

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Housing Conditions in England, HC 1154

Tuesday 14 October 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 14 October 2025.

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Members present: Florence Eshalomi (Chair); Chris Curtis; Mr Lee Dillon; Mr Will Forster; Andrew Lewin; Sarah Smith.

Questions 32 to 70

Witnesses

I: Kwajo Tweneboa, social housing activist and writer; Richard Blakeway, Housing Ombudsman, Housing Ombudsman Service; Nic Bliss, Campaign Director, Stop Social Housing Stigma.

II: Councillor Sarah King, Leader of Southwark Council; Ian McDermott, Chief Executive, Peabody and Chair, G15; Craig Moule, Group Chief Executive, Sanctuary; Alistair Smyth, Director of Policy and Research, National Housing Federation.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kwajo Tweneboa, Richard Blakeway and Nic Bliss.

Chair: Good morning. Welcome to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. I am Florence Eshalomi MP, Chair of this Select Committee. Could I ask my members on the Committee to introduce themselves, please?

Andrew Lewin: Good morning. I am Andrew Lewin, the MP for Welwyn Hatfield. I have previously worked in the sector, so I draw attention to my entry in the register of interests.

Chris Curtis: I am Chris Curtis. I am Labour MP for Milton Keynes North.

Sarah Smith: I am Sarah Smith, the Labour MP for Hyndburn.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Forster: I am Will Forster, Lib Dem MP for Woking.

Mr Dillon: I am Lee Dillon, Lib Dem MP for Newbury.

Chair: Can I ask our guests to introduce themselves please?

Richard Blakeway: I am Richard Blakeway. I am the Housing Ombudsman.

Kwajo Tweneboa: I am Kwajo Tweneboa, a housing campaigner.

Nic Bliss: I am Nic Bliss from Stop Social Housing Stigma.

Q32 **Chair:** I should declare an interest as well. My constituency of Vauxhall and Camberwell Green also covers the Borough of Southwark and we will be hearing from Southwark in the second session.

Thank you to our guests for coming this morning. It is fair to say that this is an issue that affects so many people that we know and affects so many of us as constituency MPs. It is an issue that has come across to all of us as MPs in terms of our inbox. When you get an email from a constituent and you see some of the conditions that people are living in, you think, "Wow".

In 2022, the predecessor Committee, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, had an inquiry on regulation of social housing. That report concluded that the majority of homes were decent, but that the condition of some social housing stock had deteriorated so far as to be unfit for human habitation. That was in 2022, and we know that the situation now, in 2025, in some cases has not improved. In some cases, it is actually worse. Starting off in terms of questioning, Kwajo, how would you describe the state of social housing in England today?

Kwajo Tweneboa: I feel like a broken record. I have been doing this for five years. It is still appalling. The first half of this year has been the busiest that I have had in the five years that I have been campaigning. Some of the cases that I am dealing with are far worse than what I was dealing with when I first started.

There is still serious concern surrounding health and safety of many of the residents that I deal with. A massive part of the issue is stigma, unprofessionalism and a lack of serious accountability and action. It means that tenants do not feel like things have improved. There is a lot of lip service but, from what I have seen, not enough action happening in terms of tackling this crisis, especially more than eight years on since Grenfell.

Q33 **Chair:** Richard, as the ombudsman, having to assess and look at complaints from residents up and down the country, how would you say the situation is?

Richard Blakeway: The volumes that we receive are indicative of the scale of the challenge. We receive a contact roughly every 25 seconds. We have seen some areas where there has been improvement, but from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

a position that no one would want. That is probably on handling complaints themselves, where there have started to be early signs of improvement. By the time it reaches the complaints process someone may have experienced a problem for a significant period of time. We are still seeing very much the same challenges. Landlords are experiencing handling issues, whether that is poor communication, poor records or issues around level of responsiveness, inspections, risk assessments and so on.

One observation I would make is that we undertake further investigations into some landlords and there are two very strong features where we do that. We do it when we see a level of failing that is high and there are two strong features. One is local authorities and the other one is merged housing associations. About 83% of our further investigations have involved merged housing associations. That is important in the context of significant structural change that we are going to see with the English devolution Bill, with a number of non-social housing local authority landlords joining those that are—that is a big shift—as well as potentially significant merger activity within the housing association sector. That could be a real trigger of issues as well.

Q34 Mr Dillon: Sorry, Richard, this is just a clarification question. Most housing associations have gone through mergers. How far from the merger happening are that 83%?

Richard Blakeway: For the majority, it would be in the last decade, and in some cases it is a merger on a merger, so it is not just a single merger. There are different models. It also stands out to us that, for some housing associations that have merged, we are not seeing a significant volume of casework or, if we are, we are not seeing a significant level of failure compared to others. There might be something about the model, not just the merger in and of itself, but it is a factor that needs to be reflected on.

Q35 Chair: The English Housing Survey found a higher incidence of category 1 hazards in local authorities in comparison to those properties rented out by housing associations.

Richard Blakeway: I accept that, but one of the challenges here is that there is not a single source of truth. One thing that the sector, and policymakers and parliamentarians, might benefit from is a national standard around record-keeping. When we did our report earlier this year on repairing trust, one thing I was really struck by is the figures estimated in the English Housing Survey for non-decency. Across housing associations and councils, it was somewhere between 9.5% and 12% or something like that, compared to what was self-reported to the regulator, which was 0.6% non-decent from housing associations. Local authorities, I think, reported 9%, so both under-reported, and housing associations significantly so.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Part of the challenge here is that it should not be like this, but we are in a period of discovery. Housing associations and councils are finding out more about their homes and tenants. That means that we probably do not know the full scale of the challenge yet.

Q36 Chair: Nic, you have been working with tenants for many years now and hearing these stories over the ages. Looking at some of the plans that the Government have recently announced and the conditions that people are currently living in, when do you think that residents will see meaningful change in their properties?

Nic Bliss: I certainly salute the work that Kwajo and Richard have been doing to raise issues. That is absolutely brilliant, but the challenge in terms of that is that they are just talking about the cases that are known about. I was talking to Richard as we were coming in about a case that we know of—a blind lady who woke up one morning with sewage coming through her bathroom. She reported it to her landlord. It has been two years since and it is only just being sorted now. I have said to her many times, “I can help you with this. I can get this sorted for you”. “I do not want to make a fuss. I do not want to have a mark against me saying that I am a difficult customer”. These are conditions that she should not be living in.

The angle that we are coming in with, as the Stop Social Housing Stigma campaign, is that we are not there with the culture, attitudes and behaviour that we need. We are carrying the culture, attitudes and behaviour from decades ago that are not about respecting tenants. It is almost like people thinking, “What are you complaining about? You have a home. You are saying that it needs to be safe and you should be getting a good service. Why are you complaining about this?”

We have been coming across a picture with tenants. We are currently doing this national tenant survey, which is open till the end of the year. We hope that many more tenants will complete it, but we have about 1,300 responses to that survey. We are asking about social housing stigma. The statistics we are getting are quite shocking, because 70% of the tenants are saying that they feel stigmatised, 55% are saying that it is because of something that their landlord is doing, and 68%—this is almost the most shocking—are saying that they think that the Government have done little or nothing to tackle social housing stigma.

In the post-Grenfell period, commitments were made to tenants, because tenants were raising the issue of social housing stigma as being that they felt like they were second-class citizens. They felt like they were the underclass. They were being told, at that that time, “We are going to start. We are going to take responsibility to change this. We are going to do work in society to tackle this issue of social housing stigma”. In our survey, we are getting that neither the previous Government nor this Government have done anything about it.

Q37 Chair: There was a report earlier this year from the ombudsman,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Richard. The report stated that there is a risk of simmering anger at poor housing conditions becoming social disquiet. After listening to some of those percentages that Nic has just quoted where a number of residents feel that this issue is not improving, can you tell us a bit more about what the ombudsman meant by that statement?

