

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

THE SIX BLOCKS

ISSUE 5 FEBRUARY 2021

THE WALL OF SHAME

A Freedom of Information request by Muirhouse Living Rent branch revealed that, despite there being fewer than 5,000 council properties in the North West locality of the city, to date there are 1,390 uncompleted repair jobs - and little sign of them being done in the near future. So late last year, before the latest lockdown, the branch held a demo at the Pennywell shops, supported by LR members from other branches and activists from the North Edinburgh Fights Back campaign, currently fighting council cuts. Shoppers were invited to chalk their feelings about the council repairs fiasco on the temporary wall. The pictures tell the story . . .



After the Wall of Shame rally the demo marched to the NW Housing Office in Pilton and handed in a petition and a letter demanding an improvement in the council's dire Repairs service. Then came the new lockdown.



But Muirhouse Living Rent's Repairs Campaign continues undaunted.

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

STILL GAME

When Jim from Fidra's living room fire conked out in mid-November Living Rent contacted Repairs to get it fixed - only to be told that it was not a matter of urgency as he could use the storage heaters. But Jim, in his mid-70s, not long out of hospital and getting about with a walking frame, can't get the storage heaters to work - like many other tenants in the blocks. Under pressure from LR the council grudgingly loaned Jim two floor fan-heaters, saying the broken fire can't be fixed until Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted.

COST A FORTUNE

But pensioner Jim soon discovered that the fan-heaters cost a mint to run and was forced to switch them on for only 40 minutes or so twice a day, and sit in the cold the rest of the time. Living Rent has contacted Repairs with a request that, as they failed to fix Jim's fire, they could help by paying something towards his exorbitant heating costs. At the time of writing two such requests to Repairs have been completely ignored.

REACHING BOILING POINT

Any tenant who has tried to get a repair done knows the stress and hassle it entails, being jugged off with blatant lies and excuses, often for years on end. Living Rent member Wioletta from Gunnet Court was on the Pennywell demo in November, and her anger was palpable. She explained why on the LR Muirhouse e-list.

'First it was a leak. Now I've got a problem with hot water. The council people did something on the 1st of December when they were fixing the leak and I didn't have hot water until Christmas. After that the water was never as hot as it used to be. Now it is hot for a short period and then it gets cool.

'So they stopped the leak together with the hot water, then they gave me a new tap and shower but since then the water is never as hot as it used to be before they fixed the leak. I know they broke something but they won't admit it and also won't fix it properly. And as advised by a council electrician this week, I have had the boiler on all night, but it only lasted for one

quick shower and when I was trying to wash the dishes it started to get cold. The plumber who came to fix a blockage told me to report this only if the water gets icy cold. I am going to write a complaint about it as this plumber and a concierge told me to buy myself a nice new showerhead or deal with it privately. I have more and more damp coming up in my kitchen. There is water on my floor in bathroom and bedroom. These flats are falling apart.'

Under pressure from Living Rent the council were forced to admit that Wioletta's boiler is faulty and needs to be replaced - but, of course, she'll have to wait until Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

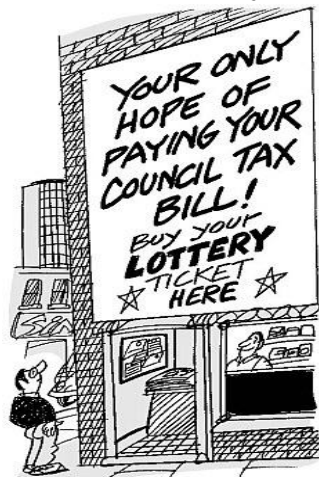
WATCH OUT, WATCH OUT, THERE'S A BAILIFF ABOUT

Back in 2007 the SNP promised to scrap the hated council tax. They never did. Now events are taking a dangerous turn, as the Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty (ECAP) reports:

Edinburgh City Council is sending Sheriff Officers to the doors of residents who can't afford the Council Tax - and issuing threats to try and scare people into paying. Three Edinburgh households have told ECAP that sheriff officers recently came to their doors. The people targeted in these cases were being threatened to pay sums they could not afford. One is a lone parent with significant health conditions and a very low income while another has serious health conditions and is on disability benefits. In one case Sheriff officers from Scott and Co lied, threatening that unless the amount allegedly owed was paid they would come back and seize the family's belongings - an empty threat with no legal backing.

ECAP says - We must resist this shocking harassment of poor people by Councils and their hired lackeys in the middle of a pandemic. We demand the Councils order the sheriffs to stop all visits to people's homes for Council Tax debt. We call on people to organise to resist.

Don't be intimidated! The sheriff officers are few and they are very unlikely to visit you. But if they do...Don't answer the door to them. If you do answer, then don't speak to them, just say you are a visitor and shut the door. **Don't let them into your home.**



Sheriff Officers have no legal powers to just turn up and take your stuff. They have no power to enter your home without going to court and getting a Special Attachment Order. Know your rights and seek solidarity. If you or a friend are visited by sheriff officers contact ECAP. Email: ecap@lists.riseup.net 0131 557 6242 (during the pandemic you can ring any time and leave a message. Alternatively email us or contact the ECAP Facebook.)

