

From Small Acorns

Even in the 21st century, it is clear that as humans we still have few really important needs. Food and water are of course vital to our lives. Clothes are also absolutely essential in most, if not all cultures, across the world. After that we probably don't really need too much else. Except shelter. A place to live. A home. Whilst there will always be those who live 'on the road', who can honestly say that the need to have a roof over our heads isn't a basic need for the vast majority of the human race? And isn't that need even greater in a climate such as ours in Northeast England, which, while not perhaps as grim as some outsiders (who often have never been here!) might portray it, can be cold and wet – and often! This makes it all the more astonishing then, that a historian in 2116 might look back 100 years and wonder just why so many people across the region and indeed the country were struggling with housing problems in 2016. But then having decent housing is sadly something people on Tyneside have had to struggle for many times in the past. All of this begs a few questions. What rights do people have regarding housing? What is the situation regarding housing on Tyneside today? And what lessons has the history of housing in the area to tell us today?

Whilst there is no specific right to decent housing in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it can be argued that it is covered in Article 25, which states that, "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control". (1) Any historian looking back would find that poor housing and the difficulty of finding enough money to have a home was a concern for many people across Britain. Indeed it was reported in *The Guardian* in March 2016 that, "more than a million Britons have seen a doctor due to stress over rent and mortgage payments." (2) Sadly, this is an old story; the right to decent housing, although basic to human life, is one which has not always been respected by the banks of the Tyne.

Housing issues, including overcrowding, housing in bad repair and tenants not being treated well by landlords, are indeed not new to Newcastle or the wider conurbation of Tyneside. Some of the highest industrial wages in the world in the nineteenth century were found in Northeast England in mining, engineering the iron and steel industry and shipbuilding and consequently the region resembled the Yukon, albeit with gold that was actually black in colour. As the hub of the region, in the mid-19th century, Tyneside was growing at a phenomenal rate and, despite the good wages, this was to cause many problems on Tyneside and particularly in Newcastle, regarding the right to decent housing. It has been reported that housing conditions in Newcastle were condemned on numerous occasions, by both citizens and visitors, who maintained that the city had a housing problem. This was due to the fact that there was "extreme overcrowding, insanitary conditions, dangerously unhealthy public space, high rents and a shortage of affordable accommodation for a substantial population." This was a population, which mushroomed from 87 156 in 1851 to 233 644 in 1901. (3)

There were many reasons for the poor housing, but clearly this rapid growth in population can be seen as a major factor. The rapid expansion of the coal mining and then other heavy industries during the period was bound to put huge pressure on the available housing, especially as there was a disparity between the wages paid and the level of the rents. It was also exacerbated by the fact that most of the industries were connected to the river and so the boom in population was not evenly spread and was indeed concentrated along the banks of the River Tyne, in districts such as Elswick and Byker . (4)

Radical Liberal M.P. Joseph Cowen, who represented Newcastle in the House of Commons, owned the *Daily Chronicle* and *Cowen's Newcastle Chronicle* also took up the cause of better housing. In 1850 it published an article, in a series on social conditions, which declared that, "too few houses have been built for the working class and too many for the middle class, hence the rents of the latter are cheaper in proportion than those of the former." Reformers were further emboldened two years later when, after there had been a third outbreak of cholera in twenty years, a Cholera Commission of inquiry produced a, "very rigorous investigation and report which concentrated on housing conditions. The Commissioners reported that, 'we shall not probably be over-stating the case, if we compute that about half the families in Newcastle are confined exclusively to the occupancy or joint occupancy of exceedingly over-crowded single-room tenements'" (5) The problem of a lack of decent, reasonably priced housing for lower and middle-income tenants would be a problem which would continue to haunt some parts of Tyneside into the 21st century.

