

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

THE SIX BLOCKS

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

THE FESTIVAL? It's for people with money. 'For £500 a night, the Tattoo's fireworks can be viewed from a room in the Balmoral Hotel – or a tourist could rent a three-bed flat in the New Town for up to £7000 for a month. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is an enormous £1 billion boost to Scotland,' says the Daily Record. 'Cash changes hands in the city quicker than a Fringe flyer. But critics say it disappears like flames down a fire-eater's throat before any hard-up Edinburgh citizen has a flash of it.'

ANOTHER GALAXY

'In the last year, 19,128 emergency food parcels were provided in the City of Edinburgh – and 6087 of these went to children, a 10 per cent increase on the previous year. The capital has the most rapidly accelerating rents anywhere in the UK, and its chronic housing shortage is exacerbated by the fact that it has the highest concentration of Airbnbs of any European city . . . For those in the Edinburgh peripheral estates,' the Record goes on, 'the Festival could be in another galaxy. Areas like Wester Hailes, Pilton and Muirhouse are dusty rings of poverty around the shining star of the city centre.'

STRUGGLING

'Community worker Wullie Adams, 61, was raised in Muirhouse, which is in the top five per cent most deprived areas in Scotland. He said: "We get told the money from the Festival filters down – but to where? Not to here. I can't be bothered to go to it . . . here people aren't happy, they're struggling. The Festival is meant to be for us all but it's not. It's for people with money." But if you're broke and enjoy drama and spectacles, don't worry. There's no need to go up to 'the shiny star of the city centre' and fight through hordes of gawking tourists. No need to pay to see the Tattoo. In the Six Blocks, part of the *other* Edinburgh that



A FAMILIAR SIGHT IN THE SIX BLOCKS

tourists never see, we have enough drama of our own. For example:

HIGH DRAMA

April. Tenant on the notorious 13th floor of Birnies Court cracks and throws furniture over the balcony, smashing up a parked ambulance in the process. The man is taken to the Royal Infirmary for assessment. The incident makes it into the papers and TV news. **July.** Oxcars Court taped off and surrounded by 7 police vehicles and 2 specialist response ambulances as riot police with shields are called in to deal with 'a hostage incident'. After a 3 hour stand-off a 57 year-old man is tasered and arrested. Like the April incident this one makes the papers and the telly. **Only a couple of weeks later** a distraught young woman climbs onto the roof of 23-floor former Council block Martello Court and perched on the roof railings a dizzying 220 feet above the ground she

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

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threatens to throw herself off. Birnies and Martello are taped off and surrounded by police cars, fire engines and ambulances. Meanwhile, cars stop along both sides of the Parkway and their occupants pour out to gawk at the unfolding drama. Bus stops on both sides are blocked until police move the cars on. Happily, the woman was eventually talked down at 2.30 a.m.

No, we don't have to go up toon to watch drama and spectacles. As Wullie Adams says, down here life is real, and life is a struggle.

The Festival is finished. The struggle continues.



GOING UP?

An Inchmickery Court resident reports that one of the block's lifts only got back into operation in August after being out of order for seven weeks! The lifts are vital for people with young children, the disabled, the elderly, those with mobility issues . . .

All six blocks are frequently hit by long spells when lifts are out of order (it appears lift parts have to be ordered from Germany!) Birnies Court tenants had a hellish time when the block was fitted with two new lifts in 2016/17. It took eight months to install them - then they kept breaking down, one of them for *two months*. After the lift was 'fixed' a tenant got trapped in it and had to be rescued by the Fire Brigade. This Council lift chaos is unacceptable, a tragedy waiting to happen. Or perhaps it already has.

Birnies Court tenant Bruce lives on the 12th floor. Because of the constant lift break-downs he decided, though not young, to climb the stairs to his flat every day after work. Two weeks ago Bruce had a massive heart attack and was rushed to the ERI. We hear he is now off the critical list and wish him a speedy recovery.

COMING DOWN!

