

## Housing (London) debate, Westminster Hall

Wednesday, 06 February 2002

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Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Given the lack of time, I shall try to reduce my speech to a few points. The first, and the most salient, is that we must fund the welcome changes that the Government have introduced. Following legislation, for the first time 18 to 21-year-old care leavers will be given priority, as will all 16 and 17-year-olds. In Tower Hamlets, that will mean a minimum of an extra 300 young people turning up at homeless services. We welcome the fact that they will be given priority, as they must be in any civilised society, but we must have the money to back that up, and it is not there at the moment.

Secondly, we must reduce temporary accommodation, especially among families with children, as has been said. Shelter estimates that an investment of only £250 million, which is surely crumbs from the table, would bring about 10,000 empty private properties back into use as temporary accommodation, with much cheaper rents. Will the Minister respond, if not now, perhaps in writing, to that proposal?

Thirdly, we must tackle and prevent homelessness among those who do not qualify for priority need. That can be done only by increasing the amount of affordable housing.

Fourthly, although all hon. Members have many problems with stock transfer in our constituencies, it is fair to say that, according to the DTLR's deprivation index, I have the worst. Recently, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble), who is in the

6 Feb 2002 : Column 286WH Chamber today, and Lord Falconer, the Minister for Housing and Planning, visited my constituency. He saw a family of 16 people who lived in two bedrooms and described that as the worst housing that he had ever seen. It is shocking that such housing problems exist. We cannot sit back and allow another generation of children to grow up in slums. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] I am glad that I have my colleagues' support on that issue, as I shall lose it on my next point. Having seen two cases of successful stock transfer, which has turned slums into very good quality housing, we must consider that route and deal with the problems that arose with the first wave of stock transfers 10 years ago.

Fifthly, the right to buy is another controversial matter. At the very least, it must be suspended in areas of regeneration where it is sucking up Government money that was made available to improve housing.

Sixthly, I am horrified by the prospect of rent restructuring. I seek the Minister's reassurance that it will not be dire for housing associations. Some housing associations in London, for example, have said that they do not want to increase their rents but will be forced to do so.

Finally, I commend the Minister on her decision to review the housing health and safety rating standards. I hope that she will deal with the overcrowding regulations, which have not changed since the 1930s. I welcome her comments on all the issues that I have raised. We are millions of pounds better off under the Labour Government, but it is still not enough for our housing problems. Please could they give us some more? 11.57 am