

Written evidence submitted by Anonymous [RSH 040]

1. Background

- 1.1. I am a leaseholder and tenant on a small Peabody Trust estate in east London. I have lived here with my family for over 17 years. The estate was completed in 1999 and built on a brownfield site. The estate is divided into three sections, each with its own car park and gated entrance for pedestrians and vehicles: (1) six terraced houses and two blocks containing nine flats; (2) a single block of nine flats; (3) a live/work development of 27 units.
- 1.2. This evidence concerns the following two questions raised by the Committee:
 - 1.2.1. How widespread and serious are the concerns about the quality of social housing?
 - 1.2.2. Does the current regime allow tenants to effectively resolve issues?

2. How widespread and serious are the concerns about the quality of social housing?

- 2.1. My main concern about the state of our housing is the poor-quality maintenance provided by Peabody. The Trust states one of its priorities is to “develop and deliver reliably good modern services.” However, the estate has faced numerous issues caused by slow and inadequate responses to repair requests. The following examples run over several years and demonstrate that residents receive a consistently poor service in return for Peabody’s service charge:
 - 2.1.1. Failure by Peabody to clear blocked estate drains. Residents on the estate recently experienced slow drainage and air pockets (causing gurgling noises) in their kitchens or bathrooms. I contracted drainage engineers to investigate my home (before I was aware it was a wider problem) and they confirmed a serious blockage in the estate drains. A thick, stagnant mass of waste had built up, filling up half the height of the drains. I contacted Thames Water and their engineers confirmed the problem and that it lay within the boundary of the estate. I informed Peabody on 22 November 2021, but it took the Trust 25 days to resolve the situation. I had to call Peabody and its contractors 19 times and raise four separate emergency requests which should have seen a response within 24 hours. I repeatedly asked for a Peabody manager to contact me, but none did. I submitted formal complaints to Peabody on 24 November and 13 December, but I have not received a response, in contravention of the Trust’s complaints policy. I wrote to Peabody’s Chief Executive (Mr Ian McDermott) on 30 November, but I have not received a reply.
 - 2.1.2. Failure of Peabody to maintain the security gates. The pedestrian and vehicle gates were installed at the request of residents, but Peabody decided not to continue the maintenance contract with the installer. Peabody relied on its own contractors who, being unfamiliar with the system, could not maintain it properly. For many years, the gates were more broken than working and any passer-by could access the estate. Visitors use an intercom which connects to residents’ phones via a

mobile number. Peabody repeatedly failed to pay the mobile number bill which put the intercom out of action over several months.

- 2.1.3. Failure by Peabody to maintain communal security lighting. The car park in section (1) of the estate should be lit by outdoor lights. They were out of action for over a year and without them residents had to access their houses or apartment blocks in near darkness at night. They were finally replaced in November 2021.
 - 2.1.4. Failure by Peabody to give prompt approval for property improvements. Leaseholders can enhance their homes with the consent of Peabody. I had to wait six months in 2019 for permission to replace the windows in my home and received it only after repeated emailing and a formal complaint.
 - 2.1.5. Failure by Peabody to remove a dangerous tree. Soon after the estate was completed, a tree was planted just 50cm away from an exterior wall of my house. By 2008, it was 2m taller than the house and leaning away from the building and into the street. The tree had the potential to damage the house foundations or topple over onto the pavement and road. I notified Peabody about my concerns in August 2008 but despite my repeated requests and a formal complaint, no-one from Peabody inspected the tree until October 2010 when a surveyor viewed it and ordered its removal. Peabody staff had refused taking action – one staff member told me that they would do so only when “something happened”, which I took to mean serious damage or injury. The tree was finally felled in March 2011, 31 months after my original request. Other trees on the estate were allowed to grow equally tall on a confined site and it was 20 years after their planting before Peabody carried out any maintenance on them.
- 2.2. My experience is that Peabody has a reactive, ‘fix on fail’ approach. This leads to a steady degradation of the estate. Problems worsen and so become more expensive to fix, potentially leading to higher service charges for residents. There is no active management by Peabody to ensure that issues are resolved. Instead, Peabody relies on residents to pursue repairs and see them through to completion.
 - 2.3. To resolve a repair, a resident must make multiple emails or phone calls. It is not uncommon to wait for 30 minutes on the phone before speaking to a Peabody or contractor representative. The longest I have waited is 1 hour 45 minutes. (Peabody has an online repair reporting system but Milligan Street residents are excluded from it. Requests to allow residents access to it have been ignored.)
 - 2.4. Repairs are handled by Peabody’s contractors and sub-contractors and residents must negotiate through a web of legal arrangements to reach a resolution. Residents may be passed from one contractor to another (or to a sub-contractor) who see their role as completing individual tasks according to a contract, rather than seeking a solution which satisfies the resident. In the recent case of the estate drains (see 2.1.1), a sub-contractor cleared a section of the blockage and considered their work complete. There was no follow-up to see if this work had resolved residents’ problems (it had not).

2.5. Please note that the given examples cover the period both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates that Peabody's failures in maintaining housing quality date from well before 2020.

3. Is the current regime for regulating social housing fit for purpose?

- 3.1. The inadequate responses by Peabody to repair requests suggests that the regulatory regime is ineffective. In addition to repair requests, estate residents have had issues with Peabody's billing. Annual statements are often late and when they do arrive, they can be inaccurate and have to be re-issued. Overcharging is not uncommon, and Peabody has had to issue refunds. If Peabody was concerned about the regulator, it would not consistently fail its tenants. It appears that it can act with impunity and not face any serious repercussions.
- 3.2. The Housing Ombudsman website states: "We support local resolution between residents and landlords so would encourage you to complete the landlord's internal complaints procedure until the matter is either resolved or you have exhausted the process. We do not investigate complaints before they have completed the complaints process". If Peabody fails to process a complaint, then the tenant is left with few options to take matters forward. As shown above, even an approach to a Chief Executive does not elicit a response. The Ombudsman notes that it "can take steps to encourage landlords and residents to work together to resolve a complaint" but its website does not show how this can be instigated.
- 3.3. Peabody states its mission is to "help make people's lives better." Instead, the poor level of service creates a sense of neglect and a disinterest in residents' needs by Peabody. Almost every interaction with Peabody is a struggle which is frustrating, exhausting, and demoralising. It particularly discriminates against those who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with administration or complaints processes, have limited time due to caring responsibilities, or have a first language other than English.

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