group of tenants and residents knowing that they'll be faced with having to restart the legal process.

This has been most evident with service charges: estates have secured substantial compensation for overcharging in one year, only to see the same overcharging resurface the next. The law nonetheless expects that tenants and residents pay up against the demands year-on-year, and then attempt to get yet another refund from their landlord. It is a war of attrition without equality of arms.

By contrast, landmark wins by trade unions that offer free legal advice and representation to their members result in behavioural changes by employers. Companies know that trade union members in their employment have easy access to legal advice and representation, and are therefore much more likely to comply with employment law.

The Funding Model and Legal Costs

To get the NHU off the ground, seed funding would be needed from the trade union and labour movement. However, the aim is to create a self-funding organisation through membership and affiliation fees over time.

The fees would be needed to cover the costs of office space, staff, legal fees and other resources. Some office space might be available through local trade union branches which would be willing to provide an office at minimal charge.

The trade unions solve the legal costs problem by retaining a law firm that does not represent employers. A proportion of the membership fee is used to fund the retainer, but only a tiny fraction of members ever need legal advice or representation from their union, and it is therefore a viable funding model. The legal firms benefit by receiving a steady stream of cases through this arrangement.

Over time, it is desirable for the NHU to have scope to bring legal cases, whether strategic (for example launching Judicial Review claims), or in relation to individuals. However, this may not be possible right from the start due to the costs involved. The NHU however should also lobby government to level the playing field when it comes to access to justice, for example restoring Legal



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Aid to housing cases and properly funding this service so that lawyers are willing to represent tenants and residents with housing claims.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The October 2025 conference aims to establish a steering committee with representatives from campaign groups and with the involvement of individuals to get the NHU off the ground. The steering committee would formulate a plan for the next stage, which is to secure funding from the trade union and labour movement, and start to build the framework for the NHU.

SHAC

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