

Written evidence submitted by Mr Dawud Marsh [RSH 111]

We are residents of Clare House, a tower block in Bow, East London that is managed by Clarion Housing Group. We appreciate that the parliamentary enquiry on levelling up, housing and communities has limited time and ability to hear from everyone who lives in social housing, but we feel it is important to hear directly from those of us who are immediately impacted by the poor management and ongoing stigma that is reflected in how we are treated by our landlords, in this case Clarion Housing Group.

We were urgently decanted from our homes as we were told by Clarion that the block was unsafe due to historical structural issues and risk of fire within the block.

Clarion have repeatedly not listened to our concerns since Grenfell when we raised the issue of fire safety in the block. They put in place a waking watch telling us it was only for a short time. They did not tell us the seriousness of their concerns with the cladding - we asked repeatedly about this - which we now know is made from polystyrene, neither did they respond constructively to our concerns over a lack of fire safety measures in the block - no central fire alarm system and our concerns about tenant safety during a fire as we only have one stair case for escape in the event of a fire. We did not trust the instructions to remain in our homes if there is a fire within the block - it is clear throughout the decant process that Clarion had no idea who lives within the block and what each residents needs are. Some of us have significant medical conditions, disabilities and carer responsibilities and families, some of whom have children with special educational needs.

Eventually Clarion changed communal and flat doors and still with the waking watch we were told we needed a sprinkler system throughout the block including in our flats. We raised concerns about this system not being fit for purpose but again we were not listened to. We have lived through endless poor quality repairs and building works that have caused endless noise, dust, disruption and inconvenience - the lifts are regularly breaking down especially when work people use the lifts to carry heavy things. Those of us with mobility needs are then stranded on their floors unable to get out to do basic things such as shopping or attending medical appointments when the lifts break down.

We repeatedly asked for the outcomes of investigations into the building itself but Clarion refused to share this with us. It was clear from the timeline of what we know of these investigations and the results Clarion were getting that there were significant concerns about the safety of the building as far back as November 2020. The trajectory of the results they were getting must have been clear, but instead of informing us as early as possible to better manage decant of the building, Clarion waited until they were told the block needed to be urgently evacuated before telling us. Tower Hamlets have told us that decants have happened before, but in a managed way over a period of time that allows for residents to have a choice in where they live and explain clearly what is going on and what will happen at each stage of the process. With Clarion, we have to repeatedly request for updates and detailed information because we are kept pretty much in the dark about what properties they have allocated, how they are managing the allocation process and why so many of us are refusing offers of longer term temporary accommodation due to them being unsuitable.

Clarion have refused to share the detailed results of these investigations despite requests from tenants, local councillors and MP and solicitors acting on our behalf. But still we are no clearer as to why not only did Clarion leave us in an unsafe block for almost a year, families were moved in to the block during this time.

Clarion belittled us as tenants, reinforcing the stigma around social housing, by the way they managed the decant of the block. They brought in staff who are not from the local area so were unaware of how far temp accommodation was from our homes. We were told not to keep asking for updates and information, one member of the Clarion team said to me personally, "The more questions you keep asking me the longer it takes me to get on and find people temporary accommodation to move in to."

We were told to pack like we are going on holiday - but people normally return home after going on holiday - and because there is no trust between us tenants and Clarion and because they were not telling us exactly what the issue was with the building we panicked. It seemed as if the building was about to collapse the way we were told to leave urgently, just taking what we needed for the next 2 weeks. Staff kept telling us they could not understand why we are packing all of our belongings when we just needed to leave within a couple of days? They did not understand the panic they caused within us all.

We all started to pack away everything in our homes and had daily fights with staff over how many boxes we were allowed to have. Staff onsite did not do a simple task of looking at the flat numbers, counting how many flats were there and ordering enough boxes for each flat with tape and bubble wrap. Instead, despite repeatedly requesting more boxes and tape and bubble wrap we had daily arguments with Clarion staff who insisted on defending their position of not giving us more boxes. We were told you've had your quota of boxes for today, other residents need boxes too, there just isn't enough to go round, you're just packing as if you're going on holiday! We didn't know at that point where we were going to be living nor what we needed to bring with us when we moved out. We even had Clarion staff forcing the lift door open to take boxes off us because we had taken too many! Can you imagine how that would make you feel? Clarion staff offered us IKEA bags for our packing and we asked staff, 'When you pack up your home to move, do you use IKEA bags?' The answer is obviously no.

