

Inquiry into the regulation of social housing

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee

Transcripts from public engagement roundtable session (Wednesday 11th May 2022)

[Due to technical difficulties with the recording of the session, there are some gaps in the transcripts]

Group 1

Inquiry manager: I just want to make a few points about the format for this discussion. The purpose is to create a space in which everyone feels able to speak about their experiences with both the quality of their social homes and the way that they interact with their landlord. It's part of the Committee's inquiry into the regulation of social housing, and the purpose is to inform the Committee's final report; the aim of which is to influence Government decision making. This discussion is going to be recorded so that a transcript can be made, but the transcript will be anonymised, and any information that anyone gives that could possibly identify them will be redacted. In addition to that, quotes could be used in the final report but, again, it will all be anonymised. The Committee will treat everything that gets said in the strictest confidence and we ask that everyone taking part does the same and doesn't speak about what gets spoken about. No one will be asked to share any information they don't feel comfortable sharing – for instance, who your landlord is.

Clive Betts MP: Unless you want to. Let's begin by introducing ourselves. I'm Clive Betts MP, I'm Member of Parliament for Sheffield South East. I chair the Levelling Up Housing and Communities Select Committee – it's a rather long name. It's changed its name several times over the years, because what we do is to scrutinise the department of the same name, the government department, and look at what the Government's doing and what organisations within the general subject area of the department are doing as well. So in this case, the department that covers housing. So we look at housing, both private housing and also social housing, which is what our inquiry is about now, about the performance of landlords, both councils and the Housing Association. We're looking at how well houses are maintained; what the challenges are; what the problems are for tenants; whether the regulator oversees that is doing a good job; the role of Housing Ombudsmen, and lots of other things as well. We've been taking lots of evidence about this from tenants who have come forward, others who are involved with tenants in arguing for their rights. We've spoken to the regulator, the Ombudsman, and we're speaking as well to landlords, to local councils, to housing associations, and on Monday to the Minister, Eddie Hughes, who is responsible for this area. With me, I've got Darren Henry, who is a Member of Parliament as well. Select Committees are Members of Parliament who are elected by their colleagues, so we are independent of the whip's and the frontbenchers. We come to our own views based on the evidence that we hear. We are cross-party – I'm Labour, Darren's Conservative – but we try and look at the evidence and come to a collective view about what's going on, what should be done to put it right in these subject areas, and that's why we're talking to you today, to hear from you about your experiences, what you want to tell us, about what's happening, what's going wrong, is your landlord listening, is your landlord responding, have you been to the ombudsman, what have they been doing, these sorts of issues that we want to hear from you about. As I say, just tell us what you want to say to us, it's your opportunity to give your experiences, both good and bad, to us, as Members of the Committee. I think we've met some of you already on our visit, but it might be helpful if you just introduce yourselves to me, so we know everybody.

Participant A: Yeah hi everyone, I'm Jenny, I'm here from South West London Law Centre.

Clive Betts MP: Thank you.

Participant B: Hi, I'm Participant B, I'm from South West London Law Centre.

Clive Betts MP: Thank you.

Participant C: I'm Participant C, I'm from Croydon, South Norwood.

Participant D: I'm Participant C, from Regina Road Support Group.

Participant E: I'm Participant E. I'm here to support my sister who was invited to this roundtable.

Participant F: I'm Participant F, I'm a tenant at X, so a social housing tenant from Croydon.

Participant G: I'm Participant G, I'm from Kingston on Thames, I'm representing my tenants. Oh sorry, my residents. I'm also a tenant myself.

Paul Owen: I'm Paul, I work for the Committee, I've been managing the Committee's inquiry into the regulation of social housing.

Rebecca: I'm Rebecca, I'm also a member of staff on the Committee and I'm just helping out today.

Clive Betts MP: Ok. Who wants to kick off then, and just tell us..? Just get the conversation going so just tell us what you want. You must be sitting there thinking before you came in what you want to give to us.

Participant C: You say in the literature we have printed you were going to, one of the questions, or the question you were going to pose was 'how would you describe the conditions of your home, and the service provided by your landlord?'. Well, the words that pop up quite often are unimaginable, uninhabitable and criminal. You know, there's not many areas where you could get away with doing the same things and people still have to pay for those or they will be made homeless. As for the way the landlords treat us, it's still a very bad culture. I'm sure it's not just in Croydon, I'm sure it's among many councils. And there still, even though the Housing Ombudsman said that the tenants shouldn't be blamed for the problems that arise due to poor maintenance, they are still, in Croydon, blaming the tenants for repairs issues, or 'you haven't opened your windows, that's why you have damp and you've got mould', you haven't done this, you haven't done that. It's always the tenants' fault. No responsibility taken by the landlord what-so-ever.

Darren Henry MP: Can I ask, before we move on, just how would you address that if it was you, because I mean, you know, we're looking at it from the point of view of not being able to sort Croydon Council's problem out directly but, you know, if we bring something else in, that the Government needs to think about this for future...

Participant C: I suggest an audit, a monthly audit, where an independent team, not one that's set up by the councils themselves, an independent team, goes around and makes sure that they are ticking the boxes, they are doing the maintenance, they are spending the money accordingly. You know, just an independent, like yourselves, committee, but an auditing team. Maybe once a month is a bit too frequent for the amount of councils that would probably have to go under scrutiny. But definitely some sort of independent auditing team would be a very good starting point at least.

Participant D: I think also, was it the regulatory body that..?

Participant C: Yeah within Croydon, obviously as you know, there has been a lot of stuff in the press, and it's been very highlighted and documented.

Participant D: And there was the regulators notice but there was no, they have done nothing to work towards what was put in that notice, but there's no repercussions for that.

Participant C: And we're a year on, since that news went out, and we're over a year on.

Clive Betts MP: And this is the social housing regulator, who said this is what you ought to do?

Participant C: The social housing regulator gave them a notice which they haven't... the only thing they've done is replaced a few heaters and check that the fire safety alarms are up to scratch. There has been nothing done with the pipework, nothing done with the leaks on the roof. Oh, and some new, revolutionary mould wash that they've got that is going to keep the mould at bay. Yeah, until November until it gets cold and damp again. It's highly toxic as well for the residents. If it's not enough that their breathing all these toxins already, then they are being sprayed with these washes. You know some are fortunate enough to get put in hotels for a couple of days. But they return and the work still hasn't been completed, and they have to sit outside their home until the late afternoon, so.

Participant B: What I've also experienced was as if the law has given them license to kill. Incredible, you know... Because of them I've suffered four miscarriages. They've continued to bully me because I've stood up to them. You know, I'm a lawyer myself, and because of them I've lost my job, I've lost my relationship, I've suffered miscarriages, and now I have no chance of having a baby. You know how I feel? Can you imagine how I feel? I took them to court, and I became so ill I could not stand up. I approach Ministers but no one helped. I still write to them, and they say, 'oh, I'm not giving access', they always say, 'I'm not giving access'. The other thing they say is that I'm making excuses, I said, 'ok, send me an email that said I didn't give access'. This is what they sent me, the law, this evidence. Yeah I had ten of them, and I didn't print them all because of ink and I'm not working, I'm on benefits. And I got the best sponsorship this country could give me to study law, and I went to the best law school.

Clive Betts MP: So why do you think they said you won't give them access? It's just an excuse is it?

Participant B: Yes. They came [*inaudible*] their electricity from right to left, left to centre, back to forth, and I haven't got electricity. I became so ill I couldn't open my eyes. I became so tired I made a mistake. I sent an email which I was supposed to have proofread, and now I have been charged with malicious communication. Next month I could lose my license to practice law, with a criminal record. Do you think I haven't suffered enough? I'm not the only one. I came here to talk but I'm talking for millions out there. And I wrote down every single thing that could be done and what must be done to avoid those people because they are given licenses to kill. Not just to people like me. They don't care about veterans, they don't care about white people, they don't care about anything. I went to the office and they told me to shut up and sit down. This is how I'm spoken to.

Clive Betts MP: Just in terms of the regulator and the notice, did the regulator talk to tenants before the notice was issued?

Participant C: No. This was off the back of the Ark... there was an independent report done by Ark, and the regulators notice was only served after that. But the Ark report was only done on the block that was on the news, they got their own independent surveyors to carry out the surveillance.

Participant D: And the only reason they moved on was because it was on the news. The issue had been raised for years and years and years beforehand.

Clive Betts MP: Have any of you gone back to the regulator and said, 'thank you for the notice but nothing's happened?'

Participant C: No, but that's a good idea and you gave me the one about going to.. complaining about the complaint's procedure to the ombudsman.

Participant D: It's tricky though, because tenants don't necessarily have direct contact with those bodies, especially the regulatory body if that's gone to the council. There's a common thread of tenants having to go above and beyond in order to get the minimum. And, you know, we've been putting so much pressure on Croydon Council for a long time, but it's a lot of work to keep doing that. As soon as we take the pressure off, nothing happens, and it's just not sustainable for the tenants to have to push for just a minimum.

Participant E: We've got a similar experience, so with.. Participant F, do you want to speak?

Participant F: So yeah, I was... in 2019, I had a lot of leaks coming into my flat. Also that same year I actually got diagnosed with severe anxiety and [*inaudible*] as well. My sister kind-of became my full-time carer, and worked for the NHS for 7 years before that. And you know, the level of stress and amount of effort you have to put in in order to get just a small way, it's a lot. So I did contact the regulatory services, the housing regulations; they said to me that they don't take on independent situations like personal matters. Then I got in touch with... they told me to go to the Ombudsman. But when I went to the Ombudsman, they said I need to wait for the complaints procedure to be ended by my housing association at that time. And they were taking a long time – they actually took two years to complete the complaint form – and it was just last year that the Ombudsman took on the case and their investigating, but I'm still waiting for an adjudicator to fill out for my case. So I'm currently still living in a massive amount of disrepairs, I'm still trying to get my life back on track after suddenly becoming unwell, and it's been a nightmare to be honest. It's very disruptive to my life, to my children's lives, to my rest of my family's lives. It stops people progressing on with life. I'm still quite young, I want to get on with my career, but I'm living in a situation that is constantly causing me stress, depression, anxiety, and it flares up my illnesses. So, you know, I feel like everywhere I turn... because I've even reached out to Michael Gove himself, he tried to help somehow, he got in contact with the CEO of my housing association, and also he got in contact with my local MP, but I find that there is never a follow up. So they will say, you know, they'll pass you on to this person, pass you onto another person, but it's never like a follow up, 'where have you got to?' They'll send out all these nice emails and that's it. And to be honest, even from my housing association I haven't even had an apology from them. And you're forced in all different directions. You think about going to a solicitor, but then obviously there is a restriction now with legal aid, so you're not able to get access to legal aid, especially if you earn over a certain amount. And when you do contact centres that take legal aid, the queue... they're working to full capacity. So then you're stuck in that situation that again causes a lot of stress, so you know...