Mid-19th century Newcastle, saw the growth of large industrial developments such as the Hawthorn and Stephenson engineering works, built before effective suburban transport had been developed. Accordingly, those who flocked into Newcastle had to live close to their places of work. This, naturally put huge pressure on existing housing, helping to create appalling living conditions in the poorest areas, where the large numbers of Irish immigrants lived cheek by jowl with casually employed quayside labour. In 1865, Newcastle's population had increased by half in just 20 years to 122 000. It is noted that, a council report suggested that 9 639 families were living in single-room homes and a further 6 191 with only two rooms. Nearly 14 000 people were without a toilet, while Newcastle's death rate was then 36.7 per 1 000 annually; the highest of any major town or city in the country.(6)

It is also argued that the large influx of Irish immigrants in the wake of the potato famine added to the housing problems on Tyneside. Norman McCord has related an eye-witness account of life for an Irish family in a Newcastle slum in 1850:

"A cow-feeder's premises were contiguous to the house I have just been describing, and separated from it only by a wall. In order to collect the liquid refuse, a hole was rudely knocked through the wall, to let it run into a barrel that was sunk in the ground beside the poor man's door, and which not only diffused a peculiar odour through the house, but, when it overflowed, which was not seldom, discharged itself into the yard; and no arrangement having been made for carrying off the stream, it found its way into the stable, and from

thence leaked through into the room where they lived, and this it has done for three years. The said barrel was placed there by a gentleman, whom I shall not name, but whom I had heard of before as one that bore the character of a philanthropist! The surgeon of the district had pointed out the injurious influence which the nuisance had upon the people in the yard, and had tried to get it removed, but had failed.....

...In the same neighbourhood I met a sweep-boy, who slept in the soot-house, in a soot-box, beside the watch-dog. I saw the place. There was no window, and nothing provided for the poor boy's comfort. He was just as comfortable as the dog, but nothing more – a little dirty straw was discernible at the bottom of the box. I asked how often it was changed, whether it might be every week? 'Every week!' said the boy, 'every six months rather'. His face was washed every Saturday night; and his clothes were very likely never off his back, except when they were exchanged for others. His wages were a sovereign a year. He was at a Sunday School, but knew nothing. I put a simple question to him, but his reply was, 'I have not been there long'. (7)

Housing conditions on Tyneside didn't seem to have improved since the days when Thomas Bewick was documenting Northumbrian life 80 years earlier, slipping drawings of people suffering from grinding poverty into his books documenting the natural life of Northumberland, so that some of the more wealthy might get a reminder of how the 'other half' lived. Something had to change.

It was in the 1870's that the tide began to turn slightly against unsanitary housing conditions. John Gibson Youll, who was later to be an election agent for Joseph Cowen, was elected as a Liberal in the St John's Ward of Newcastle. From the same year, it was possible to gain a more regular and precise account of living conditions, as it was in 1873 that a Medical Officer was appointed for Newcastle. However, two years of pressure only led to what has been described as a "modest plan for the demolition of the unhealthy Pandon group of houses", leading Youll to complain in the Newcastle Corporation Proceedings of, "cold obstruction's apathy". It is also claimed that poor attendance at Sanitary Committee meetings was another reason why there was as such a delay. (8)

No great improvement was made during the 1880's and it was not until the 1890 *Housing of the Working Classes Act* that real progress could begin to be made. This act helped the delivery of decent working-class housing, by simplifying procedures and this helped Councillor Riley Lord to take up the baton for working-class housing in Newcastle in his positions as the north-east's principal representative of the Prudential Assurance Company and as councillor for the predominantly working-class district of Byker. He proposed that the council build Model Common Lodging Houses, as he argued at Newcastle Corporation Proceedings in 1891 that, "it was very difficult for any woman at present to keep herself decent – driven into neighbourhoods where decency was not to be found." Again however, the Corporation stalled, fearful of "getting themselves on an inclined plane which would lead them into the vortex of municipal socialism", so that by the beginning of 1895 the Improvement Committee was in a position to no longer recommend going ahead with the

scheme. (9) It would take until well into the 20th century for real improvements to take place.

A century later some of the old problems had been alleviated, but slum housing remained a major problem in many British cities despite huge council house building programmes after the Second World War when there was a real determination that the people of Britain would be given the homes fit for heroes, which they had been promised after the First World War, but never received. Newcastle was no exception to the trend of trying to alleviate slum housing, which was still a problem. However, some of the supposed solutions, especially those involving extensive planning, which did not always involve real consultation with the residents who were going to be affected by changes, caused yet more housing problems in Newcastle and the wider Northeast. Two features of this planning were the establishment of New Towns after the Second World War near to major conurbations, to alleviate slum housing and the building of high rise flats in the 1960's. It was part of a move across the whole country to move on from the slums and poverty of the 1920's and 1930's and the ruins of blitzed housing from the 1940's. However, not all went well.