Richard Blakeway: Complaints are a window into the culture of an organisation and reveal behaviours. Some of what Nic says is seen in our casework. There are a couple of areas. You can sometimes detect conscious and unconscious stigma, if that makes sense, to distinguish between it. We probably see examples of overt stigma less, although we do see it. We did a report last week where members of a call centre were not recording repairs if they took a dislike to the resident who phoned.

More typically, we see unconscious stigma. That might be reflective of the system pressures on staff. There are some really dedicated, passionate people in housing, but they are often working with antiquated systems, insufficient resources, processes that are not necessarily fit for purpose and overwhelming pressure because of this housing crisis. That probably leads to behaviours that are at times unacceptable, or normalising unacceptable behaviours.

That is then reflected in the residents' experience where, ultimately, for a social tenant, there is this inescapable imbalance of power. However poor the service is, you have really limited choice. That is therefore reflective of this issue about social disquiet, because people feel they are just not being heard or listened to and are not going to get a response. As I say, that is partly about that engagement and cultural issues.

Q38 Chris Curtis: How effective do you expect Awaab's law will be to prevent social tenants from being left in hazardous conditions that harm their health?

Kwajo Tweneboa: I have spoken to Awaab's parents in the past and there are definitely many benefits to it. It is really important, in fact, but the massive question is how it is going to be enforced. When it was first suggested, I certainly believed, and I know the sector did, that it was going to be implemented in its entirety. We now know that it is going to be phased in over a number of years, which—I will be honest—I was not happy about, considering the volume of people I am dealing with in terms of living in poor conditions.

Fundamentally, for me, it comes down to enforcement and how it is going to be funded. Unfortunately, if it is not, it is not going to be worth the paper it is written on. At the moment there is no dedicated funding for enforcement and no proactive inspections or monitoring, meaning landlords may delay action, undermining the law's effectiveness.

My huge worry is around funding, especially for local authorities, because they will be dipping into their HRA in order to pick up costs for this and costs are soaring for local authorities. Income is falling and councils



HOUSE OF COMMONS

cannot plug the gap. In January 2025, there was a report that found 91% of councils expect their HRA to be in deficit within five years without reform, meaning mounting debt and worsening homes. They may have to consider selling stock or stopping building altogether in order to balance the books.

Funding for this, and not just this but the Renters' Rights Bill, is not an optional extra. It is something that has to be done if it is going to be effective. If it is not, ultimately it will jeopardise the ability for councils to deliver new homes and undermine the Government's ambition of building 1.5 million homes. First and foremost for me, it comes down to the health and safety of residents. I worry that it is not going to go as far as it needs to in order to tackle the mounting issue that we are facing around conditions of homes that people are living in.

- Q39 **Chris Curtis:** Nic, can I ask a follow-up on that? Based on your work and experience, can you think of anything else that could prevent tenants from using these new powers, or difficulties that will come in the way of them?

Nic Bliss: I would agree with what Kwajo has just said, but we have to reflect on why there was ever even a need for Awaab's law. I agree with what Richard said: there are some good people working in landlords who want to see real change, but the systems and structures that we have set up are just not designed to enable the kinds of dialogues and relationships with tenants that need to be happening to make change. Do you know what I mean?

- Q40 **Chris Curtis:** Do you think that the new powers that are coming in might—

Nic Bliss: We have to go to the root of the problem, which, to me, is the culture, attitude and behaviour that said it was okay for tenants to be living in a damp home. I do not see anything that the Ministry is doing that is tackling those cultural issues.

We produced a set of ideas that we thought could start to look at some of those problems. We suggested that we could be putting something in the regulatory framework that said that landlords should work with their tenants on tackling social housing stigma. They did not do this. That is a simple thing. It would not have cost anybody any money. This is actually about how we create dialogue between landlords and their tenants.

Do not get me wrong: some landlords are doing this and we welcome that, but this needs to be across the piece. There needs to be a wholesale change of culture. That was certainly identified in the Grenfell debates in Parliament and in the House.

- Q41 **Chris Curtis:** Richard, you said that the Government should tighten up their guidance to ensure that the law is applied consistently. How would you like to see the guidance changed in order to achieve this?



Richard Blakeway: Clearly Awaab's law has brought focus and landlords have put some effort into making sure that they are prepared for it, but I worry that there is some false assurance around readiness for Awaab's law. There has been a focus on the timeliness around Awaab's law, and that is how it is characterised. What has been missed in Awaab's law are the more qualitative elements.

Because of the timeliness, if you are designing a process, an optimal process will drive you forward, because you have to keep going through each stage to meet the timescale commitments. The problem is that sometimes you might need to go backwards before you go forwards again, because you have to understand what your definition, as a landlord, of a significant hazard or significant harm is and how you address material change. Those are all reasons why what you have decided already may no longer be right and you need to re-evaluate it. That requires agility.

If you look at my casework, the one thing that characterises it is a lack of agility. It is clunky processes. That is why I worry. You could put something vanilla in and say, "We can do this in three days, this in five days and that in 10 days", but there could be a material change or someone could be not quite right in their evaluation of what significant is. The definition in the guidance of a significant hazard is a hazard that could cause significant harm. What is that? That is where you will lose agility in the process and that is the risk for it being successful.

Q42 **Andrew Lewin:** I just wanted to jump in on the theme of culture, because it is already coming through strongly this morning. You have all spoken powerfully about some shocking examples of residents feeling disconnected and not cared for. It is really important that you do that, we hear it and everyone in Parliament and Government hears it. I also want to ask whether you have seen—and I hope the answer is yes—examples of positive culture. To learn and change, we often need to learn from the bottom up, so I want to pose that question to any of you who want to jump in on good examples that you have seen that we can build on.

Nic Bliss: We have produced this framework, which we are calling the tackling stigma journey planner, which is about helping tenants and landlords work together to identify stigma and look at how to address things. We are saying it is a journey. The problem with all of this is that the whole issue of poor culture has been so hard-baked into the sector for so long that it is going to take a long time to change it, so we are calling it a journey.

Continuing the metaphor, we worked with 10 pioneer travellers, as in landlords and their tenants, five local authorities and five housing associations. The work that we did with them was really illustrative for us. It showed us that tenants and landlords can work together and change things. They might make small steps and some bigger steps, but it is possible if the commitment and belief is there.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are some staff who believe that they want to see change, and obviously we have to support them. I agree, though, with Richard that we have hugely difficult structures within which people are working, which make it very difficult to change anything, to change this culture and to address all the issues that need to be addressed.

You are focusing on the condition of the property, and obviously that is really important, but actually this whole issue of stigma goes across the whole of the tenant experience and the whole of the relationship between the tenant and the landlord, and it all needs to change. It is not easy to change that.

Richard Blakeway: I absolutely see examples of positive culture in my casework. Each week we share cases where we feel that landlords have handled a challenging situation really effectively. The way in which landlords have sought to think about how to learn from complaints is indicative of a positive complaints culture. In terms of the way that governing bodies have engaged, they have really engaged. This is no longer down at the bottom of the list and an operational issue. They have thought strategically about what complaint handling means, and that is a positive.

I will tell you the thing I see in my casework. Sometimes I see three cultures in a case. You could characterise it as the heroes and villains in a case. I will see teams not necessarily working effectively with each other. A case really sticks in my mind recently where the windows were not fit for purpose and the major works team was saying, "We are going to replace them in a few years, so we are not doing something now". The responsive repairs team was saying, "You cannot leave the child living in this property without safe windows". That is two cultures going on in that organisation.

That is why I come back to this point around mergers. Often, if a merger or organisational change—it might be a council—does not happen, it is put down to cultural barriers or a cultural reason. You should not assume that, just because it happened, there is a unified culture and, because they are really nice in the room with each other in a meeting, a great positive culture. That has come out in some of our further investigations. That is one of the reasons why our next systemic investigation will be looking at organisational change in local authorities as well as housing associations. We will mine what we now have, which is 10 years' worth of data. We can mine and analyse that data to inform that.