There were arguments between Clarion staff and tenants as they kept information close and used the waking watch fire Wardens as security. The process of decanting was chaotic to say the least. Clarion had seen the outcome of a desktop review of the results of invasive explorations from the previous reports and sat on this for two weeks. We would have thought that any housing association that designs its service around local residents needs would have been planning how to manage the decant process.

It was clear this had not been done and it was down to individual staff to support people. That really depended on who you got allocated as a case worker. Some staff were simply not up to the task of supporting people who were going through trauma. They did not have any ability to listen to our needs and concerns nor to respond to our questions and anxieties about where we were going to be moved to. Some staff promised we would have additional costs, such as taxi fares, paid for, other staff said this was not possible. Some staff eventually used their own credit cards to pay for temporary accommodation, and this was seen by Clarion as a sign of how dedicated staff were to support us. Actually, it showed significant lack of organisational planning to give staff on the ground resources to ensure us residents were properly re-housed.

As residents were being moved, there were ongoing issues with the process. We turned up to apartments only to find out there were no bookings, or payments had not been made, or the places we were asked to move in to were in a very bad state, such as water damage, broken beds and sinks, poorly maintained and not clean. The size of the places we were being put in did not suit families, some of who are still living in small, over crowded service apartments. Residents simply asked for confirmation of booking so that when they turned up at the apartment you have some proof there

was a booking. Some staff simply refused to do this and there was no one to contact out of hours after we turned up to an apartment and found out it was not booked for us. This meant families, with small children, were going back into their homes within a tower block that was being urgently decanted due to fire and structural safety concerns. Families were distraught and the next day frustrated to be told, 'well we booked the apartment for you so why are not back here at Clare House?'

Interpreters were a huge issue, especially for those who speak Chinese and Lithuanian and we often had staff shouting slowly at residents whose first language is not English, as if this method of communication would help that person understand. I personally witnessed several incidents of this and from the very beginning of this process we requested independent interpreters, but even now several months along this process, there is still no independent interpreters for residents who are struggling to access meetings online in English and to read and understand often large documents that have an impact on our lives. Those of us who are able to speak English fluently have access to Clarion's senior management team. Those for whom English is not their first language do not. That sounds like a housing association, who are a charity, is set up to serve only some of the community - not the model Claire Miller described at the enquiry meeting. We were told that Clarion staff can interpret, but even there are issues with this. Firstly, staff over the phone were telling residents their English is good enough - which is simply wrong. Without completing a detailed ESOL assessment, for which people are trained, how would someone know if another person's English is good enough? What about reading all the pages of text we were being given? Secondly, having Clarion staff interpreting for residents opens up issues of safeguarding. What does a resident do if they have an issue with the staff member who is interpreting for them? Also, imagine being a member of staff working in a team and whenever someone who speaks your first language needs help you are asked to interpret? That is discrimination plain and simple. A fully independent interpreting service would avoid all this and the council asked to step in and help but Clarion refused. There have been many issues and incidents where Clarion had the opportunity to design their service around the needs of the residents and they did nothing to ensure all residents are treated equally. There is a serious issue around equality of access to Clarion services here that they have continued to refuse to address.

Clarion have made promises that they have then gone back on, such as the promise to be active in the housing market to find suitable properties - if there is nothing on the current housing stack they will buy and rent. They have not been active at all in the housing market and what they did instead was insist everyone signed up to the local housing register and indeed this is the main source of properties from which Clarion are drawing on. Clarion said they will offer everyone 3 options and we would have 3 options through the housing register plus if we are still not housed Clarion will offer another choice. Now, we are told the three offers are combined and there is no additional choice. Some residents have been on the housing register for many years and they are still unable to find a suitable property.