Participant E: It's not just to her as well, it's to her kids. So for example, the repairs in her home, it's urgent. We've had surveyors and stuff come through, and they've already said it's uninhabitable for them to live in. Stuff like where my nieces who are four, they're lifting up the mattress and there is mould underneath it, completely damp. My nephew's skin has completely flared up because skin obviously has a reaction towards the mould. The bathroom is falling apart, falling on the kids. And it's like we've done so many things... I've written so many letters on her behalf, she's written letters, we've done all of these types of follow up. And I agree as well, I do believe an audit definitely needs to be in place, but there also needs to be a follow-up audit, something that is there in the sense of, 'ok, we've said that this and this needs to be done, who do we follow up with to know that this is being done, and if it's not being done, who do we go to follow up with them to make sure that someone is being held responsible?' I think that the problem is that there is no one being held accountable, and that's where the frustration is. We're all doing stuff, we're following the procedures – I understand as well

with the housing association council they can only do as much as policies allow them to do – but at the same time it's like we're literally going up a road and it's never-ending, it's a never-ending battle, and it's really frustrating for obviously my sister and other people who are in that position.

Participant C: They've been able to get away with it for so long as well, it's like it's the norm now, it's ok.

Participant D: And people are having to live in these crumbling council flats because the Government are not building council flats. At the end of the day all of these rules are being broken because there are no other flats to put people in, except for these horrendous crumbling flats.

Participant C: Just going back to what she was saying about her little kid, I imagine you don't have any friends over because it's embarrassing...

Participant F: Yeah, exactly, I can't invite them over.

Participant C: You then get frustrated with your sister, and you get frustrated with your mum because you have no other release. It just causes... it's just not a good quality of life at all.

Participant B: It's a vicious cycle, you know. And the other thing they do, they bring the police and mental health hospital officers to harass me, to section me. I don't have any mental health problems except suffering from depression. And they deliberately do that. And now I'm on anti-depressants, all these years I haven't been. They've put me on anti-depressant because I'm so tired. And now they're saying I'm hallucinating and that the leak doesn't exist.

Participant F: Yeah, I actually experienced where one of the disrepair managers came into the home and he almost gaslit me to tell me that there were no leaks there. My sister was there. It was one of the most traumatic days of my life, I would say. He came over, and he was like, 'so where are the leaks, show me'. I said, 'well, some of the water has stopped but you can see evidence of leaks'. And he was just like, 'well, there's no leaks there', and things like that. And it really got me so upset. So what happens is when I get over-anxious I collapse at times. So that's what happened; I collapsed, and the ambulance service was called. And while I was there, he had his workers coming into the flat. I'm lying there and the ambulance crew had to be like, 'It's very undignified, we're looking after a patient, can you ask your workers to leave?' And he was still telling them, 'come have a look here, come have a look there,' while I'm lying on the floor. Honestly, every time I think about it it's very upsetting. And it's the most undignified. I felt that I wasn't even a human being to be treated like that. You just ask yourself: why am I being treated this way? What did I do to deserve being treated this way? Have I done something? Then you start looking at other factors that might not even be there: is it because of my colour of my skin and things like that, are they presuming that I'm from a lower class, so they think that it's ok to treat me this way? And it really knocks your confidence, and I think it's really not good. And another thing I wanted to point out as well is disrepair solicitors, the 'no win no fees'. I feel like they also are preying on people's vulnerable situations. They come in and pretend they're going to help you, they take photos all of that sort of stuff, and then every single thing is a cost for them. So they try to see how much money they can get from the housing associations or the council to make a profit. And then they'll obviously take about 60% of that compensation that the person's entitled to. Yet the problem's not been solved for them [the tenants]. And I had to say to a couple of them that as much as compensation is important to me to compensate for the damages, what's most important to me is having a safe home to live in, and having somewhere that is stable so that I am able to go on with my life. But they are not interested in that, they can lure tenants in into giving over information, taking photos, thinking that they're going to win a large sum of compensation and then they are left

in a situation where not much has been done or the works have been done and haven't been done properly and then in a few months they're back in the same situation.

Participant B: There was one incident when I was visited alone and he was forcing me to take the 'Go Fund Me' page. And then I said to him, 'I think I'll email the lawyer myself'. And then he said to me, 'well, you can give our bank account the money', and I said, 'how much are you looking for?' [It was] £120,000. I could buy a house. Could you imagine that? And not just private solicitors, the local authority solicitors are also doing the same thing. I am a very up-front person. If you take my name they will know me by my first name, I can assure you that. I don't have any hesitancy to tell it as it is, because I don't care whether... black, Asian, white, I'll say it. I care about this country. It has given me a better quality of life. And now when I see people abusing the system, I don't feel comfortable.

Participant G: I feel like a bit of a fraud actually, as I don't have any children and I don't have any illnesses.

Participant C: But you're representing other tenants aren't you?

Participant G: I am but, you know, I'm representing the elderly who are completely forgotten and neglected so badly. Contracts – all the councils have contracts, you know, window cleaners, gardeners, maintenance, all that – but, we are paying for gardening. We have a new contractor for now which is Glendale. We've been paying window cleaning for the last five years, but I've never seen a window cleaner in the borough of Kingston. So where's that money going? I'm [*inaudible*] and so are the tenants. We've asked... I've asked the people to come on site – the contractors to come on site – which they did, and then said I was telling a lie. But they were there with their window cleaning. And they were there right through Covid. But I said if you were, I was locked down through Covid so I would have seen you through the window. I found out they were lying. We've now got a new contractor for ground maintenance which is Glendale. Again, the council have paid the cheapest contractor. I was on the procurement team, I didn't vote for them because I felt that they were all-singing all-dancing on the computer, but they weren't off from any community stuff. So I didn't vote for them. They got the contract because it was £300,000 cheaper than the other contractor. And now it's falling apart. They've only had it since November. We're paying for it again; we're not getting it. The pensioners are just being fleeced. Yesterday I had to go and see a tenant, like you, with damp, because no one has seen to the damp again [*inaudible*]. She's 90 years old, for God's sake. Her boiler went 28th of April. Yesterday I stayed there in her flat until access had begun. I refused to leave until they came. And they did. But we shouldn't have to be fighting for something... we're paying our rent, and we're paying our council tax.

Participant C: We're paying maintenance on top of that

Participant G: And we're paying maintenance. We also are paying... the elderly are also paying for care and support. Which is £5.34 a week for one phone call and an out-of-hours service, which is an emergency service. But it's not working at the moment because they have no staff. So there's no emergency service. If you pull that break cord, or if you press that red button on your wrist at midnight... And again we're paying for it. These are the things we're fighting for.

Darren Henry MP: That came up when we heard from a gentleman who made us look over the fence, and said you've got all these leaves piled up there but you've not actually cleared them away. I just wondered about ways of improving communication, and I'm just wondering if people could comment on residents associations. We've talked about sort of an ad hoc, you just help out and volunteer, but what if we had residents associations that had some increased powers to help represent residents?

Participant G: I am the chairperson of our residents associations, and that's why I get... I don't get everything done, don't get me wrong, I don't get everything done but I get some things done. I hold a Zoom meeting with the council once a month and I request any... like I will have repairs on there, I'll have an electrician on there, maybe, I might have something... I also have my local councillor on there, or my local MP. And they attend, because if they don't I'll report them. It's that simple. It is that simple. We voted them in to look after us. I mean, so we have a Zoom meeting once a month – mine is actually Friday – and I have a list here of complaints from the tenants. I have also got an A4 sheet that has been set up [by the residents association] and just say you brought me an issue today, I write it in that issue sheet. I will give them seven days for small jobs. The biggest complaint we have is that the council is not looking after their stock. They're not checking out their properties on a regular basis. And most of mine have got, like you, mould and damp.

Participant C: We're sort-of the same. I'm a former Regina Road resident. I got moved January this year thankfully, so it is possible. And it is the same, we meet quite regularly with Cabinet Minister for homes – I know it's all changed up now – but at the time the Cabinet Minister for Homes, the leader of Croydon... we feel that even with the Ark report and news report if we hadn't set up the support group and we hadn't been going to these meetings not very much would have been... even the little things that have been done, nothing would have got done. It is slightly beneficial.

Participant D: I think one of the important things is that it took us a while to sit down at the table with the council because the power dynamic was so... the wrong way round. And that it wasn't until they had genuinely committed to meeting some of our demands that we were prepared to leave them.

Participant C: They realised that we wasn't going to go away

Participant D: Exactly. I mean, one of the tricky things is that the council employs lots of people to be like community engagement and get paid....

Participant G: We have one of them and I was introduced to see if she wanted to do a new contract... terms and conditions for the [inaudible]...

Participant D: But Participant G ends up doing her job for her, and she's doing it for free, you know, she'll ask Participant G to communicate X, Y, and Z with tenants, or to find out X, Y, and Z information from tenants or what people's disrepairs are. And you think, 'how do you not know yourself what the repairs issues are of your residents?'

Participant C: Questions we ask them they put in their newsletters and answer them in their newsletters... it's quite laughable, really.

Participant B: The other thing I discovered is you know every single year as [inaudible] out, I don't have a heater, when someone comes I get heater. And they send me a £10 electric heater. And I never get refunded nothing. Can you imagine up and down the country? And I volunteer in the law centre. [inaudible]. Even when I was studying law I didn't have a heater; I come home, feverish, I go to college, feverish, I refused to give up my study. And now I refuse to give up my flat because that's what they're trying to do, and I would rather die than give it up. And not just for me, but those people out there, because that's why I studied law.