Kwajo Tweneboa: In terms of culture, the vast majority of people who reach out to me have received no positive response in terms of good practice, good culture or anything. I understand and completely get, otherwise I would be completely naive, that there are people who work within the housing sector, and the social housing sector in particular, who genuinely care.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

My massive worry is around homelessness and temporary accommodation. In fact, when it comes to culture and stigma, it is so much more deep-rooted among local authorities in terms of poor performance and poor behaviour when it comes to stigma and culture. I will give you three examples that left me really angry, and they are recent examples.

I had a mum and young son stuck in temporary accommodation. They had been complaining and complaining about having no water coming into their home, which meant that the toilet did not fill up. They were having to defecate and urinate in bin bags and bottles for months and the child had to go to school in order to shower.

Under another local authority, a man's Macmillan nurse reached out to me. He had a stage 4 brain tumour. He was homeless. They had to pause his cancer treatment because he did not have anywhere to go back to to recover. He had presented himself as homeless to the council. It said that it was not taking duty over him, so therefore he had to have his treatment stopped. I got involved and obviously things changed, but I have seen a lot of cases like that in terms of people who are terminally ill.

Recently, I had a case of a lady, who in fact I knew from a few years ago, fleeing domestic violence. She went to the council and the council eventually, after a long period of going back and forth, put her into accommodation. She is an end-of-life carer and was trying to maintain her job while dealing with this and not telling people at work, because she was embarrassed. The end-of-life carer one day went into work and finished work at about 10 pm. She came back to her accommodation to find a half-naked man asleep in her bed and her belongings removed from her accommodation.

The next day, she found out that her belongings had been put into a cleaner's cupboard by staff members. The local authority had double-booked the room and put a homeless man into her accommodation while she was out at work. She was on the streets in the early hours of the morning, trying to get help and in fact having to call the police to get assistance. She did not even get an apology. I put a stage 1 complaint in to this council nearly two months ago. I have yet to receive a response, and I am happy to name the council. It is Lambeth Council. I have been chasing it the last few days in order to try to receive a response.

When we talk about culture, attitude and stigma towards tenants, this is what I mean. It is so bad towards those who are homeless and some of the most vulnerable in society who do not even know where they are going to lay their heads at night. They often financially do not have enough money to pay for food and put clothes on their back. They often have young kids who are being subject to the most disgraceful conditions. There is a lack of empathy, human decency and respect. I have seen a lot of this under local authorities, and I have been saying this for years. Things need to change. Attitude, stigma and culture starts



HOUSE OF COMMONS

with Government, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister. I do not think that enough has been done over the last few years to start tackling this.

Chair: Just for transparency, I should declare that my other local authority is Lambeth Council, where my constituency is.

Q43 Sarah Smith: To what extent do the Government's proposed reforms to the decent homes standard reflect the levels of decency that social tenants ought to expect from their home?

Kwajo Tweneboa: I will be really quick with this. The decent homes standard needs to be updated, quite frankly. The current decent homes standard is so poor that half of the issues that I see, going into people's homes, are not even considered under the decent homes standard, which is appalling. It really needs updating.

I had a look through the consultation. There are some good, positive things in there that will go far in helping people if it is enforced correctly. One thing I felt was absolutely disgraceful, though, was the timeframe in terms of implementation of the decent homes standard and the fact that they are talking about potentially implementing it in 2035 to 2037. That is nearly 20 years on after Grenfell. I started campaigning when I was 22. I will be nearly 40 by the time that is implemented.

That says to me that there is a lack of urgency in terms of addressing this problem of people—we are talking about millions of people up and down the country—living in slum accommodation, where we do not even have an accurate decent standard of what homes should look like. We are not setting that precedent. Delaying it to 2035 to 2037, quite frankly, is unacceptable. I think that the sector as a whole will be appalled if that is the case.

I want to see this Government deliver on it, but they need to treat this with urgency, because there are so many people who should not have to wait the next 10 years living in slum conditions, having their health and safety put at risk and risking their health. There are young kids growing up in those conditions and people who are terminally ill having to live in those conditions, when the Government could choose to implement it much sooner, and I personally believe they really should.

Richard Blakeway: What has been proposed in the guidance is very well crafted. It is thoughtful. It has reflected on the first decent homes standard and makes some meaningful changes to the way in which the decent homes standard would work. The fact that it will be extended across the private rented tenure as well is positive. There is a lot of very credible action in that decent homes standard. There are some things missing, such as issues around pests and balconies, for example. Even the way it has been drafted around heating, for example, could be strengthened.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

All of that said, I know that you need to look at the decent homes standard alongside the hazards and Awaab's law, so there is a challenge there around integration. That speaks to Kwajo's issue also about different things coming in on different timescales. Therefore, landlords will respond in quite different ways, I suspect. One real challenge is that people are looking at when the decent homes standard will be implemented by, whereas we should be asking the question of when it can start to be implemented now.

Potentially, there are three areas that could be explored. The first is that there is not a universal approach to what is called voids or vacant properties in social housing. There is just not a universal approach. We had an investigation the other day and asked the landlord, because the issues started when the resident entered the property, "What is your void standard?", and they said, "We do not have one". There is not a universal approach to that. You should incrementally implement at least some aspects of the decent homes standard as and when properties become vacant, and do that now.

The second thing is that there are some things that are fundamental to safety, for example windows—an area we have highlighted. That should be fast-tracked. The risk potentially from a window being faulty is arguably greater than a bath, although it depends on circumstances, but that is where the hazards should provide you with a safeguard.

The third thing is the tests that could be brought in to make sure that landlords can balance these very challenging things and different pressures. That is why Homes England, particularly if it has a partnership arrangement with a provider, should be thinking about, "Here is your plan to build lots of homes, but is that sustainable alongside your plan to maintain and bring up the standard of homes?"

Those tests have to be applied at the same time, because otherwise you end up with an oscillation or a feast-or-famine situation between more investment in repairs and more investment in supply. These are different funding streams that should be sustained in different ways, but very clearly the evidence of recent years shows that you seem to be moving between the two in cycles. That is simply not sustainable, desirable or fair.

Nic Bliss: I support what the other two speakers have said here. Most tenants probably did not even bother to think about the previous decent homes standard. It was not particularly relevant to anything. The new one is looking better. It is interesting but, as you say, the timeframe is a problem.

Ultimately, the bottom line of this is that we all know what a decent home is, not the legal or whatever definition of it. We know what a decent home is. We know what standards you guys would like in your homes. Landlords know what standards they would like in their homes. We should be delivering those standards for social housing tenants, end of. It



should have been happening forever. Why are we in this mess? Why are we here? Again, it is the culture, attitudes and behaviour that has not been right and needs to change.

Q44 Sarah Smith: I have one short follow-up. I think that Shelter came back and said that the decent homes standard would be of very limited use to tenants because they would not actually be able to use it to enforce their rights. Do you agree with that or how else can we support tenants to enforce their rights, fundamentally?

Richard Blakeway: The onus should not be placed on the resident to phone up and say, "I am reporting what I think is a category 1 hazard", or "I have looked at the guidance on the decent homes standard and do not think that my kitchen is appropriate". I do not think that the onus is on residents to apply it, but it is about landlords thinking about how they produce a holistic response back and thinking about the property and how they assess the property.

One thing that I have seen with the original decent homes standard is, because there is a lack of specification, sometimes technically it might meet the decent homes standard but probably, in practice, not deliver what would be considered a decent home. I remember in particular a case that involved a bath being installed where you needed to be in the foetal position to use that bath. Technically, it met the age, because under the current standard it is age-based, but it was not, realistically, what would be considered decent from a tenant's perspective. Obviously, when they raised their case, they were told, "It fulfils the criteria". That is potentially an area of disconnect.

