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Towards a tenant-centred approach to illegal eviction, harassment and tenant abuse

Julie Rugg and Lisa O'Malley

2026



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1. Introduction

These are notes from an event that took place with an invited audience of around 40 practitioners, researchers and people with lived experience of illegal eviction, harassment and tenant abuse. The event took place in London on 28th May 2026, and was organised by Safer Renting, in collaboration with a team of researchers from the Universities of York, Sheffield and Northumberland.¹

Each panel was introduced by either one or two Safer Renting clients who discussed their rental experience, which was then followed by comment from three/four other panellists. The panellist responses do not necessarily reflect the opinion of their organisation, and these have been anonymised. Client and panellist contributions were checked by the speaker to ensure accuracy.

Each session concluded with the floor being opened for general comment and discussion.

¹ The ESRC-funded project 'Understanding criminality in the private rented sector and co-producing solutions', ESRC Reference: ES/X001687/1.

2. Entering into an exploitative tenancy

Case #1

The Safer Renting client is a female asylum seeker who came to the UK around three years ago. She had no clear right to rent and No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). She found it hard to get any help at all given her migration status. She sought accommodation in the private rented sector. All communication with her landlord took place over the phone or through text messages. He offered her several HMO properties to choose from – he said he had 30 properties in total. The rent was payable weekly, and he asked for the first week's rent plus an additional week's rent to secure the property. He did not ask for any details about her at all, not even her name.

The client decided on a particular property after she met other people who were living there. They got on well and became friends. The property was not in good condition. The electric supply was not good, and the heating system did not work. However, everyone knew they had limited options to move and believed they had no housing rights. They also knew other people in worse housing situations, and rationalised that the property was not so bad.

Time passed, and the council came around for a routine check-up of the property. The property was an unregistered HMO, which the landlord tried to cover up by taking all the fridges from the rooms and telling everyone living there that they should say they were all members of the same family. A further visit took place from migration officers in addition to the council, who came with a court order. It was confirmed that the property was indeed an unlicensed HMO and all six tenants were unlawfully evicted.

The client said that the landlord had all the money and the power to get what they wanted and to avoid the law. She knew that they were not the only ones that the landlord had exploited. When the landlords got caught, he just closed the company down and started another one. He had over 80 companies registered in his name. She does not want these things to happen to anyone again: tenants like her are defenceless.

Safer Renting client

Comments from the panel

Tenants' union #1

- There are many structural reasons that put people in situations of harm. The Right to Rent cements endemic racism in housing. Not everyone is asked to prove right to rent and the basis on which those decisions are made is arbitrary.

- Reflected on his own grandfather's experience of anti-Irish racism, which also provoked landlord 'No Irish' notices.
- Added further evidence of the migrants being highly vulnerable to harm. He knew of one individual who had come to the UK as part of the Windrush generation. Latterly, her right to remain in the UK had become moot. She was living with her children and paying £400 a month for a two-bed property. She worked three jobs as a cleaner and was unaware that she could claim for benefits. The property was infested with rats. There were holes in the ceiling of the bathroom and bedroom, where the rats dropped down onto the beds. The electrical wiring had been condemned but the tenant continued to use electricity. The gas supply was disconnected. She fell behind with the rent and was evicted by the landlord. The tenant had a s8 defence in relation to disrepair but did not want to move into temporary accommodation, which she thought would be too risky for her children.
- Uncertain migration status creates harm for tenants who are seeking a rental property. They are left to secure properties that are let informally, by landlords advertising on scraps of paper in newsagent windows. Landlords are complicit in labour exploitation, offering properties where beds are shared by workers on alternate shifts.
- If tenants leave this kind of accommodation, they run the risk of being categorised as intentionally homeless.