Darren Henry MP: With contractors, do you often find that the council treats contractors as if they're totally separate? That somehow the council aren't responsible for them?

Participant C: 100%. And they blame each other... the council will say access aren't doing their job and access will say Croydon Council aren't giving us the money to do the job. They all speak the same narrative.

Participant D: There are lots of contractors going into Regina Road flats saying things that would be unimaginable for the council to say, you know, saying, 'we think we should pull these down', 'you shouldn't have to be living here', 'these flats should be condemned'.

Participant C: Or, 'if they are going to pull these down in ten years, they're not going to do these works'.

Participant D: Tenants were recording some of that stuff that the access people were coming in and saying.

Participant C: And that's the thing, you know, in our situation they've had an Ark report, they've been given improvement repairs, but speaking to one of your colleagues earlier, she said, 'what's the date on these improvements, on these works?' I said, 'there is no date', she said, 'there is no date', and she said, 'well, that's not improvements, is it? That's a wish list'.

Darren Henry MP: Have we got a copy of this notice, do you know?

Participant C: We didn't print one off for you, sorry.

Darren Henry MP: I think it would be helpful...

Participant C: We can print one off for you and I can send it on.

Darren Henry MP: What we can do – and we can't deal with individual complaints as a Committee – but we can do is use that as an example of a regulator. It's not very often that they do things of this nature. But we could write to them and say why did you serve this notice? What is the time frame? What have you done to follow up to see if it's been complied with? We can ask those questions.

Participant D: Just to pick up on what you were saying about being treated like you weren't human, we had everyone in Regina Road say exactly the same thing when we started working with them. And I think it's a culture in the council as well and the contractors that everyone was being gaslit, everyone was being told that the disrepairs didn't exist over the phone, people were being hung up on by the contractors, people were being told that they weren't in when they were in. And that's still happening now, and it's a year on. That culture of the front-line service delivery and not treating people like humans is still a massive problem.

Participant C: And that's why they're not here representing themselves. They don't believe that any of this is going to make a change. They don't see any change. They don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. This is where they are stuck: they are stuck here until they are knocked down or, God forbid, something unimaginable happens.

Participant G: That's what we feel. I mean, I've got a lot of sheltered tenants and I've got one block in my area which is completely sheltered. And then in another area of Kingston I've got another sheltered. It's like it's just to dump the old people in there and just forget them, they'll die off eventually. I know we've had a death and they've brushed it under the carpet, and the person was lying there for five days, dead. But they brushed it under the carpet. And to me the way they're working...

Participant B: In my building there was an elderly lady suffering from dementia. Every day she would go out by herself walking around the street, and the council wouldn't do anything. And eventually I went to the council and sat in the office and said, 'I'm not leaving until you do something for the lady'.

Participant G: I mean we've got... in the middle block when we've got the sheltered – completely sheltered it is – there was a leak outside the main hall: sewage. Christmas week and they classed it as not an emergency, so she was smelling sewage for six weeks and its wafting outside her window.

Participant F: Yeah I've noticed that as well actually on social media, that a lot of people have been complaining about things like heating, hot water – things that are necessities – toilets, and they're classing it as non-emergencies. Well how can you live without a toilet, and how can you live without hot water?

Participant C: They explode don't they.... down in Tower Hamlets where they have just re-done up the area and these people are living with toilets that explode once a month.

Participant G: I mean part of Kingston has been regenerated, you've probably all seen the news, and of course they're moving some of the residents out. They're just putting them any old place. It's like they're putting somebody with mental health issues into sheltered accommodation. He's too young for sheltered accommodation. He's not even 50 for goodness sake.

Participant C: Down at Regina Road there's talk that the houses that they've moved people out of that were the worst affected, they're going to do those up and then move tenants within the same block into those properties while they do up their property. How does even that make any sense?

Participant B: Going back to the behaviour, this is also degrading. It chips away at your confidence, and everybody at this table has very huge confidence. Often I get men coming into my flat and last time I had two men circulating me and asking me, 'can I see your British passport?' to see if I'm entitled to live in this country.

Participant C: That's something I hear a lot from tenants: 'you should be happy you've got somewhere to live, you should be grateful that you're here'.

Participant D: It's not like you don't pay rent.

Participant B: I've seen worse. It's an old building. So then I ask her, 'so are you saying that my building is built in the 1960s, so how come Parliament has built 400 years ago..?'

Clive Betts MP: Don't worry, this is falling down.

Participant B: I'm just asking.

Clive Betts MP: I know. It's alright. We've got a few problems here.

Participant F: We've had a similar situation, where someone's actually come in to look at and said, 'don't worry, we've seen worse than this'. And I'm like, 'you shouldn't be proud of that either because my situation is terrible'. If people are saying that it is uninhabitable and you're seeing worse, that means.. what can be worse than that? Hell? That's not something to brag about.

Clive Betts MP: How easy is it to report repairs? I mean, is that a supreme effort to try and get through? I mean is it telephone? Is it online?

Participant F: With my housing association, I would say reporting repairs is quite easy because they've got multiple different ways you can report repairs. They've got a text service, they've got an online

form fill-in, and you've got phone-calls. With the calls you've got different options, so you know 'press 1 if it's for heating' and all of that. But then that's where it stops. So you report the repair, sometimes if it's online you've got a number, especially online...there's nothing. They don't come to do anything. They don't give you an average wait time.

Clive Betts MP: Do you get a receipt or anything?

Participant F: Yeah, I just... most of my ones I do online and I get a receipt number to say it's been logged, but that's it.

Participant C: In Croydon it's a three months wait. You could be without any running water in the bathroom, like handbasin not being able to wash. Three months. If you report it in February they're not coming to you until May. And that is generally... yeah over all repairs, three months. You know, that's going to then create another problem, right, because property is going to then be leaking for three months. No matter how many times you change the pot, at some point that pot is going to overflow. You're not in all the time, you do go to sleep sometimes. That's going to cause another problem for another tenant.

Participant D: You had some terrible stuff that wasn't repaired for a long time.

Participant C: Yeah.

Participant F: And not to mention the fact that this is not just one person, people are doing this with maybe their carers, these are people that are doing this with kids, you know, kids with disabilities, they might have disabilities themselves. It's just not fair to put people through... as if we haven't got enough to deal with just being everyday humans and dealing with life.

Participant G: Have you all noticed – and you probably have now – the amount of wastage, money wasted in the council. I've made a note of a few. I called out somebody for repair for number 16 I did. I'm doing the site managers job, by the way, but I don't get paid for it. I called out for someone because she had a leak, and they sent out an electrician. He comes to repair the door for another lady because her lock was broken. I ended up repairing it in the end anyway. It took a month for them to order the parts. She can't open the front door. What's wrong? Sewage is not classed as an emergency, and the damp in the properties... they just don't investigate. We're wasting all this money all the time. We had Better Homes come in to do the whole of Kingston. Well, most of it had it done, and they put in security doors but with no locks.

Participant F: Going back to waste of money actually, what's happened with a lot of... well my building for example, they came to do some repairs outside the property, but the surveyor came last week and said all the jobs are botched, everything needs to be redone.

Clive Betts MP: So who was the surveyor? Was that the council?

Participant F: It was a surveyor sent by them. But he was an independent surveyor. And he said, 'well, you know the work hasn't been done to a good standard, so you're going to find yourself in the same situation in a few months' time'. So I said to them, 'where do we go from here, because we've been inconvenienced by the work being done and now the work has got to be redone because it hasn't been done properly'. And the surveyor frankly said that, 'it's because of a lack of communication with the different departments that they deal with'. It's just terrible because it's an ongoing thing and like I said, everyone wants stability and that's the most important thing. It's very disruptive.

Participant C: What I don't understand with the waste of money is like... with me when I was at Regina Road I was without a boiler from May until when I left. I had to choose whether I wash the dishes or

bathe my children. That was the choice I had to make every day, and I had to keep boosting the button and putting more electric on. They sent four people out to look at it but never replaced it and... you're going to keep paying these people to come out and look and look but not do anything about it. But that's because the boiler costs a lot of money to replace, so they'll just send out somebody to pacify you for however long they can get away with it this time.

Participant D: You were there for 17 years?

Participant C: 17 years

Participant D: Were you there when the council... when it was in-house the repair service for the council?

Participant C: No, it was always [*inaudible*] and then access.

Participant B: For me, you know, I took them to court and I'm still going, and this is the height for the panel they needed to put and this is the length of the panel to lengthen it so a cooker to go in. And it cost them, in four years, over £40,000. Exactly. If you had given me a drill I could have done it. And also when I told them, they refused. When I called my local Council and Housing Officer they look at me and said, 'am I here to deal with this?' And as I am very up front, I was going to say, 'but who is?', but I didn't. At court, and a few times... we're still going to court, and then it was still going on. They insisted to come and decorate the place before they would make the repair. So when I went to court, in the application, the Barrister, they said, 'work could have been done'. Three years on the work hasn't been done. I said, 'can you detail what they said when?' They refused. Can you imagine? Every time I write to the barrister, the lawyer, and said, 'could you detail me every single time you guys write, and send me a letter and you call me, how much this will cost?' They refused to do that. Can you imagine? £250 lawyers fee...

Clive Betts MP: Well freedom of information means they would be obliged to give you that.

Participant B: Yeah, they refused to give me it

Clive Betts MP: Well, I think they'll be in trouble there.

Participant B: Now you put that in my head I forgot.... I will write to them.

Participant C: You know, I think there should be some more things in place for the tenants. Why should tenants be paying to live in such properties? Another one of your colleagues said earlier, 'if you hired a car and the car isn't up to scratch, you wouldn't be paying to hire the car'. So why should people be paying out the rent, their service charges every week?

Clive Betts MP: Well sometimes they do say, 'well, I'm not going to pay while it's in this condition', that's sometimes a risk you take about not paying. But just coming back to the point about the Ombudsman, I think it's one of the challenges that a lot of people don't know about the Ombudsman; but certainly if you're being unreasonably, if the repairs are not being done – well you go through the complaints process, but if they're not very good at repairs they're probably not very good at the complaints process either – gets to the end of the 28 days (and you may have to go through two stages) you go to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman will award compensation not just to the actual damage to your property but for the upset and inconvenience caused. And sometimes the threat of that will cause the council to think or the Housing Association to think they may offer you something because of the threat of that.

