

Written evidence to the Public Bill Committee submitted by openDemocracy (RRB43)

The Renters (Reform) Bill must do more

Overview

Renters in England face very challenging circumstances, as shown below by the highlights of openDemocracy's recent reporting on the housing crisis. The Renters (Reform) Bill offers an opportunity to alleviate some of those difficulties but it simply does not go far enough. The delay over the ending of "no-fault" evictions is particularly concerning, as are the financial hardships caused by unchecked high rent.

Key findings from our journalism

- UK private sector rents in the last year saw [their highest jump](#) since records began in 2016. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) showed landlords pocketed an average of 3.2% more in the 12 months to July 2022. Real-terms wages fell by record amounts between April and June.
- In May, we reported that more than two-thirds of landlords in England who kicked tenants out in the last year had [used so-called 'no-fault' evictions](#) to do so.
- The UK government [ignored warnings](#) that the Renters (Reform) Bill could create a loophole that leaves vulnerable people at risk of homelessness.
- Vulnerable renters are being ["hounded" by utility companies](#) to pay off huge debts despite having 'bills included' contracts with their landlord.
- Only 16 rogue landlords in the whole of England are currently [subject to banning orders](#) because cash-strapped councils can't afford to take others to court.
- Councils across England paid [private landlords at least £1.25bn](#) last year for temporary accommodation, including hostels and bed and breakfasts.
- Unchecked, unrealistic rent demands [are being used as a tool to force renters out of their homes](#) without formally triggering an eviction process.
- The insurance sector is driving [disproportionate harm towards the most vulnerable tenants](#), even when they are able to pay their rent in full, because they are seen as being higher risk.

Reader opinion

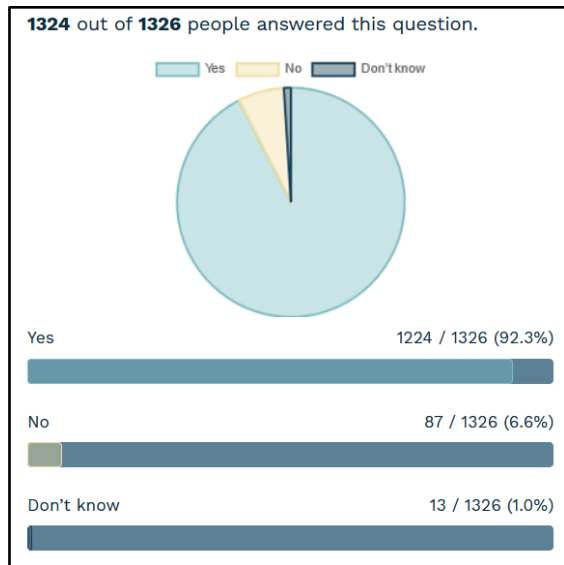
We wanted to gauge public opinion so we asked openDemocracy readers in England to take a survey on issues around the Renters (Reform) Bill. Just over 1,300 responded between 9 and 13 November 2023. Although not a weighted opinion poll, the survey does show a significant degree of public concern as the answers below demonstrate.

We found that issues around renting had affected a lot of our readers personally, which is surprising given that they tend to be older and more affluent than the general population.

- 12% of respondents had themselves experienced a no-fault eviction, which is an incredibly high proportion
- 17% have had difficulty finding accommodation because their benefits would not cover rents
- 11% have had to ask for help to cover their rent
- And **just over half** (50.4%) have had to help someone else pay their rent

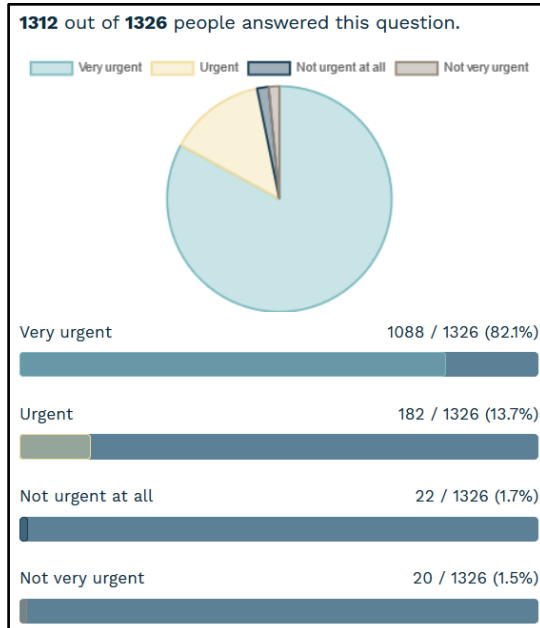
We also asked the following questions:

Should renters be protected from being evicted with no justification, known as no-fault evictions?