London community charity

- Delivers projects across a range of issues, to clients with complex mental, physical and economic issues. Housing is a constant thread: shelter is a fundamental right but is not regarded that way.
- Project recognises the discrimination that excludes many of their clients from housing, including anti-Muslim sentiment. The Renters' Rights Act debars use of 'No-DSS' notices, but there is no clear guidance on how this measure will be implemented.
- Landlords can exclude tenants by increasing the obstacles, including requiring guarantors or local references.
- Some landlords do actively target individuals in receipt of benefit. These tenants are often supported with incentive payment from the local authority. It is also possible for the landlord to exploit LHA age criteria which means that over-35s can claim a higher rate for rooms that can be described as 'studios', despite being rooms in HMOs.
- Some tenants on Universal Credit are trapped in dependence, because they are unable to secure work that will enable them to cover the rent.
- Tenants learning and knowing their rights is important to their ability to negotiate this market.

London Borough homelessness unit

- Structural housing pressure and constrained choice creates context for people entering problem tenancies. Urgency and crisis-driven decision-making can leave tenants with limited choice so under pressure they tend to prioritise having a roof over any quality issues
- The council draws on strong community advice networks to help stop tenants falling through the net, but but these resources are not available everywhere. Very often tenants come to the council as a last resort, so having community-level organisations with expertise really matters.
- There can be limited awareness of rights: the Renters' Rights Act is significant step but it will take time for new practices and there is still more to do.
- Tenant profiling by landlords is likely to continue, so that some tenants will continue to rely on the shadow PRS.
- Exploitative practices are normalised in parts of the PRS, particularly where rent-to-rent models proliferate. Landlords cost disruption to their operations into their business model – they plan out all eventualities to make sure they are still making a profit.
- More proactive enforcement models are needed across all local authorities, supported with opportunities to share best practice across authorities. There needs to be better intelligence that identifies high-risk landlords and tenancies: a task-force approach should be considered.

Themes within comments from the floor

Educating tenants

- Educating tenants and clients is key. Providing one-to-one support for tenants includes empowering tenants to know their rights and what to do in the event of a tenancy breaking down.
- Tenants do not always know who to trust. People presenting as 'professionals' can persuade tenants to sign documents that include unfair clauses or which define tenancies as being licenced rather than as assured shorthold tenancies.
- At the same time, there was some resistance to the notion of tenants having to become lawyers in order to defend their rights. Victims are not generally expected to be conversant with the law to protect themselves from criminality.

Supporting tenants in poor quality tenancies

- Tenancy sustainment support can work – landlords change the way they engage with a tenant once they know someone is being supported.

- How can tenants complain and still be safe in their homes? Local authorities need to consider this issue in more detail. Measures to counter retaliatory eviction do not deal with cases where landlord abuse is a response to tenants seeking to assert their rights or approaching the authorities.
- Local authorities should be more attuned to early warning signs that a tenancy is likely to be or become abusive. Understanding of abusive behaviours is becoming well understood. This means a stronger focus should be placed on early intervention opportunities, which should encourage tenants to come forward when problems emerge.
- Tenants should be involved in developing a complaint system which better reflects their experiences, and which can help local authorities to identify problem behaviours and offer more targeted intervention. Currently, complaints are 'triaged' rather than being dealt with: too many tenants are turned away without their experiences being acknowledged.
- Barriers to support for tenants exist around fear of the local authority as a statutory agency. There is a need for more multi-agency working with organisations that tenants trust.

Identifying and avoiding poor quality practitioners

- Sharing information across organisations about unsuitable landlords is also important – if one organisation stops using a poor-quality landlord, that individual landlord can just move on to a different organisations.
- Mandatory licensing would ensure that all PRS properties are subject to inspection within the licensing period. This would identify problematic tenancies without the tenant having to complain to the local authority.
- Using anti-social behaviour legislation and criminal injunctions against poor landlords can be an effective way of protecting tenants from exploitative behaviour.

Impact of the RRA Database

- The database that will be introduced under the Renters' Rights Act could contribute to resolving the problem. However, it is unlikely to have an impact on but shadow PRS landlords. Removing some of the facilitators to discrimination means that marginalised tenants will have access to a better-quality rentals.
- Limited discussion has taken place of third-sector agency access to the database, which could contribute to their helping clients to negotiate the lowest end of the market.