Participant F: I think that's what happened in my situation but also I feel that the Ombudsman is... although the people I've come across in the Ombudsman are all very lovely and helpful, it's just a very long process, the Ombudsman. It's a very long process.

Participant C: Stuff changed this year though, didn't it, as well with the recognition.

Participant F: I'm still waiting for an adjudicator, and I remember every time I kept going back to the Ombudsman, and said you know, 'they're not responding to me, so what do I do?' And then they say, 'well you've got to wait this amount of days or that amount of days'. And then it got to a point where they weren't even responding to the Ombudsman, and that's when the Ombudsman noticed the problem that there's a communication problem and they're not communicating with tenants, so how can anything get resolved?

Participant B: What I thought when we introduced the plastic bag, you know, when we pay for the plastic bag, I was thinking those housing people when they aren't doing their job, the Housing Officers should be pay from their own pocket [*inaudible*]. I have a feeling that will work. I often say to those people, if it was your mother or your sister would you be doing that?

Clive Betts MP: But it may be something that we have got to look at, about how – we'll talk to the Ombudsman about this as well – because it does take time, they're under pressure, but they will eventually come to a view and if they feel like... because the other thing we talked about this morning was the complaints service not working, that they just don't take complaints seriously. And again the ombudsman has laid down that councils must follow their code of practice on complaints, about how they deal with them. Now in my view, I think councils often tick the box and say they're doing it when they're not. But again that's something that the Ombudsman... we might look at the Ombudsman and the mechanism to launch complaints and the failure to deal with complaints properly which I think is a wider issue. No organisation will get things right first time. But you need to assure them that if it doesn't, the complaints process works properly. And it clearly doesn't in many cases.

Participant F: I would also say that, and I don't know how it works, but social housing needs to be looked at as a holistic thing because the affect that it has on people's life, poor quality of homes, it's a great deal. I can't begin to tell you the amount of times I've been in and out of depression because of this whole situation, just feeling stuck, feeling like I have nowhere to go because I feel like I have exhausted all of my sources, getting in contact with MPs, getting in contact with... Nothing has been done, because I'm still in the same situation and its very hard and frustrating. I'm blessed to have a family support system, but not everyone has that, especially the elderly. I've worked in mental health for years and also I was looking after patients before I became a patient myself. The quality of housing has a big role in people's mental health. It's deteriorating people's mental health, not only people's mental health but also children's mental health which is a cost to the NHS. At the end of the day, when it comes to spending and public money, tax-payers money, if these issues are not addressed you're going to have a cycle of long NHS queues; long mental health services; pressures on mental health services; pressures on the schools for example because my son had swimming lessons for his school and he couldn't attend half of them because the mould flare up and the eczema, he can't do his swimming which keeps him back and causes anxiety for him, and so you've got children's mental health now being a problem, especially coming out of the pandemic. I just feel like these housing associations and councils they need to be held accountable, because at the end of the day it is a waste of tax-payer's money. People's lives are being affected to the point that, like I say, if I didn't have a family support system, I don't know where I would be. My sister had to support me getting back to work and things like that. But if you don't have that, you're just sinking deeper into depression and anxiety and you're mental health is getting worse. It's a major factor.

Participant A: I think it's not just mental health either, it's physical health as well. People with asthma who are living in conditions with mould, and it's exacerbating the problem. And as you're quite rightly saying the cost to the NHS down the line is going to be immense because with no running water, if you've got a health condition where you need to wash regularly, it's not helping.

Participant C: Sorry, just one thing that we touched on this morning and something else that should be scrutinised is council allocation policies. People are getting moving into properties who are just two people. Then the family reproduces and they become a family of five. And the council's remedy of that – because there is no social housing – is to tell you to make your living room a bedroom so that the children can have separate bedrooms. Ok, if you're close family that maybe can work. But when you've got young kiddies in the mix they're not developing. Now there's developmental issues as well as health issues

Participant D: As an example, there's a family on Regina Road, four kids and a mum and a dad in a small two-bedroom flat. And that was within Croydon Council's allocation policy that it's a fair size family to live in a two-bedroom flat.

Clive Betts MP: Is that presumably because they haven't got enough houses of the right size?

Participant D: Yeah, I think it is

Participant C: But you've got to think that then there's more people breathing in that property, there's more damp, there's more clothes being dried, there's more everything. When it's not ventilated very well, and it's not heated very well, that's a recipe for disaster.

Participant D: But also you've got to think, how can you have a family with a tiny kitchen, a living room with mum and dad sleeping in, one bedroom with two kids sleeping in, another bedroom with two kids sleeping in, and you live on a tenth floor?

Participant C: No socialisation. We've just come out of a lockdown era. Imagine what that's been like for hundreds of thousands of families.

Darren Henry MP: There was a gentleman at Regina Road who mentioned a 95 page document that needed to be filled out, was that the allocations document?

Participant D: That's the allocations policy, yeah.

Darren Henry MP: So tell us about that.

Participant D: It basically sets out what size properties are appropriate for what size families, but it contradicts itself in many places. it's very complicated.

Participant G: I never knew that existed

Participant C: And the other thing is medical assistance. They're not medically trained to be denying children that have severe health conditions, that have several proofs of documentation that says the property is causing a child's health to be worsened and subsequently affecting other children. And then the medical team within Croydon Council, who we've been told on good authority have no medical qualification, are denying the family a move, are denying the child a better quality of life, maybe adding some years onto her life because she has a syndrome where her chest is dilapidated so she's very prone to lower respiratory tract infections which are caused by damp and mould, and she now she just has to live there. Missing school, making her siblings ill, comparing herself because she shares a bedroom with her siblings, because she's never going to be like her siblings, she's always going to be different. They've said that she needs a separate bedroom because of this, he's denied a

move, he has three doctor's letters, a letter from her consultant at GOSH [Great Ormond Street Hospital], the nursery provision has written a document, and every time denied. [They say], 'we will not move you, we will just improve your environment'. And they are family of five living in a two-bedroom.

Participant A: And you have a Right to Buy policy being introduced, so there is already a shortage of appropriate social housing. If you're going to allow people to buy their properties, then there's going to be even more of a shortage.

Participant G: And lots of just developing eight units so they don't have to give any to affordable homes, because we all know it's nine or more, and then you maybe have to give up one or two for social housing affordable rents. And people know that now so they're just building eights, four-by-fours.

Darren Henry MP: The numbers of social housing has come up a couple of times in this meeting. Will that come out from the Committee for the Government?

Clive Betts MP: We can certainly do that. We had a report on social housing provision about two years ago, where we basically said that we got to build... our recommendation was you've got to build at least 90,000 social houses a year, both of itself because of the need, but also we're going to hit the 300,000 target as a national overall target, you're going to have to deal with that many social houses as a major contribution towards it. So we have come out thoroughly in support of that.

Participant D: Which is the tip of the iceberg: there are 5000 people on the waiting list in Croydon alone.

Participant G: 6,400 in Kingston.

Participant B: You spoke about family support. I'm the example: I don't have any family. I'm on my own, basically on my own. Every time those housing people come, because I'm not working, I'm not socialising; I don't have many people to run to, to ask, 'can you come here when those men come in my home', so I'm completely on my own. And now I'm about to get a criminal record and I'm scared to let them in. I'm having to ask left, right, centre asking people in case they accuse me of more things. I'm terrified, and I don't know where to turn. And I'm scared about getting a criminal conviction. And they're desperately trying to evict me so that they can get the flat and sell it to private investors. That's what they do. Tell me where do I go? Maybe I should pitch up in front of you guys. Say hello in the morning.

Clive Betts MP: Just asking about when they come to do repairs: do you have an appointment system? And do you have a problem with them not keeping appointments? Is it generally another cost for you, say if you have to take time off work to stay at home waiting for them?

Participant C: And then they don't turn up and they say that you didn't give them access.

Clive Betts MP: Is that..?

Participant C: Yeah, it's always blamed on the tenant. That's the culture.

Participant B: I was thinking maybe we could empower the court to send someone when they come to do the work. Like me, I don't have anyone to tell, 'can you stay here with me?'

Participant C: It's pretty simple.

Clive Betts MP: Do you have a text message to say they're coming?

Participant F: Yeah, they send text messages saying that they're going to come and then no one turns up. Or sometimes they come to have a look and that's it.

Participant G: I'll give you a good one. All blocks are different but in the middle section of where I live on the Alpha Road there are four blocks. They're very different to the outside blocks, they're built years apart - my block was built in the 1970s and I don't know when these where... anyway, this lady had her window broken and she asked for repairs and he said he turned up just like you said, sent her a message and said, 'I called but you weren't in'. She said, 'but I was sitting inside the door', so she said back, 'but I did', he said, 'I put a note through the door', she said, 'no you didn't, I'm sitting here'. I found the note. I thought I've had enough, so I went and met her, she lives on the top floor, and I went up and I said, 'he put the note in the laundry room', what we call the drying room, 'he put the note under the door'. There's no number on that door for goodness sake. She's number 12. There's no number on that door.

Participant B: Also often the people who work for the council, I question them and talk to them. I said, 'do you enjoy working for them?' They said, 'because we have kids, mortgage', and I said, who would you say is the nicest person to work with?' [*inaudible*]

Participant G: I don't know if Croydon Council has a scrutiny panel, does it?

Participant C: It does, but it's all within the inside, in-house.

Participant G: Right, I belong to the Kingston one right, CRISP it's called. I've come out of it because we've done investigations for the last eight years, we've done repairs, we've done voids, we've done garages, we've done finance, we've done.... And nothing changes. We spent three months on each of those and what's the point. We've put all these recommendations in of where they can make money, where they were losing money... nobody's done anything. They're all on the website.

Clive Betts MP: I think sometimes we have that feeling on select committees. We do our reports, and the Government doesn't always take notice of us. Nevertheless they should, they have to come back and respond to us with our recommendations, say if they don't agree with them, why, and what they are going to and what they aren't going to do. Do they have to do that with your scrutiny?

