

Single-Issue Meetings - Key Headline Reports

May 2022

Quotes from the meeting attendees:

"These sessions are so, so, helpful when there's only a few of you trying to do these things for so many people"

"Meetings like this give people confidence, it's a boost"

"These groups are so good, spurs you on"

Repairs & Major Works, Building and Fire Safety

1. **Summary:** At this meeting, tenants from across London were joined by representatives from Tower Blocks UK (TBUK) and South West London Law Centres (SWLLC), who shared tips and resources on how to gather evidence and hold landlords to account on these issues
2. **SWLLC presentation on dealing with housing disrepair – *Rhiannon Hughes*.**

The first law centres in SW London were founded in 1974. In 2004, four law centres in Battersea, Croydon, Kingston and Tooting joined together to create South West London Law Centres. Since then, they have given vital legal advice to many 1000s of residents across the six SW London boroughs of Croydon, Merton, Kingston, Sutton, Richmond and Wandsworth.

To be effective in dealing with disrepair use the memorable acronym: **EIRC**

Evidence – important to gather evidence (photos, videos, audio, etc). This is useful for making complaints, going to the Ombudsman and taking legal action.

Identify – what is the issue and who is responsible for dealing with it (check the tenancy agreement). Does anyone in your household have a health condition, which is being made worse by the disrepair?

Report – to the responsible person – contact the landlord to identify, and get it logged with the landlord. If you report an issue (and ensure this is in writing – e.g in an email) you can always escalate the case.

Connect – with neighbours to find out if the same issue is affecting them, and if so, report through TRA. If you don't have a TRA try to organise a public meeting where you live to find out who is affected. To escalate the issue, contact a ward councillor and contact an MP if a bigger issue is at play and is an issue that they can represent in parliament.

- When does a repair become a disrepair issue? If something goes wrong (sudden leaky tap) this requires repair. If the leaking becomes so severe that it floods and affects the floor below and the landlord doesn't fix it then it becomes a disrepair issue.
- If a repair hasn't been fixed in the time frame specified by the landlord – go through the landlord's complaints procedure. Usually, this is two levels of complaint and if still not resolved go to the housing ombudsman.
- At the same time, you could seek legal advice – e.g., the Citizen's Advice Bureau or a local law centre. All the work corresponding to ERIC will be useful. You can use a no-win-no-fee solicitor – but they will usually take a high percentage of any wins.

The video of the presentation is on the LTF website - [here](#)

You can also listen to the audio recording of Richard Blakeway, the [Ombudsman's](#), presentation to tenants at an LTF open meeting in July 2022 and you will find a link to notes taken from the Q&A session with him.

2. **Tower Blocks UK (TBUK) presentation - providing tips for tower blocks on repairs – Danielle Gregory**

- **FixMyBlock** is a set of tried and tested action guides, tools and resources about how to get things fixed – information and resources for those living in tower blocks. TBUK put together with [mySociety](#)
- **Guides** - fire safety, structural concerns, how to find out how the block is constructed, pests, gas safety, asbestos,
- **Tools** - info on elements, citizen journalism to document, issues, campaigning toolkit, info strategy and tactics to use
- **Resources** - template letters with legal aspects that show tenants understand their rights. Case studies success stories, podcasts, digital action pack with poster templates etc, directory of resident action groups

Click on this link to [FixMyBlock](#) to access the action guides, tools and resources.

Tenants and residents working together as a tenants' group are important in helping to address all issues impacting estates.

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, in response to the current system that is failing them.

3. **Key issues raised by meeting attendees**

- It is difficult to obtain legal aid.