The writer Sid Chaplin made the following point about the County Durham and Northumberland new towns:

"The brand new towns such as Killingworth and Washington may teach us to live and work and enjoy our leisure better – and folk at Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee, ignoring the news of the wonderful new computer-information link-up, are demanding votes and representation. Embarrassingly, they're citizens not students, and something may have to be done." (10)

In 1962, Jimmy Forsyth photographed the Newcastle Council leader T. Dan Smith unveiling a bronze statue in front of a new block of high-rise flats, which were replacing old terraced houses in the city. It has been reported that the photograph conveys something of the utopian feeling at the time, but Jimmy Forsyth was more sceptical. Looking back later he commented that, "the planners actually believed that they could build communities, but instead the community was scattered to the four winds, people were sent to far-flung estates and a community was lost forever." (11)

The same point was made by the writer Shelagh Delaney about the home town of Salford near Manchester. On a BBC programme in 1960, Delaney stated that,

"They're tearing down whole parts of Salford and building them again. They're tearing them down and again they're not putting the people back there...they're sending them away. Far away to places where there's no city, to sort of sterile places.....nobody knows anybody on it and when they're building these places they never think of putting anything in them like a theatre or something." (12) No doubt the planners and architects of the particular estate of high-rise flats shown in the programme lived some distance away.

These small glimpses of Newcastle's housing history outline a number of the problems which remain in one form or another to this day. There were unsanitary, unhealthy housing conditions mentioned as well as a lack of control over their own housing from the people who lived in them. The short passages above also demonstrate the importance of community. What is clear is that there were shortages of housing in the past. It is

interesting that one of the first local figures to take up the issue of housing was local M.P. and newspaper owner Joseph Cowen. Cowen was famous for being at the forefront of community engagement in Northeast England in the second half of the 19th century, a community engagement which empowered people across the region in a form of community self-help. This was a form of collective self-improvement aimed at a whole community rising, not just an individual or a single family. In some form or other all the problems mentioned above remain in Newcastle and perhaps a modern form of community organising might be the answer to them. It is this kind of community engagement, which one organisation, ACORN, sought to develop in one part of Tyneside, while the housing problems they found would present major challenges to ACORN in their determination to help tenants in the Heaton area of Newcastle.

Acorn is a grassroots organisation, which began its work in this country in Bristol in May 2014. The organisation was originally founded in Arkansas in the USA in the 1970's. They use distributed, grassroots community organising to run adaptive, locally-driven campaigns in our communities and cities. ACORN's small team of paid staff supports teams of community leaders, members and activists running their own groups and campaigns across the UK. Part of the ACORN philosophy is that "inequality and our personal and social problems are about power". Following on from this, ACORN believe that, "the only way we'll see meaningful action is if we can counter the power of money and big politics with the power of people taking collective action". They work the way they do because, they aim to build power in communities by bringing people together to run campaigns. ACORN think that collective action can counter vested interests, financial power and inequality and lead to change. They find out what issues matter to people through listening to people door knocking and on street stalls, or wherever they can find them. By doing this, they get the right campaign that most people care about.

ACORN have set out to build up that grassroots power, through the hard work of organisers and volunteers in many different community settings. These include, "shopping parades, living rooms and cafes, listening to concerns and connecting people who share those concerns to build new ACORN groups and take action". ACORN have many different members, each of whom offer and contribute what they can.

ACORN undertake their work by supporting, training and coaching leaders to bring in friends and neighbours, running meet-ups and workshops, planning campaigns and actions, running public meetings and negotiating with decision makers. ACORN also, "use online tools to increase and leverage that power, to help people see themselves as one movement, and to facilitate strategic offline action".

