

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

THE SIX BLOCKS

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THREE YEARS HAVE PASSED since the Grenfell towering inferno took the lives of 72 tenants. Readers will remember how in the wake of that holocaust the Muirhouse high rises were alive with firefighters and Council officers, checking everything, and hardly a day went by without a leaflet coming through the door assuring us that all was well and not to worry. Well, that dedication to fire safety didn't last long, as we discovered . . .

ACTION BY the Muirhouse branch of Living Rent has succeeded in forcing City of Edinburgh Council to repair two defective fire doors in Oxcars Court. Only after Living Rent called the Fire Brigade, did on-line publicity and contacted councillors and managers did the Council finally act to secure residents' safety.

HALF A DOOR

The fire doors were missing panes of reinforced glass so there were substantial gaps – in one case nearly half the door! In the event of a fire, smoke and flames would have gone straight through the empty gaps. Now the glass has been replaced..

The fire doors were broken from around 27 April and so it took the Council at least three weeks to carry out this emergency repair. Putting residents' safety at risk like this is not acceptable. Have the



IN MEMORIAM GRENFELL

Council forgotten the 72 lost lives in Grenfell Tower caused by the criminal neglect of *that* local council?

This episode shows it is vital that tenants act to insist on safe and healthy housing, otherwise our landlords can get away with murder. Join Living Rent in forcing the City of Edinburgh Council to put proper systems in place so that emergency

repairs are carried out immediately.

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Since that article was sent in we have received reports of two other broken fire doors, one on the 1st floor of May Court, the other on the 13th floor of Birnies. There are probably others. If you find one in your block don't just adopt a 'Somebody should do something about it' attitude . . .

Report it.

We accuse Edinburgh City Council of endangering tenants' lives by flaunting the fire safety regulations and failing to perform emergency repairs until being forced to do so by Living Rent and the Fire Brigade.

And emergency repairs are not the only thing the Council has been failing to do during the virus epidemic. *Read on . . .*

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

'DEFINITELY ON LOCKDOWN'

THE FARCE OF THE BIRNIES lifts continues. For the three years since the Council took out lifts that worked perfectly well and replaced them with two that are constantly breaking down, Birnies tenants have had to do with one working lift at best, often with none at all.

The complications of social distancing when 56 flats on 14 floors with over 100 residents are forced to use one small lift during a virus pandemic are dire, with a queue forming during busy times. It was heartwarming to see the behaviour of tenants, refusing to share the lift but letting others go before them. Even in non-pandemic times the hardship these constantly breaking down lifts create can be demanding, especially for those with mobility difficulties. If the lift that serves your floor is broken down, it means having to negotiate two hefty self-closing fire doors, walking down two flights of stairs, and negotiating another two hefty fire doors before accessing the lower landing. The difficulties this causes to the elderly, disabled, mothers with buggies and bairns etc. can be easily imagined.

TRAPPED

In Birnies one lift serves the even-number floors, the other does the odds. They take turns at breaking down. But sometimes both conk out, leaving many tenants struggling.

Says one Birnies tenant, *'I'm a pensioner on the 12th floor. Both lifts were out last week, I had 2 bags of shopping and my dog and they expect me to climb 12 floors. My legs are bad. I'm sick to death of these lifts - when they do work you get stuck in them. Yes, we're definitely on lockdown with these lifts. It's terrible what they are doing to folk living here.'*

Another elderly tenant on the



Sick joke in Birnies Court

block's top floor says, *'When both lifts are down I'm trapped in the flat. As simple as that. It's like doing time for a crime I didn't commit.'*

OUTRAGE

In Inchmickery Court one lift has been broken down for over three months, forcing some tenants to walk twice the

(continued) full length of the block, just to get to the shops or the 'recycling depot' An Inchmick tenant with a health condition tells us, *'I have to ask the concierge to help me with the rubbish. I can't manage it alone with the lift broken.'*

On 17 April, at the height of the coronavirus epidemic, the Birnies odd-number lift broke down yet again. A notice was stuck on the lift door stating that the lift was 'a little unwell at the moment.' If it was meant as a joke, it was a bad one, with fear stalking the blocks and folk scared to go out in case they caught the virus..