'Lumps of masonry are falling off my balcony, causing danger to any people below,' reports a Fidra Court tenant. 'I reported it to the Council months ago, but nothing's been done.' Council officials have attended and viewed the damage but no repair work has been carried out. Children sometimes play football at the foot of the block below this balcony.

Will it take a tragedy before the Council acts?

CAN YOU SEE THEM?

The Council claims that 'all the balconies in Oxcars and Inchmickery' have been fitted with ultraviolet pigeon scarers that are 'invisible to the human eye'. They must be - nobody can find them! 'The workers who fitted them must be invisible too,' says one Inchmickery tenant. 'I never saw them either.' If you've got one fitted, please let us know.

LONGHORN BEASTIES BAFFLE COONCIL

After much agitation and pressure from Living Rent the Council finally did something about the multiple leaks through Inchmickery Court's roof. David of Inchmickery reports that after suffering consistent leaks for four and a half years, his flat has been dry since January.

But years of water ingress caused wood to rot in David's flat, resulting in infestation by "longhorn" beetles. This was reported to the Council in January and though the rotten wood was removed relatively quickly it took until June - nearly six months! - for the replacement fittings to be installed. But as we write in early September the job is still

COLD COMFORT

Jim from Fidra Court is a pensioner who has serious health conditions and recently spent time in hospital. In May his water boiler stopped working. Jim describes what happened next:

'On 13 May I phoned Repairs Direct to report the loss of hot water. An electrician called during that week. He concluded all tests were fine and all I needed now was a plumber to connect up the water supply. A week later I was visited by a second electrician who carried out the exact same tests and came to the same conclusion. This was followed up by a *third* electrician also doing the above, and a plumber doing HIS bit as well, both to no avail - no hot water. On 27 May a *fourth* electrician turned up. I made him phone the office from my flat to arrange a PLUMBER immediately. On 28 May a second plumber called and did the needful, although I had to wait two days to prove it was finally working! So, this simple repair job took 17 days, 4 electricians and 2 plumbers to complete. *Shambles . . .*' **Living Rent says - this is a disgrace! This should have been treated as an emergency call-out which means Repairs workers must attend within four hours.**

unfinished.

Leaks in the Inchmickery roof have caused untold misery to many residents, David reports that there are still four flats near him lying empty - the tenants had to be decanted as the flats were uninhabitable due to constant water ingress.

The Council recently reported that 'Work is currently ongoing to the guttering on Inchmickery roof.' But a tenant whose Birnies flat overlooks that roof quickly forced them to admit the truth. *No work is being done to Inchmickery's leaking roof.* Not a thing.



LIFTING THE LID ON COUNCIL NEGLECT

When the recent summer storm struck the blocks it came as no surprise to one top floor tenant of Birnies Court to find water streaming through his ceiling - a ceiling that's been leaking for over five years now. But 140 feet below, on the sheltered first floor, Chris and his family have water coming from another direction. Chris explains:

I've got a new water feature in my flat. I'm usually a fan of fountains and such - but not when it involves raw sewage spewing into my bathroom. It's a recurring problem in my flat whenever there's a major storm. Three times now. I'm told that due to old plumbing in the block a key component is missing – a valve that stops air being forced down the stack pipe, causing the water to be violently expelled from the toilet pan, bathroom sink and bath. Not ideal in any situation especially when small children are involved. It's not the first hassle I've had with the Council. When I moved into the property the socket in my kitchen boiler cupboard was sparking. My son was only four months and this was a serious issue. I called Repairs countless times and was ignored until I got help from 'higher ups'. It was fixed the day after they spoke to Repairs - they hadn't even logged the job in the repairs diary and I'd been chasing them for the best part of a year.

OUTRAGE

Local councillor Graham Hutchison has stated, 'if this was a private landlord there would be outrage'. That's the point. How many times have you contacted the Council about a repair problem and it's actually been resolved? You're told 'someone will be out'. When (if) they do there is a half-assed attempt at fixing the problem, if it's fixed at all. How far will they go in their neglect? Until a piece of masonry falls from a block and kills a kid? Until someone is electrocuted? They hold their hand out every month for rent. If you are in even a month's worth of arrears they'll chase you and then send you to a debt collector. The Council are civil servants – they are there to serve us. They accept rent for a property, so they are legally obliged to provide safe and habitable housing under the warranty of habitability.