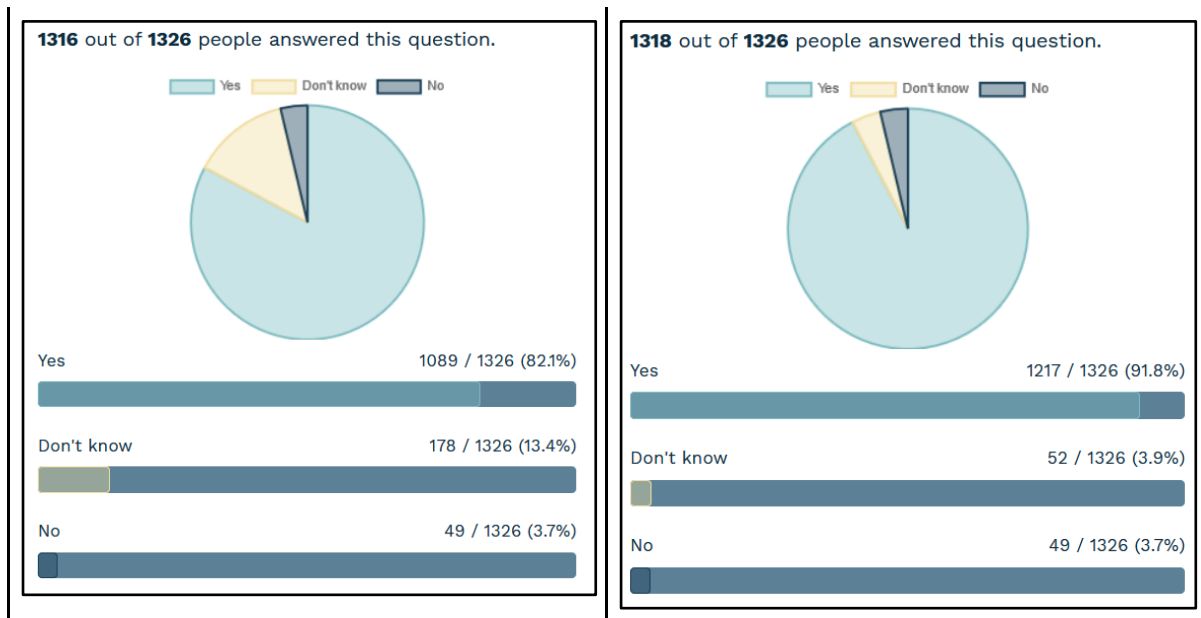


Should benefits like housing allowance reflect local rents in different areas?

How urgent would you say the need is for reform to prevent no-fault evictions?



Do you think there should be restrictions on how much landlords can increase rent?



Next steps

We are concerned about the above issues and are now asking the bill committee to:

- Ensure the abolition of Section 21 ('no-fault') evictions remains in the bill, and that its enforcement is not contingent upon an improvement in the courts system, which the government said it would be in its 30 October 2023 response to a report by the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on Reforming the Private Rented Sector
- Ban all unfair evictions by making sure that there are no loopholes for landlords to exploit. If a landlord does exploit eviction terms, for instance by falsely claiming they are evicting tenants in order to move in a member of their family, tenants should be eligible for compensation.
- Extend the notice for evictions from two months to four months because of how difficult it can be for tenants to find a new home.
- Create an easy way for tenants to challenge unfair rent increases through a tribunal, where unfair rent increases aren't measured by the market rate.
- Commit to further reform of the private rented sector to limit landlords' ability to use unrealistic rent demands as a tool to force renters out of their homes.
- Commit to further regulation of the insurance sector to crack down on discriminatory policies that disproportionately affect tenants with protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

Contact

For more information, please contact:

Stewart Kirkpatrick, Head of Impact, openDemocracy,
stewart.kirkpatrick@opendemocracy.net

About openDemocracy

openDemocracy is an independent international media organisation. Through reporting and analysis of social and political issues, we seek to educate citizens to challenge power and encourage democratic debate across the world.

November 2023