But if both lifts were out, or tenants were scared to use them, well, at least the fit and those on the lower floors could use the stairs. If they had a strong stomach, that is . . .

FILTH

Birnies' stairs have not been mopped down since last autumn, and rarely swept. The lower floors especially are often soaked in urine and other liquids. Muirhouse Living Rent produced a video of the stairs and posted it on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=500_hfc1Ukk

But it isn't just the high rises whose stairs are disgusting. . .

'They just make the stairs dirtier.'

THE STAIRS in many if not all the low rise council blocks, including Muirhouse Drive, Gardens and Grove, are Council contracted to be cleaned by private company ISS.

But tenants paying about £200 per year for stair cleaning have been dissatisfied by the poor performance of ISS for several years and this has been compounded by the drastic reduction, and even complete stopping, of cleaning in some stairs since the pandemic started.

Tenants report that their stairs in Muirhouse Grove and Drive have not been done by ISS since March. They have complained to the

Council and to ISS over the years, but nothing was done.

DO IT YOURSELF

Some have taken to cleaning the stairs themselves and report that when ISS eventually turn up to 'clean' they often make the stairs dirtier due to the use of filthy mops. (ISS use a mop with no water and some kind of cleaning agent in a tank on their back which they spray.) Tenants have many complaints about ISS: they often only spend less than 2 minutes cleaning a stair when they are supposed to spend 10 minutes: there has been no deep clean in years: ISS never clean

the walls or banisters

A Muirhouse Grove tenant has been complaining to ISS and the Council for 4-5 years and last year inspectors from both organisations visited. This tenant says many others in Muirhouse Grove complain about the service. One Muirhouse Drive tenant has complained to Alistair Bell the CEC Housing Officer, but there has been no improvement.

This dire situation is made worse by the presence of some owner-occupiers in the stairs who don't pay cleaning charges and are supposed to take a turn doing the stairs, but refuse to do it.

(continued from previous page)

Research by Living Rent has found that ISS is a huge multinational corporation with a reputation for poor pay and conditions, and that it's cleaning contract with Edinburgh City Council comes up for renewal in October.

PETITION

Residents in the low rise blocks and Living Rent are producing a letter - petition to be handed into the Council pointing out these failings on the part of ISS. Contact us for more info.

But of course it isn't just ISS who are failing in adhering to their duty of maintaining hygiene in the blocks. The Scottish Government issued a set of Hygiene Guidelines about cleaning and hygiene in high density housing like the Six Blocks, but they were not made statutory so the Council just ignored them. Instead they announced their own policy: *'For a short period of time we will not be carrying out our normal stair cleaning service,'* it said. *'We will be carrying out emergency stair cleans only at this time..'*



Filthy stairs, Birnies Court

We accuse the Council of endangering tenants' health by failing to maintain hygiene in the six blocks' communal areas, and failing to maintain the lifts so that tenants could safely social distance. But Covid-19 is not the only virus we have to worry about - far from it. Read on . . .

'Bird droppings can carry over 60 diseases'

Histoplasmosis is a respiratory disease that may be fatal. It results from a fungus growing in dried bird droppings. **Candidiasis** is a yeast or fungus infection spread by pigeons. The disease affects the skin, the mouth, the respiratory system, the intestines and the urogenital tract, especially the vagina. It is a growing problem for women, causing itching, pain and discharge. **Cryptococcosis** is caused by yeast found in the intestinal tract of pigeons. The illness often begins as a pulmonary disease and may later affect the central nervous system. Since balconies, open landings etc. are typical roosting and nesting sites, the fungus is apt to found in these areas. **Salmonellosis** often occurs as "food poisoning" and can be traced to pigeons, starlings and sparrows. The disease bacteria are found in bird droppings; dust from droppings can be sucked through ventilators and air conditioners, contaminating food and cooking surfaces in homes. Besides being direct carriers of disease, nuisance birds are frequently associated with over 50 kinds of ectoparasites, like bed bugs, which can work their way throughout structures to infest and bite humans.

(Info from www.medicalnewstoday.com)

DON'T FEED THE PIGEONS!

(Long-suffering May Court tenant Lee describes the impact of pigeon infestation.)

