



Petitions Committee

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Steven Mark
Defence Committee
House of Commons

9 January 2024

Dear Steven,

Service accommodation: Petitions Committee public engagement

I am writing with regard to the Defence Committee's inquiry into service accommodation.

The Chamber Engagement Team work as part of the Petitions Committee Team to engage people who have signed petitions with relevant parliamentary debates.

In December 2023 the team ran a public engagement activity in respect of Alistair Strathern's Westminster Hall debate on 'Adequacy of service accommodation' (HC Deb 19 December, vol 742). This involved inviting petitioners to answer a survey about their experiences of service accommodation, and putting forward suggestions for how it could be improved. Some of the contributions received were then referred to in the debate.

Given the direct relevance of the activity to the Defence Committee's inquiry, I am attaching a summary of the engagement as evidence to the inquiry. This features the main themes to emerge from responses to the survey, and example quotes to illustrate them. It also shows the constituencies from which survey responses were submitted, and lists the petitions whose signatories were contacted.

I hope you will find this useful for the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

Cat Smith MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee

Service accommodation

Summary of public contributions to a Westminster Hall debate

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Introduction

On 19 December 2023, Alistair Strathern MP led a Westminster Hall debate entitled 'Adequacy of service accommodation' (HC Deb, vol 742). To support the debate, the Chamber Engagement Team distributed a survey asking people who had signed relevant petitions about their experiences of service accommodation.

The survey featured questions posed by the MP, and was shared with signatories of the e-petitions:

- [Review and enhance the rights of Service Family Accommodation \(SFA\) tenants](#) (632147)
- [Launch a judge-led public inquiry into the standards of military accommodation](#) (588558)

There were **84** responses to the survey. See Appendix II for a constituency map.

This summary details the main themes to emerge from the survey responses, and gives example quotes to illustrate them.

Its contents are to be read as reflective only of the experiences of those who responded to the survey.

Experiences of service accommodation

The majority of respondents reported having negative experiences.

Common themes included:

- Overall standards

"I lived in a house that used to flood every year and was told that it was okay as we would be housed in a hotel when the flood happened. House insurance was extortionate."

"Leaking soil pipes, letting human waste from the floor above drip onto the occupants below. Civi have repaired twice in the last four weeks. Two weeks later and it's leaking again. Living in freezing cold block. Freezing cold water or boiling hot water that you can't touch – there's never anything in between. Constant mould everywhere."

"I have spent the last three years trying to get a faulty boiler fixed, with intermittent heating in winter. This year, it gave out, so we have had no heating or hot water. Relying on the immersion heater and two small fan heaters they provided (one which was reported faulty, and I have so far had no response or replacement). Being told water leaking through a light fitting is not an emergency, and 'if it sets on fire, call us back' – a direct quote. Mould in numerous areas and being told it's because we breathe at night!"

- Quality of repair work

"There seems to be no concern for poor living conditions by Amey, Pinnacle or the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO). We've been living in poor conditions for over two years; and had to engage with our MP to get one issue resolved. No one involved with military housing seems accountable despite numerous complaints. We have received so many missed appointment compensation payments, we have now lost count. None of these organisations are fit for purpose. Why should we pay for sub-standard housing when they obviously do not care and aren't penalised for shockingly inadequate performance?"

"I am ashamed to bring non-military friends to my house. These houses would not be rentable on the open market. In fact, we suffer the indignity of Pinnacle having to make improvements to houses to sell them. On the rare occasion you get a repair, it is done with resentment and to the lowest possible standard."

"The companies contracted to deal with maintenance and repairs have gotten progressively worse in the nearly 11 years in which we have lived in Service Family Accommodation (SFA). Every minor thing is the resident's 'fault'."

"I have lived in SFA for 16 years, including 13 years in my current quarter. Over those years, we have experienced a massive eroding of the maintenance contract. Each time a new contract is made, they seem to go for the cheapest offer, paying no attention to quality of service. Service families are second-class citizens in the eyes of Pinnacle, Amey and Vivo."

- The effect on morale

"The house is falling apart. I have two young children and there is mould all over the kitchen. It's so upsetting – I do the job I do for this great nation but our nation doesn't repay the favour and throws it in our faces. No one should live the way we are in these houses but the people that serve our nation have no choice. It's very sad."

"Over almost 20 years of service I have detected an increasing sense of disappointment and frustration for those of us required to use SFA so we can serve the nation. It is hard not to become cynical when the standard of accommodation and its maintenance has consistently been eroded. In service of others, we are required to move with regularity and although we recognise the cost of rent is much lower than the open market, why should we be penalised and expected to live and nurture our families in substandard accommodation? I feel sure that no other tenant, whether a public servant or not, would tolerate such degradation."

- The effect on children

"Shocking, there's black damp and mould. Boilers repeatedly not working meaning no hot water or heating. You make appointments, take time off work and the workers don't come or even have the decency to let you know. We have a child with a serious medical condition who should not be in damp and cold conditions. They have been told about this multiple times over the years and still they don't seem to care –it's very frustrating, upsetting and concerning."

"The mould is also affecting my children and irritating their asthma. They have both ended up in hospital with breathing difficulties and constantly get bad coughs."

"Since moving into the property in October last year, we have had severe damp and black mould issues which are still to be resolved. The black mould spores are growing over the ceiling in both upstairs bedrooms and behind the tiles in the bathroom. Our 2-year-old daughter has been suffering from repeated chest infections and coughs which are exacerbated by the presence of mould. We had a phone call over five weeks ago to say works would be starting in the next few weeks but couldn't be told what was happening or when. Needless to say, nothing has happened!"

