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Tony Cain  
Secretary  
Housing Improvement Task Force  
Housing Division 2  
Victoria Quay  
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15th May 2002

Dear Mr Cain

I refer to the first report of the Housing Improvement Task Force and I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of West Lothian Council. The report is certainly to be welcomed and does very well set out the issues concerning house condition and quality of provision in the private sector. It is hoped that in raising these issues the Executive will now find ways of following through with solutions. We would like to think that in accordance with the tone of the report solutions can be found through partnership arrangements particularly with local authorities who obviously in our view are best placed to deal with local solutions. It is important that respective parties to this debate play their full role and where for example legislation would help this is taken on board by the Executive and where particular resources are needed to meet particular objectives sensible discussions can be held between the various parties.

We agree with many of the conclusions from the report and would wish to make comment on a few of these which are particularly significant to us here in West Lothian.

We have identified significant issues with former public sector properties sold under the Right to Buy legislation. In particular we agree that there are major issues with the sale of flats, particularly where as a Council we wish to carry out improvement work. Our experience has been that many owners in this situation are unwilling to participate in Council sponsored schemes. This is despite the fact that the cost of such works are offered at a significant discount to the market rate. We do feel it would be helpful if the Executive could consider innovative ways in which owners could be encouraged to participate. In particular the report raises the possibility of equity release schemes and we do think this should be pursued further even to the extent of giving local authorities some powers of compulsion albeit with appropriate safeguards written in.

There is in our view a general lack of awareness by people contemplating owner occupation concerning the costs involved both initially and in ensuring that houses are maintained to a reasonable standard. We do think that this is something which could be addressed nationally, particularly where people are taking up right to buy schemes and are buying houses where their financial resources are maybe fully stretched.

We accept the comments made about the private rented sector and do have some experience of poor standards of maintenance, which are not related to the rent charged. We wonder whether there is a case for defining acceptable quality standards in the private sector and whether this is something which local authorities could be encouraged to manage. A benefit here would be in making a much-needed resource of housing for rent available to help authorities fulfil their other duties and also offer wider choice of housing in an area.

The issue of poor quality housing is a significant one in that if investment is not made in good time then living conditions in such properties will deteriorate. We take the view that the below tolerable standard set should very much be seen as a basic minimum and every effort should be made to improve on this. We do think that it should be a major role for local authorities to tackle such issues before they become serious problems. At the moment the grants legislation and resources available to local authorities can act as disincentives to this and we do agree with the view that there needs to be a review of existing local authority repair powers and how these can be better used. In particular we do think that as part of the wider debate on local authority responsibilities there should be a power to promote good maintenance practice. This needs to be thought through in a practical way and would include possible future local authority powers and responsibilities in dealing with fuel poverty.

I trust the above is of help to you in taking forward the work of the Housing Improvement Task Force and we look forward to further proposals from the Executive in due course.

Yours sincerely

**John Reid**  
**Head of Strategy & Development (Housing)**