Regarding the housing register, we as Clare House residents, have urgent decant status for a year, after which we then drop down the register in terms of priority. At the moment, if you go onto the register without logging in, there are some properties that may meet some of our requirements, but when you log in with our account, the choice and range of properties is much less. The properties are filtered so that we have less choice. There has been no explanation for this, despite us raising this with Clarion and the local authority.

Additionally, we have on the whole, larger space at Clare House. Many residents who have been matched to a longer term temporary property, report they are unable to take their furniture with them. The space is too small for wardrobes, living room furniture and even kitchen tables and chairs. Residents are saying they have to get rid of their furniture and buy new furniture.

Clarion said they would help with the cost of this, but there is no choice about what furniture we can have as Clarion insist on using their own supplier. The furniture bought this way will be attached to the property. One thing Clarion insisted is that when we move into longer term temporary accommodation we can have our own belongings around us. This is not going to be the case. Many residents panicked when packing and not knowing where we were going to move to or how long our things would be in storage, decided to get rid of personal possessions. Clarion staff couldn't understand this saying we only need to pack for a 3 week period as if we are going on holiday. Over 4 months down the line most of us are still in serviced apartments with no idea when we will be moving out.

Clare Miller, in an interview on national news said at the beginning of the decant process that the safety of residents was their priority and those in the top 5 floors had been moved out within 3 days. This was not true. Some families on that top floor were there for over 2 weeks before being placed in a serviced apartment.

Clare Miller also said on the BBC politics Now programme that Clarion will have everyone placed in longer term temporary accommodation before Christmas. This didn't happen. In fact, we felt abandoned over the holiday period and contact with case workers dropped to complete silence. In fact, it often takes repeatedly asking for replies before we get a response. Clarion said they set up a dedicated team to manage the decant and ongoing needs of us residents, but emails go unanswered for weeks, voicemails left unanswered and case workers seem to be missing in action. Apparently, the dedicated email address is viewed every hour. Then why do we often wait weeks for a reply? Just the courtesy of saying the email and questions/ queries have been received would make us feel as if we are being supported. But nothing. Residents report getting no replies for many weeks, despite repeatedly sending emails.

Clarion said that due to the cost of living out of our homes and the extra pressure of Christmas they would give every adult £20 and every child £10 before the holiday period. This works out so that a single parent on universal credit with 2 children gets £40 whilst a working couple with 1 child gets £50. A clear advantage to working families. The payments actually didn't arrive until after Christmas and we thought that as we complained about this unfairness they had decided not to give the money. It became a running joke amongst Clare House residents as another promise by Clarion, ill thought out as it was, would go broken. Clarion complained that residents are always complaining and picking up on the negatives. But our lives, through no fault of our own, have been turned completely upside down and Clarion, as they are not listening, don't realise how it has impacted on us.

When many residents complained about the mental and physical impact this was having on them, we were told to speak to local MIND, a mental health charity. We politely asked, would it not be better to resolve the reasons for our distress? It's as if they are seeing our upset as something that needs to be talked out, rather than Clarion taking steps to fulfil their primary purpose, which is to safely house us all.

We were told we could not move without signing form 8. On the government's own website it explicitly states do not sign this form as you are signing away your tenant rights. Clarion told us this was the only way we can move into longer term temporary property. But this is another lie. The solicitor that some of us have instructed to act on our behalf said we should not sign this form. They also said they'd be currently working with other Clarion residents and know that Clarion have set up parallel tenancies, which is what we asked for. When the Clare House TRA instructed residents not

to sign the form, we were told we are being obstructive to the process and stopping residents being placed in longer term temporary accommodation.

Some families have been repeatedly moved and some have had their serviced apartment bookings run down and had to wait with a suitcase to hear from their case worker where they will be living next. Clarion leave the rebooking of serviced apartments so late that the rooms are then booked out. One family in particular, a single mother, has had to endure this trauma several times, dropping off her daughter to school, not knowing where they will be living that day. Imagine waiting to hear where you will be moving to, with your personal belongings in a suitcase and having to manage taking your daughter to school and working.

The ongoing trauma is causing a lot of distress and upset and it is no wonder residents are finding it hard to cope and feeling down, depressed and struggling to balance family life, jobs and continue with the battle with Clarion to treat us with respect. Recent resident meetings have become pointless as we have questions that go unanswered and a promise staff will get back to us, when they don't.

