



Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee

Oral evidence: The regulation of social housing, HC 874

Monday 14 March 2022

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Ian Byrne; Florence Eshalomi; Ben Everitt; Kate Hollern; Andrew Lewer; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 218 - 266

Witnesses

I: Angela Price, Tenant, Guinness Housing; Nicole Walters, Tenant, Southwark Council; Daniel Hewitt, Political Correspondent, ITV News.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Angela Price, Nicole Walters and Daniel Hewitt.

Chair: Welcome, everyone, to this afternoon's session of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee. We have another session this afternoon of our inquiry into the regulation of social housing and we have particularly important witnesses, who I will introduce in a minute. Before that, I just want to ask Committee members to put on record any particular interests they have that may be relevant to this inquiry. I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

Ian Byrne: I employ a councillor in my office.

Kate Hollern: I also employ a councillor in my office.

Mohammad Yasin: I am a member of Bedford town deal board.

Andrew Lewer: I am a vice-president of the LGA.

Chair: Thank you for that. Now we will come over to our witnesses. First of all, it is a great pleasure to welcome Daniel Hewitt. Daniel, can you introduce yourself?



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Daniel Hewitt: My name is Daniel Hewitt. I am a political correspondent for ITV News.

Chair: Alongside him with us today is Nicole Walters.

Nicole Walters: Hi. My name is Nicole Walters. I am a social tenant in the Southwark Council residency. I have been living in there since 2016.

Chair: Nicole, thank you very much. You are very welcome. Online we have Angela Price.

Angela Price: Hi. My name is Angela Price. I am a social housing tenant. I have been a social housing tenant with the same housing association for 20 years.

Chair: Which association is that?

Angela Price: Guinness Partnership.

Q218 **Chair:** Thank you for introducing yourselves. Just to begin with, Daniel, many people will have seen the reporting you have done and the stories about some appalling situations you have found in social housing. You ran one story and that sparked off an awful lot of interest elsewhere, but I would just put on record, first of all, that everyone has valued the exposés you have done on behalf of the individuals you assisted in getting their problems highlighted and hopefully dealt with, but also many others who have come forward to identify similar problems.

The wider spread nature of this has certainly been brought to general attention and to this Committee's attention. Part of that is why we are here today to look at this, so thanks very much for that. Could you just tell us a little bit, Dan, about how the story first came about and what you found when you did your investigations?

Daniel Hewitt: Thanks for inviting me. It would be remiss of me not to mention that we are a team at ITV News. It was a team-led investigation. I would like to put on record Imogen Barrer, Sarah O'Connell and Sophie Alexander, who are my producers and editor on this. It is worth mentioning their names as well.

Two or three years ago I did an investigation looking into people in working families who experienced child poverty. That was in the north-west of England when I was a reporter at "Granada Reports". I noticed that the quality of the housing, the instability of tenancies and the complete unaffordability for people living with private landlords but also social housing to ever afford a home were a large part of the reason they were finding themselves in poverty and they were struggling. The quality of their housing was a big part of why they were in the situation they were in, but it was not the story we were telling. We were telling a story about issues around that.



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It occurred to me that housing was very rarely the central point of the story. We would talk around it and there are issues that feed into it, but actually you do not really see housing much in mainstream journalism, aside from young people being able to buy a property, so I have always had it in the back of my mind as something we should look into further.

Then I noticed in December 2020, probably led by Covid, that Facebook groups were popping up all over the place of people upset, annoyed and frustrated that they were not being listened to by their social landlord. Often private landlords have been a big focus, but social housing often has not been talked about.

We started looking into it and then—long story short—we got a tip-off about a flat in Croydon, which you will have now seen, in Regina Road and a tenant living there, Fransoy Hewitt, who was kind enough to open up her home and let us in. What we found there was just the most indescribably poor, squalid and dangerous housing I have ever seen. It was probably the angriest I have ever been, not just as a journalist, but as a human being, to walk in that flat and see the condition, and then to go knocking on doors in Regina Road and find that it was not just Fransoy; it was Leroy McNally and others who did not want to be on camera.

The most appalling thing about it was not just the risk of electrocution, the drenched floors and the fact that the family were confined to one room in this small flat because the entire flat had been destroyed. It is the fact that she had complained and complained and complained, and reported it and reported it, and nothing had been done. I was stood in this flat where it felt like you were outside when it was raining and literally pouring. Surveyors and council repair teams had been in that, seen it like we had and left, and nothing had been done. That was the start really.

If I am being honest, we did not set out to do a 12-month investigation into the quality of social housing, but once we put that on ITV News, the response was the biggest response ITV News has had to a home story in a generation and we realised, "This is not a one-off. There is something happening here". People were contacting us appalled, but there were people contacting us saying, "I live in a flat that is leaking. I live in a flat where it is like that, and I have tried and tried and tried to get it fixed and I have not been able to".

We received hundreds of emails in the first week. Within a few weeks, it was thousands, and we set about telling those stories around the country. We are still telling them. That is a sign of how big a problem this is. I could show you my inbox today. Before I walked in this committee room I got an email off another social housing tenant. There will be a report on ITV News next week of another social housing tenant. We could tell these stories every day if we wanted.

Q219 **Chair:** Is it certain social housing providers that tend to appear more



often, or is it generally right across the piece?

Daniel Hewitt: It is right across the piece. You are likely to see more from certain councils and housing associations. With councils, it is predominantly London-based. That is probably a sign of the stock, though. There is a lot more council housing in London and you often have bigger families. There is a much bigger temporary accommodation crisis in London.

Housing associations are spread. You would probably expect more complaints from the bigger ones anyway, as a proportion, but you will have seen from our coverage the housing associations we have reported on. There are some that appear more often, but I would not say there is a particular problem with one above all others, if that makes sense. It has been across the board. We have found problems across England, and not just in London or with one particular provider.

Q220 **Chair:** When these problems are raised with you, how do you process them? Do you make contact with the social landlords and ask for a response? Do you get a response generally?