I would probably take a slightly different approach to Shelter and think, "The onus is not on the resident to have to refer to these different things". Actually, it is about the landlord and it is how that is integrated. We are clearly reaching a critical point where we need to think about, "What is the plan to integrate all of this and manage this maintenance alongside increasing supply?"

Nic Bliss: With the regulatory framework, there is an expectation that landlords should know the homes that they own and have a relationship with the tenants who are living in their homes. That is what needs to happen. We need to build this up. We are expecting residents to sort all this out. The case that I am talking about is that, if they do not even feel confident enough to be able to raise what anybody would see as a basic level complaint, they are not actually going to be able to use hundreds of pieces of legislation. It is the duty of the landlord to make it so that the tenants come forward, raise issues and these things are getting sorted. That should have been the case for years.

Kwajo Tweneboa: The question is about the teeth of all this. In terms of that standard, the onus is on the landlord and I think it sets a precedent, but the question is what happens when they choose not to follow it. I have suggested it to the Government before. If that is the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

case, especially within the private sector, if landlords are repeatedly not doing it and putting tenants' health and safety at risk, or just not following policy, such as the decent homes standard, I do not think that they should be allowed to operate as a landlord in the United Kingdom.

I do not know why that is complicated, why it is not seen as basic and why we are not doing it. They are there to provide a service. You, as a resident, are there to pay rent. There is an exchange there. There is a contract. If they are not fulfilling their side repeatedly and putting people's health and safety at risk, eight years on from Grenfell, they should not be allowed to operate as a landlord in the UK. That is the precedent that needs to be set.

Q45 Andrew Lewin: Building on the quality of homes, we are heading into the winter. There is a question about minimum energy efficiency standards. The Government have proposed that, by 2030, all social homes will be brought up to EPC C or above. If that were to happen, that would mean that it was only social homes that would have that guarantee. If that were to be achieved, what difference would realising that objective make to social housing residents?

Kwajo Tweneboa: That is really important. In terms of the homes that I see and energy efficiencies, bills are very high for many families, but we also have this issue in terms of new builds and them overheating too. We have had situations where we have had extremely hot summers, so it is not just about homes being cold in the winter, but how efficient homes are in the summer too.

In terms of quality as a whole, this is an issue that really needs to be addressed. Something that I have warned the Government about for years is that I am quite shocked at the quality of some of these new builds going up at the moment. If they do not address that issue and set standards and a precedent now, especially for those building the homes and the future homes that residents and people so desperately are going to need to live in, if we think we have a housing crisis at the moment, we are going to have an even bigger one in 15 years' time when some of these homes have to be torn down because the quality is so bad and they fall apart.

There is an example in Croydon called The Fold. I have been to that building. It is a massive building. It is a private block at the moment, but they have an identical social home next door. I do not know whether it is open yet. I went there. It is about three years old. The residents, I believe, have been told that they need to start vacating that building because conditions are really bad. I went there and visited. There are collapsed ceilings, damp and mould, sewage leaks and residents in some cases paying £3,000 per month to rent in that block.

It is a new build. The builders built it, handed it over and went into administration, as far as I am aware. They probably went and set up elsewhere, but now the landlord cannot chase in order for repairs to be



carried out and therefore cannot afford it. That is my worry about new builds that are going up up and down the country. We need to be making sure now, in the beginning, that we are focusing on getting it right and building homes that last, rather than waiting for five years, or knock up 1.5 million homes and find out, 10 years from now, that they begin to start falling apart.

Richard Blakeway: Kwajo is right to highlight the issues around overheating as well as the need to insulate properties. On the face of it, MEES and the proposals there will make a meaningful difference to both reduce carbon and reduce bills for residents. It is another level of complexity in and of itself for the sector to deliver. We are at a cliff edge now on the decent homes standard. I routinely see it in my casework around responsive repairs not being done, even if to potentially prevent a hazard, because of the intention to do major works in the future.

Another area of complexity is delivery, and a case sticks in my mind, which was probably homes acquired under Section 106 by two housing associations. We had complaints about overheating in the building and one housing association decided to do the works to improve the ventilation. The other housing association said, "We did not build this. It is the developer's responsibility". There were very different outcomes for the residents because the developer said, "It is now Section 106. We built it to the specification required, so it is not our responsibility", so there were really different responses there.

Given the increasing complexity of delivery, which might involve multiple parties—and you will see this with heat networks as well as potentially on the new build development that Kwajo was alluding to—it can be very hard to resolve issues there. Residents can end up feeling that they are being passed from pillar to post to sort something out.

Andrew Lewin: On the cooling and the technology, Lee and I were talking earlier about Mitsubishi Electric. Did you want to jump in?

Q46 **Mr Dillon:** With air source heat pumps, there is a housing association working with Mitsubishi Electric around using a higher-pressure system. There needs to be changes to regulations to enable that to be rolled out, but it would not then require radiators to be pulled off the walls. You could use the existing heating systems. Given tenants' right to refusal is one of the grounds that you do not upgrade a home, it is about how we can work better with business to change those regulations quickly, so that we get those efficiencies into homes and get more tenants taking up the ability to have their homes retrofitted, because the technology is not as invasive anymore as it used to be.

Richard Blakeway: It is a really interesting proposal. I do not know much about it, but it is a really interesting proposal. It points to the importance of taking residents on the journey. You are going to see tens of thousands of homes having changes done to them. It also points to the need for collaboration and innovation, so those are all good things.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I come back to the fact that this is a sector where, over the next decade, there will be fewer social landlords. That is a fundamental change. How is that going to affect the experience of residents? How is that going to affect the delivery of some of these fundamental things, all of which are over the next decade, essentially?

Q47 Mr Dillon: With fewer housing associations, it means that there will be bigger housing associations, so more mergers. You go away from that local identity and accountability more. Councillors used to sit on housing association boards, for example. That very rarely happens now. I see it through academisation of schools and having less accountability locally. What fear do you have about the impact of larger mergers on local accountability?

Richard Blakeway: I do not think that larger necessarily means that you cannot have a local connection. It comes down to the operating model, and those are matters for the providers. Also, within that, you have larger local authorities as well.

The real challenge—and Nic or Kwajo might want to talk to this as well—is how you keep the resident voice having impact. There is a real need for a national tenant body that can provide a voice during that period of significant change. While I have certainly seen landlords engaging their residents more and doing it in their governance and in different ways, it is still fragmented. How do you ensure that that resident voice is not just the residents who can engage and have time, but the residents who landlords may hear less from? That is one of the lessons of the damp and mould issue. Landlords had to fight their silences as well. There were residents who clearly there was less engagement with, for lots of different reasons. There needs to be some sort of structure to give tenants a voice during that period of change.

Q48 Chair: I wanted to ask one final question to you before we change panel. Since the Grenfell tragedy, we have seen the issues of tenants' voice and tenants' engagement rightly coming up and higher on the agenda. It is fair to say, at many times, people have felt that those in position of power and those who should have known better perpetuate some of that stigma that we see.

I know that you held a series of roadshows, Richard, across the country, and one key issue that came up was around the stigma. This is the work that both Kwajo and Nic have been doing. We, as MPs, see that in our inbox. In terms of following some of the stuff around Grenfell, do you think that there is anything that the Government need to do in terms of addressing this key issue of stigma facing tenants in social housing?

Nic Bliss: Certainly, we think that there are things that the Ministry should be looking at. We set out a set of proposals to the Ministry about how it could go about tackling stigma. We said that there needed to be something in the regulatory framework about tackling stigma. We said that using the framework that we have created could help to build the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

relationship between tenants and landlords. As yet, the Ministry has not even engaged with us on the proposals that we have put to it. We would love it to come and speak to us about them and to come up with some new ideas.

