

Covid-19 and everyday tenant activism: private tenants demand the right to home

Adriana M Soaita
University of Glasgow
Urban Studies & CaCHE

Housing Studies Association Conference, 14-15 April 2021

Covid-19 and everyday tenant activism: private tenants demand the right to home

PART 1: to explore private tenants' renting experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. CaCHE report

PART 2: to document the policy demands that private tenants make to the government

- Why and in what ways do private tenants engage in activism?
- The question of collective representation
- What are their demands to the government?

Chatterton and Pickerill (2010)

- Nuanced view
- Goes beyond simple militant action
- Privileges '*doing*' activism rather than '*being*' an activist
- Builds brick by brick the hoped-for-future into the present

Tenant activist agency/engagement

- Signing a petition, making a complaint to/against the landlord, joining a tenant organisation, picketing, taking to the streets with the belief that one's action may improve the sector for all

Online “written interview” (Bristol form)

- A short online questionnaire (24q) with 11 open-ended, mandatory questions
- Surprisingly successful: 60 participants, rich data

Please tell us about your experience of tenant activism in as much detail as you wish. *For instance, we would like to know*

Q17

what you did (when, with whom), what caused you to become involved and what you hoped to achieve. Overall, have you enjoyed doing it or it has been a stressful experience?

3,928
min=2
avg=82
max=962

In your opinion, what should the government do to help private tenants make their rented property home? *Please think what would be of help to you and also tell us if you believe that such changes are likely to happen soon.*

Q22

3,706
min=1
avg=62
max=606



UK COLLABORATIVE
CENTRE FOR
HOUSING EVIDENCE



AGE GROUP	N
18-34	34
35-44	10
45-54	10
Over 55	6

HOUSEHOLD TYPE	N
Single	34
Couple	17
With children	8
Other	1

FINANCIAL SITUATION	N
Doing alright & comfortable	27
Getting by	17
Very difficult & difficult	15

OVERALL SAMPLE, MOSTLY:

- Urban
- Female (n=46)
- “Stay-Home” (1 key worker)

Collective action

26 were TU members, with two setting up new local branches and recruiting members, three being part of 'defense teams' and 12 taking part in protests (e.g. picketing) and campaigning. Many were signing petitions (n=14), with two having initiated their own.

Individual action

Complaining to/against landlords, letting agents and Councils (n=9), writing to the local MP (n=4), speaking up to Councils/Mayor (n=4) or to the media (n=4), giving professional advice on tenant platforms (n=3), taking Court action (n=3), fighting contract clauses (n=1).

Improve the sector ‘brick by brick’

We took our previous landlady to court. We hoped that this would set **an example to other landlords** that they cannot shirk their responsibilities and reinforce our rights as tenants (r22, f, 18-34, London)

A sense of emergency (short-term)

COVID-19 has also spurred me into action; so many people are in rent arrears and there is no government legislation whatsoever to protect them **when the courts start processing evictions** (r3, f, 18-34, Oxford)

Changing the system (long-term)

To raise awareness, increase pressure to change laws and policies to a **fair system** for all, change abuse from governments regardless of political stance, authorities, building companies, landlords, away from this mafia system where only profit and abuse counts (r13, f, 55-64, Littlehampton)

HOW IT FEELS?

Stressful and cathartic

It has been really stressful and tiring, but also cathartic - I don't know how I would have fully 'healed' from the trauma of the situation without at least trying to do my bit to make sure that the landlord and other authorities did not get off easily (r35, f, 18-35, Luton)

Empowering and belonging

I have found it a very empowering experience, as we mostly win the campaigns we take on and it's really helped me to feel like I have found a group of like-minded people. It gives me a lot of hope for the future (r51, f, 18-34, Sheffield)

SELF-REPRESENTATION

I think **tenant union/individual tenant voices** should take precedence over more mainstream charities that can't honestly claim to speak for tenants (r52, f, 18-34, Edinburgh)

- A democratic right
- A matter is one of contention
- Unequal tenant/landlord relationship
- Governments privilege property owners
- UK “landlord democracy”