Information asymmetries

- Amount of information that landlords are allowed to ask for seems ridiculous and facilitates aspects of discrimination. Tenants are, in turn, given very limited access to information on the landlord.

3. Problems emerging in the tenancy

Case #2

A couple had entered into a tenancy in June 2024. There were some warning signs at the start of the tenancy. The landlord insisted that they sign a long tenancy agreement. The letting agent agreed it was long but told the couple not to worry about it. It later emerged that the agreement contained several unfair clauses.

The landlord's behaviour became more erratic and difficult once the tenancy started. The couple acquired a cat, which the landlord said was 'illegal'. She required that the couple pay for expensive pet insurance and pay to have the sofa professionally cleaned every three months. The landlord inspections required the tenants to leave the property for three hours: on their return, it was clear that the landlord had opened drawers and cupboards. These inspections took place once a month. However, the couple were in work, were well supported by their family and did not feel that they should be seeking help for their housing problem because they were not at risk of homelessness.

There came to be a point when the landlord clearly wanted the couple to leave. The couple finally approached Citizens' Advice and Shelter for advice. The landlord reported the couple to the council, and it was at this point that the council defined the landlord's behaviour as harassment and referred the case to Safer Renting. The couple left the tenancy after a year.

The tenant said that it had been unfair that the landlord had been able to secure extensive information about the tenant, but the tenant had no access to even basic information about the landlord including whether complaints had been made about them, or if they had illegally evicted someone.

Safer Renting clients

Comments from the panel

Advice charity

- This agency considers housing a major issue for its clients, who have particular difficulties where the cases combine low income, digital exclusion and English not being a first language. However, some clients can act for themselves once they are assured that they are doing the right thing.
- Common issues range from minor disrepair to serious issues including pest infestations. Disrepair is an indicator of a poor landlord relationship, and it is notable that some clients initially reporting with repair often come back with other problems in the tenancy.

- Tenant support includes information on how to complain to the landlord and how to bring a tenancy to an end, and sometimes clients are signposted to legal advice.
- Support can also include debt and money advice and signposting to other local organisations. The local infrastructure of community-level support is important.
- Advice on disrepair also includes telling the client to report this to the council. This could be an opportunity for early intervention. However, once a PRS team is involved, it becomes an enforcement/landlord issue and the tenant is sidelined. Tenants are cut out of dialogue about what is happening to their home.
- There is a selected licensing scheme in their borough. Tenants can become very upset when their home is granted a licence without tenants being consulted. It is common for landlords to move tenants around so that the council is not aware of overcrowding. Tenants are never asked if the conditions are satisfactory.

Tenants' union #2

- There are plenty of early warning signs that low-level harassment that can end with an illegal eviction.
- The approach of this union is to have branches with regular meetings so that people experiencing early-stage abuse can secure support. Tenants often feel isolated and powerless so the union operates as form of mutual aid where tenants can share collective knowledge and experience. It then also becomes the case that communities build legal knowledge, and neighbours can intervene when there has been a lock-change eviction.
- The union can connect individuals into other networks of legal and professional advice. This way of working creates opportunities to track cases and can support tenants who are building a case against their landlord.
- Abusive landlord behaviour that does not present as an immediate threat of eviction still needs a response, and local collective action is one way to achieve this.

London Borough private sector housing team

- Councils are starting to employ more Tenancy Relations Officers in private sector housing teams in response to the Renters' Rights Act.
- There are early warning signs of criminal landlord intent: no tenancy agreement; deposit not lodged with a scheme; and landlords who 'disappear' when challenged. Sometimes harassment does not feel serious, at first. For example, landlords might start by turning up at unreasonable times, without giving notice in the common parts of an HMO (where prior notice is not needed). Tenants should be encouraged to keep a diary.
- Tenant abuse and exploitation is often linked to rent-to-rent scams. A recent case was a four-tier scam which made it difficult to find and prosecute the responsible person.