The City of Edinburgh Council is an SNP-Labour administration. This use of sheriff officers against the poor and disabled by the SNP and Labour illustrates that any political party taking power just uses that power to keep attacking the poor.

UNFAIR

The Council Tax is widely recognised as being unfair, disproportionately hitting those on low and average incomes. The SNP promised to abolish council tax in 2007! While the poor are hounded for Council Tax, the rich and multinational corporations use lawyers and biased laws to avoid tax.

By using sheriff officers the politicians and the rich are waging class war against the poor. We need to organise direct action from below. We need to resist and lay the basis for a better society. When millions refused to pay the poll tax, the sheriffs and bailiffs were sent packing and the unfair tax proved unworkable.

Tell council leaders they must end this harassment and order sheriff officers to stop all visits to homes for Council Tax debt.

Contact: City of Edinburgh Council Leader SNP Adam McVey 0131 529 3279 adam.mcvey@edinburgh.gov.uk
Leader Labour Group Cammy Day 0131 529 3281 Cammy.Day@edinburgh.gov.uk

'A BIG BLACK MONSTER'

A mother-of-two said she is 'at wits end' after suffering with an ongoing mould problem at her council home .

The 27-year-old, who wishes to remain anonymous, lives in Muirhouse with her four-year-old son and six-month-old baby boy. She said mould conditions in the children's bedroom have reached 'catastrophic' levels to the point where her son is too scared to sleep in his own room.

'I'm honestly at wits end and I can't live like this anymore,' she said. 'My four-year-old is terrified of it, he thinks it's a big black monster above his bed in the night so he and my six-month old are in my room with me. It's reaching breaking point and the response I have had from the council has been robotic. I've had issues with mould here for more than a year but it's been a lot worse in the last six months.'

'HOPE FOR THE BEST'

But during her last encounter with a member of the council she was told to 'redecorate and hope for the best.' 'I've tried to paint over and wallpaper my son's bedroom three times but the mould keeps coming through. He can't sleep in there, it's not good for his health. He already had breathing issues as a baby so I don't want to risk it . . . I have been told various things from the council, one being that it was "down to my lifestyle" as to why it is in the condition that it is. But it can't be as the rest of the house is fine . . . I thought that comment was appalling and laughable and just showed such a lack of compassion.'

The young mum said she is hoping to move council house but has been told her case 'is not a priority.' 'It's so difficult when I have had officials come round, look at the mould which is just disgusting, and still not treat our situation as important. I have two little boys and look at the state of their room.'



Black mould in the four-year-old's bedroom

An Edinburgh City Council spokeswoman said: 'We have identified the need to carry out repairs in the property though unfortunately, due to Covid-19 restrictions, haven't been able to complete this work.' She added: 'We are working with the tenant to find suitable temporary accommodation for her family so we can carry out all the required repairs safely.'

(Condensed from an article in the Edinburgh Evening News by Katharine Hay on Tuesday 19 January).

INCHMICKERY MOCKERY

The scaffolding has been taken down and Inchmickery Court's roof is now officially completed.. It's a pity they didn't fix the leaks when they were up there . . .



Inchmickery: Flat Roof, Apex Roof

In the very first issue of *The Six Blocks*, back in September 2018, we reported on a Muirhouse Living Rent delegation to the council's full housing committee. Delegation member David from 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.'

The media picked up on his case and, wonder of wonders, the council swung into action and actually fixed the leak. After 4 years of fighting the council tooth and nail, David could actually enjoy his flat. But not for long.

SNOW

It snowed just after last Christmas, but it soon melted away – and meltwater began to pour through David's lobby ceiling. Inchmickery Court is one of the blocks that have an apex roof in the middle and flat roofs above the two gables (see picture). David lives in a top floor flat beneath a flat roof.

We photographed the leak and published the pics online, and before you could say 'Cheap and Shoddy Work' council big shots were queuing up at his front door to view the damage. David, and the rest of us, were astonished to learn that despite spending a fortune scaffolding the building, **the flat roofs on the gables were ignored. Only the apex roof was done.** Mind you, it would have come as an even bigger surprise if the job had been done right. Which takes us across the road to Birnies, whose famous leak has moved yet again. First

reported in April 2014, the council just ignored the leak until the sodden ceiling collapsed in 2017. The council flew into action, and tore half the ceiling down. The wooden roof beams were so saturated they took till January 2018 to dry out. Meanwhile, the council repaired and recovered Birnies roof. But with the tenant's ceiling replaced, and the room almost redecorated, the leak returned, 20 feet across the ceiling from its original spot. All attempts to get it fixed failed. Then a month ago it suddenly stopped.

'I couldn't understand it,' says tenant and LR member Eddie. 'It was raining but there was no water coming in. Then I learned that the flat next door had water pouring through their ceiling. The leak had moved again.' The family, with two young children, has been moved out.