- Council tenants can't get environmental health officers to assist (as they are employed by the council and would be a conflict of interest).
- If you have several problems – deal with them one at a time. This provides a better opportunity of being successful.
- A multi-pronged approach is useful – reporting issues/making complaints where issues are not dealt with, holding meetings and putting the issue in the public domain – via a local press article or on social media.
- It is best to try to limit face-to-face engagement with officers – unless you record the conversation after the meeting and ask them to confirm the discussion.
- Communal heating problems can be a problem.
- The Equalities Act is not very often used – surprisingly – since a lot of people in social housing have young people and or vulnerable people in their household – which puts them more at risk. Adaptations for disabled people are far behind what is needed – so there are issues of older people falling down stairs and of difficulties getting around flats in wheelchairs.
- There is often a lack of landlord accountability. The pandemic is being blamed, but these issues predate Covid19.
- Housing associations have apps but still don't do repairs. They keep passing the buck between different departments.
- During covid – we were having refurbishment and a new heating system installed. During a lockdown, they were doing essential drilling work while kids were at home school. We started a petition and sent it to everyone. The council didn't listen. We organised a protest as the council wanted to take away balcony doors, protested, went to court and won.
- Local residents' associations are often side-lined.
- Our unity is our strength and using this is how we effectively exert our rights.
- Its best to separate communal from individual household repairs
- We need to have Facebook communities or a blog.
- Regarding contractors, we are paying for window cleaning which hasn't been done.
- We waited weeks for seven weeks before the landlord came out to deal with sewage coming out of the drain.
- Only a few boroughs are looking at creating Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs), which are especially important for older and disabled people and those with small children.
- Recommendations made from the Hackitt report need to be acted on. We need a code of conduct/service standards to be drawn up.
- There should be a fire inspection report done post-refurbishment/retrofit.
- Residents need more independent technical advice and support.

Fuel Poverty

1. **LTF's 12-point guidance and principles for social landlords on net-zero work to tenants' homes.** [These](#) were introduced to meeting attendees.
2. **LTF presentation [Net Zero and retrofit](#)** - looking in more detail relating to some of the LTF's 12 points –

- Net Zero works must improve the condition of social housing tenants' Homes, including reductions in energy costs and addressing fuel poverty.
- Unhealthy retrofitting
- Healthy retrofitting
- Wall cavity insulation disaster case studies
- Net-Zero should contribute to the self-sufficiency of each estate and/or neighbourhood.
- Social landlords must develop communications and consultation strategies with their tenants about net zero works to their homes.

Strategies must enable tenants to be informed as to the construction sector's widely acknowledged deficiencies of applying poorly functioning materials (e.g., steel and concrete) and made aware of the benefits of low-carbon materials.

Social landlords (and UK Government in turn) must incorporate funding incentives to schemes that utilise natural and ecologically-regenerative materials to tenants' homes (whether they are retrofitting or new build)

3. **Issues raised by meeting attendees:**

- It is hard to get housing associations to listen to you. They still have the culture of 'that's what we are doing and there is no further discussion.'
- When we have tried to do things, they have shut us down.
- We have so many problems - with dampness, heating inadequate and people having to spend so much money on fuel costs.
- Tenants are the experts on issues about their homes.
- I'm disabled and find it difficult to deal with health issues.
- I'm on the landlord panel and have been told that I can't drop leaflets to other residents.
- Being a tenant, they dismiss what we are saying, in lots of areas around fuel poverty and retrofit.
- I'm concerned about the retrofit and the fact that my landlord has had drones out and hasn't told anyone what they are doing
- I live in a fuel-poor street property, with the estate behind. There have been some discussions – but most things fall back into the hands of residents.

- Environmental health officers can be approached by housing association tenants concerned with some disrepair issues.
- Retrofitting will depend on what resources there are out there.
- Is there a way to make the landlord ensure that a certain number of people have responded to consultation before they go ahead with their plans?
- Lots of refurbishment/demolition is happening in Merton.
- 80% of residents are unaware of net zero.
- It's important that tenants get ahead of landlords on Net Zero because things are going on behind the scenes.
- Can the council be scrutinised on how they are spending their money?
- People feel so downtrodden many have given up. When you are fighting, you do feel like you are trying to get what's just and right. Then you have members of staff saying you know you're scaring people. You can't keep writing strategies there's no evidence.
- The strength is the collective voice - we must bring people together

Overcrowded Homes

1. **Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth (HASL) – presentation about their work including around overcrowded homes.**