- Abusive behaviours can also be linked to tenancies that are set up with 'family friends' or acquaintances, where the tenant presumes that they have no rights even though they are paying rent.
- Harassment is also often linked to rent arrears. Some landlords feel that they are within their rights to harass the tenant when rent is owing, but this is not the case. Tenants do not always realise that Councils can sometimes offer financial assistance.
- Tenants in London are not always aware of the Rogue Landlord and Agent Checker.
- The Renters' Rights Act might improve this situation, in obliging councils to exercise their housing enforcement responsibilities.
- More work needs to be done to link policing and enforcement. In a recent case, the police arrested a landlord for an illegal eviction since a warrant was issued for the landlord's arrest. However, the local authority and the tenant were not informed of the court date and were unable to give evidence. The landlord pleaded guilty and was fined just £300.

Themes within comments from the floor

Identifying risk factors

- Identifying risk factors can lead to early interventions that stop a situation escalating to further harm/trauma for the tenant.
- Information on tenant risk factors should be made available via multiple types of groups including schools and faith groups.
- There are no clear channels for community groups to report problem landlords to the local authority.
- Tenants do not have access to the same level of information on their landlord, as the landlord has on them. Tenants should also be able to do 'due diligence' on their landlord.

Tenants, enforcement action and legal support

- Tenants appear to be poorly informed of outcomes where there has been a complaint: for example, one tenant reported an illegal eviction which was investigated but they were not told about the outcome.
- Some tenants have been advised by lawyers that any compensation would not cover the legal costs. Tenants receiving compensation for illegal eviction depends on their access to legal aid, which is a postcode lottery.
- Collaboration across organisations is vital in supporting tenants but must include access to legal support.
- Legal aid centres do not like illegal eviction cases, because they difficult to work.
- It might be the case that, in the future, the PRS Ombudsman will step in where local authorities fail to act or are slow to act in response to an illegal eviction complaint.

4. Harassment and coercive eviction

Case #3

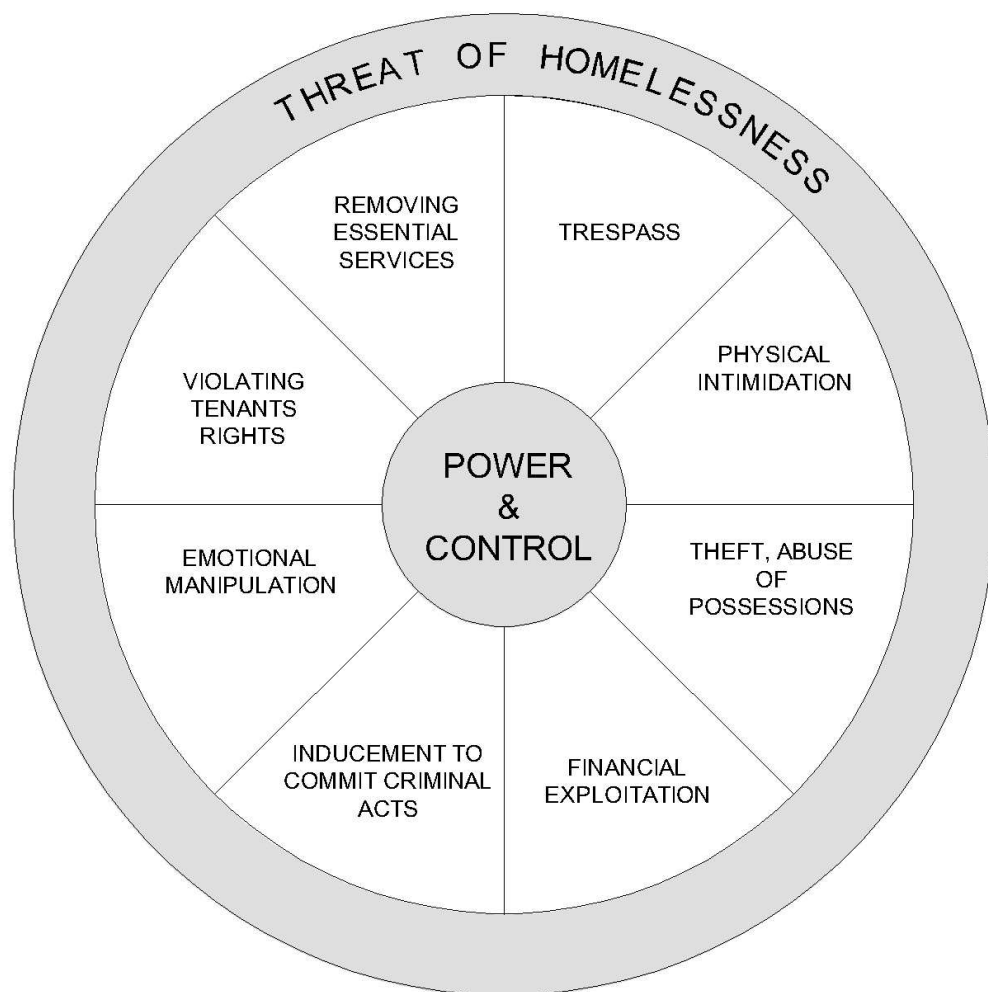
The client had been living in a rented property with her family for twelve years but was finding it difficult to pay the rent. She moved into what she regarded initially as a cheaper property although she was still working three jobs to cover the rent. After three years, the landlord said she wanted to sell the property. The landlord was told that they had to serve a s21 notice but claimed that the client was in fact a lodger, and that the tenancy agreement was only a licence. The client refused to move, and the landlord moved in. The two households were now sharing the property. The landlord began a relentless campaign of harassment to force the client to leave. This included calling the police on multiple occasions, controlling the heating in the property, complaining to the authorities that the client should not be working with children, and reporting that the client was mistreating her pet. The client went to Citizens Advice about the behaviour, but they were not willing to give advice twice about the same case.