(Below: Inchmickery tenant David's leaking ceiling. Note the nearby live electrics.)



WELL DONE!

But it's not all bad news. We hear that Head of Repairs Willie Gilhooly and his team have defeated 2,000 other entrants to win the prestigious Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents Gold Medal for the fourth time. The medal is awarded for ensuring 'that our staff, front line operatives and our framework contractors are working in an environment that delivers a safe, fully compliant service to all our customers, every time,' according to the council's Tenants Courier.

Well done Willie and the Repairs team. Pity about those 1,390 outstanding repairs in North Edinburgh. Shame about all those tenants having to live with black mould, leaking roofs, broken fires, dodgy boilers, lifts that are unreliable at best, and so on, and so on, and so on . . .

RENT FREEZE VICTORY

Edinburgh has the highest council house rents in Scotland. Despite this, in mid-February the Labour/SNP coalition council tried to increase rents by 2 per cent – only to be defeated by a ‘rainbow alliance’ of Greens, Lib Dems and Tories. After the defeat council leader Adam McVey angrily tweeted in a short political suicide note that no rent rise would mean council tenants having to wait longer for repairs – and sparked a torrent of criticism.

SLUM LANDLORD

‘It’s no good saying to someone in a council house that they’re going to receive a new kitchen in 2077, or a new bathroom in 2031, when their roof is leaking, when windows have the wind blowing in, when they have damp patches all over their walls - that’s the conditions the citizens in our council housing are facing,’ said Tory councillor Graham Hutchison. **‘By any other standard Edinburgh City Council would be considered a slum landlord,’** (an accusation that first appeared in print in the first issue of *The Six Blocks*).

STRANGE DAYS

Strange days indeed, when Labour and SNP councillors are trying, in a deadly pandemic, to bump up council house rents, only to be voted down by Tories and Lib Dems.

Said Muirhouse Living Rent organiser Elle Glenny, ‘Across Scotland, tenants have faced intolerable circumstances during the pandemic. Rents have become impossible to meet. It was ludicrous that the council were even considering rent increases,’ she said, and warned that **‘as we head into the Holyrood elections, we hope that political parties will pay close attention to this.’**

HAD YOUR JAB YET?

In early February Muirhouse members of the over-70s and extremely vulnerable group got their so-called ‘offers’ of a covid-19 jab. The result was confusion and anger as many were expected to travel miles . . .

Speaking at First Minister’s Questions in the Scottish Parliament, Lib Dem leader Willie Rennie said: “Pennywell All Care Centre has been designated a vaccination hub because it is located in the middle of one of Scotland’s most deprived communities. We have learned from local GPs that appointments there have been given to people from elsewhere; the people in Muirhouse, who can see the building from their front living room window, are being sent to the EICC, [Edinburgh International Conference Centre at the top of distant Morrison Street] two whole bus journeys away. That makes absolutely no sense to them. Doctors think this is bound to have an impact on the take-up of the vaccine. The First Minister knows this is happening elsewhere too. What on earth is going on with this appointment system?”

‘I THOUGHT THAT’S WHAT EVERYBODY WANTED’

In response First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said: “Yes, sometimes people will be asked to go to a centre that is further away than their own GP but that is so we can get through more people more quickly, which I thought is what everybody wanted.”

One vulnerable Muirhouse tenant and LR member says, ‘I wasn’t “offered” a jab at the EICC. I was expected to travel out to the Royal Highland Show complex in Ingliston, away in rural Midlothian, at half-past-seven at night in a howling east wind that would cut you in half. I don’t have a car and don’t know anyone who has. It was impossible. I tried to reschedule online. That was impossible too, so I phoned the NHS infoline only to be told, “Sorry, the system’s down. Could you phone back tomorrow?” I did, without success. And the next day . . . They might as well have “offered” me a jab in Stornoway.’

‘A MASSIVELY DETRIMENTAL IMPACT ON UPTAKE’

Edinburgh Western MSP and Lib Dem health spokesman Alex Cole-Hamilton said after the Holyrood meeting: ‘It made absolute sense when Pennywell All Care was designated a vaccination hub because deprived communities really need a facility on their doorstep to maximise uptake. To learn these vulnerable residents are being invited to appointments at the EICC, several miles and potentially two bus journeys away, is just ridiculous. This is going to have a massively detrimental impact on uptake in the communities that arguably need it most.’

Cole-Hamilton has intimated that he plans to start a local campaign over the issue. Meanwhile, charity groups across Scotland are calling on Holyrood to ensure that residents in the country’s designated ‘areas of severe deprivation’, including Muirhouse, are offered a vaccination in their local health centres.

Research in England by the *Financial Times* uncovered that, while Boris and Co were crowing about 15 million jabs having been delivered, 376,000 people had not taken up their ‘offer’ simply because they couldn’t get to the distant vaccination hubs, and would have been far worse were it not for volunteer drivers running people with no access to cars out to the distant hubs.

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https://www.livingrent.org/muirhouse_deserves_better