- HASL has teamed up with MEDACT – health professionals – for an event this month about significant medical issues and households not claiming benefits for a variety of reasons. GPs will be helping with applications to make lives much easier. Some people have cancer and are on chemotherapy or have broken bones and are not claiming anything.
- HASL meetings are held on the second Thursday and last Saturday of the month. They engage with 70 families, the majority are in bad temporary housing, social or private rented.
- An example of the levels of overcrowding includes five people in a 1-bedroom flat – as the council says the living room counts as a bedroom.
- Another was a tenant living in a 1-bed flat. The council moved her in when she was pregnant. Then later there were two children in the flat. They said both children could stay in the same room as their parents till they were 8 years old.
- Examples of other issues that HASL deal with are where a homeless family was living in temporary housing for seven years – costing millions of pounds; a dreadful 17-year domestic abuse case, councils and housing associations getting away with breaking their own policies, a case of mould taking over a whole house and housing, benefits - everything is often related.
- Some overcrowded families say they want to stay in Southwark, but most don't mind where they move to as they are living in such awful conditions.

- At their last meeting, HASL met with Shelter and other organisations, and everyone was talking about the need to build more family-sized homes.
- When refugees get papers, they are evicted by Home Office and then the council says they haven't got a local connection so they can't help them. It used to be that wherever a refugee arrived would form the local connection.
- Some housing charities have really bad temporary housing. Even if people in the household are disabled, they get placed on the first floor.
- Some people are not in the right priority band, so they could be overcrowded and still on band 4 (of the lettings policy). Then after a few months of HASL writing letters etc, they are moved to band 1 and within a few weeks, they are rehoused. Loads of HASL volunteers provide legal advice.
- HASL volunteers write letters on behalf of overcrowded households. There is stress on children doing exams and needing to move.
- Housing Associations and councils could do more, e.g., with teenage children, could they not partition the room so they have some privacy – for example if a child is going through puberty? Do they not go back to their own childhood?
- We need landlords to build bigger homes and to consider the age of children.
- HASL started 9 years ago with 4 colleagues to help people with benefits on an estate. They realised that a lot of people were suffering from housing problems, overcrowding, dampness and mould antisocial behaviour.
- Initially homeless units were leafleted, then in 2014 things exploded, people were talking in mosques, churches, and local communities. People now come to HASL meetings through word of mouth. There are monthly meetings with the Southwark law centre and the council. People wanted to help their neighbours and communities. Childcare comes from north London to Elephant and Castle. And a meeting is held once a month to help members learn English. Kids did drawings of their houses and sent them to Robert Jenrick, but when they got a response, he was no longer the housing minister.
- Recently they had a meeting with video makers and artists, to get more attention from policy-makers, Shelter and Z2K.
- At times landlords try and move families outside the borough, and then they need to travel far for school or work. And if they refuse a home outside the, they are classed as intentionally homeless. It's a vicious cycle.

Comments:

- Right to Buy has meant that a lot of family-sized homes were sold. Households then moved elsewhere in the country where properties are cheaper to buy. Buy-to-let landlords have bought up many of those former council family-sized homes and are letting them a room at a time or to a group of students / young people – sometimes bringing in rent that is more than three times that of council rents.

- We have six floors with 8 flats on each floor – on my floor only me and my neighbour are social housing tenants most of the others are Airbnb lets.
- We are witnessing outcomes in changes in government policy over the last 30 years. Housing used to be cradle to grave and people could move around as their circumstances changed. Local authorities even had connections with others with properties on the coast, for retirement. Now its profit based. Developers want to maximise the number of smaller flats that they build as it increases profits. Sons and Daughters policy, used to be the children would be allowed properties
- The mayor could do a lot more to try and address that problem.
- Newham and Brent have the highest levels of overcrowding. Perhaps LTF could do some work to support networks of people in those boroughs,
- How do we access people to begin to set up a similar situation in other boroughs?
- HASL has built up trust in communities over a long period, then a gradual increase in campaigning groups voicing at the grassroots level.
- Many years ago, Shelter put together a booklet about children living in overcrowded homes and shared their stories – it was very good.