Newcastle was chosen as a city for ACORN to operate in because they had done community organising and community engagement in the Newcastle and Gateshead. They wanted to build on what they had achieved and so established ACORN in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the summer of 2015. It was decided that they should start by concentrating its efforts in the Heaton area of the city and after a large amount of door-to-door and other consultation

with residents, it was further decided that they should begin by tackling local housing issues, particularly those regarding rented accommodation in the Heaton area.

Heaton was chosen as a starting point in Newcastle because ACORN considered a number of places that are low to middle income and Heaton was chosen for a few reasons including the fact it has one of the highest rates of private renting in Newcastle. Those establishing ACORN in Newcastle had seen the organisation nationally organise people around private rented housing successfully so thought it would be worth beginning the listening process and seeing what the response was. They got a lot of interest and people were getting involved.

ACORN was launched in Heaton in Newcastle on Thursday 3rd December 2015, at a meeting at Chillingham Road Primary School. It was billed as an opportunity for residents of Heaton to come along meet their neighbours, discuss what matters most and, "decide what our first campaign should be to build a voice for local people". On a cold, wet, December evening a very encouraging total of 90 local residents attended the launch. One of those who was there, Hannah, commented that she couldn't, "believe how many people turned up in such bad weather! The meeting really felt like the beginning of something exciting. It was a great atmosphere and really good to meet other people in my community."

A vote was taken regarding what the first campaign should be and the vote was overwhelming, that ACORN needed to take on housing in the private-rented sector. One person attending the launch noted that, "one neighbour told me she'd been told to pay £700 agency fees for nothing, just to secure her home. Another said her walls were black with mould. It was great to see so many people vote to campaign on this!" Many other stories emerged during the meeting around discussion tables, including tales about "damp and mould, poor standards, high fees and deposits not being returned fairly among many other examples of unfair treatment of tenants". It was determined that these were issues which those present wanted to work together on to change.

ACORN held a launch meeting in December and those who attended were asked to sit in groups and discuss what kinds of issues they felt were important to address for the area and listen to each others' ideas. They were asked to rank the top 3 issues and then we voted between each table's number 1 priority. Each table put housing as the number one priority.

The meeting was very productive. In small groups, participants discussed priorities for campaigns and came up with a list of things they thought they could work on in the future. Two examples of this cited on the ACORN website were, improving the local environment and aiming to try to help combat climate change and dealing with cuts to benefits being implemented by the government. However these campaigns would have to wait for another time; every single group's number one priority was housing, which was voted for overwhelmingly as the first campaign. So it was that ACORN launched their housing campaign in the snow on Saturday 12th December. On that auspicious day, twenty supporters and members of ACORN braved the rain and snow to launch the housing campaign voted for at the launch meeting on 3rd December, and even managed a few housing-related Christmas carols.....

Despite the inclement weather, the spirit was upbeat, as can be seen in the words of some of those who were there. Dom commented that, "it was great to see so much community spirit on such a wet and cold day! Housing is important because it's where we live. It might be business and numbers for some people, but when it's a space you call your own, the state of it directly affects you."

As decided at the launch, members and supporters of ACORN came together to show that they wouldn't accept low standards. They set up a fake letting agent on Chillingham Road, with pictures of the mould and disrepair renters face. That was used as a focal point to attract local residents and who proceeded spoke to tell their housing stories, while three ACORN teams broke off to speak to the Heaton letting agents, talking to them about their fees and asking them to come and meet with ACORN in 2016.

One person noted that, "from my experience door knocking it is really clear that housing, private renting in particular, is a massive problem in Heaton. Some of the stories I have heard are just awful and nobody should be subject to bad living conditions or extortionate agency fees." Kenzia commented that she, "felt like this was a very effective action... and I am really excited to see what the next one brings. We got a lot of attention and hopefully have encouraged more people to join in the future."

But was the action successful in securing engagement with those who controlled much of the rented housing in Heaton, the letting agents? There was at least one success as ACORN were able to secure an agreement from one agent to attend a future meeting, while several others said that they also wanted to attend. ACORN were also able to report that they now had more supporters for the campaign.

