

ANGRY COUNCIL TENANTS SPEAK OUT ABOUT PROBLEMS
AND HAZARDS IN THE MUIRHOUSE
HIGH RISE FLATS



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The Fire and the Fury

THE GRENFELL TOWER INFERNO last year that cost the lives of 72 council tenants, all sacrificed to the god of skimping, opened the nation's eyes to life in its tower blocks. 'But it couldn't happen here,' boasted Holyrood. 'Scottish high rises are not clad in flammable materials.'

Edinburgh City Council swung into unprecedented activity. Hardly a day went by without a leaflet being stuck through our doors telling us that that we had no need to fear a towering inferno, and teams of firefighters went round the blocks reassuring tenants. There was talk of installing sprinklers. Then it went quiet. The panic was over. Everything was fine in the six blocks.

But it isn't. There may be no danger of a high-rise holocaust like Grenfell Tower, but Muirhouse's six blocks remain riddled with problems, a situation made worse by the Council's notorious 'cock-up and cover-up' culture, its refusal to address these problems, and the near impossibility of getting repairs done. Tenants in the six blocks are sick fed up of Council excuses and foot-dragging. Fury is growing.

THAT'S WHY in early August tenants from the six Muirhouse blocks attended a meeting in Fidra Court's communal kitchen to raise these issues and hammer out a Mission Statement – a list of demands to be pre-

The meeting was organised by the Living Rent tenants' union, fresh from its success in preventing mass evictions in Glasgow, and TRIFiC (Tenants and Residents in Fidra Court.) Maddie from Living Rent chaired the meeting. One often-heard comment was 'I thought it was just me,' as tenants who had never met before swapped accounts of their housing problems and realised they were not alone in their fight.

And what a list of problems there was! The threat of asbestos contamination in the flats, the 'recycling depots' outside some of the blocks that often look like rubbish dumps, birdshit on open landings, dodgy lifts, cold flats that are impossible to heat . . . the list went and on on. But by far the biggest concern was water ingress into the flats and the dampness and mould it creates – and the Council's complete failure to even address the issue.

Water, Water, Everywhere

IN THIS the first issue of *The Six Blocks* we present first-hand accounts by Muirhouse high-rise tenants of having to live with health-damaging water, mould and dampness in their flats, often for years, and the Council's cock-up and cover-up treatment of this long-running blight. They don't care.

Let's make them care

BRINGING YOU NEWS FROM MAY COURT,
FIDRA, GUNNET, BIRNIES, INCHMICKERY
AND OXCARS – THE SIX BLOCKS

‘Like banging your

‘AFTER GRENFELL TOWER people kept asking me, *Are you not scared of fire, living on the top floor of a tower block?* Not in the least, I’d answer. My flat’s too wet to burn – though I am a bit scared of being poached.’

Birmies, according to our Council mole, is the block worst affected by leaks and dampness. Eddie’s long saga began back in Easter 2014 when he came home to find water dripping from the ceiling of the small bedroom. ‘It was weird,’ he says. ‘My ceiling is the roof and there’s no pipes or tanks up there. And it hadn’t rained for weeks.’ The concierge called a plumber. He stuck a screwdriver into the ceiling and a gush of water poured down. ‘It’s not a plumber you’re needing,’ he said. ‘It’s a team of roofers.’

COLLAPSE

‘I spent nearly two years trying to get the leak fixed but all I got were lies and the run-around. I’ve reached the stage where if a Council officer told me that New Year’s Day was the First of January I’d check two calendars just to make sure.’

Then in early 2016 the ceiling collapsed. ‘A Council worker turned up and pulled half the sodden ceiling down. The roof and the wooden beams beneath



Collapsed ceiling, Birmies



Soaking beams, Birmies were saturated.’ A survey of the roof discovered that the roofing was soaking up water like a sponge and then slowly releasing it. But nothing was done.

‘It got worse,’ he says. ‘It spread into the bathroom. The electrics were hissing and crackling. Then the wallpaper at the front door fell off. Nobody would lift a finger to help – not Councillor Cammy Day, not the local housing office. Shelter was too busy to help and any lawyer I approached said ‘Oh, we don’t do work like that.’ But then everything changed.

PANIC

‘ON the Monday morning after the Grenfell Tower disaster the roof was suddenly moving with workmen. What a coincidence.’ The reroofing was finished by last September but the beams were so wet they took to January 2018 to dry. Then the ceiling was replaced. But when the ‘Beast from the East’ storm hit in April it started to leak again. ‘All they did was move the leak 20 feet across the ceiling. That room’s been unusable for four-

-and-a-half years now. It’s back to square one.’

In Inchmickery David has spent four years trying to get his leaking roof repaired (see back page). ‘It’s like banging your head off a brick wall,’ he says – a phrase that was heard over and over again at the August meeting in Fidra. And it’s not just the block roofs.

Another top floor flat in Birmies has had water leaking from the boiler cupboard into the flat downstairs for months. And water is leaking from *that* flat’s boiler cupboard into the flat below – three floors with water damage. Mike from Fidra may have found a solution.



Mould in Inchmickery

FRACTURED

‘I’VE suffered a leak through the ceiling of the boiler cupboard in my kitchen for almost a year,’ he says. ‘Despite repeated phone calls to the Council no effective action was taken. Damage and mould has spread to the ceilings of the kitchen and the bathroom – and now water has started running down the walls of my living room. My upstairs neighbour has suffered even worse from the same leak. She has had water come through the ceiling in three rooms and is

head off a brick wall’

worried for the health of her child. The Council claimed that the problem was caused by condensation – the usual excuse. It was impossible to find out what was happening as the Repairs contact centre *does not keep info on the outcome of repairs work.*

‘Only after numerous complaints did they discover there was a crack in the main waste pipe that runs right down the block and start to fix it. When the leaking continued it took Tenants and Residents in Fidra Court contacting all local councillors to force Repairs to do something at once.’