In terms of the previous discussions that we have just been having about EPC level C, there is a need for a dialogue between tenants and the landlord about these issues. You are saying that tenants will not want to have these changes done. If you start to talk to tenants, maybe they will do if they understand what is actually being proposed. For new build, one of the tragic things that you hear is that wonderful new systems are put in but tenants do not know how to use them, so they are completely useless.

Q49 Chair: Kwajo, I know that you have had a lot of engagement with former Ministers. I know that you had good relationship with the former Secretary of State, Michael Gove. I know that you had engagement with the former Deputy Prime Minister as well. Obviously, there has been a change in the Department recently. Have you had an opportunity to meet with the new Secretary of State? Is that something that you are going to pursue in terms of the campaign that you have been leading on?

Kwajo Tweneboa: We have not had a formal meeting yet. I hope that we will, because there are still so many issues still outstanding, especially around the decency of people's homes. I have spoken to many MPs who say that these issues make up the majority of their casework. I want to make that point that more needs to be done under local authorities in terms of setting a standard for them to follow, because human decency and respect and treating tenants with that does not cost anything.

Also, there is that question that I still have around social housing and how many are going to be built. We are about 16 months into Government now and still no closer to understanding, out of the 1.5 million homes, how many are going to be social housing, knowing that we have record levels of child homelessness and homelessness in general. Tackling this crisis starts with building quality, long-lasting social housing, but we are still no closer to finding out how many of those are going to be built.

There is so much that I want to speak to the Government about. I want them to deliver—I really do—but, if they are going to, they need to do it in the right way. They need to start treating this with urgency, because there has been a lot of lip service. There has not been enough action, I am afraid.

Q50 Chair: That is something that we will definitely be posing to the new Secretary of State in a few weeks, in terms of how many homes. We have been asking that question.

Richard, the Regulator of Social Housing has had a number of reports on this. One of its areas was looking at raising professional competency of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

staff working in the social housing sector. In terms of your engagement with staff in housing departments in both local authorities and housing associations, what more do you think needs to be improved to address that issue of stigma towards social tenants?

Richard Blakeway: The ownership of this has to rest with the landlord. Any organisation has to create its own culture. It has to agree what that is in the boardroom and make sure that its values are lived. I have always said that complaints are a good indicator as to whether values are being lived.

The competency and conduct standard is another welcome addition, but it will not necessarily change culture in and of itself. There is something about how it is fulfilled and it raises professionalism, and that is positive.

Underneath all of this is a real need to modernise services. The way that homes are built is quite old-fashioned and, arguably, the way that they are managed can be quite old-fashioned as well. You really need to move to a model where landlords are able to be more predictive and able to predict when to intervene, rather than being reactive, particularly if, in that reaction, you end up with issues not being gripped and ending up on my desk, or with Kwajo, Nic and others, and that was all preventable and avoidable. We need to move from reaction into a more predictive model.

Chair: Thank you for the work that all three of you do in different areas on this in terms of helping us as parliamentarians. The work that you do helps us remember that these are people, not just statistics, when we are able to ask those questions directly to Government and policymakers.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah King, Ian McDermott, Craig Moule and Alistair Smyth.

Q51 **Chair:** Welcome to the second part of our Committee meeting this morning. Can I ask our guests to introduce themselves, please?

Craig Moule: I am Craig Moule. I am Sanctuary's chief executive. Sanctuary works across Scotland and England. We have about 125,000 homes in management, covering a range of tenures: everything from supported housing and homelessness, through to general needs, elderly and elderly care provision as well.

Sarah King: I am Councillor Sarah King and I am the leader of Southwark Council. Southwark Council is the second-largest council landlord in the country. We are landlords to over 125,000 of our residents. We are also one of the leading councils that established the Securing the Future of Council Housing campaign, which is a coalition of over 100 councils that is absolutely focused on securing a future of council homes that can flourish and how we address funding.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alistair Smyth: Good morning. I am Alistair Smyth. I am the director of policy and research at the National Housing Federation. We are the trade body for not-for-profit providers of social and affordable housing in England, providing 2.7 million homes to around 6 million people.

Ian McDermott: Good morning. I am Ian McDermott, chief executive at Peabody. Peabody is a large organisation based in London. I am also the chair of the G15, which is a collection of the larger associations, also based in London.

Chair: Lee, I think you wanted to declare an interest.

Mr Dillon: Yes. Just to declare an interest, my wife works for one of the G15 organisations.

Chair: I declared an interest earlier, in that one of my boroughs is Southwark Council.

Q52 **Mr Dillon:** I wanted to start off on the state of social housing in the country. How would you describe the state of social housing? Shall we start with you first, Ian?

Ian McDermott: I wonder if Alistair should start, given that you have national responsibility.

Alistair Smyth: I am happy to start, yes, absolutely.

Q53 **Mr Dillon:** I can see that there is going to be a difference then. It is easier to take the national picture. That is why I deliberately went that way.

Alistair Smyth: I will start by saying that our members, housing associations, are absolutely committed to providing safe, high-quality and affordable homes. We welcome this inquiry as an opportunity to set that out and explore what more can be done. Our members have told us that investment in their existing homes is their number-one priority. They spent nearly £9 billion in 2023-24 on repairing and improving their homes. They will spend £50 billion over the coming five years on repairing and improving their existing homes.

We know, as was discussed by your previous witnesses, that there is more to be done. We need to do more to continue driving improvements that we have started to make in recent years and it must be the case that every resident has access to a good-quality and secure home. Through the Better Social Housing Review, which was published at the end of 2022, and our sector's response to that, published in 2023, our members have outlined their ongoing commitment to improving services, including things such as focusing on repairs.

Q54 **Mr Dillon:** I have not asked what the sector is going to do going forward. I have asked you to describe what social housing is like at the moment.



Alistair Smyth: I will come on to that. Just to finish that, our members are doing as much as they can to invest in the quality of their existing homes.

In terms of the state of social housing, overall—and some statistics were mentioned earlier on—our members' homes are 91% decent. They meet the decent homes standard in the majority of instances. That is higher than any other tenure. In terms of damp and mould, our members' homes have damp and mould in around 5.4% of their homes. That is the lowest of any rented tenure. To be very clear, though, we are not in any way complacent about that. We know that that means there are still over 100,000 housing association homes affected by damp, mould and condensation. As we may come on to, that is a number that our members are working hard to reduce, both on their own and through different regulations and policy that has been introduced.

It is also important, in terms of contextualising the state of the sector, to reflect on what has happened to the sector's finances over the course of the last 15 years, through decisions that have been made by the previous Government. The first was a decision to cut capital funding by 63% at the start of the 2010s and, within that, a decision to remove funding for social rent altogether.

The second is an intervention in the sector's rents, which you will be well aware of, having worked in the sector. There was a cut of 15% in real terms from 2015 to 2025. That amounts to £3 billion in cash terms per year that the sector now has less to spend on investing in its existing homes or new homes. That has made a significant difference.

We strongly welcomed the Government's announcements over the summer, through the spending review, on long-term rent certainty and a big new capital programme. It is a good opportunity to thank this Committee for its role in making the case for that settlement. We believe that that settlement will better enable our members to invest more in their existing homes and do their very best to build as much social and affordable housing as possible.

Q55 **Chair:** Coming back to Lee's question on that, bearing in mind the first panel that we had, what we, as parliamentarians, and councillors receive in our inboxes and what Richard would receive as the ombudsman, how would you describe the state of social housing? You have said that only 5.4% of your members' properties would fall in that damp and mould category. That 5.4% is far too much, in our view. Looking at the state of social housing now in England in 2025, is it good? Are there more improvements? Would you say that it is habitable for the tenants who live there? Do they get good service? Is it value for money? What would you say?