Safer Renting client

Comments from the panel

ESRC Criminal Landlord project team

- Landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse can be equated to tenant abuse, as indicated in the power-and-control wheel. Landlords offering poor-quality properties seek to exert control over the tenant by threatening homelessness. This means that the tenant is less likely to complain.
- Tenants are generally subject to more than one type of abuse.
- Often, tenants think that landlords are within their rights to enact some kinds of abusive behaviours, which means that the behaviours are more likely to be tolerated.
- A landlord giving the tenant notice to quit is the threat being enacted: early action is needed before abuse reaches this point.



Elements of landlord-perpetrated tenant abuse

Lisa O'Malley, Loren Parton and Julie Rugg (2025) *Landlord-perpetrated abuse of tenants in the English private rented sector*, York: University of York.

London Borough private sector housing team #2

- The officer commented further on Case #1, indicating that this rent-to-rent property was controlled by a group of individuals with linkages to wider criminality including trafficking and dealing in unauthorised medicines. The tenants had been removed by a spurious enforcement company, and the police would not support the tenants re-entering the property. The police claimed that the issue was a civil matter. The property was subsequently relet to another group of tenants.
- Enforcement work tends to fail single tenants living in HMOs, because they are often single adults and not in priority need.

- The Protection from Eviction Act does not protect tenants or stop evictions taking place. Issues become confused in rent-to-rent cases, where the individuals responsible for cutting utilities or for illegally evicting the tenants might not be the same people.
- It was important to keep the tenant updated on the progress of a case.

Safer Renting

- Police have a poor record of attending where an illegal eviction is taking place: in 49 cases where Safer Renting is aware that the police were called, in only two cases did the police actually attend.
- Local authorities are seeking to increase the number of Tenancy Relations Officers, but there is a skills shortage in relation to expertise in implementing the Protection from Eviction Act. Other legislative approaches have proved to be valuable, including the use of Community Protection Notices and Anti-Social Behaviour legislation.