Participant C: In Croydon they've just started a tenant and leaseholder panel committee, improver panel, so they get invited to all the table meetings, and they can reject their proposals. So three times before they came back with something semi-acceptable.

Participant G: One group of leaseholders in my area refused to pay the maintenance, they're holding it back.

Participant C: I don't blame them, why not, what maintenance? If they have dirty water and it smells...

Participant G: They've been fighting for five years for a report. They want the report broken down to what the maintenance is like lighting, heating, ground maintenance. They want it all broken down by the council. For the last five years they've been asking...

Clive Betts MP: Which they're obliged to do. It's a legal requirement.

Participant G: I know it is, we know it is. We've even got solicitors involved. We're getting nowhere, well it's not me, it's friends of mine.

Participant C: Anything you can't get the answer for just put in an Freedom of Information request. It might take a little bit longer but...

Participant G: She has done everything. So their holding back their money at the moment. They're refusing.

Participant B: How about having the media involved? Those who don't do their job, because every time the media get involved, they start doing their job. It's like name and shame.

Participant C: That has been what has helped a few residents in Croydon.

Participant E: What about the people who don't want to be on the media? I've been told go to the media but for some people that's a bit humiliating. Not everyone wants people to know that these are the conditions they're living in. Also these days on the internet everything stays there. You don't want that to be remembered. Not only that as well, but you also still feel scrutinised as well. You can put yourself out there but then the comments and feedback you're going to get from trolls, that's going to affect you.

Participant D: What we'd hoped as well by putting a few cases out there is that it might change systemically what's happening. But unfortunately all the councils and housing associations do is clear up the one case that's come out and don't change the practice for everyone else.

Participant F: Another thing I wanted to... because with Croydon Council as well, I had to deal with the environmental team, because once the council wasn't doing anything, I got in contact with the environmental team. It was a round and round thing and in the end they said no, they were not going to come out. One of my friends at the moment, she is living in a private home, and the state of the property is poor. I know you're meant to contact the environmental team to come and do a surveillance of the property. Yet Croydon Council – I don't know about anywhere else – has been refusing to send their environmental team out to have a look at the properties. Croydon Council still tell me to go on 'Home-swap' with a property in disrepair.

Participant E: How can you expect... if I don't want to live there, how can I swap a home? No one else is going to want to live there.

Clive Betts MP: In terms of their environmental powers, with the housing associations, yes they can go in there, because they are separate organisations.

Participant C: But it's not separate, it's all in-house. Like Croydon's one is Croydon Environmental Services.

Clive Betts MP: Yes, but the Housing Association is separate. The environmental team of the Council can go in there. They can't go and serve notices on a council property because an organisation cannot serve a legal notice on itself.

Participant F: I was told by the environmental team that they can't come out a visit. And same thing with the lady who is in a private let property was told the environmental team can't come out. So we're constantly being exploited then because we have no one to turn to.

Darren Henry MP: Sorry, did you say that if it's social housing and run by the council..? For example, a particularly memorable point for me today was in a lady's house that had that smell, that toxic smell which I could not believe, I actually wondered if they're going to be contacted about that particular house. I don't know how she can live in there. [*inaudible*]. I just couldn't believe it.

Clive Betts MP: Officers can go in and advise, but they can't serve a notice on themselves to sort it.

Darren Henry MP: Well we've got to sort that out.

Clive Betts MP: It's a legal problem, you can't actually take out legal action against yourself.

Participant C: It shouldn't be a body within itself then, should it? It should be a totally separate body. It shouldn't be within itself.

Clive Betts MP: They are the environmental health officers for that area. That's the problem. It is a difficulty, I don't know how you get around it, that's the problem.

Darren Henry MP: No, is it something we can...

Clive Betts MP: We can raise it as an issue, certainly.

Participant B: Another issue I suffered was my neighbour upstairs. For the last ten years she drills every day. Every single day, every time. And when I report it, she happens to go to the council. This is what left me not able to sleep. I end up making this mistake by sending this email because I became so ill and a bit tired. She drills at seven in the morning until eleven at night. So I became so ill.

Clive Betts MP: Is there any other issues you wanted to raise, as we're going to have to leave the room in a few minutes?

Participant C: I was just going to say that with the buildings at Regina Road it's well documented: they were erected in 1966 and were not meant to serve purpose more than 30 years. Where's the regulation to check that ok we've allowed you to keep this erected and make money from it, where's the regulation to make sure the maintenance is being kept up and you know, this shouldn't be living past this time but it's still meeting certain criteria to be able to live past that date? Does that make sense?

Clive Betts MP: I don't think the legal position is about how long initially the property was supposed to stay on. I don't think so. That would be more to do with the guarantee on the building, you know, 'we guarantee to keep it for this length of time'. If a building is fit for purpose even if it's gone beyond the date it might have been expected to... Therefore I think the issue is about is it fit for human habitation or are the repairs capable of being done? That in the end is a decision for the council to come to about whether in the end it's better value to knock them down or to refurbish them further. What they can't do is do nothing.

Participant C: But they do and they get away with it.

Clive Betts MP: Yes, well that's the issue that we're looking at.

Participant A: Can I just raise the issue..? We've talked about what legal help is available for people. Disrepair doesn't come under legal aid, which means we as a law centre can do very little to help people. We feel that people don't have the power to enforce their rights. We can only do legal aid work on disrepair if it's someone is being taken to court and it's being used for eviction because rent arrears are being used as defence. That's it, that's all we can do and that doesn't seem right at all. Just add that to the list of things to think about, how we can give people power. We can't do 'no win no fee', and, as has been discussed, this isn't always appropriate either. We're not in a position to offer that.

Clive Betts MP: One of the things the Committee asked for – as a lawyer I wonder how you feel about it – is a simplified housing court system where people can get simpler access. And we've called for that several times and we'd like to see it as part of the rental reforms as well.

Participant C: Almost like small claims?

Clive Betts MP: That sort of thing, but with a judge there who is experienced in housing matters.

Participant A: We've also got the fixed recovery of costs going through which is going to cause us huge problems for housing solicitors as well. Lots of difficulties in what we're doing.

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee – regulation of social housing

Public engagement roundtable session (Wednesday 11th May 2022)

Group 2

Ben Everitt MP: Welcome everybody. This is a roundtable discussion and I'll explain how it works, but first I'll talk to you briefly about what we're doing as a committee, then we'll go around the table and introduce ourselves, then I'll talk about what we want to get out of today's session. We're finishing at 4.30pm but what I will do is run this as conversationally as possible. It won't be formal like a parliamentary experience – there will be no 'order, order' and such – but what I'm keen to do is let everyone feel as they leave the room that they have said everything that you needed to say. So let's do the formal bit. This is the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. Our role is to scrutinise the Government in the application of their policy in whole swathes of policy areas, but in this particular instance the committee is doing an inquiry on the regulation of social housing. We've heard from Ministers and academics, journalists, tenants and tenant's associations on social housing. But today we had our first site visit to actually experience some of the conditions that you've been living in first-hand. It was quite an experience, and this is an opportunity really for us to explore that a bit further. The focus of this particular inquiry is to look at the ability of the regulator of social housing and the housing Ombudsman to identify and address the problems that have been brought to our attention. We are going to go into more depth. This is one of two roundtables; there are clerks here who work for the committee who will be taking notes. We are also recording the session. Don't worry that it is being recorded, it's so that we capture everything, it's not going to be published or anything like that, and it's not going to be live on BBC Parliament...

John-Paul Flaherty: The recording is so that we can make note of the issues that you address. Before we make that note we will anonymise it, so there will be no names. If you give [identifying] information as you're speaking we will summarise it so that someone reading that note would not be able to look at the circumstances that you've described and say, 'I think it might be this person'. Once we have summarised that in written form the audio recording will be deleted.

Ben Everitt MP: Fantastic. So essentially what we're saying is that this is a safe space to say what you think. The products of this inquiry will form a report; the report will be presented to the Government and will have a series of recommendations which will hold them to account. We can't promise you that we'll change the world... It's non-party political – there are MPs of different parties here – but our job is to scrutinise Government regardless of [what party we are in] to make sure that their policy objectives are being delivered and that they have the right policy objectives. So let's crack on. My name is Ben Everitt, I'm the MP for Milton Keynes North, I've been on the select committee since January 2020, and I was elected in 2019. So really it's nice to be outside, because it's been illegal to meet people for the last few years.

John-Paul Flaherty: My name is John-Paul Flaherty, I'm the clerk for the committee, so I'm an impartial staff member of the House of Commons. For the inquiries and work that the committee decide to do, me and my team put that together – so setting up this session.

Participant A: My name is Participant A. I'm the Chair of the Central LSA Resident's Association, which is an estate in London which is facing regeneration and has been for several years.

Participant B: My name is Participant B. I live on X estate which is up for regeneration and I'm a bit concerned.

Participant C: Hi I'm Participant C. I trained as an architect. In response to a lot of the 'demolition first' approach to regeneration across London, a few other architects and engineers have come up with a Peoples' Plan approach, an alternative to... [*Inaudible (phone interruption)*]... a very well-funded and resourced regeneration strategy that seems to be destroying social housing and building affordable houses that are not really affordable and not for the community.

Participant D: Hi I'm Participant D. I am a resident of X that is currently affected with disrepair.... [*inaudible*]... a passionate advocate for troubled families who share similar scenarios and I try to help those in the community.

Participant E: Hi I'm Participant E. I [have a property in] disrepair but my disrepair case has still been unheard... When they do try to fix something... [*inaudible*]

Participant F: My name is Participant F from South West London Law Centre.

Kate Hollern MP: I'm Kate Hollern. I'm the MP for Blackburn in Lancashire, which is a couple of hundred miles away from here. I was a social tenant for a long time, so I do understand the issues.

Participant G: My name is Participant G. I'm a tenant and Chair of the tenant's group for the whole of X borough.

Whitley Lane: Hi I'm Whitley Lane. I'm part of the committee team and I'm kind of organising and facilitating this meeting.