Daniel Hewitt: After Croydon, we realised we had a massive story on our hands, effectively, and we set up a small unit of people, who I named earlier. We set about effectively contacting them once they had contacted us. Some do not want to be on television. Nicole and Angela will speak in a moment, but I have to say it takes an incredible amount of bravery and courage to go on television. It speaks to the desperation that some tenants have. You do not contact ITV national news with your housing concern if you do not feel like you are in trouble and there is a problem. A lot has gone wrong for them to come to us and say, "Yes, show 4 million people my house that is falling apart around me"—in Nicole's case, quite literally falling apart around her.

We have a duty of care to those people, and I am still in contact with lots of those tenants. We contact them. If they agree to be filmed, we go and film. We then contact the housing association for a right of reply and the degrees of replies can be from, "Hands up, we got this wrong", to, "We are sorry, but". In some cases we have seen the tenants being blamed, or the housing association effectively saying it is not their fault. It is a real range of responses, depending on who we are talking about.

Q221 **Chair:** Do you pass all the issues that you get on to the social housing provider?

Daniel Hewitt: Yes. We will speak to the tenant, film, contact them and say, "This is what we found". We will sometimes send a video and picture if that is appropriate, so they know, and we often give them a day or two to come back—or sometimes longer, depending how complicated it is. Sometimes we delay it, depending on their response, but, no, we give them the full facts. We do not hold anything back. It is like, "This is what we found. What is your response?"



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As I say, I am not a campaign journalist. My job is to speak to tenants, get their concerns, pass those concerns on to the housing association or council, get their response and then present them on television. We are Ofcom regulated, so we have to give both sides of the story.

Q222 **Chair:** What happens if you are not satisfied with the response?

Daniel Hewitt: It is not really my place to say whether I am satisfied or not. If their response is to effectively say, "We are sorry, but we think it might be this", my opinion does not really matter. The only opinion that matters is the viewer's, so the viewer will make their mind up. We went to Eastfields, for instance, and did a big piece there. Clarion gave an on-camera interview. We asked them the questions that tenants put to us. We got their response. It is up to the viewer to decide whether they felt Clarion's response was adequate. It is not really my place to say whether it is adequate or not. The beauty of what I do is that the public can decide what they think. It is the same with you guys. That is the approach we take.

Q223 **Chair:** I have one additional point. Do you ever encourage people in this situation—particularly where their problems are not being resolved, even after you have gone to the social landlord—to contact their councillor or their MP to get things done? We tend to find that people come to us as MPs with problems that have not got resolved through the normal process, and then they come to us and say, "Can you help, because this has not worked so far?"

Daniel Hewitt: There is not a one-size-fits-all answer to that. I am not sure what Nicole and Angela's position is, but in some cases people have contacted their councillor or MP and it still has not been resolved, so they have come to us after that.

Again, it is not my place as a journalist, or my team's place, to encourage them to go to their MP or councillor. I will ask them if they have, but one part of this investigation has been the complete lack of awareness tenants have of where they can go. I have often asked, "Have you gone to the ombudsman? Have you spoken to the regulator? Have you contacted your local council or local MP?" On the ombudsman and regulator, I cannot think of a single housing tenant who ever contacted the regulator, which says a lot. Some have contacted the ombudsman, but the vast majority did not know the ombudsman was an option for them and, if they have, they did not feel like the response was adequate.

Q224 **Chair:** They have not been told by their housing provider that they could go to the ombudsman.

Daniel Hewitt: I can count on one hand the number of tenants who have said to me, in a year, "I have gone to the ombudsman". I cannot actually think of a single case where they have told me their landlord told them the ombudsman was an option for them, proactively.

Chair: That is supposed to be a requirement, so that is certainly



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something I am sure we would want to take up in due course.

Q225 **Ian Byrne:** I just have a quick one, Daniel. I have a doctor I work with who has talked on poverty before. He is a paediatrician in Alder Hey and he wrote a letter to me about today about what you faced. He is passionate about the impact housing has on children and communities.

He said, "Even though we focus on the short-term effects, the problems the poorest children in the poorest-quality housing face in childhood are even more stark. They are five times more likely to develop adult diseases like COPD, and chronic illnesses such as this lead to the poorest adults when they grow up dying two decades earlier than the richest ones". He mentioned Liverpool, because that is where he is based in Alder Hey, and many other cities. "There is a window of opportunity for children to develop and grow, and the state of housing in which millions of children are forced to live is holding them back". From your experience over the last 12 months, would you agree with that?

Daniel Hewitt: Which part in particular?

Ian Byrne: That it is holding them back.

Daniel Hewitt: Again, it is not my place to say either way. As an Ofcom-regulated journalist, it is my role to report what I find. It is probably not a controversial statement to say that, if you are living in a home that has consistent leaks, mould and damp; that has, in some cases, risks of electrocution; and where you are sharing a room with two, three or maybe sometimes four siblings, your ability to achieve your maximum in life is stunted. That is probably not a controversial point to make.

Ian Byrne: It is certainly not a controversial point.

Daniel Hewitt: I did not do the majority of my reporting during lockdown, but consistently families said to me, "I lived in this during lockdown with children", and so how on earth could they have thrived, done their homework or even done the absolute bare minimum? There has been a lot of talk during Covid about a lack of access to the internet and to laptops. That is absolutely right, and that is a legitimate question for the Government, but we are not even reaching that in some of the families I have talked about. The bare minimum is, "How do I stop the ceilings falling in on them?"

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Chair: Welcome back, everyone. We have just been into the House for a statement about the resettlement of Ukrainian refugees. That is why we had to have a break. I am sure we all recognise that as an important issue that we need to give consideration to, but back to this really important issue that we are giving consideration to as a Select Committee this afternoon.



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Q226 **Ian Byrne:** Thanks, Angela, for everything you have done on highlighting this issue. It is extremely brave and this is your opportunity to speak about your story, really, and what you have experienced. I have just a couple of things to start with. Can you tell us first about the condition of your property? When did you move there? How many people lived in there? Who was your landlord? When did the problems start and what were they?

Angela Price: I moved in there in 2002, originally with my son. Later on I had a daughter and I was with her father. I have been there 20 years. I had problems on and off quite a few times with damp and mould, and I had to keep on top of it and keep washing it down. I was always told to open the windows to air the property, well ventilate it and heat it, which I do not know how you do. They installed vents in the bedrooms, but not the vents that were supposed to be installed. They are supposed to have a mechanical device inside and they just put a drainpipe from one side to the other, which exacerbated the damp and mould because it was getting colder and colder.