A minority reported more positive experiences:

"Current Serco accommodation and service is of a much better standard. We have previously lived in Colchester where we had lots of black mould, damp and lots of chasing and fighting to get repairs and upgrading completed."

"I am a husband to a RAF Officer, and I have lived in two SFA houses over the last seven years. Overall, I have to say our experience has been excellent. The standard of the accommodation is good and when repairs have been required, they have been undertaken (although this always requires a lot of work on my part to get them to fix it)."

"Mixed. Some accommodation is great – energy efficient, roomy and with storage space. Others however are awful – mouldy, leaking, dangerous and impossible to make or keep warm."

"Overall very positive but the repairs process for anything but minor issues takes far too long and has to be chased constantly by us."

Suggestions for changes

Common themes included:

- Changes to licencing, regulations and rights

"The under investment and maintenance delivery failures under privatisation has been going on for years and over multiple contracts and multiple parliamentary reports. I think there is only one solution to this: to give the occupants of SFA the same legal rights to safe housing as council tenants. The Licence to Occupy agreement as currently written does not give occupants sufficient legal rights to a safe and reasonable standard of housing."

"The key thing that needs to change is that military property needs to be regulated as proper tenancies with the standard protections that offers."

"Introduction of a proper tenancy contract. As occupiers we have very few rights."

- Modernising and improving standards

"Homes should be modernised to become somewhere people can be proud to live and where it feels like a home. I am embarrassed by the wood chip wallpaper and 1970s electric fire in the sitting room. The kitchen is falling apart and industrial floorings and no place for a fridge freezer make the lived experience pretty poor. Kitchens, when replaced, should be properly designed for modern living. Repairs should be undertaken and not just 'fixed' with the cheapest bodge job."

"Pull down every house older than 20 years and start again. You would not have such a huge repair team and bill if the houses were of a decent standard to begin with. Then repair with quality materials and a high standard workforce."

- Changes to the maintenance system

"Planned maintenance rather than reactive maintenance which is often carried out to a substandard level or just not carried out at all. Better access to complaints managers, and easier way to track updates on repairs and full visibility. Access to all history of repairs within the system."

"Clear communication between Pinnacle and the client regarding appointments. Listen to the clients. If I request an electrician, I shouldn't get four instances of plumbers turning up at the door. More time allocation for appointments, including proper preparation. Frequently get tradespeople turn up to fix something and then have to order parts and come back."

"I would like to see the repairs being done to a decent standard, it feels like everything is done to cheapest, quickest, boded standard, none of the tradesman can possible have any pride in their work."

"More timely response to repairs, correct trades person sent to complete the repair, better communication between workers on the ground and Pinnacle so that further repairs can be booked in correctly. Also, correct recording of repair and details from families as often the operator just puts in what they think rather than what is said then wrong trade sent, universal standard of service over the whole country."

- Regular surveys and inspections

"Before any house is allocated to a service person, a full survey of the house should be carried out, to identify any issues prior to handover, including things such as the material state of lofts which service personnel are not allowed to access, proximity of trees to the property and any potential damage they might cause, the condition of housing insulation and whether it has been carried out, and any other surveys that would normally be expected on taking responsibility for a property in the civilian world."

"A more proactive approach to repairs and upkeep with perhaps a dedicated building manager for each area with experience in building upkeep. They could then visit patches and highlight potential maintenance and improvements without waiting for issues to arise from poor upkeep. This would make life easier and better for residents of SFA and would benefit the companies and the military in the long run, paying less for upkeep than for expensive repairs that could have been prevented. We have never had a visit from anyone to check on the house, this is something that is a given in the private rental sector."

- **Accountability**

“Hold all properly accountable for their poor performance and lack of action. The current contract for the provision of service housing is wholly inadequate and unfit for purpose despite the shallow handwringing and promises provided by all contractors, including DIO, which constantly provides evidence that they are a toothless badly managed government organisation.”

“It is absolutely vital that armed forces personnel have more rights when it comes to being an occupier. We are being treated as though we can be placed in housing regardless of the condition and left there without resolution whilst having no mechanism to hold DIO, Pinnacle or VIVO to account.”

“Our SFA isn’t somewhere we just exist – this is our home. We have spent a considerable amount of time and money buying furniture and soft furnishings so that we can make these soulless magnolia boxes a place we enjoy living in, entertaining our neighbours and friends, having family to visit, working etc. A lot of the time you give up chasing on works that needs to be done because you’re worn down by it all; you just report it all before you move and leave it to be the next person’s problem.”

Additional comments

“The current standard of accommodation is not commensurate with the new ‘Modern Housing’ narrative being published. This is another reason Service Personnel become dissatisfied and leave the Service.”

“It is so upsetting to move into these accommodations and think that it has to be your home for however many years. I know of people who now live separate to their partners and children as they don’t want to stay in [the same] accommodation anymore.”

“When the military, especially lower ranked, are paid barely minimum wage for the amount of hours they work, how are we supposed to afford to get out of military accommodation? What else are our options when it’s the only affordable housing in the current financial crisis? It is absolutely debilitating knowing we are trapped in this house that has mould, lets in no end of cold through the windows (we live in the highlands and it is minus nine degrees some nights), where the kitchen is unfinished, roof falling to pieces, loose brickwork on our garden wall that could easily hurt someone – yet no one ever comes to fix anything when we call.”

Appendix I: Methodology

Chamber Engagement staff manually reviewed all individual comments and answers to the survey. Recurring themes which were threaded throughout the responses were grouped and summarised.

Appendix II: Constituency map of respondents