Ben Everitt MP: Right, now we know who we all are... the principle objective for this discussion is how would you describe the condition of your homes and the service provided by your landlord? It says here that there's no need for participants to identify their landlord if they don't feel comfortable doing so. So again, feel free to speak as much as you want to. You've all had briefing material prior to this, and there are a few follow-up questions that if we don't cover then I'll steer the discussion into that. Given that it's a service provided by your landlord, Participant E, do you want to kick off?

Participant E: Basically I was with a housing association first... [*inaudible*]... after a year they put me in a place. As soon as I got in there were big problems. Plaster was just thrown in at random places on the wall – is there a hole there, what do I do with it? When you go into other rooms you start taking off wallpaper and the whole plaster is coming off, the walls left with half plasterboard, half plaster and some paint that they've put in-between. The electrical cupboard... so the house next door is bought, and the electricity is looped. The first day I moved in they had to call the emergency number and have [someone come], who said that whoever was here had bodge jobbed the electrics. The only problem is that we can't get in to fix it because it's looped electricity, and if we can't get access we can't fix it. So that was a hazard, and we couldn't get access to this gentleman's house... So [*inaudible (annunciator noise)*]... is that machine gong to start a fire? For two years I had that on my mind. Then I started finding expanding foam in random places. There's a reason for expanding foam normally, it's to fill holes where rats and mice come in, so all the rats when I was there ate right through it and they lived in the house more than we did. I had a dog; the dog refused to sleep downstairs. My kids would tell you they'd watch the TV and about three of four of them would run past and I'm like I can't sit down there any more, I can't do it. If one runs past you can ignore it, but if it's three or four I don't want to sit there! We're dealing with that. They sent out the pest control and I said I just want to know where they're coming in so I can do the rest in-house, but they didn't want to come and investigate. There was a cupboard with a hole that led to a sort-of sewer bit, so you could tell they were coming in from around there. I said if you do [*inaudible*] then I'll do the rest,

but they don't want me doing the work because it's more money [for them]. Eventually I had to get family services involved and had to make a complaint higher up. We then got the housing manager to come who said it will cost thousands to fix the house. He didn't tell me that to my face, he told me he would get it done by Christmas. Christmas came and it didn't get done, February came and it didn't get done. They're saying it's going to cost thousands to fix that property instead of going and fixing it. Once they established that they got me on eviction, because I just stopped paying rent, but this is something that I told them. I'm not paying rent because you're affecting my mental health. I didn't pay rent from September, so by February I got an eviction notice in. By August they stopped the eviction, then they came back round and said disrepair, which had been the case anyway. Then they moved me to where I am now, which has problems but it's nowhere the problems that were in the last property.

Ben Everitt MP: How long were you having to complain before..?

Participant E: Three years... [*inaudible*]... didn't even get past stage one, they just kept saying, 'well you didn't do this, you didn't do that'. And you're like, that's fine but can I please go to stage two now?

Ben Everitt MP: Did they tell you that you have to complete the complaints process to go to...

Participant E: That's what I'm doing. So I'm doing stage one and then they just cut me back down. Even when it was done in disrepair, they didn't move me up. It puts me through a lot of stress and they're like, 'we're sorry, but your rent'. They're going back to the same money that I didn't pay from before. And I'm thinking we can talk about that, but can we talk about the issue of why it got there?

Kate Hollern MP: It's a very complicated process to lodge a complaint, to go through the stages. Did the council tell you that if you go through stage one, stage two, and then refer it on, and you can make another complain in-between, it takes the whole thing back to stage one?

Participant E: No. What they do is... I put in a complaint, and the complaints are meant to be investigated, so they're meant to say upheld, not partially upheld. It doesn't say any of that. It just said, 'well you didn't let us come to your house'. Because basically they wanted me to give them the property back for two weeks on my annual leave. I work for my annual leave, that's time for my kids. I'm not sitting for two weeks in [another] place when the [current] place was empty for two years before I got there. It was empty for two years; they didn't do anything in the house. So I'm not going to give up two weeks of my annual leave for something they could have done in the two years nobody was in there. So every complaint comes back with a summary of me and what I won't allow them to do, if that makes sense, but they don't want to talk about what they didn't do.

Kate Hollern MP: And that makes it difficult for you..?

Participant E: Yes, and I'm still stuck there right now, three years on.

Participant F: I think that's quite a common thing that we see at the Law Centre, that people have not gone on escalating their complaint, and that someone can't take a legal case... and the only recourse they feel is to withhold the rent which then threatens them with eviction... [*inaudible*]... a solicitor said you can counterclaim for disrepair. But that's probably the only route we can do at the Law Centre to tackle disrepair.

Kate Hollern MP: And in the meantime you've got rats?

Participant E: Still in the house, still in the same spot right this minute. So when I moved to the new house I lost a baby. The man said, 'I'm sorry for what you went through, but you need to go and talk to so and so'. It's the same theme. I will talk about the [rent] when we talk about why [it was withheld]. I don't mind talking about it, but they refuse...

Participant G: Can I ask a question? Do you have a tenants group?

Participant E: No.

Ben Everitt MP: [To Participant G] Is this problem reflected in the tenants you represent?

Participant G: No, because we have a very strong tenants group. What we find if there's a problem with the council, they [residents] come to us and we take it up on their behalf because we've found the more volume, the more voices there are; when there's just one of you, it's just one voice. So we go as a group.

Kate Hollern MP: And a better understanding of the process as well.

Participant G: Yes. So if you can get a group together that puts you in a far stronger position

Participant E: I tried to get a few MPs involved – I'd tell you which was the best one, but you'd laugh at me – but even the lady I was going to lately just downplays it. I'm saying that the house is that bad, but because she can't visualise it she doesn't understand and says, 'well, let's just get the repairs done'. I'm trying to explain to her that this is not just a little bit of repairs, it's a lot of repairs and I've got dogs, where do the dogs go [while repairs are being carried out]? I've got two jobs. When the evening comes for me to go to work, I don't want to leave my kids in a hotel. So you can't really get anywhere with them. They're always downplaying how important your complaint actually is.

Kate Hollern MP: Sometimes it's just an understanding of how horrific a situation really is.

Participant E: I did call in to the MPs office and they said, 'just get the repairs done'. But I've gone back to you now to tell you that that option *was* where I was at [but] I've moved. I told her that, 'I knew you didn't help me before, but now that I've moved can you help me make the complaint?' She still downplayed it. I'll just do it myself; it gets to that stage. Sometimes the help they're offering isn't going to get you anywhere.

Ben Everitt MP: Let's stick with landlords a bit longer.

Participant B: I'm in a similar situation. I've had a leak four times now, it's been a serious leak and I've spent a lot of money on my flat because I own it. I've just had grief all the time, you know. The other day it leaked for eight days solid, and it was like a swimming pool, it was leaking all over my floor. I've spent a lot of money on the flat, it's a beautiful place, I love it where I live... But it's the same story. They sent five plumbers round to fix this leak, and eventually they did it after eight days. I had to bring buckets of water up to my neighbours. Since they turned the water on again it leaked again, and it has happened four times. It's really affecting my [mental health]. I come home and it's all peaceful and nice, and then I hear this dripping and then the next minute it's really heavily flooding. I rung them up numerous times. I've lost count of how many times I've rung them up. Also I'm concerned about the contractors that go and do the repairs and how much they're charging each time they visit the houses they go to, and what is their contract situation with the council or whoever they're dealing with? Who's making money out of it? What's going on with the service charge costing them a fortune? It's just a waste of money and time. I mean, in my business if I make

one mistake I'm not going to get any more work. I cannot afford to be incompetent. I've got to do a proper good job and that is it. Everything should be simple; nothing should be made complicated.

Kate Hollern MP: So your landlord is the council?

Participant B: My landlord is the council, yeah.

Kate Hollern MP: Do you have insurance that will cover your flat?

Participant B: I am insured.

Kate Hollern MP: Does the council have an insurance that covers..?

Participant B: Yeah, I'm covered by my service charges insurance, so it's not too bad. But I don't want to keep on claiming and getting quotes for my floor and decorating, I don't need that in my life.

Participant A: The insurance that we have to pay... I've got a three-bedroom house and I think it's about £500 a year, and it's quite clearly more than what you would get if your home wasn't a council or ex-council home, because they know they are not well kept and therefore no one wants to insure them on the open market. You're almost locked into whatever insurance company the council works with. I don't know if they're being open and honest, but the council sort-of said to us, 'actually it's quite hard to find people to insure us'. So we're already paying more than if we had good workmanship in the first place.

Participant B: I know this could happen anywhere obviously, if you've got a £2,000,000 or £15,000,000 house, and it can happen in any place, but it seems to be happening more and more, especially for regeneration as well, you know, they're just leaving it to wreck and ruin.

Participant A: I'm the Chair of the residents association, and when it was the People's Audit I asked how much revenue was received on our estate and it was £1,200,000. Unfortunately many of our properties were left empty and taken out of the equation, so it would be more than that. Then I asked how much they were spending on repairs, and they gave me a quote of £700,000. There were a couple of anomalies on there that I wrote a freedom of information request to find out about, because the audit had closed, and they didn't recognise the original document or some of the information on the original document. It's got to the point where almost 50% of it could be questionable as to why the housing revenue account was spent on that, what they receive from secure tenancies isn't on the account. Transparency is very difficult to come across, you know. Also the very high number of voids. It seems like if you're a secure tenant and you've got a leaky roof – you've been there two, three or twenty years – you pay your rent, and if you don't pay your rent they come after you, you pay your rent and get fed up and move out, and then literally within a few months or two years or whatever they will eventually repair it and then rent it out to temporaries. The voids came to a sixth of what they spent on there. It just shows that because you're a secure tenant it's not a good thing you're on the estate because you have a lot more of a say than if you're a temporary and they move you around. So the whole agenda on our estate at every step, every breath, every letter, everything in the council, points towards regeneration. They had a fundraiser. They threw so much money that we'd never even dream of, and they contracted dancers, a person who knew how to teach lots of different things, and it was great but it was all under the umbrella of Homes for Lambeth the development company, and then we don't get any money. We don't even have access to the community centre despite having lots of different places on the estate.