Alistair Smyth: For the most part, it is good quality. Most homes are safe and of course homes are, by definition, affordable as well, so we are starting from a good place. Of course the number of homes that are non-



decent or affected by damp, mould and condensation is still too high. Following 15 years of really challenging financial circumstances, our members are doing their best to turn that around. We took it upon ourselves to look at how the sector was operating through the Better Social Housing Review and have been making changes off the back of that ever since then.

There are definitely still—and you will see this in your inboxes—cases where services or homes are not up to scratch. We are really grateful for the work that you do as MPs to advocate on behalf of your constituents and we work collaboratively with you to solve those issues. The sector is working hard to make improvements, but the overall position, notwithstanding the challenging financial circumstances, is still one that is far better than it is worse.

Q56 Sarah Smith: You have said that there are about 100,000 homes that are not decent and are suffering from that damp and mould; that is just from your members. What would be the numbers of other people sitting on the panel today, in terms of what percentage or how many of your residents are currently living in homes that are not up to standard?

Ian McDermott: It is a very small percentage. I cannot remember the exact number. I do not have that in front of me, I am afraid, but I am very happy to provide that to you and write to you separately.

Chair: Yes, if you could, Ian, that would be helpful. Thank you.

Ian McDermott: I would be very happy to do that. I have worked my whole life in social housing. Social housing is my passion. It is what gets me out of bed in the morning. To hear what we heard this morning is always really difficult. Behind each of those cases, there is an individual who suffered, and suffered really badly.

I want to make one additional point to those of Alistair. In London, we have the tallest, densest, oldest and most overcrowded housing in the country. Housing and what we do is part of an ecosystem that is under enormous strain. All too often, what we see in our homes is a function of that ecosystem simply not working.

A stone's throw away from here, we have five people living in a one-bedroom home. It was built in the 1860s. The rooms are small, because those are the rooms that were built at the time. We cannot insulate it internally because it would make the rooms even smaller. We cannot insulate it externally because it is protected. The danger with where we go sometimes is that we may end up thinking that we cannot make this work as social housing. My point is that the answer for that particular family is for them to be rehoused in proper-sized accommodation. Given the waiting list in Westminster, we know it will be many years, if not decades, before they are rehoused.

Q57 Mr Dillon: I am a social housing advocate as well. I am not asking you a hard question; I just wanted an answer to that particular question rather



HOUSE OF COMMONS

than the sales pitch for what you are doing. I know that, as an industry, you have your nose to grindstone and you are trying to make improvements. We are in a situation where we have stock that is not at the right level. You have just talked through one case there. Where does the blame for this lie? I do not mind who takes this one.

Sarah King: I just want to start by saying that the really important bit, to be frank, is that we absolutely know that our homes are not at the standard that our tenants deserve. A significant number of them need real investment to bring them up to the standards in terms of health and safety and in terms of what our residents really deserve. They deserve good-quality housing and they deserve to live well.

In terms of the position for Southwark, 75% of our homes meet the decent homes standard, which is just simply not good enough. We are trying to invest. At this stage, we are committed to investing £250 million over the next three years in those homes, but that is focused very much on health and safety. It does not come close to the amount of money that we need to invest to ensure that estates are lovely places to live. It does not allow us to deliver new playgrounds or things such as kitchens and bathrooms, which are what our residents tell us that they want.

Going back to what the problem is, for councils it is really hard to get away from the funding situation. The Housing Revenue Account system is fundamentally broken. We have a ring-fenced budget system where the only income that we have available to us is our tenants' rents and our leaseholders' service charges. That is simply not enough to invest in this many homes. In Southwark, we have over 8,000 homes that were built before the war. We have more towers in council ownership in the London Borough of Southwark than in any other local authority.

The amount of rent that tenants pay has been constrained, often for exactly the right reasons. The Government decisions that have been made to address tenants' rents during spiralling inflation and the cost of living crisis have meant that our funding has simply been starved.

I come back to the harsh point that council landlords across the country simply do not have the money to be making the investments that we need to make and that our tenants deserve.

Craig Moule: As at today, in management we have 252 homes that are not at the decent homes standard. All of those are subject to a programme of work. Out of management, we have several hundred homes that are all scheduled either to be demolished or to have a programme of reinvestment in them.

The decent homes standard is an interesting discussion in its own right, in the sense that we are measuring it against the current standard. I am not sure, in my own mind, from my discussions with residents, that it meets their aspirations and what they would consider a decent home.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q58 Mr Dillon: As an organisation, are you considering going above the decent homes standard to serve your customers?

Craig Moule: We would certainly welcome the introduction of a new decent homes standard that raises the bar. It needs to have clarity around it and it needs to be more precise than the current standard. It certainly needs resident input into it, so that their voice is not lost.

Q59 Mr Dillon: If that is not done at national level, as the leader of your organisation, would you instruct your resident involvement team to work with your residents to hear what extra value could be added to the decent homes standard, and then whether you could afford to deliver against it, of course?

Craig Moule: That is what we would aspire to do. There is the question of the affordability envelope. Just as with void standards, we would work with our residents on what they would aspire for those to be as well.

Q60 Mr Forster: Can I talk about Awaab's law? How well prepared are your organisations to comply with Awaab's law when it comes into effect in just under two weeks' time? For example, what preparation have you done to prepare for the regulations? When did those preparations start? What have you had to spend to comply with this new law?

Alistair Smyth: I can start with the general picture. Just to start with, the death of Awaab Ishak was a tragedy that shocked our sector. It was a result of horrendous failings. Since then, we in the sector have worked hard to do our very best to ensure that something like this does not reoccur. We firmly supported the principles of Awaab's law when it was introduced. It is absolutely right that residents must be safe in their homes. Instances of damp and mould should always be dealt with swiftly and effectively.

In terms of preparing for it, generally speaking, members have been investing significant resources in bringing on new staff with the right skill sets to triage cases, to survey homes and to make informed assessments as to whether a hazard represents a serious risk of harm to a resident. That is a significant investment, and some of our members have brought on significant numbers of new staff to do that.

Alongside that, they have also been investing in their existing staff, particularly contact centre staff, who might be the first point of contact for them to determine whether the damp and mould is a serious issue. In some cases, they have been investing in new systems or upgrading old systems. There has been a lot of investment across the board.

We also welcome the Government's test and learn approach in this first phase, which is focusing on the most important issue of damp, mould and condensation. Taking that phased approach will allow the learning to be better applied to phases two and three to make sure they are a success both for residents and for landlords.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ian McDermott: From our point of view, we support Awaab's law. As Alistair has already said, it sent a shockwave through the whole sector. So far, we have invested about £1.5 million just in technology to make sure we are ready for it. We are employing an additional 92 people to deal with both Awaab's law and disrepair combined. We have a separate supply chain so we are not competing with our day-to-day maintenance in terms of supply. We have a dedicated damp and mould team to make sure we are picking things up.

One of the things that was talked about a lot in the first session was culture. We are doing training for the whole organisation, not just for the damp and mould team or the call handlers who deal with the calls as they come in. We are investing very heavily in triaging to make sure we get triaging right. We have an end-to-end process with remote monitoring in some cases where that is appropriate.

We scan all of our records to pick up keywords such as "damp", "mould", "asthma" and those sorts of things, to make sure that anyone who has not come through the normal system is still being picked up. We are starting to introduce automatic questions when people ring into the contact centre. They may have rung for a different purpose, but we will ask them about damp and mould.

We are as ready as we could be at this stage. None of us knows exactly how it will work out in reality. I also agree with Alistair that we need to make sure we are fleet of foot and adapting as things change and as we learn from the process.

Q61 **Mr Forster:** Ian, you said you do not fully know how it will work out. Is there a risk that you and others will not be able to comply with Awaab's law?

Ian McDermott: We are as confident as we could be that we can. We have invested incredibly heavily in making sure that we can, but nobody knows how any new legislation or regulation will fall until they actually start doing it. We have been shadowing it for some time now. We are feeling pretty confident. It would be wrong to say that we are 100% certain that we are going to be able to cope. Nobody could say that.

