SUBMISSION FROM UNISON SCOTLAND

Introduction
1. UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the call for written evidence from the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee regarding the above Bill. UNISON is Scotland’s largest trade union representing over 162,000 members working in the public sector in Scotland, including many working within the social housing sector.

Introduction
2. UNISON Scotland’s response will look at the three main areas covered by the Bill as well as providing a general summary of our position on social housing.

Part 1: modernising the regime for regulating social landlords
3. UNISON Scotland agrees that the modernised Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) should have a statutory objective of promoting the interests of tenants and future tenants, and that this objective should also consider the interests of homeless applicants.

4. We also believe there has to be a choice between the SHR being accountable to Ministers and Parliament for its actions and allowing enough operational ‘independence’. UNISON Scotland would want further clarification on this issue and believes that the issue of public accountability should not be sacrificed for the sake of greater independence.

5. UNISON Scotland believes any inspection regime should be appropriate to the powers and duties of the organisation being inspected. We also note that unlike RSLs, council housing tenants have direct democratic accountability on their landlord via their local councillors.

6. Some more about inspection being appropriate for the size and ‘powers’ of the landlord but note that unlike housing associations councils have democratic accountability via their councillors.

7. However, UNISON Scotland has a concern regarding SHR having the ability to charge fees for any of its functions. This could have significant impact on public sector housing bodies – although this simply restates the current position, there is a concern with increased pressure on public sector budgets that SHR may use this as a means of raising revenue.

8. We are pleased that since the publication of the draft Housing Bill, the Scottish Government has removed the option of profit distributing bodies being registered as social landlords.

Part 2: reforming the Right to Buy
9. As stated in our response to Firm Foundations, UNISON Scotland is opposed to the Right to Buy policy. We believe that the Right to Buy has
damaged the supply of social housing, with over 480,000 council houses sold between 1980 and 2006. Although this Bill will not remove this policy completely it will have the effect of limiting the future scope of Right to Buy. Over time this will diminish Right to Buy as a policy which threatens social housing. Removing the Right to Buy for new properties will also be beneficial to the public housing sector and would encourage more local authorities to build new houses.

10. UNISON Scotland believes the policy objective of protecting investment in new social housing should take precedence and existing tenants who move into such properties should be made aware that their right to buy would not be applicable to new properties.

11. UNISON Scotland agrees that there is a need to reform the pressured-areas designations and, while Right to Buy exists, agrees to the proposals within the Bill including extending this designation to particular properties. This proposal will help local authorities maintain a more balanced housing stock. We also believe that councils are better placed to make decisions on pressured areas and that this would sit well alongside their responsibilities for their Local Housing Strategy.

Part 3: amending the law:

registering private landlords, licensing homes in multiple occupation;
dealing with disrepair in private housing

12. UNISON Scotland supports the proposals within the Bill to help local authorities take action against private landlords (or their agents) where they have a concern.

13. As regards the licensing of homes in multiple occupation, we agree that having planning permission, where required, should be a requirement for the grant of an HMO licence.

14. UNISON Scotland also supports the policy objectives within the Bill dealing with disrepair in private housing, especially allowing local authorities to recover from owners any expenses occurred in the development of maintenance plans.

General Comments

15. Although UNISON Scotland would like to see the complete abolition of the Right to Buy policy, we support the general principles of this bill. However, we believe more needs to be done to promote social housing and increase the number of houses available. As part of this we would like to see some equality of treatment between local authorities and RSLs. For instance, RSLs receive significant amounts of public funding (via Housing Association Grant etc) yet do not receive the same level of scrutiny as councils such as being subject to Freedom of Information requests.

16. UNISON Scotland would like to see council housing move away from a perception of being the tenure of last resort. We would like an approach
that sees the full dispersal and integration of council housing within wider housing developments, ensuring that council housing does not suffer from the impression of residualisation – where only those in most need end up with council housing. This approach would help to make council housing a more attractive option for all members of society, providing greater integration within communities.

17. UNISON Scotland also believes that there should be more emphasis on tackling fuel poverty. It is not just what we build, but how we build. New houses need to be built to higher standards with a real emphasis on tackling fuel poverty and meeting Scotland’s ambitious climate change targets.

Shelter Scotland

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