Kate Hollern MP: If I can just go back to... what we're concerned about is how poorly, in the cases I've seen, councils respond to their tenants and the situations that people are left to live in because

they're unresponsive. Your damage came from the flat upstairs, and I presume that was a council tenant?

Participant B: It was a council tenant, yeah. It wasn't their fault, obviously. It's been an ongoing problem. Firstly, last year it was a washing machine, then it was a washer, and I'm thinking it's coming from the same place, and it gets worse and worse. It's really heavy, and now it's the boiler and something else.

Kate Hollern MP: So because your flat – no disrespect to you – was horrendous, wasn't it? I'm keen to understand... so the council took a long time to fix the problem upstairs. Have they made any contact with you to repair the damage to your flat?

Participant B: Well I've had the insurance contact me, so I've made progress in that area. I've got to get quotes now for my floor and redecorate it. My business is picking up now after a quiet period, so it's finding the time... There's a lot worse situations. I'm lucky that I can have that done, but it's all the hassle, it just drags you down and will slowly just niggle at you...

Participant D: I recognise a lot of similarities with everyone at this table. I was placed originally in temporary accommodation in 2012. I spent two years there, and I was moved because it was not fit for habitation. Then I was given a permanent home in 2014. That home was severely in disrepair, and when I was there I had numerous leaks in the toilet. They changed it about six times: it goes out onto the floor, the urine goes into the kitchen. Then the front room ceiling fell in. They moved me into the home that I'm [currently] in because they said that accommodation was dangerous. While we have the provision to wait for them to fix it and make something liveable they find asbestos, and they said it needs to be under environmental control. That took six months. We asked them, while we were still in the dangerous situation, to re-evaluate and find something different, but they said, 'no, we've signed the contract, they aren't willing to do that'. So we stayed there for six months. We moved in January 2018 to the current home that we're in. When I moved I had no electricity, no water, no gas, so I had to then move back to the old home. When I moved back to the old home we had to stay there four more weeks until provision became adequate. What they said was to move in and they would build the kitchen around us, they would build certain things around us. I agreed because I didn't want to be intentionally homeless – and I've been moved around, I didn't want to do that – so I accepted the conditions. The current home, after two months everything started turning black because the plaster hadn't dried, and they refused to use an electric heater. Then we had a squirrel infestation. I was charged rent for the old address that I left and the new address, and in 2019 when [*inaudible (annunciator noise)*]... they realised they made a mistake, when I formulated the evidence and presented it to a judge at the time – I didn't have legal representation, but I tried to represent myself – he then ruled in my favour and said I must do a counterclaim. But there have been numerous things... On December 23rd 2020, a squirrel chewed through the wire of an electric heater and we were cut off for three months, we couldn't use it. Then what transpired on New Year's Day is when they [*inaudible (annunciator noise)*] it was just a hole, it was like a building site. They removed the tank, but they didn't remove the tank in the loft, so it leaked from the loft and rusted and caused an explosion. My toilet has leaked since 2019, and every time you flush it water covers my floor. But I think that because we went through litigation it became more hostile. I feel like I'm in a nightmare. My health... it's not about the disrepair, it's about the effect on the family. I don't have a family anymore. What was dear to me was lost. The home is not a home if there's no one in it. My daughter had to move out and live with other family members just for safety. Me and my husband, still now, are restricted just to the front room, no other room works. He's diabetic and it's got worse due to the stress. I had to do the cleaning for both of us and I now have trouble with both hands, I have spinal arthritis from cleaning. What happened on the 29th January is the radiator

exploded, and in trying to stop the leak I had a severe fall and sprained my ankle. The council came and made an assessment and said they have logged it in their records. They say it can't be part of litigation because it's not a litigated matter. What we then found was, rather than try to fix the report, they create further disrepairs. They did damp treatment the outside [of the property]. We said we're asthmatic, they knocked it out from the inside, and said there's no medical condition here, and that this doesn't apply. They said under the statutory level of disrepairs they don't see any going through as disrepairs. I have reached out to my MP. The MP has been brilliant in some cases, but said that legally they can't interfere, so we understand that. For me it is more of a progression. So for example they promised me each time... So in January they promised me the home would be fixed. Then they said it was too expensive and they couldn't do it. Then in May they said they were going to come again. Each time I'm repairing, I'm trying, I'm repairing, my business is failing, I'm trying. So then in September I thought there would be progression. I wanted to start my Master's [degree] and lectures. But I had to defer because nothing has changed, and it's just a revolving situation. So we went through litigation, and in litigation they were telling me they didn't want to take liability, if we chose to settle they will fix it, but they might move us out. What is that supposed to mean? The whole purpose of us going through it was for liability, it's not something that I choose to be here. They have started some of the works now, but it's a tactical game. For example, what I find is there are resources that they have are not exercised properly. For example, they didn't follow the joint report and created two other reports. They put in another expensive ventilation system and when they put that in they had to shut it down the same day, and for a year and a half it can't work because of the squirrel infestation. They run the ventilation through the loft so that the excrement goes back into the house whenever they turn it on, and they come in through a hole. What they said to me was that, 'oh, my mother lives in the country and she gets squirrels, please explain to me the relevance'. I really don't know... I'm trying to be patient, but where I'm at today is they then say, 'well, you have become difficult, if you stick with litigation we will try to fix the hole'. My legal aid has now been cancelled, that support has been taken away, and the two times that I appeared in the big court in Central London I had to represent myself. I don't really know how to, and honestly I'm trying beyond my capabilities.

Kate Hollern MP: Do you think the council doesn't understand? I think they just don't care.

Participant D: If I was to be honest, I'm a care leaver and I would say they don't care. I see the council as an entity, as an organisation, but I think it's the people that run the organisation. I think it's the culture and mindset. If the culture and the mindset don't understand the diversity of our people and what we experience, how can we get tangible solutions? I think this is a problem. I think when we're looking to have a resolution or have a problem solved... So for example, once I was complaining and there was no litigation, and it was just them coming... Respectfully, I didn't see great changes but it wasn't like, woah, someone squeezing, if you kind-of understand, until my estate agent, the person who runs the property, what they could do is tactical things. So they would, for example, let's say I'm in litigation, they call me asking if they can come round, but my solicitor is in litigation, we're here and the managers are there, why are you calling? They say the tenant was unavailable, 'we tried to contact her and she wasn't there'. What I had to do was get a camera, so I see everyone that comes in the home. So when he comes, he then says to me, 'well, I visited your home and you weren't there,' so I said to him, 'well, we were here, so let me just check the camera and can I see if you were in the vicinity'. When I checked it I said to him I have checked the footage and you were nowhere near. I was sent an apology letter that said, 'the windows were closed and we made an assumption that you were not in...'

Ben Everitt MP: Have you considered the Ombudsman?

Participant D: I have gone through my Ombudsman. I went through my Ombudsman when it was just a stage one complaint, and then stage two, but my case was a little bit more than that because what happened was they decided to take me for a possession notification and the judge awarded the counterclaim, so that's where my one became a little bit different from my colleagues. But then also what I have signed... But then sometimes I just feel... I don't know what to say. One of my greatest struggles where I was in project management earning good money, due to health disabilities and all this kind of stuff now I'm on what you call limited capability for work. My work hours went to three hours then diminished to nothing. I can't do a Master's [degree] if I can't type, I will have to have supported technology in order to do so but I can't afford it. Everything that was meant to be my progression has been compromised, and I think that is the bit that no one seems to... It's not about the disrepair...

Ben Everitt MP: It's about you as a person, because ultimately houses are for people to live in, it's the person

Participant D: They generated two independent reports because they wanted to prove that the joint report was wrong, but what has happened with the two independent reports is it has brought up something else. When we moved we were a family of six. I had one daughter who was 16, but everyone else was classified as young adults. It was meant to be a three-bed, but it is now [classified as] a two-bed in the report that they have generated. I have wanted them for years to explain to me why it is that the allocation put me in a two-bed and put me in overcrowded [accommodation] and why it wasn't a three-bed.

Kate Hollern MP: Can I just go back a step? How do you feel the Ombudsman handled your case?

Participant D: I feel the Ombudsman gave sufficient information in the sense that when it was just step by step, they told me that if the council does not answer back your complaint and former complaint, 'well this is what we can do, we can go and do these steps and we can do such and such'. So in those stages the early part of it was satisfactory. I didn't feel that they didn't aid us because they tried numerous times to help. But then I would go back to the management transfer... The thing is they could have moved us and fixed the accommodation and put us in, rather than have us suffer and fix it around us. So they are trying to fix it now around me and they said they will do it room by room. But they came in and they are everywhere. I don't have a sleeping space. I don't have a kitchen. I have been without my bathroom for four weeks now. So what they do is they come in and work on the bathroom; while he is working on that I can't use the bathroom, he takes the toilet out and the toilet goes in the kitchen. He puts it back in the evening, but it has no flush, so I have to use water and flush it that way. It's been that way for four weeks now. I don't know what to do anymore.

Participant G: We know you don't have a tenant's group. Does your council have an independent scrutiny panel that scrutinises the running of the business? It's laid down in legislation that every landlord should have an independent scrutiny panel. Independent can be made up of tenants, outsiders, your local councillors, but it must be independent.

Participant A: Can I just say that we may have, and I'm not the most knowledgeable person... but it is very difficult. I remember I was in a meeting once with just one person and I was saying we don't even know the structure of the resident engagement, we don't know the structure of the repairs, who is the boss? Somebody then was saying they had a copy of that in their bag, but they didn't know if they were entitled to give it to us. I'm just saying it would be nice to know....

Participant G: It's been laid down in legislation because, for example, if you had a complaint against me I can't deal with that complaint myself, otherwise it's not fair.

Ben Everitt MP: Is this where Participant F comes in?