Q227 **Ian Byrne:** Can you just describe the impact that these problems had on you and your family?

Angela Price: I will not be the same person ever again. I cannot believe that somebody thinks they are entitled to treat you in that manner. We have lived in salmonella, E. coli and hazard 1 damp and mould. Carpets, doors, wooden floors, curtains, curtain poles, clothes, shoes, beds, settees, beddings, towels and everything you can think of has been destroyed. I have nothing left. It has eaten through the wood in wardrobes. It has just left me with nothing. I have kept buying electrical appliances and it just blows the electrics. I have had two dishwashers. I have had three tumble dryers. I have had four microwaves. I have had three hairdryers. It just goes on. It is just a multitude and all they say is, "It is your lifestyle".

Q228 **Ian Byrne:** Your landlord was Guinness. Is that correct?

Angela Price: Yes.

Q229 **Ian Byrne:** When did you first contact them about the problems and what was their response?

Angela Price: The massive problems started in 2018. I was 60,000 miles away. I was over the other side of the world and my mum was going down looking after my property, switching lights on, and so on, for me. She went down one day and she said the smell when she walked in was absolutely horrific. I came back off my holiday and walked into raw sewage right up the hallway, in the carpets, soaked into doors, through to the bedrooms and kitchen. It had gone everywhere because of the layout.

My mum had been on the phone from the Friday morning and I landed on the Tuesday morning afterwards. She had been on the phone to



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environmental health, Guinness and everybody she possibly could, and nobody addressed it. Somebody came out just before I came home on the Tuesday.

They sent a cleaning firm out, and they said they were never told what they were coming out to. They had only brought equipment to suck up clean water, which was not what they found. They phoned up Guinness and were quite angry, and they were told to do the best they can. They said, "We cannot do anything with the carpets. We cannot shampoo. It has soaked in that many things." They went away, and in total it took me 15 days to get anybody from Guinness to come out to even have a look at it. We lived in raw sewage flowing in, which never stopped. Nobody came out to address it. Nobody got in touch with me from the 24-hour emergency service. Three of us were living in that property in those conditions.

Q230 Ian Byrne: It is obvious how you were treated, but on a personal level, how did you feel about Guinness? Did you find them in any way sympathetic to what was actually happening in your place and your family's?

Angela Price: I was frustrated. I was just frustrated, because there is not one particular person—you have a housing officer, but there is not one particular person who will address it. They say, "This is your housing officer". You try to get through to them, and they push you off on to somebody else—"No, it is not that person who is dealing with it". You go back through to head office. Then it is between 24 and 48 hours before anybody will get in touch with you. I did WhatsApp messages and everything I possibly could, and nobody would address it.

Q231 Ian Byrne: Just to finish, was there a local office you could actually go to with Guinness?

Angela Price: I phoned environmental health and I asked environmental health to do something. I was absolutely desperate and environmental health said, "We cannot do anything because it is a conflict of interest when we act on housing associations". I absolutely implored him and he said, "Perhaps I can do you a favour and just give them a phone call to see if they come out".

Chair: Thanks for explaining that, Angela. We are all shocked; I can see Members here. It probably takes quite a lot to shock a number of MPs, but we are shocked at the situation you found yourself in. That really is absolutely awful. I am actually surprised about environmental health, because that is not true about the housing association. That just simply is not true. We are going on now to the issue of how your complaint was dealt with.

Q232 Bob Blackman: Angela, as Clive has said, we are all shocked by the treatment that you have received. Very sadly, you are probably not a unique case, and that is another worry that many of us had. Did you



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approach a councillor, MP or anyone else who maybe independently could have helped?

Angela Price: I got to the stage where I was absolutely desperate. I had to get a solicitor as well to make them act, because they would not do anything, so I had to do what I had to do. I got in touch with the secretary of the Lord Mayor and asked him if he could get environmental health to act because I needed a prohibition order. The only prohibition order you can get is off the council. Nobody else can give you one. His secretary sent an email through to environmental health and I got the same response from environmental health. "We do not act with housing associations because it is a conflict of interest".

Q233 **Bob Blackman:** Frankly, you have just been misled. Can I just take you through? Did you make a formal complaint to Guinness? You have talked about the informal process that you have been through, i.e. phoning them, and so on. Did you actually make a formal complaint to them in writing about the treatment that you received?

Angela Price: Yes.

Q234 **Bob Blackman:** You did. What sort of response did you get from them as a result?

Angela Price: It was not addressed.

Q235 **Bob Blackman:** You then took on a claim through a claims management company, we understand. Is that right?

Angela Price: It is not really claims management. It is a solicitor in the area. I got in touch with her because I thought the only way that anybody was going to act was if there was somebody legal involved.

Q236 **Bob Blackman:** What happened when you got to the solicitor?

Angela Price: The solicitor asked for a court injunction. As soon as she asked for a court injunction, they came in to have a look at the problem, but it took them nearly three weeks to move me out of my property.

Q237 **Bob Blackman:** How long did it take between you experiencing the start of this problem, and the injunction and Guinness finally doing what they should have done in the first place? How long did that take?

Angela Price: About three weeks.

Q238 **Bob Blackman:** Did Guinness make you aware that you could complain to the Housing Ombudsman about the service?

Angela Price: No.

Q239 **Bob Blackman:** Surprise, surprise. Did you actually go to the ombudsman?

Angela Price: Yes.



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Q240 **Bob Blackman:** You went to the ombudsman. What happened with the ombudsman?

Angela Price: The ombudsman told me that, because I had a solicitor, there was nothing they could do. I also went to Shelter, which gave me the same advice that, because I had a solicitor, there was nothing they could do.

Bob Blackman: Okay. I will leave it there, but I think Andrew may want to come in.

Andrew Lewer: That was the key bit—that you were not made aware of that. That was the key question, and Bob has covered it.

Q241 **Kate Hollern:** Angela, you must have been at the end of your tether. When did you finally approach ITV?

Angela Price: Last year.

Q242 **Kate Hollern:** Daniel, can you tell us what you found when you visited Angela's flat?