Residents have complained that their medical conditions have got worse throughout this time. Parents of children with special needs have spoke about problems with their child's behaviour and sleep patterns and ability to go to school - having a taxi isn't helpful for those who struggle to cope with changes in their routines.

Regarding the taxis to and from school, this has been an ongoing problem for families. They say taxis come late, or not at all. Taxi companies have cancelled bookings because of non-payment by Clarion. Taxi drivers don't understand the needs of the children and families they are picking up. Children with Autism find it extremely difficult to cope with sudden changes in routine and uncertainty in what is going to happen. It is an ongoing trauma for families and their children.

There is a lot of stigma with social housing and the ongoing need to keep chasing Clarion for answers, payment of expenses and be told to stop harassing staff and to wait is almost like a slap in the face. It's like begging. But we didn't put ourselves in the situation and don't want to keep asking and asking and asking. It's very tiring. Your self esteem is impacted. You cannot sleep not knowing what is going to happen next.

When we were at Clare House one big issue we had as residents was repairs. It was a running issue that we all spoke about where you have a repair reported, Clarion book in a repair, you take time off work and wait and no one comes. When you report this to Clarion they say well the contractor said they came but there was no answer. Or you get the wrong person coming to a repair. Or you are told the repair will take weeks - we waited weeks for repair to our water and had no means of shower and bath. We had to go to a relatives house to have a proper wash.

The huge issue we are facing now is the urgent need to extend serviced apartments for those of us who are waiting for longer term temporary accommodation and then being 'matched' to a suitable property that meets our needs. For example, families want to stay close to the schools where their children attend, some families have applied for secondary schools based on living at Clare House, many of us have a much needed support network of family and friends around Clare House, with medical clinics and health support services close by. Some have lived in the area for many years and fear moving away. We are currently scattered across the borough in our serviced apartments. But, despite repeated request for clarity of the allocation process, which Clarion say they are working very hard on, many offers of longer term temp accommodation is being turned down as it is not suitable. Clarion keep warning us that we have to have a very good reason for turning down a

property as they are working so hard on matching us. But, families are being offered tower blocks, places far away from school that need long walking times, or having to cross main busy roads. The impact on the extra traveling time is huge - those with cars are being matched to no car zone areas, Clarion are offering taxis, but this is not working out now. The size of the properties does not meet our needs and it's clear from the spread of accommodation being offered to us, we are only being given a limited choice.

Moving home is a huge step and probably one of the most stressful times for any person and their family, Clarion are making this process increasingly more difficult and stressful for all of us. They won't shed light on how they are matching us, they won't give us a choice, and they won't allow us to choose furniture we need for moving in.

Most of us are now exhausted with the endless battle with Clarion. At a recent meeting online with Clarion, we have been told that staff will get back to us in two days. We were told that dedicated staff have been sending in weekly reports to their managers saying how they are keeping in touch with everyone. But many residents are feeling abandoned and report that their dedicated staff are often uncontactable and seem to go missing for days and even weeks at a time. We said that their customer service is atrocious and we have no faith that anyone will get back in touch with us about any issues and concerns we raise, some of these issues for specific residents have been going on for weeks and months with no resolve.

This is just a flavour of the experience we have had from Clarion that reflects the ongoing trauma we are facing as residents who have been forced out of our homes with no idea where we will live, how long for nor what support we will receive once we have been allocated a longer term temporary accommodation. We all fear that Clarion will forget us once we are moved out of our serviced apartments, which we are told are very expensive. That is not something we need to know about as we did not choose to put ourselves into this situation but yet Clarion feel it is ok for them to make us feel as if it is somehow our fault.

We simply ask that you consider our experience in the parliamentary enquiry on levelling up, housing and communities and use our experience to ensure that Clarion, and other housing associations, are held accountable for the way they treat residents, not just in times of emergencies such as Clare House, but every day.

Thank you for your time and for reading this and we ask for a debate in parliament for ministers and MPs to hear our plight, that would surely be of benefit to the many tenants across the country who are suffering as we are.

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