Themes within comments from the floor

Tenant's role in relation to enforcement action

- Enforcement work should consider what actions the tenant would find acceptable. For example, a landlord might break the boiler to provoke a Prohibition Order which means that the tenant must leave. Using this strategy, the landlord can use the local authority to expedite an eviction. In some cases, the tenant might want for the property to be brought to standard so they can stay.
- Tenants are offered limited incentive to support local authority enforcement work. Often, tenants are required to give witness statements, but local authorities do not acknowledge instances where this might put the tenant at risk.
- There is little political pressure for local authorities to adopt a more tenant-focused approach to enforcement.
- Tenants are expected to forward their own cases, but legal aid is not available. Citizens' Advice offers limited support. Some tenants are not eligible for support from agencies such as Shelter or Justice for Tenants.
- Within enforcement work, tenants are not generally regarded as the victims of a crime.

5. The act of illegal eviction

Case #4

This client was living in a rental property with his family. He gave the estate agency that handled the property £1,700 as a 'holding deposit', but this has never been repaid. The property was in poor condition, and missing part of the roof. The client found a solicitor to try and force the landlord to deal with the disrepair, but this seemed to make the situation worse. The landlord attempted to evict the client illegally by sending men to force the tenant out of the property. When the first attempt failed, the landlord sent a larger group of men, who dragged the client from the house and assaulted him so severely that he lost several teeth. The police attended the scene. They accepted 'a bit of paper' as a valid eviction notice and arrested the client for anti-social behaviour. He was taken in handcuffs to A&E. The client threatened to take the police to court and was offered £5,000 as an out-of-court settlement, which he refused. When the case finally reached court, it was dismissed by the judge. The client has had no compensation for his experience.

Safer Renting Client

Case #5

The client had been living in a shared property with another family for around eight years. In the last two years, the landlord moved in one of his friends who then moved in his girlfriend. This couple wanted the client to move out and started a campaign of harassment and threat which took place over months. This included removing the client's property from the kitchen and locking up appliances so she was unable to use them. The couple called the police, saying that the client had assaulted them. When the police attended, they advised the client to move out for a few days to let things settle down. Three days after she returned, there was a lock-change eviction. She had come back from the gym and had nothing to wear but her gym clothes. The client didn't know where to go. She went to the Citizens Advice office, but no-one was there.

She returned to the property and tried to recover some of her belongings. She was subjected to physical attack by the girlfriend. Her neighbours phoned the police, who were not interested in the assault, even though the client had recorded the action on her phone. The police isolated her from the neighbours, searched her room and then allowed her to get some belongings. The police were laughing as she packed. She could not take all her belongings, and these have never been recovered.

The illegal eviction has left the client feeling unsafe and traumatised. Her anxiety has increased and she has started to isolate herself from other people. She had to take days

off at the time of the eviction, and her employer eventually pressured her to resign. Victims receive no support for this crime, and she has been on her own in trying to secure help. She has spent countless hours trying to find support that leads nowhere, and each time she has had to repeat the story which is retraumatising. This amounts to psychological torture. There is no justice for tenants in these cases.

Comments from the panel

Police law practitioner

- The Metropolitan Police have a landlord/tenant guide² which sets out steps an officer should take including a presumption in favour of the tenant. This appears to be rarely followed in practice. It is suggested that this policy should be shown to officers on the ground as a simple first step when police say that illegal eviction is a civil matter.
- Deighton Pierce Glynn takes civil actions and complaints against the police when the police do not act according to the law when attending an illegal eviction. Cases make reference to the Human Rights Act. An illegal eviction engages Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights which protects the right to respect for private life, family life, and home. DPG is developing case law around police inactivity in illegal eviction cases, which has led to damages being paid to the tenants affected.

Housing law practitioner

- Once a tenant is evicted the whole case is much harder than trying to keep people in their home to begin with. Four approaches are possible.
 - First, calling the police – but risking that they will make it worse. The police erroneously telling the landlord that it is a civil matter hints that their action is acceptable.
 - Second, civil actions such as injunctions also carry problems. Legal Aid does not cover costs for people to go down this route, and many people have an income which means that they are not eligible. Many solicitors might not have expertise to take these kinds of cases, which can take a long time. In the meantime, the landlord can re-let the property.
 - LA enforcement rarely happens and local authorities discharged their duty to the solicitors which is not adequate. Landlords know the background /framework and simply refuse to take calls or comply with the case being pursued.