A SAFE, DRY HOME?

‘THE complete absence of communication and of anyone to take responsibility for repairs,’ he says, ‘highlights our tenants’ demand that there must be a named person responsible for repairs. We need to act to stop this abuse of our human right to a safe and healthy home!’

Fidra tenant ‘L’ reported mould and dampness down the wall of the big bedroom ‘Wash the wall with bleach,’ the Council advised. She has done this, but of course the damp and

mould keep coming back. She also has to try and keep warm in the winter with none of her three storage heaters working. When called out to the damp flat the Council repair workers said they didn’t know how to repair the heaters because ‘the course we were supposed to be going on was cancelled.’

SLUM LANDLORD



Soaked walls and floor, May Ct

AZAZ writes: ‘My neighbour in May Court has very serious problems with damp. He lives with his wife and three young children, aged 8, 4 and 1. However, he is suffering with very bad damp in his property, as shown in the pictures attached.’

The photos he sent (see above) showed a flat riddled with damp and mould from floor to ceiling

That anyone, let alone three young children, should have to live in such conditions in this the

capital city of one of the richest countries on the planet in the year 2018 is a disgrace.

The City of Edinburgh Council is a slum landlord and should be prosecuted.

And this is not an isolated case of children living in squalor in Muirhouse. A Gunnet tenant, Tomasz, came to the Fidra meeting with a sheaf of photos of damp and mould in the flat he lives in with his family.



Damp and mould, Gunnet Ct.

On the second floor of Birnies a young mother has been trying for *nine years* to get a huge dampness problem sorted. ‘At first they said it was condensation. Then they said that when the cladding was put on the wall must’ve been wet and the wet’s been sealed in. They’re going to drill holes to let air in.’

Aye, it’s like banging your head off a brick wall.

‘If you have damp and mould you’re more likely to have respiratory problems, respiratory infections, allergies or asthma. Damp and mould can also affect the immune system. Some people are more sensitive than others, including: babies and children, elderly people, those with existing skin problems, such as eczema, those with respiratory problems, such as allergies and asthma, those with a weakened immune system.

Moulds produce allergens (substances that can cause an allergic reaction), irritants and, sometimes, toxic substances. Inhaling or touching mould spores may cause an allergic reaction, such as sneezing, a runny nose, red eyes and skin rash. Moulds can also cause asthma attacks.’ NHS Website

Making the Council sit up and take notice

A deputation from Muirhouse made up of Maddie from Living Rent, Mike from Tenants and Residents in Fidra Court, and David from Inchmickery has addressed the Council's Housing Committee.

Maddie reports:

TENANTS WHO HAVE faced years of shocking conditions have had enough, they told Edinburgh City Council's Housing and Economy Committee in a deputation this week. Councillors were visibly shocked by stories of mould, leaks and cracked asbestos floor tiles in high rises in Muirhouse, and the council have promised to take urgent action.

Six high rises in Muirhouse are council owned: Fidra Court, Birnies Court, Inchmickery Court, Gunnet Court, May Court and Oxcars Court. All of them have been neglected and tenants are frustrated with the service level when requesting repairs.

'I Had to Pay for my own Repairs'

Fidra Court tenant Michael Vallance explained: "There's nobody a tenant can contact that has any kind of overview or any kind of responsibility for repairs. All you can do is ring the contact centre." The lack of oversight has left many tenants in dangerous situations for years. David Greer, a tenant in Inchmickery court, told the committee: "I got the house in October 4 years ago. I was in 3 weeks before the leaks appeared. I had been homeless with no choice in a house. The leaks get into my electrics. I have had to pay for my own repairs and this is sad."

Living Rent in Action

Living Rent has been working tirelessly to speak to as many of the effected tenants as possible, knocking on all 358 flats in the six blocks. Out of the 60 tenants we managed to speak to, 45 of them have personally been affected by one or more outstanding repairs.

This includes families with young children living with unrelenting mould. One tenant, who has since moved out, lost many of his possessions to the mould, as well as losing a college placement and his job due to the detrimental effects on his health.

'We Didn't Know'

Mr. Vallance told the committee, "Fom the figures that we're getting the majority of tenants in Muirhouse are living in substandard conditions, which if they were being inflicted on tenants by a private landlord would be subject to legal action." Councillors on the committee acknowledged the seriousness of the issues raised by the deputation and the need for action to be taken, as well as expressing shock that this had not come to light before now. Head of Place Development Michael Thane stated that he would like to "give members and the deputation some reassurance that we will take what you've said here today and seek to work with you to rectify some of the issues that you've experienced in that area."

An Instant Response?

The response seems to be immediate, with some tenants already receiving calls from the council repair services. Mike commented: "The Council has ignored individual complaints. But now that the tenants are organising together, the Council are being forced to take notice. Top officials have pledged to meet tenants to resolve the problems. We should be encouraged to step up our actions to make sure the Council keep their promises and we win our right to a safe, warm and healthy home."

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thesixblocks0@gmail.com Send us your stories and pics. Or put them in an envelope and leave them for us in the Fidra communal kitchen.**