BROKEN PROMISES

There has been a budget of £7.5 million in place since November 2018 to bring the six blocks up to scratch, but we're yet to see any improvements. They're not doing as they promised. You have to pester them and hound them to get things done. They won't listen to one voice – but when it's twenty or thirty of us they have no choice but to listen. My advice if you need repairs? Document it all. Record it on your smart phone, write down dates and times. Get involved. It's only a matter of time before Council neglect maims or kills someone.

Chris has posted a short but shocking must-see video of the 'Birnies Blowback' on youtube. Go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTTKXbEoHUM>



LIFTING THE LID. A still from Chris's youtube video

'A BURGLAR'S DREAM'

When the flats in Fidra and Birnies were fitted with new front doors, at least one tenant refused to have one. 'I went to the show flat,' he says. 'The new door looked great from the outside, but when I looked behind the side panel, right away I said I didn't want one. Why not? Because that side panel's a burglar's dream – I could push it in with my bum.'



He kept his old front door. His words were prophetic. Within a few months two Birnies flats were broken into – by kicking in the flimsy new side panels.

We raised this weakness with Council officers. It was agreed that all the new side panels in both blocks will be reinforced. We wonder what the local Crime Prevention Officer was doing when these burglar's dreams were fitted? We asked the Fire Brigade to check the panels for fire resistance. They did, but because they don't know what the panels are made off, they were unable to give an opinion.

ORGANISING IN THE BLOCKS

SEPTEMBER MARKS THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF THE 'MUIRHOUSE DESERVES BETTER' CAMPAIGN. LIVING RENT ORGANISER EMMA S. REPORTS:

FOR the last year we – residents of the six Muirhouse blocks and helpers from around Edinburgh – have door knocked up and down the blocks, speaking to most people (you've probably spoken to one of the members or volunteers) about the issues in the blocks. Whether mould, damp, leaks, pests, garbage, mushrooms, broken doors, crumbling balconies, dripping water or gushing toilets, we've heard it all. Unabashed, we got together, organising meetings in the evening to bring our issues together and pick the most urgent ones, and then turning up at the Council office in Pilton

UNACCEPTABLE

There we made sure that the 'we'll call you back in 2 weeks' response was not acceptable and demanded commitments, not just about 'small' issues of repairs but also the large scale refurbishment of all the blocks.

Since these actions the Council has been on its toes and keen to ensure that residents are listened to. But, as you know, repairs take way, way, way too long and leave people stranded, their quality of life diminished, for weeks if not months with no sign of repairs being done, or suffering any

number of missed appointments, and sometimes below-standard repairs. We will continue to put pressure on the council to change this situation. If you have any suggestions or experience as regards this, please get in touch!



(Picture: September 2018. Angry tenants protest outside Fidra Court as they wait for local councillors to arrive and answer their questions)

DON'T GIVE UP – TAKE ACTION!

Been chasing the Council for weeks or months to do a repair and feel like you're banging your head off a brick wall? Don't give up – join together with other tenants though Living Rent and take action!

Two or three times now a group of tenants turned up at the Council North Office at West Pilton Gardens and demanded a meeting with a responsible manager or Housing Officer to insist vital repairs are done. This resulted in some repairs being sorted on the spot and pushed the Council to put proper resources into maintaining housing in the area.

We must always be prepared to take direct action to force the Council to provide the quality of housing everyone deserves. If you have an ongoing repairs problem which isn't being sorted GET IN TOUCH. It's only together that our voices will be heard. And look out for our regular meetings in Fidra Court community kitchen.

NEXT MEETING IS IN THE FIDRA COURT COMMUNITY KITCHEN ON WEDNESDAY 2 OCTOBER AT 7 PM. COME ALONG!

CONTACT: edinburgh@livingrent.org

https://www.livingrent.org/muirhouse_deserves_better Send us your stories and pics. Or put them in an envelope and leave them for us in the Fidra communal kitchen.