Daniel Hewitt: Forgive me if I am wrong, Angela, but this would have been about June last year or around that time, if I remember. Initially Angela contacted us through our dedicated email we had set up and my producer, Sophie, went up to see, which we did a lot with these stories. We went to see them first without a camera, so we could just see and they could tell us what happened without any pressure.

Then when I went up after that, when Angela agreed to film, we found there were no carpets in the hallway at all, which was a consequence of the flood that had happened with the sewage. It still had not been replaced. The skirting boards were all rotting in the hallway. It was down to the brick on the walls because they had taken the plaster off, again because of the sewage, but it had not been replaced.

Then the bedroom was caked in mould on the windowsills and the ceilings. The bathroom was the one that was the most shocking. I have shared with the Committee a link of this from the report. The ceiling was just completely covered in black mould. Correct me if I am wrong, Angela, but your bathroom tap to your sink just did not work at all, and you said that for two years there had basically been no hot water coming out of the tap in the sink. The shower had hot water, but, again, that was in and out. On the report I would lift the tap up and down, and no water comes out.

To Angela's credit, the living room was beautifully presented. There were more candles and diffusers on than you can number, because Angela was trying to make it a home. The living room was untouched by mould and damp to the eye, and she had made it look how you would expect the rest of the home to look if she had been given the opportunity for it to look like that. But it was pretty bad—one of the worst I have seen. Of all



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the cases we saw, it was clear that Angela had just gone through the mill and had just given up hope. The way I would describe Angela's state at that time is that she felt like nothing was going to happen to change it.

Q243 Kate Hollern: You said at the beginning that you gave the social landlord the right to reply. Did you get any response from Guinness?

Daniel Hewitt: Yes, we did. We had a statement from Guinness, which apologised to Angela for the condition of the property, acknowledged that she had had the flood and did not challenge anything that Angela had said. Forgive me; I will double check this, because we have found it difficult to find the original statement, but it was along the lines that they acknowledged it was a complicated case and said there had been times where they had tried to access the property and had not been allowed to.

That is quite common where you have that. I find with councils and housing associations that, if there are one or two occasions where they have not been able to access the property for whatever reason, they will state that in their statement, but that often needs quite a few follow-up questions, because Angela could probably answer that.

Sometimes it is because the tenant is not in or they turn up when they are not told they are turning up, or it gets to a point where they have gone in so many times, taken pictures, left and done nothing that, in the end, the tenant just says, "You are not coming in again because this is pointless. Unless you are going to actually do what I ask you to do or need you to do, I am not going to let you in until you agree to do what I need you to do". That then, taken out of context, looks like the tenant has stopped the landlord coming in and we often have to ask the follow-up questions on that.

I remember asking Angela, "Is this true? Have you denied them access?", and Angela can speak for herself, but she explained to me why she had stopped letting them in at one point, because she said they were not fixing the problem.

Q244 Kate Hollern: That is understandable. Angela, can you tell me what happened after the ITV report?

Angela Price: After the ITV report, they came in very quickly and gave me hot water in the bathroom. I had had everything in the bathroom done, and I had to rebuy the appliances because they were going to put the sewage-soaked back in—it was all under the handles of the bath, and I just couldn't. I bought all the appliances, and they came out to give me hot water and, with a hacksaw, went right down the middle of the tiles on either side, through the wood frame, ripped my sink out—I do not know where it is—and put a temporary unit in that leans back. I had to phone them again that night, because in the process they knocked the stack off the toilet and I had everything flowing into my property once again.

Q245 Kate Hollern: For goodness' sake. How has this impacted on your family, Angela?



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Angela Price: My daughter was 15 when it first happened. She has not been able to bring anybody home. She is not allowed to have friends in. She is embarrassed. Our social lives have completely stopped. I used to go round to friends; I could not have them in my home. I was ashamed. I smelled to high heaven because of the damp and mould that had imprinted in my clothes and everywhere. Some people were too polite to say anything; some were quite rude about it. We have all isolated ourselves.

Kate Hollern: Thank you very much, Angela. You have obviously had a terrible time.

Q246 **Chair:** Did they ever sort out where the sewage initially came from and what had caused it?

Angela Price: They said that the drains had collapsed and they had a lean on them. They dug up all the floors in my daughter's bedroom and the bathroom—I mean absolutely hacked it, and there was no need for it. They moved us out for nearly five weeks in a hotel, and the very day we came back all the sewage and everything was pouring out the stack again. It was never, ever a problem with the drains. It was the stack in the bathroom. When they opened up the stack they found that it had a repair on it from I do not know how long ago, and the original mess started when somebody came out and jetted my drains instead of the drains next door. They blew the whole lot and they blew the temporary repair on the stack.

Q247 **Chair:** How far have you got now? Is everything sorted now?

Angela Price: No. We have been moved out of our property for a total of 17 weeks altogether. The last one was on 17 January and it was extended for another week, so we were out of our home for nearly six weeks. We came back in. We are on Manchester Move, so we have been offered another property, which we have accepted, but the property is bare concrete. The walls need decorating. I am disabled because I have had a massive brain operation. My daughter's father is disabled. He had a brainstem stroke. We have to wait. It is not liveable.

We moved out of the apartment on 25 February, and all our stuff had been taken into storage and cleared out. Nobody asked whether our furniture was to be moved back in. They just totally ignored me. They said I could not communicate with the removal firms. I was told that from the very beginning. We had to ask for the keys and they had put them in a code outside on a security lock. I got the keys in there and went inside, and nothing really has been done. They have put new heating in, but not where it is supposed to be. The environmentalist I personally paid for gave them a schedule, which they had to abide by. They have not abided by one bit of it, apart from the heating. Whatever I had, I have nothing left.

Chair: All I can hope is that the chief executive of Guinness is listening



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today, and that he will be so embarrassed that he gets on with the job tomorrow and gets you sorted out very quickly, because this has just been an appalling story. None of us can imagine how you have lived through it. Thank you really for coming today and sharing it with us. I know it has been difficult to do that, and we really appreciate it. Thank you very much.

Angela Price: You are welcome.

Chair: We are going to go on now and listen to what Nicole Walters is going to say to us in response to questions that colleagues have.