Sarah King: The key thing from a council perspective is that we are diverting resources away from other parts of the housing department to make sure we are fully prepared for our Awaab's law. We fully support its objectives. It is absolutely fundamental that landlords across the country are providing safe homes and tackling damp and mould as quickly and effectively as possible.

In terms of what that means in Southwark, we have established a dedicated damp and mould team. We have expanded upon our existing resources. It is also about looking at training and expertise across the whole authority. That includes training for all councillors who may see damp and mould in homes but not necessarily have it raised with them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

directly by a resident. It means making sure that our social workers understand the process, if they see damp and mould in a house, for putting that back through our own processes and into the housing department so we can respond to it within the timescales.

There is a significant amount of work going on and it must be our priority, but I am conscious that, as a landlord, we are diverting from elsewhere in the organisation to be as fully prepared as we can be. We will continue to need to do that as we go into the implementation phase.

Craig Moule: I would make similar comments to those that you have already heard. Our approach has been to work with our resident advisory panel on the design of our response to Awaab's law. We have been doing that over the course of the past year. We have spent about £500,000 to £750,000 on adjusting our systems and preparing for its implementation.

As you heard from Ian, we have prepared thoroughly. We have done a pilot. We are as confident as we can be, but you can never presume what the effect of any change in legislation will be.

Q62 Mr Forster: Can I follow up on this area, if I may? Which things are you not now doing or doing less as a result? Southwark Council was awarded a C3 by the regulator of social housing recently, which highlights serious failings in around 50% of homes. The one that stuck out to me is that 50% of homes do not have a working smoke alarm or electrical safety check. Clearly, the regulator is concerned already that Southwark Council is not following the existing rules, let alone the new ones. How confident are you that you can catch up with the current rules and then improve things and meet the higher standards, as we all want?

Sarah King: That is a really important question. Overwhelmingly, as a council landlord, Southwark is focused on health and safety. That is both the health and safety findings of the regulator and preparing for Awaab's law.

Organisationally, our investment and the intellectual capital of the department are now aligned very closely to health and safety over above everything else. Following the regulatory inspection, the C3 grading and the self-referral that we made, over the next two years we will have a programme of electrical safety testing and smoke alarm inspections. Since we self-referred, we have doubled the amount of electrical safety tests that have taken place.

I can provide more detailed figures to the Committee, if that is helpful. We are installing smoke alarms. That is a very clear programme of absolute priority, as is Awaab's law. Organisationally, that has to be our focus. The health and safety of our tenants and the regulations that we must rightly follow are everything that the department is focused on.

As a result, we are no longer pursuing the delivery of new council homes in the borough. We have already delivered 3,000 new council homes, but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the vast majority of schemes that we had in the pipeline are now on hold unless they are on site already. We have two regeneration schemes that are on site at the moment, which we are continuing with because we were already committed to them. We are no longer able to direct our investment and resourcing towards delivering new council homes. We are also not prioritising the things that our tenants want to see happening in terms of bathrooms, kitchens or playgrounds. We have to be solely focused on health and safety.

The figure that we are spending over the next three years is a significant one. It is £250 million. That just touches the sides of what our tenants need and deserve. Really importantly, it does not allow us to deliver the new homes that we know our residents need, given that we have 20,000 people on our council waiting list and 4,000 people living in temporary accommodation. We know our residents want to live in a council home—I am conscious of who I am on the panel with—more than any other type of provider because it has democratic accountability at its heart. Those are the choices that we have to make at this stage in order to focus solely on health and safety.

Q63 Mr Forster: This is a question to Sarah, but it is also to all of you. It is a very philosophical one. Why did Southwark Council have to get a serious failings rating by the regulator for health and safety to now be a priority? Why did someone have to die for the sector to take damp and mould seriously? Why did 72 people have to die at Grenfell for us to take building safety seriously?

Sarah King: There were lots of contributing reasons, but our housing department was not focused on the new regulation to the degree that it should have been in terms of consumer standards. As a housing department, did we get things wrong? We absolutely did. That is why I, as leader, and the leader beforehand have apologised to tenants for our failings.

Since then, we have been very clear that we need to be able to deliver for our tenants both in terms of the regulatory environment and their priorities, which is why we have been reforming what our housing department fundamentally does to deliver for residents. That has involved significant recruitment at both the senior level and throughout the organisation and we have looked at the skills and expertise that we need internally. We have also been looking very much at our culture as a landlord, in terms of making sure that respect for tenants, which is an absolute priority, runs through everything that we do organisationally.

Q64 Chair: Just being mindful of time, I wanted to come back on that, Alistair. That realisation and acceptance from landlords is one of the things that was raised at the last panel. Are more of your members coming forward and accepting that they are sometimes at fault? Are they accepting responsibility and apologising? Is that still something that is an issue across the sector?



Alistair Smyth: Over the last several years, since the tragic fire at Grenfell and the other events have happened in the sector, we have certainly seen that the sector generally has recognised that there were shortcomings and failings. It has been very supportive of the regulatory and oversight system that has been carefully put together over the last few years in order to give tenants the ability to better hold their landlords to account.

The whole sector, through the Better Social Housing Review and the responses to it, has agreed with the fact that improvements needed to be made. They have been made and are continuing to be made at the moment. We are on a journey. The additional support from Government that has been announced this summer will help us to go further in doing that.

Q65 **Andrew Lewin:** I have a brief follow-up on culture. That was the most striking theme of the earlier panel. There is a sense that residents do not feel valued, listened to or, at worst, do not even want to raise issues because they feel like they are a burden. I have a challenge for the panel, but the question is just for one of you. Is one of you able to tell me a story or give me a living example of where you got the culture right? I appreciate the importance of investment and training, but can you give me a story of an example of where a housing officer got culture really right and that is an embodiment of what you want to do? I know it is a challenge, but I am interested in the story.

Ian McDermott: I will give you one very quick example. We had a support worker employed by Peabody who worked with a resident who had been mute for their whole life. As a consequence of the care, support, trust and involvement that they had, that resident started speaking again. That was life-changing for that individual.

Yes, culture is a real challenge. It is a challenge for us all. We do not get it right. We are working on it incredibly hard. There are fantastic examples, which do not hit the headlines, that demonstrate the real passion that sits within Peabody and the organisation that I represent.

Craig Moule: Without going into detail, I received a letter from a resident who had been a complainant to compliment my frontline complaints handler on having resolved their problem. They turned what was a non-happy resident into a happy resident. That is the sort of thing that does go on under the radar, though possibly not often enough.

If I could also add to the comment about culture, if I may, I use a phraseology that I am fairly public about. The sector as a whole—I do not exclude Sanctuary from this—stepped too far away from its customers, from its residents. It has learned a number of salutary lessons about that. It has started to and in some instances is successfully re-engaging the customers and giving customers the right voice and the right say in their organisations.



Culture does take some time to change. It is fair to say we have further to go on that basis, but “customers at the heart of what we do” is a more meaningful phrase today than it was five or six years ago.

Sarah King: As a councillor since 2014—all councillors across the country, particularly in London, will understand this—your inbox is constantly full of people in housing need. Over the years of being a councillor, you realise that it is just harder and harder and harder to solve housing casework, whether that is about investment in homes or someone in housing need who is trying to move to a larger home or to move into a council home.

The stories that have the most effect on me is when you receive emails from people who have been in desperate situations and we have helped them as councillors. It is really difficult for us as a council landlord, given the pressures that we face, the regulatory environment and our recent C3 status. It is really easy to forget our resident services officers, who are the frontline in our estates and homes. These are the people who are assessing housing need and looking at application forms, knowing how short we are of homes. The work that they do and their dedication to public service is extraordinary.

