

## Single-Issue Meetings - Key Headline Reports

February 2022

*"These were very useful meetings. We were able to see that we were having the same problems – we are all in the same shoes. I gained a lot of useful information and learned tips from other residents about how to address the problems differently. The facilitators were not condescending, we were given time to speak and that was what was so good." Chair, Tower Gardens TRA*

### Repairs & Major Works

#### **State of disrepair:**

There were reports across the board of homes being in a state of disrepair due to bad management and a poor level of repairs including severe mould, damp and leaks. Three different estates reported prolonged sewage leakage into their homes and around the communal areas of estates. One case had been going on for five years, the root of the problem never being investigated and fixed.

#### **Experiences reporting repairs:**

Very long waiting times after reporting repairs, issues passed between departments and sometimes lost were reported. A lack of trained staff in call centres mean repairs get misreported to the wrong departments. There are concerns over digital exclusion as older people struggle with the digital channels of communication.

#### **Contractors:**

The contractors working on housing repairs and maintenance are usually very large. Landlords are fixed into long contracts and there is no tenant control over contractors or supervision. There are problems with cowboy builders and generally bad management e.g., an instance raised of a contractor coming to the estate without the key to access the boiler house.

**Lack of Landlord accountability/repairs complaints:**

There is a general lack of landlord accountability. The pandemic is being blamed, but these issues predate Covid19.

**Success for getting repairs done:**

Tenants and residents working together as a tenants' group: connecting repair with health issues and demanding regular meetings with council officers to directly report repairs to, has proved successful for some groups. Tenants are often working as unpaid housing officers, as a response to the current system failing them.

---

** Fire and Building Safety ****Building Safety Bill**

Concerns were raised about the disruption and costs to residents as well as a general lack of confidence in the works that will be done in regard to the fire and building safety bill.

**Fire Evacuation**

Only a few boroughs are looking at creating personal evacuation plans, which are especially important for older and disabled people and those with small children.

**Major works/retrofit/refurb regeneration projects**

There are many concerns about refurbishment works not taking into account fire and building safety. Tenants usually know more about the buildings than the landlord and people designing the refurbishment/retrofit, as they pre-date a lot of the staff. People attending the meeting had fears about more disasters like Grenfell, as landlords regenerate the housing to meet new standards and are not following the recommendations from the Hackitt report.

**Residents' thoughts on Demands**

Recommendations made from the Hackitt report need to be acted on. We need code of conduct/service standards to be drawn up. There should be a fire inspection report done post refurbishment/retrofit. More independent technical advice and support is needed for residents.

---

## Estate Watch

This meeting focused on the difficult and controversial issues relating to estate demolition ballots.

### **Ballots process:**

Residents shared examples of highly undemocratic ballot processes and many examples of the electoral services not acting impartially: door knocking with a ballot box alongside council officers, recommending a yes vote, providing information to the council officers about who had not voted, whilst withholding that information from the residents' association.

### **Conditions/incentives on ballots:**

Temporary tenants are offered council tenancies if they vote 'yes' but at affordable, not social rents. It's presented as a choice but it's either: vote for demolition or keep the estates as they are - which are often in a state of extreme disrepair.

### **Engagement Companies:**

Lots of money is being spent on private engagement companies to campaign for a 'yes' vote. There are examples of the engagement companies removing tenants' posters campaigning for a no vote. It is very hard for tenants' groups to compete.

### **Advice for future ballots:**

Campaigners on one estate have written a code of conduct based on the undemocratic ballot process that Love Lane Estate experienced. Their council is being encouraged to adopt this code of conduct. They also shared how they influenced the landlord offer, including getting the council to include details about the rent levels in the new development.

---

## Fuel Poverty

Tenants shared their concerns about struggling with fuel poverty and the causes of it. One person shared that they hadn't put their heating on all winter. Fuel Poverty is not just about heating but about cooling homes in the summer and cooking food.

**Root Causes:**

The root causes are a combination of: the building fabric itself being not up to modern standards, unregulated energy companies reliant on fossil fuels, and the inefficient energy systems themselves.

**'Net 0 by 2030':**

We discussed the Mayor of London moving towards 'net 0' by 2030 – while the Government's target is 2050. The latest government-led/top-down initiative doing things 'to' tenants. Tenants are aware of this and fighting for more control over what happens to their homes and estates. With a lot of money being quickly pumped into retrofit schemes, how do we make sure whatever happens to people's homes is driven by the tenants themselves?

---

## Overcrowded Homes

**Effects & Issues:**

Whilst overcrowding has a detrimental effect on physical and mental health, it is an issue that often falls to the bottom of the list, due to more pressing issues people are facing such as living in homes in disrepair and/or fighting regeneration. People don't want to leave the people and places they know and/or can't afford the rent on bigger homes, so they stay in overcrowded homes.

**Increasing Need:**

Regeneration schemes many housing developments focus on developing 1 and 2-bed rather than family-sized social rented homes, while the need for family-sized homes rises and families placed in temporary or stay in overcrowded homes.

**Solutions for keeping communities together:**

We need more local lettings allocations, Councils should review their allocation policies to allow initiatives that allow local reallocation of homes, based on the knowledge of people who live on estates and keeping communities together. A return to local mutual exchange schemes (as well as the national) would be good. More info here on development of a local lettings policy on Lancaster West Estate : <https://londontenants.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/report-and-proposals-LWW.pdf>

---

## Rents & Service Charges

### **Rising Rents & Service Charges**

Tenants have concerns over the rising rent and service charge levels and the lack of transparency between them.

### **Differences between rents and service charges**

A representative from one estate said that tenants are paying different service charges to each other. After investigating, they found out that people who are living in the same blocks and for the same sized properties are paying different amounts. (NB - this often can occur on estates where some social rented flats have been converted to affordable rents.)

### **Service Charges**

There are lots of examples of people paying for services that they are not getting. There is a lack of transparency about the breakdown of service charges, in some cases, the council landlord has refused to give the breakdown, despite being asked for by tenants and residents for 5 years. There is no resident control over the contractors or easy complaints procedures.

### **What people are doing about it**

Tenants and residents that have worked together in the form of tenants' and residents' associations has led to wins. Tenants investigating the real cost of services and comparing it to what they are paying for and receiving has fed into campaigns. This is done by requesting the breakdown of service charges, finding out the amount tenants are paying for each service and then calculating how much the contractors are being paid - e.g., contractors charging £100 per hour for estate cleaning. Some tenants had had success doing collective compensation claims.

**Why join us at some of our next single-issue meetings?**