Ben Everitt: Nicole, thank you so much for coming in. We really appreciate your time and this is your opportunity to tell the story of what has happened to you in your own words. I will ask you a few questions just to get the details out that will be useful to the Committee, so that we can then write our report and hopefully make your case.

Nicole Walters: That is absolutely fine.

Q248 **Ben Everitt:** We will start with just a bit in general about you and the property, so when you moved in, where it was, who else was living there with you, who was the landlord, when the problems started and that kind of thing.

Nicole Walters: I first moved into my property in August 2016 and I moved there with my son. When I initially moved into the property, I did notice that there were beams on the ceiling, but as a new tenant owner of a new home, having never been in the property before, I did not think to question it because I did not know that it was not normal for a house to not have plastered ceilings. They give you a six-week period and then you move in after that. When I moved in after that the ceiling was completely covered up, so, as I said, I did not think to ask about what that was or why it was like that previously.

I lived there for a year. There were no problems. In August 2017 I went to Jamaica for my grandfather's 10-year memorial. I came back. I had a friend who was checking in and out of the property, as you know, to switch the lights on and switch the lights off. Then he stated there was a line through the ceiling, so I said, "I will be back from holiday in two days' time, so I will deal with it when I get back". He was not dramatic at the time about the damage and he did not send me a photo. If he had sent me a photo at that time, I would have immediately sought attention.

Two days later I have returned, and I have complained—no, I have done an initial report on the ceiling and they said that somebody would be out to fix it. Nobody came for nine months. It got worse. It rained inside the property for literally nine months, on and off. I complained. I made several complaints via email and via telephone; there was no response. Then I was allocated a person who was corresponding via email, but nobody came to see the actual issue in the house. I was corresponding



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with one of the supervisors, but nobody had come into the property to survey it or see the actual damage to know what was happening there. All they did was come to make it safe. That was the first period.

I was not informed about the Housing Ombudsman or the regulator. I did not even know that was a thing. Even up to this current day, I have not been informed of how to report to the Housing Ombudsman, what the Housing Ombudsman is, what the regulator is and how you go about doing that. I was never told that to this day.

Going back to 2017, I complained to my local MP in the December, and then they lied to the MP and said that the ceiling had been rectified. It had not. I was very frustrated. I sent over another set of pictures and emails to my local MP stating, "I do not know why they have lied and said it has been fixed. I am still living with raining conditions inside the home". It is damp. I am getting colds and flus. Me and my son are constantly sick throughout this period and nobody came to rectify it at that time.

They fixed it. As I said, it was just constantly temporary solutions for a permanent problem, so I felt like they just wanted me to be quiet. They would fix it so it looked like it was fixed from the outside, but internally there was so much going on. That was the January of 2018.

It then collapsed on me in November of 2018. I was sleeping on the sofa, and I jumped out of my sleep. I do not even know up until this day what happened, but something just jumped out of my spirit; I just jumped out. I went to the toilet, and I came back. I was originally lying in this position, but when I came back from the toilet, I was tired, and I went to the other side. It is a good thing I did, because the ceiling would have collapsed on my head, but it ended up collapsing on my leg instead, so I was grateful that I was not still sleeping there. I made a complaint about that.

At the time it fell on me, I called for help. That was not the first time it came down. That was the second time it collapsed. The first time, it came down gradually throughout the nine months. The second time, as I said, I was sleeping and it came down while I was sleeping.

They came to make it safe. I had to call the fire brigade, because when I called the out-of-hours service, I was told there was nobody who could come to help with this particular issue, so I would need to seek other help. I called the fire brigade to come and make it safe, because the concrete and the plaster was falling from the ceiling and I had a young child in the home, which is what I was saying. I believe my son was four or five at the time.

So that happened. As I said, I complained. They said I would be compensated at the time. After the job was finished, I did not hear anything about being compensated or what happens next. For me, I was



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always concerned that it was going to happen again because I had already had a previous issue with the ceiling.

Then I had another leak at the front of the property, which was the January of 2019, so it was just constantly one after the other. My life felt like it was ruined at that time because I could not live a normal life. I could not stay overnight at my mum's or anyone's house because I had to constantly keep changing buckets and towels. It is just damp. Every single day it was hell. My son started calling the house the leaky home, because he said, "We live in a leaky home". People ask where we live and he will say, "We live in a leaky home", not our actual address. The leaky home is what we lived in.

In 2019, as I said, we had a leak at the front of the property and then it was just constantly back and forth with leaks throughout the home. You complain; nothing happens. They send someone over to take pictures. Then there was a dispute with the neighbours upstairs and the repair man, so they refused to do the job. That penalised me further, because they needed to now allocate a new person to come and do the job who was willing to go into the property. It was just hearsay: "She is saying"; "He is saying". That was a difficult period for me, because I was the middle person and I just wanted my property to be fixed at this time. I just wanted to move on with my life.

I was running a home kitchen from my property at the time. I had just been granted my hygiene inspection. I was very concerned that running that with food in the house is an environmental issue with the damp and the mould, and I am unable to trade to make money for a living. How do you expect me to work when I am unable to work in these unliveable conditions? Southwark Council had a duty of care and I felt like it failed to uphold that duty of care several times throughout this period. That was the January of 2019.

It was constant. I had little leaks throughout the house. I want to be very specific. In the May of 2021 I was sleeping, as I said, in my bedroom. I heard a loud bang. I went into the living room and a panel of the wall had gushed out with water. You can imagine how shocked I was, because it is a panel of a wall. I called immediately. They came and they said, "It is dry, so where does this water come from?" I don't know. I am not a surveyor. I do not know where it has come from. That is your job to try to investigate where it has come from. He said, "As it is dry, the case needs to be closed", because they cannot see where the leak is coming from. All they have is basically my word and they can clearly see that it is dry.

I sent an email. I was on my 32nd email of complaint during this time. My last complaint was the 33rd, which is why I know, and it was in the May of 2021. I stated in a long, hefty email that I felt like my life was at risk in the property. This was a warning sign for something major that was about to happen, because I have already had the signals and the



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signs from the previous times when the ceiling had fallen on me before. I was ignored.

