

# The Colin Wiles blog

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## We're on the telly!

But for all the wrong reasons. Over the past few months, ITV's Daniel Hewitt has presented a series of [hard-to-watch films](#) about appalling housing conditions in social housing properties.

He started back in March with an exposé of damp and mould in [Croydon](#). He says he was then inundated with similar stories from around the country, mostly involving council and housing association homes. His latest piece involves the [Eastfield estate](#) in Mitcham. I won't name the individual landlords involved but you can check the details from his stories.

Two of the key themes from his reports are that residents' lifestyles are often being wrongly blamed for much deeper problems, and that residents feel powerless when they try to seek redress from bureaucratic and faceless landlords.

As a case in point, I was recently invited to join the Facebook tenants' support group for one of the largest housing associations in the southeast. It has over 3,100 members and some of the individual stories about poor service and unresponsive staff are shocking. Among many other claims, the tenants allege that the landlord is seeking to manipulate reviews on Trustpilot, to filter out negative reviews and engineer positive ones.

Hewitt has recently widened his reporting to cover "excessive" executive pay in the housing association sector. *"Housing association bosses are earning up to £436,681 a year, yet many of the properties they rent out are squalid and dangerous,"* [he tweeted](#). He invited the ten associations with the highest paid CEOs to participate in the discussion but they all declined to comment, although my old SHOUT colleague Tom Murtha, a former CEO, agreed to [appear](#).

I thought the [response](#) from the National Housing Federation to these stories was misjudged. It was poorly written and full of typos and the attack line that only 5% of stock was damp and mouldy (*"we're better than other sectors"*) was ill-judged. It would have been wiser to issue a sincere apology and say that lessons have been learned. Similarly, the landlord involved in the Eastfield estate put up their director to apologise but pointed out that properties were nearing the end of their life, as if this excused the damp and disrepair.

This will not wash with tenants. To begin with, they have the law on their side. This means that properties must be maintained to a good standard regardless of their age. In the town where I live there are scores of homes built between 1400 and 1900 and they are almost all perfectly serviceable.

The Home Standard requires all properties to meet the Decent Homes Standard, and this states quite clearly that properties must comply with the current statutory minimum standard for housing; that they must be in a reasonable state of repair; that they must have reasonably modern facilities and services; and they must provide a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. Landlords can agree exemptions with the regulator where this cannot be achieved, but I would like to know if that has happened in the cases highlighted by Hewitt. I doubt it.

On top of this, the Home Standard also requires providers to provide a cost-effective repairs and maintenance service to a homes that *“responds to the needs of, and offers choices to, tenants, and has the objective of completing repairs and improvements right first time”*. That is pretty clear.

There have clearly been some huge failings among some landlords in these areas. Whether the pandemic has been a factor in this will be for individual associations to decide, but it also highlights the role of the regulator and whether the assessment process is as effective as it could be.

In his latest [video](#) Alistair McIntosh makes the point that these failings are not just about size – after all, the Kensington TMO operated in just one borough, and yet 72 people died and major failings are being highlighted week by week in the public inquiry. But Hewitt’s ITV reports suggest that it is the largest landlords that are disproportionately represented. My recent briefing for HQN on Ombudsman cases also shows a significant showing for the largest associations.

Around 20 years ago I wrote an article for the now-defunct magazine *Housing* titled *Dawn of the Monster Age*, where I predicted the coming of the first 100,000-home landlord. I argued that the move towards consolidation in the housing association sector could be bad for tenants, and that large, monolithic council housing departments were in danger of being replaced by even larger landlords that were less democratic, less accountable, and harder to regulate.

I also pointed out that smaller landlords often provide a better service. Soon we will no doubt have the first 200,000-home landlord, with some spread over hundreds of local authority areas. I am not sure these overlapping empires are sustainable or in the best interest of tenants. Perhaps some have grown too fast without proper oversight or control by remote boards.

For years we have been talking about the need for stock rationalisation, but little has happened. Perhaps there will come a time when we decide that the private provider experiment has failed and that it would be best to nationalise the debt and set up a public landlord for each local authority area to take on all the social housing stock. At a stroke we would reduce the number of providers from 1,600 to 343 and put social housing back under democratic control. We could even call it council housing. It is just a thought.

## About the author

Colin Wiles has worked in affordable housing for almost forty years, for local authorities and housing associations. For the past eight years he has worked as a consultant, working on a range of projects for dozens of clients across the sector. He specialises in governance, service reviews, research and policy work. Colin has written extensively on housing and planning issues for Inside Housing, 24 Housing and The Guardian. He is a co-founder of SHOUT, the Campaign for Social Housing.