Another concern that was raised was the high fees being demanded by letting agents, which were high enough to beg the question – were some of the letting agents breaking the law? In order to try and get to the bottom of this particular problem, ACORN mapped out what the different agency fees were. It was discovered that Northumbria University's agent charges no fees at all, while some charge hundreds of pounds. It was also ascertained that some letting agents didn't seem to be displaying their fees in store and online, even though they're supposed to by law. Accordingly, it was decided that one of the jobs for ACORN in Heaton for 2016, would be making sure that letting agents' fees in Heaton were transparent. It was argued that this would really matter, because without transparency, it would mean that letting agents could introduce hidden fees and charge more to people who are often in desperate situations. Such was the interest that people in Heaton stopped in the snow to talk to workers and volunteers from ACORN and hear more about the campaign, raising hopes that there would be more people campaigning together in the future.

The launch and the way forward for 2016 was summarised on the ACORN Newcastle website as follows: "2015 was a big year for the housing crisis. It seems that everyone in the country is talking about it. Houses prices going through the roof (no pun intended), housing policies that benefit the rich and growing awareness of horrifying statistics showing how

poor housing affects our health. And let's not forget that 350,000 renters were evicted last year.”

ACORN argued that the situation was bad for many people, but that they were part of a growing movement organising a fight back and that they had shown that when people got together they could get results. It was also noted that ACORN in the UK was growing their campaign for tenants' rights and had beaten evictions, won repairs and were campaigning for ethical lettings.

In Newcastle, ACORN were now launched in Heaton, where housing was voted as the first campaign. In December, ACORN faced snowy conditions to let people know what their plans were, showing them how bad some of the housing is and initiating conversations with lettings agents. The media had been in touch to cover what they were doing as they built up towards their first community housing meeting in March 2016 where they could talk to letting agents about these issues, celebrate the good and put pressure on the bad. ACORN also announced that they would be meeting local politicians and working with other organisations to move the campaign forward, and doing outreach to meet as many residents as possible and hear their stories.

I interviewed Claire Henly from ACORN about other ways in which housing in Heaton could be improved for residents living there. Claire commented that Newcastle City Council could help tenants by taking enforcement action on bad landlords, while the government should bring in laws protecting tenants. It was also noted that far from doing this, “the government recently voted out a bill which would have required landlords to ensure homes were fit for human habitation”. Perhaps one reason for this was reported in *The Guardian* in January 2016, the fact that 39% of Conservative M.P.s were landlords, just as were 26% of SNP M.P.s and 22% of Labour M.P.s. (13)

Claire also mentioned that landlords should sign up to Ethical Lettings, more of which later, whilst the tenants themselves could help themselves by seeking support and advice from Citizens Advice Bureau, Shelter and the council's environmental health team. However, housing is not just a personal problem and is part of a wider structure for which we need to seek change for everyone. Claire also commented on ways in which the old problem of too little housing is available, saying that house building should be a priority for the government as there is, “a chronic shortage of houses and too many people are living in houses that are substandard or unsuitable”.

The law is on the side of tenants in some key areas; as long as tenants are aware of it. It has been noted that the law, “provides some protection for private rented tenants covering housing conditions and disrepair, rights against eviction and harassment and rights to information and proper notice.” (14) But what if landlords in Heaton were breaking the law?

This is indeed one of the important questions facing anybody campaigning around the issue of rented housing; what to do if landlords are breaking the law. There has been no decision on whether ACORN would challenge them, although it was noted that, "if members wanted us to do this, we could look into how viable it was given the resources we have".

Speaking of the law, the government made a great deal of their starter homes policy to help people buy their own homes, but it was claimed that this policy did not help many, including many who lived in Heaton, who still had to rent. Indeed it was argued that the government's 'starter home' policies force those on the lowest incomes to rent in the private sector because house prices are too high for many. Indeed it was viewed that policies on this such as right to buy would only make things worse as it would not alleviate the problem that there is not sufficient social housing to meet demand. It was also noted by Claire that, "renting is expensive.... where it is unaffordable for those on low incomes, housing benefit is paid to help but this money is going to private landlords."