It got through to June of 2021 when I managed to capture the film on my phone. I am going to go to the day before. My son was sitting on the sofa. He said, "Mummy, I have just had a leak on my nose". I just thought that as a child, he was traumatised. This is what I am thinking. He does not know what he is talking about; he is traumatised. I cannot physically see any water, so there cannot be any water, but he said it "leaked-ed" on his nose. Those were his exact words. I said to him, "What sort of grammar is that?", so we turned it into a whole grammar thing and I left it at that. That was about 6 pm on 5 June.

I went out. I returned from a party at 6 am and it literally felt like the house was screaming at me—it was raining. You could see the water. The damage was all down the ceiling. Obviously, I went into the house. It is sunny outside and it is raining inside, and you can hear the water pelting down. I called Southwark Council immediately, because that is what you do. I said, "I think it is going to collapse, because I have been here before". She said, "If you think it is going to collapse, you should step out of the room". She said that this was an out-of-hours service and they cannot provide any help until after 9 am. I called them at 6 am, so they said they could not provide any help to me until 9 am.

The ceiling collapsed at about 8 am, which I had to call the fire brigade for, because they did not send any immediate help for me. They managed to send somebody at about 9.20 am, or something to 10—after the 9 o'clock period. That was the Sunday. I sent the video to a family member of mine, because she was already dealing with my case with the local MP from before. I did not intend to have the social media presence that happened. It just happened like that. She was already helping me, dealing with the case, because I suffer with a little bit of anxiety, so she was helping me to make sure that I could do what I needed to do to get the situation rectified.

I sent her over the video, then she reposted it on her social media and that is how ITV got into contact with me. At that point, I was at the end of my tether and I wanted some help. That was the Sunday. I think ITV contacted me the next day or maybe the same day to come the next day. The news report went on the news, I think, on the Monday. I watched the apology for myself on the news. Nobody physically gave me my apology. I was reading the statement on the news, which stated—obviously it is a long time ago—something along the lines of, "We apologise to Ms Walters. She is now in a safe temporary accommodation". I was watching that from the house where the leak had happened, so I was quite appalled.

I emailed Imogen from ITV and said, "There is this apology that I was told I was given. I was never given any apology and I am reading my apology on the news with everybody else". That was the Monday.



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Although that was the Monday, they did not move me into a temporary accommodation until the Wednesday. Even the Tuesday, the day after, there was no sense of urgency, I felt. It was urgent enough to give the statement to the news about that, but, when it came to actually apologising and being direct with me, nobody actually said anything to me.

Then my son and I were hotel hopping throughout the whole of the summer. That was from the June to the August. They put us in several different hotels. As I said, I was running a home kitchen before, so now I am obviously not able to work. I still have the same bills coming in and no income coming out, so I was concerned. I was travelling back and forth. There were times that I was not even able to eat, because I could not afford for my son to eat and for me to eat, so I had to choose between the two.

They did not offer help or services until I was begging them, literally in tears saying, "I need some sort of help. I cannot survive like this. I do not know how you expect people to survive when you have done this to me, when I complained so many times prior and nothing was done". As I said, if they stopped doing temporary solutions for the permanent problem in the beginning, maybe it would not have collapsed. If they had sent a surveyor in at the appropriate times, maybe things would have been different. I felt like I literally could have lost my life within that property.

As I said, they put me into this temporary accommodation that I am in now. I was told that it was temporary and they were going to duplicate my application, so that I would be able to bid as effectively as I was doing while I was within the hotels. I have moved into the property. My bidding number was suspended. They said that it needed to be suspended because of auditing processes and I needed to reapply with a new bidding number. They stated that my application would be duplicated.

Speaking with Dan today, they stated that I was on band 1, which was my original application, which is actually a lie. I can log in right now and show you guys. I am still on band 4. I am unable to bid on 1; 1 is still suspended. For the other application, where they told me to reapply and that it would be duplicated to what it was on band 1, I am still on band 4. Up to this day, they are still making promises that they do not intend to keep and it is not fair.

Q249 **Ben Everitt:** What is your current situation? Are you still in hotels?

Nicole Walters: No, I am in temporary accommodation now. They stated to Dan today that it is a secure tenancy apparently. In my email, before I moved into that property, I was told that it was a temporary accommodation. I needed to bid for my permanent place and I will be able to do so as soon as I reapply, due to auditing processes. I have reapplied. I have done everything appropriately. There was a point in my



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application where they said they were unaware that I even had a son. They had all of my documents from prior. It is absolutely crazy. It is overwhelming me, sorry.

Q250 **Ben Everitt:** Nicole, we can totally see why you suffer from anxiety. It is incredibly brave of you to come here today and tell the story in your own words. What has happened to you is obviously horrific, and over such a long period of time as well. Can you tell me how long it took from you making that initial report about the ceiling to them getting somebody in to look at it and, after that, doing something? It is the doing something bit that they clearly have not done.

Nicole Walters: That is what I was just about to say. They will send somebody on the same day to look at it. Sending somebody to fix it is a whole completely different ballgame. I have waited at least a good two weeks before anybody has even stepped into the property to try to rectify the issue. You can complain and complain and complain, but they do not take your complaints on board. It is like you are wasting your breath.

As I said, I have sent 33 emails throughout this whole period. That is not including the hourly phone calls. You have to wait. You do not call the switchboard and get through straightaway. It is a longwinded process. You have geared yourself up to speak to one person and when you speak to that person now they say they cannot help you. They say you have to speak to somebody else and you have to now gear yourself up again to speak to that other person. It is really unfair.

If they said to me, "Nicole, we have given you this property as your permanent home. This is where you are going to be. This is where you are going to stay", that is what it is and that is what I will take, but that is not what I was told. I was told, "This is a temporary place. You are going to be able to bid for your permanent property of your choice". They have not upheld that.

When Dan emails them and says to them, "How come Ms Walters is still on band 4?", they say, "No, we do not know what that is about. She is actually on band 1". I can log in right now and my thing is still not duplicated, and they have not upheld the promises that they said they were going to keep.