Consumer rights

- Fit-for-purpose service (r22, f, 18-34, London)
- Equivalence to a commercial tenancy (r49, f, 45-54, Bath)

The Right to Home

- illegal for landlords to prevent tenants from **living as in a HOME, regardless of who owns it** (r18, f, 18-34, Southampton)
- Equivalence to social housing/homeownership (bar disposal)

The Right to Social Justice

The UK is very much engrossed in upstairs, downstairs thinking, class divide, the haves/have-nots, giving the haves privileges. It is a cancer through the entire British system, law, society, culture, not only related to housing. I am not saying that any country is perfect, but I wonder if the UK should be more socially advanced instead of believing in total hardcore capitalism (r13, f, 55-64, Littlehampton)

TENANTS DEMANDS

	Policy	No	Specifics
1	Rent control	31	Reduction (n=5); Freeze (n=2); Capped /indexed increases (n=7) by quality, wage or equivalent mortgages; German model (n=1)
2	Tenure stability and flexibility	28	Tighter clauses for eviction (n=26), including: making it illegal to evict in winter (n=1), for a rent increase (n=1), for landlord to move in (n=1), during the Covid19 pandemic (n=1); Remove Section 21 (n=6); New York model (n=1); longer-assured contracts (n=1). longer-assured contracts (n=1) Flexibility (n=8) including: rolling contracts (n=1), unlimited contracts (n=1), open-ended contracts (n=2), longer eviction notes (n=2); opt-out clauses (n=1).

Being trapped for six months somewhere you want to leave is horrible (r4, f, 18-34, Bristol)

TENANTS DEMANDS

	Policy	No	Specifics
3	Personalisation	19	Decorating (n=11, including for carpets and kitchen units), furnishing (n=6, even just changing the layout), pictures hanging (n=4), wall painting (n=3), mirror fixing (n=1), planting flowers in the garden (n=1).
4	Property quality, repairs	17	<p>Quality (n=11): Legislate more 'detailed, stringent, higher, greater, less vague, livable, decent' standards (n=10), including for thermal efficiency (n=2), quality of furniture (n=1), dividing walls in HMOs (n=1), mandatory living room in HMOs (n=1); Do not allow poor quality housing to be rented (n=1).</p> <p>Repairs (n=8): Quick deadline (n=5); Rent reduction (n=5); Prompt enforcement, including through the Court (n=2); By tenant & deducted from rent (n=2); Real teeth legislation (n=1);</p>
5	Pets	16	Pro-pet, standard position (n=9, unless landlord give good reason not to, n=2); Make pet discrimination illegal (n=5); Recognise they help with mental health (n=2).

TENANTS DEMANDS

	Policy	No	Specifics
6	Detailed regulation	14	Detailed quality standards for property, maintenance/repairs and rent deductions/ increases (n=14); Repeal the 1988 Act (n=1); Defining “peaceful habitation” (n=1) or “home” (n=1).
7	Disputes	13	Support with non-Court third party (n=11) and Court proceedings (n=5); Strengthen enforcement (n=3).
8	Licensing	12	Including: public register (n=3) and transparent tenant reviews (n=2)
9	Rules for landlords	12	Greater penalties (n=6); Disallow rough landlords to let (n=3); Limit landlord portfolio (n=3); Disallow speculation (n=1); Selling with tenant at the same rent as in Germany (n=1); Restrict landlord right to move in (n=1)

The neighbours’ landlord talked to me about doing repairs *'out of the goodness of his heart'*. The fact that landlords can see themselves in this light is why we need detailed regulation to frame landlords’ duties (r3, f, 18-34, Oxford)

Policy recommendations

Hesitancy to act in fear that landlords will sell up is pathetic, landlords exit, the houses remain (r23, f, 45-54, Edinburgh)

The online 'written interview'

- Collected data of breadth and depth with minimal resource
- Similarities with structured interviews (incl content analysis)
- Requires participant effort, hence their interest
- Digital exclusion or activism having an urban expression?