When you receive an email, as the leader of a council, thanking a specific resident services officer or someone in a housing needs department who has helped someone navigate what is so hard to describe as a housing crisis—we have been saying that for a decade—those are the moments when you realise just how important your work is as a council landlord and how much we touch people’s lives and can change them by having trust and belief in our residents.

Q66 **Sarah Smith:** I am going to move on to the decent homes standard and the proposed reforms that the Government have been outlining there. I have been very clear with the Minister that I do not think it is okay that residents should be waiting to 2035 or later to see these reforms implemented. What would the consequences on your organisations be if these reforms were brought in sooner, say for 2030? Reflecting on some of the earlier panel’s proposals, how could you have the aim towards those starting much sooner?

Alistair Smyth: I will start by saying that the first decent homes standard was hugely beneficial for millions of residents across the social housing sector. That was introduced with £22 billion of Government funding to support implementation. It has been absolutely game-changing. It is one of the key reasons why social housing is now better quality than private rented sector housing. The new standard has been consulted on. We were supportive of the majority of changes set out in that consultation.

This really gets to the heart of the key challenge facing the sector, which is around the trade-offs and choices that we make. We have been talking today about the quality of existing homes. We recognise that it is an area



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that still requires more investment and more work. Alongside that, everyone here will know about the state of the housing crisis and the great need to get building as much new social and affordable housing as we can.

Those two things working together create a lot of pressure on the system. There is simply not enough money in the system to do both things to the fullest possible extent at once. That is why we have been supportive of the Government's approach in the consultation to implementing the new standard in the mid-2030s. Doing that will allow the sector to spread the cost of the new requirements over a longer period and, crucially, we can build more social and affordable housing in the meantime because those resources will be spread across those two priorities.

As part of that, we have made the case for the Government to provide some additional funding through rent convergence, which we may come to. That was another consultation held over the summer. That would better enable us to do both of those things.

Importantly, though, if it is implemented in the mid-2030s, that does not mean all the improvements will come then. In the meantime, our members will be complying with existing standards, including the new consumer regulatory system, but they will be making those upgrades to get to decent homes 2 level along the way. You will see gradual improvements over the course of the next decade so that all homes are complying by the time we get to 2035 or 2037.

Ian McDermott: This issue is more than a decade in the making. The under-investment in housing is more than a decade in the making. The exclusion of social housing residents from the building safety fund diverted millions of pounds away from investment in homes into remediation. That had to be paid on the back of what is, for the G15, an average rent of £128 a week.

It is slightly wrong to think that we are going to start working in 2034 to meet the standard in 2035. We will change what we do next year to build up, over that decade, to making sure we are fully compliant in advance of the introduction of the standard. Although it is some distance away, we are going to be changing what we do in our investment plans next year to make sure that, come 2035, we do not hit a huge level of non-compliance.

Q67 Chair: One of the issues that has been announced is around making sure that we build new social homes. We have been asking Ministers how many new social homes there are going to be in the 1.5 million new homes. The Government have highlighted that they want to see around 180,000 new social homes built to add to the existing ones. What assessments have you made within your own respective organisations and councils, both initial assessments and cumulative impact studies, to look at the designs, when we are talking about some of the issues in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

those homes, and the ability to build those new homes within the next few years?

Alistair Smyth: I will start with some general observations. Members have been enormously supportive of the package announced over the summer, as I have mentioned. What has been happening in the interim and is still happening now in the autumn is organisations up and down the country are having strategy days and strategy sessions with their boards, looking at the new funding from the settlement and at all of their competing priorities for spending decisions and arriving, in some cases, at the decision that their ability to build new homes remains the same. In other cases, they will be able to build more new social and affordable housing.

Different members are affected in different ways. Some have been particularly affected by building and fire safety costs. Overall in the sector, there is a huge appetite to build more social and affordable housing. Once the bidding window opens for the new programme in January, we will see how quickly that funding is drawn down. The indications that we are having from members suggest there is plenty of appetite out there to take up that funding and build all 180,000 homes over the next decade. In fact, we will deliver more than that through the planning system.

Q68 **Chair:** Sarah, Craig and Ian, very quickly, one of the issues that you have to confront is the state and age of some of your properties. Over the next few years, will we see a situation where you may have to dispose, as opposed to invest, in those properties?

Sarah King: Yes, absolutely. The challenges that we face in terms of funding mean that council landlords are already making disposals due to the financial situation that they are in with their housing revenue account. The survey that we did of over 100 council landlords recently found that 10% of landlords are already making disposals for homes that need such significant investment that it is financially better to sell them off now, deplete the stock and have that money to invest in existing homes. We are expecting that 30% of those landlords will consider selling off homes in the next few years to be able to balance their housing revenue accounts.

The ambition among council landlords is to deliver those council homes. We want to be out there building, but without real structural reform on how we are funded, we are going to be in a really depressing state where we will be seeing more disposals rather than delivering more homes.

Craig Moule: As a policy, we would wish not to dispose of much-needed social housing, but we cannot rule it out. There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation around needing to know the outcome of the decent homes standard to price that in. We need to understand what the implications are for our development.



My residents are quite clear with me that they want us to be able to reinvest in our homes and they do not want our development programme to detract from that. With that said, Sanctuary will be bidding for development funding from the Government's allocation. We expect to deliver a multi-tenure programme of around about 15,000 homes over the next 10 years.

Q69 **Chair:** Does Peabody have some of the oldest stock?

Ian McDermott: We do. We absolutely do. The regeneration of existing homes is a real problem, and the funding of that is a real challenge. There is not the funding out there that there needs to be for regeneration. We have the oldest stock in Europe. It is a problem. Our priority is really clearly on existing homes. That is unequivocally what our residents say and it is what our board says.

Historically, we have been a really big developer, but we stopped committing to new development a couple of years ago. We are waiting to see how it all pans out in terms of what capacity is left over to allow us to build. We really want to build. We have the opportunity to build and we have the sites to build. We are keen that we continue to be a provider of those much-needed social homes.

Q70 **Andrew Lewin:** Sarah, I will give you the opportunity to close, because I understand that you have called for the Government to introduce a green and decent homes programme. You have the floor.

Sarah King: We talked about a new decent homes standard as part of the earlier session. The campaign Securing the Future of Council Housing is calling for an even higher standard. We want to make sure that it takes into account retrofitting and it looks across the board at whether our homes are warm enough and, if they are too hot, how we address overheating. It also addresses issues such as district heating networks. In ageing homes, we have even older district heating systems that need addressing. We have come together to call for a higher standard.

What I should say, though—this is probably the most important point—is that we are also calling for the capital funding that sits behind that new standard so we can be on the ground delivering those improvements to residents as quickly as possible. We know that the previous decent homes standard absolutely changed people's lives. Importantly, it changed lives, not just homes. We want to go further. The ambition is there, but the state of council housing finance at the moment means that we need a capital contribution from the Government to be able to deliver on the ground.

Craig Moule: I was just going to supplement that with a comment about standards and a plea around unifying the standards in one place. If there is one point of reference, that will make it easier for our customers to understand and it will make it much clearer for organisations such as Sanctuary to be able to achieve that standard.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If you think about it, you have MEES, the decent homes standard, health and safety legislation and Awaab's law. It really all needs to be reflected in one place where it is intelligible and clear to everybody. That plea is my final comment, Chair.

Chair: Thank you for that. There was just one area that we would be grateful if you could write to the Committee with some further detail on, which was the Government's proposal for you all to meet the minimum energy standards by 2030 and how prepared you all are to do that. If you have a snapshot of your members, Alistair, that would be really helpful.

This is an issue that will continue to dominate all our inboxes, as MPs, councillors, landlords and trade organisations working with tenants and landlords. It is an issue that unfortunately continues to be in the news as well, when some of those horrific cases come to the media's attention. There is outrage and outcry, but it is about how we make meaningful change. We will continue to pose these questions to the Government over the course of the next few weeks.

Thank you very much for coming this morning and attending our session.