Daniel Hewitt: I have literally been outside. With right of reply, I contacted them this morning and said, "We were filming Nicole last night at the temporary accommodation. Can you give us an update on why she is in temporary accommodation and what the situation is?" They replied and told us that it was not temporary; it was a secure tenancy, but she can bid for properties and she is band 1.

Literally outside this room, while you were all in the Commons, Nicole showed me her current status. It says band 4, so I replied and said, "It says band 4". There was a delay and the reply then came back just



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before we walked in here that said, "That is a mistake on our part and she will now be band 1. It will be updated".

Nicole Walters: It should not take that.

Daniel Hewitt: This did not happen last week. We met you in June last year and, from my experience of our conversations, you have been trying to get this rectified for several months with Southwark Council. It took, I think, two emails from ITV News for it to be resolved. That is common. There is a feeling among tenants that they battle and battle and battle, and then we get involved and suddenly it changes. It is not every time, but it is quite often that there is a change in pace quite quickly. It is hard to draw any other conclusion than that there is a reason why that has been accelerated beyond the need of the tenant.

Ben Everitt: Nicole, that is horrible. You have our deepest sympathies.

Q251 **Bob Blackman:** You are very brave to come here. Our sympathy is with you, and indeed with Angela. Were any other tenants affected? When you get floods of water like this, it does not just affect one set of people. It often affects everyone in the block of flats. Was anyone else affected and what happened to them?

Nicole Walters: Yes, several people within that block of flats alone have been going through these leaks from above for years. With—I am going to say—my column, if somebody leaks from the top it leaks all the way down to the bottom. They said that there is a void between two flats, so occasionally it will not reach all the way to the bottom, but it definitely affected the lady underneath me and above. We were all going through hell through that time. As you know, gravity brings things down. The water is going through the property and everybody was affected.

Q252 **Bob Blackman:** Did they move out the other tenants as well?

Nicole Walters: They have moved out the lady who was above me. She has been granted her permanent property and that was a few weeks ago, I believe. The lady underneath me has not been moved. They said that they are going to do extensive work on the property and rip it through the two houses. I do not know. That is just hearsay. I do not actually know, but they said that they are going to do extensive repairs.

I have been moved out and the lady above me has also been moved out. The lady above me needed to be moved out because I was saying to them, "It is clearly wear and tear as well". You have seven or eight people, depending on if the girl was coming back from uni or not, in a two-bedroom flat. That wear and tear alone is going to cause more damage with this leak. It is going to contribute to the leak, whether it is a little bit or a lot. There are too many people living in the home. They have water in the shower. That is why I feel like the leaks were so constant, because there were so many people using the shower and they were not rectifying where the leak was actually coming from in the beginning.



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- Q253 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you for coming here. I salute your bravery. Thank you for sharing your shocking story with us. You went through, and are still going through, that trauma. At any time did you feel that you should make a formal complaint to the council? If you did, what was the response?
- Nicole Walters:** I made several formal complaints to the council and I felt like nothing was done. It was only when ITV became involved. That is when I was getting immediate responses. You get the automated response. I do not know if it is the same for Angela on her side, but we get the automated response and that is it. It says 20 days and, after the 20 days happens, what happens after the 20 days? You will be on stage 1 complaint for years. It is stage 1. I do not even know what the different stages are, because I have never been informed of them. All I had was the automated response. That is how I feel. I do not know about others.
- Q254 **Mohammad Yasin:** When you say you made formal complaints, was it to the chief executive of the council or just to the housing team?
- Nicole Walters:** I made a complaint to the actual complaints department. I have cc'd the managers. As I said, I made a complaint to my local MP. They will assign you a supervisor for you to complain to. That person already has several other people they are dealing with, so your issue now gets swept under the carpet because they are dealing with so many other issues as well. You feel like you are unheard, but they feel like they have done a great job, because they have given you a person, when this person actually cannot help you.
- Q255 **Mohammad Yasin:** You mentioned that nobody told you from the council side that you can take your complaint to the Housing Ombudsman.
- Nicole Walters:** No.
- Q256 **Mohammad Yasin:** When did you realise that it is your right to do that?
- Nicole Walters:** To be honest, I have always been aware of the Housing Ombudsman. Suffering from anxiety, I did not know how to go about doing that. They use all these fancy-schmancy words, sorry to say, and they do not tell you how you are supposed to go about doing these things. I am aware that there is a Housing Ombudsman and that that is where you are supposed to go to complain, but I do not know how to go about doing it. We are never told. You said something about a regulator. It is the first time I am hearing of this.
- Q257 **Mohammad Yasin:** You have not gone to the Housing Ombudsman.
- Nicole Walters:** No, I have not.
- Q258 **Mohammad Yasin:** You mentioned earlier that the council said that it will compensate you. What happened with that?
- Nicole Walters:** I was compensated for moving from the home, but I was never compensated for the injuries to my leg and my back when the



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ceiling collapsed. There were so many things I was unaware of. I did not know that you are not allowed to do a housing disrepair and a personal injury claim together. By the time I was ready to make a claim for my injuries, which I am still suffering from now, it was past the time of the date.

Q259 **Chair:** Listening to what you have to say, it seems to me that you are potentially entitled to compensation for your injury and any damage to your property.

Nicole Walters: It is still affecting me now. I feel like I cannot physically live my life like I used to. I was saying to Dan that my friends will have a party in a hotel or something like that and I feel like I cannot go, because I feel unsafe with things above me, even in here. I feel like I am on edge, that something could happen at any moment.

Q260 **Chair:** I understand that. Above the damage to your property, your furniture, your clothes and so on, you should be entitled to something for upset and disturbance, and for your loss of business. You have a number of compensation claims there. I would certainly be looking at putting them all in, irrespective of the timescales. If we are talking about timescales, the real timescale problems are with the way you have been treated by the council.

Nicole Walters: Okay, but, as I said, I do not know how you go about doing these things, so it is very difficult, but thank you for informing me.

Chair: We will probably have a little chat afterwards.

Nicole Walters: Thank you.

Q261 **Florence Eshalomi:** Thank you, Nicole, for sharing your story. I am really sorry to hear what you have been through. For anyone who has not watched the video, it is still available online and it will really shock you. I wanted to ask how your son is.