The size of rents had become something of a political issue again in the second half of 2015. In the autumn of 2015, it seemed that one major plank of the Tory government policy had begun to unravel as the opposition to tax credit cuts, which it was argued would unfairly hit over a million hard-working people grew. This unravelling saw David Cameron unable to answer a simple question from Jeremy Corbyn on whether revised plans for tax credit cuts would continue to cause real suffering for people. Followed by a succession of Tory M.P.s lining up in the House of Commons to warn George Osborne to drastically reconsider the cuts to tax credits. At the same time rents continued to go through the roof (no pun intended), while many landlords were making thousands of pounds from housing benefits. It was argued that the housing benefits bill could be cut so easily, without causing any real financial pain, if reasonable rent caps were introduced. It can be argued that the government didn't want to do that, as two in five Tory M.P.s were private landlords. In January 2016, it was reported that the number of landlord M.P.s was continuing to rise. (15)

Meanwhile, some of those renting in Heaton were finding that their housing, there to protect them from the cold, the wind and the rain was actually causing them to have health problems. We saw earlier that housing on Tyneside in the past was unsanitary and unhealthy and lead to major health problems for residents of the conurbation in the 19th century. You might be forgiven for thinking that by the 21st century this problem should have been eradicated, but it would appear that this is not the case. Evidence collected by ACORN members and supporters, gleaned from door knocking in Heaton and listening to the experiences of people, suggested that bad housing still causes problems, affecting physical and emotional/mental health. There has also been evidence found of damp and mould causing skin and lung complaints in Heaton. Claire also noted that, "dangerous homes can be health hazards - we have heard from one person who was hospitalised for carbon monoxide poisoning. I also think poor housing and problems with landlords/letting agents can cause people stress, anxiety and other related problems. Having to feel like you are constantly battling or worrying about if your house is okay on top of other daily stresses is difficult for people." It almost seemed as if little had changed since mid-19th century.

As we have seen, the law states clearly that the rented housing should be in a good condition and the Citizens Advice Bureau states that assured shorthold tenants have, “the right to have the accommodation kept in a reasonable state of repair”. (16) Ethical Letting is a way of ensuring that landlords abide by the law and ACORN have stated clearly that landlords should sign up to the idea of Ethical Letting, but what exactly does that mean? To clear this up, the Ethical Lettings Charter that ACORN put together in Bristol states that, “The Ethical Lettings Charter is a statement of intent, a declaration of decency; to help create a fair, professional and ethical private rental sector”. The charter looks at the costs of renting, quality and maintenance of properties and security. The main purpose of the charter is to remind landlords that housing should not just be driven by private profit but people getting decent homes fit for purpose. If ACORN in Newcastle could persuade and encourage landlords in Heaton to sign up to the charter, then this would clearly be a major step forward in eliminating some of the problems tenants were facing.

In early March there was an important accountability meeting held with some of the letting agents in Heaton. It was reported that the meeting went really well with a good turnout from letting agents and people and the letting agents agreed to what ACORN were asking. A sign of how well ACORN were doing was that there were more people at the meeting than there had been at the launch with about 100 attending. Clearly it was an uplifting occasion and this was well summed up by Ellen, an ACORN member who commented that she, "was so glad to feel like progress is being made on an issue that has been affecting me for years. I think the scale of the problem was apparent yet people still remained positive and respectful! I'm really pleased the letting agents also seemed to appreciate the problem needs solving" It was also noted that in the past many tenants ACORN had met had seemed to feel totally isolated, but now did not.

The meeting heard about ceilings falling in, lies being told to encourage people to sign, mushrooms growing in bedroom walls, invasions of privacy and much, much more. ACORN members and leaders then put their questions to the letting agents. It was a triumph for ACORN that representatives of Wright Residential, Heaton Property and letslivehere all appeared at the meeting and ACORN made it clear that their attendances and responses were well appreciated. ACORN is not about being confrontational, when negotiation and persuasion can work better in bringing about change. Indeed the ACORN website stated after the meeting that, “a big part of what we've always wanted to do in this campaign is celebrate good practice as well as put pressure on the bad, so it's great to see there's agents out there who want to stay ahead of the curve.” To this end ACORN made it clear that they wanted to actively promote those letting agents and landlords who were viewed as fair and decent. This seems a very sensible way of taking things forward, as it gives the letting agents an incentive to improve their performance. Going back at least 250 years, Tyneside has a great heritage of fairness, solidarity and tolerance and it only seems right landlords who do act in a decent manner should be treated fairly and praised for what they are doing.