Last week the council finally removed all the furniture from 2/8 May Court where the pigeons had taken over the balcony for nesting. But they didn't physically clean the balcony and it's still covered in droppings, like many others where people allow pigeons to nest. The walkways/deck access areas, especially those around the lifts, are filthy with pigeon dung.

When the team arrived to install the city-fibre cables they just pulled up the wire mesh (area to the left of the lifts) and did not fix it back, so the pigeons can now nest easily under this wire. Scottish Power are also to blame as when they installed all the new power feeds into our homes they failed (as did the council) to make sure the aluminium conduit was fitted with bird spikes.

THE BAIRNS

Quite a few young children like to play on the walkways/deck access areas in May Court, and where the birds rest on the railings they leave droppings. Young children have no idea of the dangers the droppings pose to them. The council



Pigeon shit, Oxcars Court

needs to take responsibility. If they plan on cladding these blocks they must install netting to stop birds from nesting. Also, any netting will prevent the small minority of individuals from disposing of rubbish by throwing it over the balconies or dumping it on walkways/deck access areas.

People treat their environment as they perceive it - "if it looks like a shit hole, they will treat it as one!" The council has allowed the blocks to deteriorate. One weekend I washed down the walkways /deck access area on the 3rd floor of May Court and removed 95% of droppings, but the pigeons promptly restored all the droppings within a few days. Preventing nesting is the way forward. Lee

DON'T MOAN – ORGANISE

SINCE THE START of the Covid-19 pandemic our union won first a three month eviction ban, and then a six month eviction ban to safeguard tenants. We have negotiated tens of thousands of pounds in rent reductions for our members. Alongside this vital support for our members, we have also fought to safeguard tenants from the virus and the inaction of our complacent and idle landlords. Following sustained pressure, we won new hygiene guidance nationally for tenants in Council housing from the Scottish Government.

Block by block, and street by street we are building Scotland's Tenants' Union. But we can't do it without your support. We believe that every tenant deserves safe, affordable housing – free from unjust rent increases, discrimination, and eviction. The only way for us to make sure this happens, is to get organised.



We are bringing together people across the country to make sure that: (1) we can hold councils, private landlords, housing associations and letting agents to account; (2) we have a strong voice in shaping local and national policy; and (3) we have the power to stand up for our rights. We believe in the power of being a democratic and accountable organisation. We are run and controlled by our members and are not affiliated to any political party, group or sect.

With only limited resources our union does a tremendous amount, and it is people like you who make this possible. If you share our values, please join today! This helps us become financially sustainable and to be accountable to you

A NEW MEMBER WRITES: 'A year ago I contacted my landlord about the leaking living room ceiling in my top floor flat. Obviously the roof was letting in. Last September I contacted the landlord's repairs team and my housing officer. A member of the repairs team came to my flat, stuck a screwdriver in the ceiling and said that scaffolding would be erected to begin work in two weeks. It wasn't, and over the next five months the damage got worse. This year I joined the Living Rent tenants' union and was quickly linked up with Jack of Living Rent's Members' Defence Team. We discussed my situation and it became clear that the landlord had failed in their obligations under the terms of my tenancy agreement and the Housing Act. We sent an email raising my concerns to my housing officer, who quickly contacted Jack. Then I spoke to her. She apologised, saying she hadn't been informed of the promised repairs. I was offered alternative accommodation. I refused. I was then assured that as soon as the lockdown was lifted I would get my ceiling repaired. It was through the support of the Union and its Members' Defence Team that my situation was resolved.'

The City of Edinburgh Council is one of the worst landlords in the country on a range of issues, not least hygiene and minimum housing standards, but we want to take the fight to them on behalf of Muirhouse tenants. To do that we need to show our strength in membership to build the democratic voice of tenants to win big for the Muirhouse community. That happens with you. Today. Will you join us for £3 a month (or £1 if you're unwaged or broke) to make our voice roar in the corridors of power in Edinburgh? We have a track record of winning and delivering for our members. Isn't it time we made victory on your issues the heart of our next fight? *Stand up and be counted.*

CONTACT: [livingrent.org/join](https://www.livingrent.org/join)

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https://www.livingrent.org/muirhouse_deserves_better

Send us your stories and pics.