Nicole Walters: He is okay. He thinks that it is just a big, massive adventure. You know the joys of kids' imaginations, so he is like, "Oh my God, mummy, we stayed in the Hilton. Wow, my friends talk about it. It is on the TV", or whatever. I feel like he has got a little bit of trauma. When we go to places and there is a little leak, puddle or line, he will be like, "Oh, mummy, we used to have that. Is it okay to go in there", or, "Is that okay?", or, "Are you okay to go in there?" He will be asking me about my mental health or how I feel.

He is only seven, so I do not know what effects it is going to have on him or has had on him. All I can say is that, from what I have experienced with him, I feel like he does have a little bit of trauma. As I say, when we go to different sorts of places and he sees a line in the ceiling, he is going to say, "Mum, are we okay to go into this room? Is it safe?" He is only seven, so it is a lot, to be honest.

Q262 **Florence Eshalomi:** You have provided us with such a detailed outline of



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what happened to you. It is really shocking to hear that these issues have not been resolved yet. Your banding situation is something that the system should be able to pick up and rectify so that you can bid. Unfortunately, the council will say that you have to bid. That is the only way that you can move. Do you feel that there is any additional support that Southwark could have offered you, in terms of helping to resolve your accommodation?

Nicole Walters: I do not know, to be honest. Could you repeat the question, please?

Q263 **Florence Eshalomi:** I am in the neighbouring borough to you. I represent the constituency in Lambeth and this is an issue right across London councils, in terms of the issues with disrepair and longstanding repairs, and with some of the contractors that, unfortunately, councils are forced to use.

That is not excusing what you and many tenants go through, including tenants who write to me on a daily basis, outlining some of the issues that you are going through. I am in no way excusing the response, or lack of response, you have had from Southwark. I will be speaking to colleagues in Southwark about this, in the same way I raise issues in Lambeth. Do you feel that there is anything that the council could have done differently to help you? As it stands, the legislation forces tenants to bid. If they do not bid, they will not be rehoused.

Nicole Walters: It is very difficult. Could they have done anything? I do not know. I am just so—

Florence Eshalomi: Tired.

Nicole Walters: Yes. I feel like I am still in limbo with this whole situation, because I feel like I cannot close this chapter of my life, as much as I want to get away from this chapter of my life. In terms of support and things that they could have done, they just need to not lie. There is no price on honesty. All they need to be is honest and they do not need to make false promises that they do not intend to keep. I am not here to be lied to. I just want the situation to be rectified, and that is it.

I wish that they could be honest and just say what it is at the time it is, so I will not be sitting here in limbo, thinking, "Am I going to have another Christmas here? Am I not? Do I decorate? Do I not? Do I put flooring down? Do I not?" Everything was ruined. As Angela was saying from her property, it is the same with me. I have moved over to this temporary house and I have nothing. Dan came yesterday. I bought a sofa from Groupon because I did not know whether I was going to be in the property or what to do. You are in limbo constantly. If they were just honest, that is all we ask for, honesty, as residents. That is it—and to be heard.

Q264 **Chair:** Is there anything else you would like to say to us before we close



the session today?

Nicole Walters: I do not believe so.

Chair: You have given us an awful lot of information, unfortunately about the horror story of what you have had to put up with.

Nicole Walters: I know that we are talking about housing disrepair, but there is a clause in the tenancy that I feel I have only come across because of my personal experience. Clause 17(e) states that you are unable to run businesses from your home. All you are allowed to do is dwell from the property. For me, I felt that was quite concerning. Is it just because you are in social housing you are not able to try to better yourself or work for yourself? I do not understand why that clause is in the tenancy in the first place. That is just for me.

I am not going to sit here and act like I am naive to the fact that, with running a home kitchen, there are fires and stuff like that. I am fire trained, health and safety trained and so on. I am not naive to that fact. However, what about the people who are doing influencing, taxi drivers, nail people, hair people? What about those niches that people are trying to start? They are just trying to better their lives. I am trying to understand why that clause is in the tenancy in the first place. I feel like the clause needs to be reworded or changed. I do not know. It is just something else that I would like to bring up for me.

Angela Price: Can I add something there on the clauses that they have? I found that Guinness has a handbook. Unless you know where to look for it, you cannot get hold of it anywhere. I have gone through every single article in that handbook and, in my situation, they have broken nearly all of them. When it comes to their solicitors and Guinness itself, they will quote their handbook when it suits them, but, if you quote it back to them, it is completely and utterly ignored, and does not apply at all. I do not know whether you have found that.

Nicole Walters: I have definitely found the same, 100%.

Q265 **Chair:** That is a question we might ask Southwark as well. It is a very reasonable question. There are planning rules about running businesses from any house where that is likely to affect other people in the area. It could be that people should not be having lots of vehicles that they need all parked outside. It could be lots of visitors, dozens of visitors a day coming backwards and forwards. Where you are doing something that does not involve anything like that and there is no real effect on the people living around you, I do not see why the rule is there, personally.

Nicole Walters: That is my point as well, yes, definitely.

Chair: It is something we might well take up as well.

Q266 **Kate Hollern:** Can I make one point for a bit of advice? It is important you get clarity on your status of your property. You still think you are



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temporary. They are saying it is permanent. Even if you are on a band, that suggests you are open to bidding. It is really important you get clarity on that quite soon. In a few months' time you could be asked to move and they could say, "We told you you were only temporary".

Nicole Walters: Yes, exactly.

Kate Hollern: You have nothing to prove otherwise.

Florence Eshalomi: I have been texting Southwark and they said that it is secure, but I am going to follow up in writing as well.

Chair: As I said before to Angela, hopefully the chief executive of Southwark is watching now and asking a few questions about her organisation and what it has been doing in the last few years to you. Those are all the points we have to raise. As I said to Angela, Nicole, thank you very much indeed for coming. We appreciate how distressing it is just to talk about these issues, let alone to have to live through them, so thank you ever so much for coming and sharing.

It helps us to understand the scale of the problems that some people in social housing—not everyone, but some people—have to go through that no one should have to go through. We understand that and we will be following those issues up further, absolutely. Thank you very much for coming. Thank you, once again, Angela, and thank you of course, Dan, for helping with the exposé of these things through ITV. That has been really helpful to us in understanding the issues.