² <https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/metropolitan-police/disclosure-2023/october-2023/new-operational-guidance-on-attending-illegalextra-legal-eviction-calls/>

- Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act 1977 allows the tenant to break back in. However, it is likely that they will just get evicted again so this is not a long-term solution, also leading to further traumatising.
- It is hoped that the Renters' Rights Act will force local authorities to have an enforcement policy that is lawful and does not expose the local authority to the risk of judicial review.
- This policy should also consider harm prevention.

Themes within comments from the floor

Nature of offenses

- The enforcement legislation does not address landlords being able to start up new companies and repeat their offenses.
- It is possible that the Renters' Rights Act will increase the number of illegal evictions now that s21 is not available to landlords.

Police responses

- Multiple further instances given of police action that runs counter to the law: in one case, the police simply refused to read the guidance note for the police that Safer Renting had provided to the client in the event of an illegal eviction. Police training has taken place but is clearly not working. Police attendance invariably makes the situation worse.
- Officers do not attend many illegal evictions, and it may be that training call handlers might be a better approach.
- Police do not understand that tenants have a right to break back into a property. It would be helpful if legislation was clearer on the legality of a tenant breaking back in, in response to an illegal eviction.

Local authority responses

- There needs to be a changing mindset within local authorities in how this offence is being dealt with. There was a strong consensus in the room that there should be a 'zero tolerance' approach to illegal eviction.

6. Further remarks and next steps

Tenant perspectives

- Statutory authority responses to illegal eviction do not start by asking the tenant about their experience, and what they want: support, rehousing elsewhere, rehoming in the same property, prosecution of the landlord, some other method for changing the landlord's behaviour.
- Tenants who experience illegal eviction feel remarkably isolated: there is little acknowledgement of the traumatic nature of this crime and no obvious place where tenants can go for support that is not focused on prosecution or enforcement.
- Evidence from tenants is not included in any assessment of whether a home is suitable for habitation.
- Tenants are not informed about local authority enforcement action, despite such actions materially affecting their home and their relationship with their landlord. It is not unreasonable to copy tenants into dialogue between the landlord and the local authority on the outcome of inspections including information on improvement notices that have been served.
- Outcomes for landlords in terms of prosecution simply do not reflect the harms visited on tenants as a consequence of harassment, abuse and illegal eviction. Landlords who are found guilty of these behaviours should not be allowed to operate as landlords.

Tenant knowledge of rights

- Tenants 'knowing their rights' is not a guaranteed solution:
 - Some tenants simply do not know their rights, and do not challenge poor landlord practice;
 - Some tenants know their rights and do not challenge poor landlord practice because they do not want to 'rock the boat';
 - Some tenants know their rights and challenge poor landlord practice with no beneficial outcome – indeed, challenge might make a situation worse; and
 - Some tenants know their rights, challenge poor landlord practice and do secure a beneficial outcome but it is unclear what circumstances lead to successful outcomes.

Identifying and responding to risk factors

- Sufficient information is now available to isolate the risk factors that point towards a likely illegal eviction. Local authorities should regard identifying these factors as a homelessness prevention measure.

The Protection from Eviction Act and the nature of harm

- It may be that the Protection from Eviction Act is an obstacle to the prosecution of crimes that, outside of a tenant and landlord relationship, would be understood as assault, trespass, harassment and theft.

Next steps

- There was substantial support for the suggestion that the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee should undertake an Inquiry which would
 - Secure further evidence on the incidence of illegal eviction
 - Ask whether the Renters' Rights Act has improved tenant experience at the lowest end of the market
 - Review local authority enforcement in response to reports of illegal eviction
 - Consider the value of existing legislative responses, and consider whether the Protection from Eviction Act requires revision or replacement

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