In the end ACORN were able to report that all three letting agents agreed to the following:

- To the repair schedule set out in the Charter.
- That they meet all legal minimums (especially around fees, notice and deposits).
- To sign ACORN's Ethical Lettings Charter.

Agreements are one thing; actually having what was agreed happen can be another matter altogether and ACORN were only too well aware of this. ACORN also made it clear that more work needed to be done, especially as unsurprisingly some of the least ethical of letting agents and landlords had not attended the meeting. There was also the important issue of trying to ensure sure people on benefits can access the homes they need. Accordingly, some of those present stayed behind afterwards and discussed the best ways to promote the good letting agents, while also agreeing to put pressure on some of the worst landlords ACORN have come across in Heaton.

What else have ACORN in Newcastle being doing to spread the word about the fair treatment of tenants and bring about change? Two areas are worthy of noting – talking to the media and engaging with local politicians. ACORN have attracted media interest for the Newcastle group. In early March, an interview with them was broadcast on BBC Radio Newcastle. Bristol ACORN have had more coverage, as they've been on Inside Out for their region, were mentioned in the Guardian and have featured in their local paper.

ACORN have also engaged with local politicians, having met the local councillors for the South Heaton ward, a councillor from a neighbouring ward and some of the councillor candidates for the South Heaton ward. Building on this, ACORN would like to meet others in the not-too-distant future including Nick Brown, the MP for the area, other councillors from neighbouring wards and councillors responsible for housing in Newcastle. Hopefully they will have the same zeal to improve the housing for people in Newcastle as was shown by Joseph Cowen, when he was M.P. for Newcastle in the second half of the 19th century.

Tyneside, like many major British conurbations, has for many years had problems with its housing stock, dating back at least as far as the 19th century, when the population of the Tyneside conurbation grew quickly and housing was built equally quickly to house working people, but not always to a high standard. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions resulted in far too many instances. When there finally was a real political will to improve the housing, after the destruction of the Second World War, a singular lack of control on behalf of many of the people living in the new housing built to replace the old slums meant that the new flats were themselves a singular failure in many respects. It is the intention of ACORN to try and alleviate some of the decades old problems of high rents, overcrowding and unsanitary housing by empowering the residents of Heaton in Newcastle and in the future other parts of the city, to demand their rights to decent housing. The law gives a number of key rights to tenants and it is hoped that in the years to come those rights will be more widely respected in Heaton and across the wider city of Newcastle. Perhaps a

massive movement for better housing and greater respect of the rights of tenants can now develop. After all, they do say that from small acorns.....

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Footnotes

1. *Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*
2. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/07/rent-worries-keeping-you-up-at-night-share-stories>
3. B. Lancaster, *Working Class Housing on Tyneside, 1850-1939*, p. 9-10
4. *ibid.* p. 13
5. N. McCord and R.Thompson, *A Regional History of England, the Northern Counties from A.D. 1000*, p. 301-2
6. N. McCord, *Some Aspects of NE England in the 19th Century, Northern History Volume VII*, 1971, p. 84-5
7. B. Lancaster, *Working Class Housing on Tyneside 1850-1939*, p. 17
8. *ibid.* p. 20-1
9. *ibid.* p. 22
10. S. Chaplin, *The Smell of Sunday Dinner*, p. 61
11. *The Guardian* 17th July 2009
12. S. Delaney, *Monitor, BBC programme 25th September 1960*
13. <http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2016/jan/14/mp-landlords-number-risen-quarter-last-parliament-housing-bill>
14. <http://www.housing-rights.info/renting-from-a-private-landlord.php#fair-treatment>
15. <http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2016/jan/14/mp-landlords-number-risen-quarter-last-parliament-housing-bill>
16. <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/housing/renting-a-home/renting-from-a-private-landlord/>

Other information from ACORN Newcastle sources including:

http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk/heaton_christmas_launch

[http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk/things to come in 2016](http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk/things_to_come_in_2016)

[http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk/a first for newcastle](http://www.acorncommunities.org.uk/a_first_for_newcastle)

Email interviews with Claire Henly of ACORN Newcastle