2. LTF – Local lettings policies as a means of dealing with overcrowding.

- Local authorities must have policies on how they will prioritise the allocation of their homes. They can also have local lettings policies – applicable to their geographical area.
- In some circumstances they draw up local lettings policies – for example where some new homes have been built on an estate or near an estate to try to deal with local levels of overcrowding, chain lettings and under-occupancy. Through effective chain lettings, the London Assembly in 2010 produced a diagram showing that in delivering one 6-bedroom home the housing needs of 36 people could be addressed – via an overcrowded family of a 5-bedroom home would move to the 6-bedroom home, then from an overcrowded 4-bed to a 5-bed etc.
- LTF worked with tenants on Lancaster West estate in 2018 (post the Grenfell fire) to support them in putting together priorities for a local lettings policy – e.g., overcrowded homes, under-occupied and accessibility issues. 25% of the homes on the estate were overcrowded. Many people wanted to stay on the estate to support their community. The policy has been very successful in reducing the levels of overcrowding to 9% and has also facilitated a strong and supportive community staying together. This was very important in the context of the trauma of the Grenfell fire. In some instances where overcrowded households were multi-generational, it has been possible to move younger family members to neighbouring smaller-sized properties.

More [here](#) about the development of Lancaster West Estate's local lettings policy.

Rents & Service Charges

1. Open discussion on issues of rents and service charges

- There are three different landlords on my estate charging different rents and service charges. Our TRA gathered evidence of this.
- Fragmented rent levels have been going on for a long time in Haringey – rents for new lets being higher than existing tenants are paying. FOI requests found that housing associations in nine London boroughs are setting rents above the maximum formula rent levels.
- Have equality impact assessments been carried out on this?
- Tenants in Crawley, Sussex are presenting a petition with 1000 signatures to the council calling for affordable rents to be reduced in a development in the borough in July.
- On some estates relets have been changed from social to affordable rents (at up to 80% of market rents). This was allowed between 2012 and 2016 in London where social landlords that had funding from the Mayor of London's office to build new affordable rent homes were allowed to convert around the same number to affordable rents.
- In the past council tenants just paid rent, while housing association tenants have always paid rent and service charges. This was changed via 'rent-restructuring' brought in by the Labour Government in 2002. This was introduced with the aim of increasing council rents to higher housing association rents.
- Leaseholders and shared owners are withholding service charges on a Peabody block in Hackney. When a repair is requested, there is no follow-up to see if the work was done or how good the quality of the work was. Call-out charges are passed on and different charges are being made for the same jobs. Service charges are rocketing. The charge for a new communal boiler that was not set out in the projection of costs was £35,000. Often, midway through contracts, contractors are changed.
- Tenants should not withhold rent as it could result in eviction. Housing Association assured tenancy agreement includes that if a tenant is taken to court by their landlord with 8 weeks rent arrears it is a mandatory ground for eviction.
- We are supposed to have our windows cleaned every three months – but we haven't seen a window cleaner in 5 years – although we are still paying for this. We are also paying for ground maintenance. There was a new contract last November – the job is not being properly done. We also used to pay for water through our rents. Kingston council was getting rebates

from Thames Water but not passing them onto tenants. After a legal case in the borough tenants have been refunded.

- This has occurred in other boroughs – Southwark being the first.
- We made a complaint to the Ombudsman about poor block management and maintenance – but we were told that we can't do that as an association.
- Public opinion is a useful tool to use. Pressure can be exerted via social media and letters to or articles in the local press.
- Can anything be done about communal lighting being on 24/7?
- Leaseholders are able to use service charge tribunals.
- I've asked for a breakdown of service charges and put in freedom of information requests, but still haven't got the information.
- They often black out relevant information in responses to FOIs.
- Try asking for the information in a different way.
- Many tenants are worried about being discriminated against if they make complaints. This is why it is important to have a TRA.