Participant F: I think bringing it to independent scrutiny panels is completely reasonable. The problems that people contact us with for disrepairs, tenants with really severe disrepairs where they can't shut windows or doors and they're having to live like that basically, cracks in ceilings, cracks in walls. The problem we face is when people contact us with cases we can't step in. We can do 'no win no fee' but we don't have the capital to do 'no win no fee'. It influences it really heavily if you do 'no win no fee' and then a massive fee is paid in, so when people actually get the compensation it's taken. But also we used to be... For disrepair cases we would have got compensation, would get orders that the repairs would be dealt with, so the legal battle would result in just the issue being resolved, whereas now the money might be given but what is that? I spoke to someone on the estate who is also housebound, and she was saying when she moved in it was in such a bad state that she was scared she wouldn't get another offer if she didn't accept. She accepted it and borrowed £5,000 to fix it, so that's the situation that she's in, and she's said she's gone in with 'no win no fee' a few times and she gets the money. But the actual issues don't go away. So we'd be pushing that there needs to be reform around the legal address of the issues. It's not just the compensation side of things but it's ordering the landlord to fixing the issue.

Kate Hollern MP: A legal responsibility.

Participant F: A legal responsibility, and the fact of 'no win no fee' and that people are withholding their rent...

Participant E: When you get mental health from it you're talking to the doctors about it and the doctor's resolution is, 'you've got to take this tablet', and you're saying that's not going to help my problem because I'm still in the surrounding circumstances. Until that's addressed the tablets won't work.

Ben Everitt MP: We've heard a lot today about dilapidation and disrepair, and we've also heard conflicting views on regeneration versus redevelopment, even on today's visit. It would be a tremendous time to bring Participant C in.

Participant C: Just to follow up on what is happening in Lambeth... Now Lambeth's disrepair situation is now top of the list of London's councils. In response, without actually addressing the issue of disrepair, Lambeth Council set aside £2,000,000 just for their legal team to deal with these cases. To save money without giving money to external lawyers they're now building an internal legal system. A lot of that information is in a report written by The People's Audit; there's so much there where they've followed money, and there are huge holes in Lambeth's own accounts which they've now started to review.

Participant D: This is something that for me is very important. I know local government can't hold their own selves responsible, where a private landlord... if they don't do what the Government guidelines say... how do the two, when people find themselves in similar circumstances, how do the two have a balance? So for example when I have a problem with a house that is not habitable, environmental health was caused by Wandsworth to come and investigate why that property was let when it was uninhabitable. However I'm in the same scenario and environmental health can't come into my property to deem it unfit – why?

Ben Everitt MP: That's exactly the purpose of this inquiry, it's to look at the quality and regulation of social housing.

Kate Hollern MP: There needs to be some legal responsibility on local government...

Participant A: Can I just say that I was approached by the council who was going to organise a fun day in June via their wellbeing department, and it was brought up what was affecting peoples' wellbeing. Was the council going to be there, to have a stall and see if people complain about disrepairs? They were like, 'oh, I don't know, it's a Saturday...' and whatever. Then we just received a letter from Lambeth Council and Homes for Lambeth Development saying there's going to be a survey for the whole estate for them to know [about] health impact assessments and that it would feed into what is needed for the new estate. So basically that is costing them thousands, but yet on the fun day they can't provide two workers, they've already decided that two people can't work that Saturday. The peanuts we ask for we don't get but yet they can just canvass the whole estate which will go into the Lambeth Council database and feed into the new development, but not be shared with us. They need to lead with repairs, whether there are plans for regeneration or not. Decent homes for temporarily housed people... they should not be left behind.

Participant E: [In my home] they hadn't done the electricity test or gas test and they'd slung me in there. I then found an old report that was saying there was no electricity. But if there was no electricity how have they checked the electricity, if it says on the form there was no electricity? Then they say, 'ok, we'll sort something out next week.' That's not the point. They moved me in there and it's not safe. Same thing with the gas. I don't even know if the place is safe. I've had to call them in when I'm already in. It should have been done before I even had keys.

Participant B: Going back to regeneration, will there be any social housing left? I don't think so.

Participant G: Can I just ask a question which is my main question today? Following last year's white paper on social housing, which I thought was very good, what wasn't there was what support can we expect to have from the Government if our social landlords are not providing us with what the white paper says we should be getting?

Ben Everitt MP: I think it's an excellent question and it's not one that we can answer today. The purpose of this inquiry is to look into the regulation of social housing, and it's quite clear from what we're hearing that it's not working. It's complicated and it's not catching what it needs to catch.

Participant E: The council is not going to see what work has been done.

Participant D: One of the things that I do find, when they start to fix the home, one of the things is material. I see a lot of money [spent] that is wasteful, and how it is wasteful is why can't you just use decent material and fix the property where there is sustainability. For example, they've put in a panel in the bathroom, and there is a pipe that is excessively wet, but due to the fact that it's only plywood after three months it just rots away. I don't understand what the point of it is. Then they come again and do the same thing repetitively. It's just the way that you manage the budget. I definitely want to know because it just doesn't make any sense

Participant C: The contractors, the way in which they procure work really needs to be reanalysed. Say for example the contractor is working in Wandsworth, when he comes to the end of the contract, if they were to be reviewed by all their tenants and residents they would get a very terrible review. But they are of a certain size that if they were going to bid for another contact, say in neighbouring Lambeth or another London council, they would probably get it, and they would get it

for another fifteen years. Likewise, the one in Lambeth would then bid for the one in Wandsworth after they have had terrible reviews

Participant D: For one's that are carrying out repairs, they are called X, and they cover all the boroughs. They get subcontractors, so for example they came out and said to me they were going to fix [my home] in January, then the subcontractors gave them a forecast of what it would take to fix the home and they said, 'no, we're not going to do that, it's too expensive'. Then we waited until June for them to come again and re-evaluate, and they said, 'oh, we can't do it now because the contractors are yet to do it'. So finally, when it was a month and a half now they find another contractor but a smaller contractor.

Kate Hollern MP: But as a tenant, you should not even be involved in who is delivering a service. A council is buying a service, it's their responsibility to make sure that service is carried out satisfactory. Your only part in that should be to tick a box and say this job is good...

Participant E: The pressure is above them, is it makes sense?

Participant D: What happens is it's a third-party arrangement. You will have one worker who is, I wouldn't say secretive, but they might not share that information, but when it comes to the price of the contractors they might say the home isn't fixed because they don't have the resources, they can't find contractors, and Wandsworth wants to have someone who is going to be the cheapest possible alternative.

Participant B: I'd just like to say I had to pay for my roof, which is usually guaranteed for about 25 years. About three years after they'd finished it the roof started leaking again, and I said, 'listen, you've got to be covered for this', and they said, 'sorry, you're not covered anymore because we got another contractor in to repair the roof'.

Ben Everitt MP: So it was the council who broke the warranty?

Participant B: Yes. I thought this is absolutely ludicrous, this is a brand-new roof. The leaseholders had to pay about £3,000 each for the repair. Because it was another contractor who repaired the roof, they weren't liable for it. I was just thinking has this been going on since the 1960s? I think I has. What is going on in this place?

Kate Hollern MP: Your contract is between yourself and the council. It's their responsibility, you shouldn't be getting involved in that.

Participant C: When they're looking down, these companies that we've mentioned, they've done their tick-box exercise.

Kate Hollern MP: But the tenants can see they haven't.

Participant C: In Wandsworth, the only way that there's actually been some kind of tenant's voice being heard from a wider platform – and I have to mention his name – is X. He had a spat with XX of Wandsworth Council as the council was seen as the model London council, and it was a running spat. I've got evidence from tenants how badly the council is being run, but from [the member of the council's point of view], 'we're reducing your council tax, the quality of housing in our borough is fantastic', and X was like 'we've got evidence that if you want to talk about on social media we can'. That is, from my point of view, the only way I've seen tenants actually showing... no one wants to show their home to the public and have TV cameras coming in, but there's an element of trust with someone like X who's like, 'right, I'm going to fight for you'.

Kate Hollern MP: Who is it?

Participant A: He grew up in council housing...

Participant D: He's an advocate, he went to court and won. He takes other people under his umbrella, he will highlight your case and then will go directly to the authority and say, 'look, you're saying A, B, C and D but really this contradicts what you are saying.

Participant C: He shouldn't be doing this role, but because his father was ill, his housing was in a bad situation, he realised it wasn't just his family, it was his neighbours, and not just the neighbours, people in London, Birmingham, the whole country, and now he's being asked to kind-of campaign to show how bad the system has got. There's some very good people in the councils, but there's almost like a civil war. In Lambeth, some of the money that should be going to councils to do some of this work is now going to regeneration budgets and then they're wasting that money because they're bringing their associates into certain positions who are not really trained or skilled. That has a drastic effect on the quality of housing, not just across London but across the UK.

Participant A: I don't know how relevant this is, but Lambeth has just given a contract to Saville's for £5,000,000 to check the whole of its stock, and of course for people off our estate that caused shockwaves because they are basically property developers and investors. In other areas where this has happened they have been earmarked for demolition. So what I'm saying is that there was £5,000,000, and instead of doing it in-house they've given it to a potential developer.

Ben Everitt MP: I don't think that's irrelevant at all.

Participant C: In response to regeneration, it's quite easy to demolish council housing in whatever state it is, destroy communities, move people out. That option of refurbishment, retrofit, maintenance, renewable energy production, looking at community centres is usually option one in a regeneration scheme. That option one is a joke. It's like, 'oh, we could do this, but we prefer option three or four', which is increasing the density, buildings like net zero apartment blocks. But it's not really for the community. By the time all of that is in place it's 20 years ahead and the community has moved on. Also about the social housing white paper: affordable housing is not social housing. The new blocks that they're building are affordable housing. That's mixed with shared ownership. People can afford a quarter, and then they're ramping up the value of the other apartments in the block.

Participant A: A lot of it is not affordable.

Participant C: But this are social housing builds, [they say], 'oh, we're building more affordable housing'. And when you speak to someone who says that is social housing, you have to say, 'no, it's not social housing, it's 10% and it's not even affordable'. They are mixed starter homes, first home, all these nonsense terms come into it. Then you think what is a starter home, how many starter homes have been built? This was a Government policy. That's just a step to open to door to complete demolition, move the communities and build these blocks, which has serious, serious social implications.

Kate Hollern MP: I was just going to say, start looking at shared ownership – that's a minefield of problems.

Ben Everitt MP: Ladies and gentlemen, I think we'll call it there. We've covered an awful lot of ground and I think we've given ourselves plenty to go on...