



A grassroots campaign taking action against mammoth fuel bills and working towards an affordable, sustainable and democratic energy system

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21 July 2017

Dear Minister,

You will remember I spoke to you as you were leaving the UK Green Building Council event on 18 July, and told you that in our experience new build homes were as much of a problem as old ones, or worse: the reality is very far from what is promised by developers and from what appears in the brochures, in terms of both carbon emissions and residents' comfort and safety. You asked if this was an issue of inspection and enforcement, and whether we had specific examples where lack of enforcement has left people without adequate insulation or heating systems. A few examples are below, but we are a very small organization. I imagine you must know of many others yourself?

Of the estates we work with in London, the following are the most glaring examples:

1) **Orchard Village estate in Rainham, Essex.** A quick google will bring up myriad press reports [1] exposing how residents here have been left not only without adequate (or in many places, any) insulation, but also without fire breaks, with concerns over the integrity of methane membranes, and with a dysfunctional district heating system, all of which problems, and more, have seriously impacted residents' health and safety. This has been raised in Parliament by the local MP, Jon Cruddas, and is subject to legal proceedings. The fight for homes fit to live in has gone on three years, and continues.

2) **Pembroke Park estate in Hillingdon** (see attached press release). This A2Dominion estate has a similar history of shoddy construction, failure to repair, problems with the district heating, faulty fire protection, and absence of insulation, as witnessed by thermal imaging, years ago. In March 2017 residents were told by John Turner, Technical Director of A2D that they were "heating the street". They had managed to get just one home insulated – where a seriously ill child had nearly died three times from an acute respiratory condition and been rushed to Great Ormond Street due to the cold. This was achieved, after 18 months efforts, by threat of court action: the fact that the insulation should have been there in the first place, and urgent letters from the child's paediatrician, had not been enough. The rest of the estate was left to freeze.

Presently, even a letter on the various issues from Nick Hurd, as local MP and Minister responsible for fire safety has failed to get a response from A2D.

3) **Hale Village in Tottenham** is another new build estate. Here the most pressing problem at present is disabling overheating, believed to be due to lack of insulation around the pipework carrying hot water as part of the district heating network. As the climate changes, this common defect of district heating systems and current architectural design will be more and more of a

problem: homes are not being designed and built for the 21st century.

4) **Myatts Field North in Lambeth** was regenerated in a PFI project, with plans including “a new energy plant to provide more reliable and efficient heating and hot water and reduce the carbon footprint of homes”. In reality the new district heating system has been a nightmare with four years of frequent outages and continuing issues with unreliability, lack of control, lack of hot water, and high costs. As at Hale Village, residents are also suffering severe overheating in summer, which may again be due to lack of pipes insulation, or building design, and again there has been a catalogue of other problems: please see today’s [Guardian article](#) which reinforces much of what we are saying here. Promised solar panels have largely failed to materialize. The direct involvement of both Fuel Poverty Action and BEIS has led E.ON, who run the heat network, to admit to many problems and there are ongoing efforts to secure accountability here – difficult because of the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms built into the original contracts, and the multiple layers of firms and a consortium involved in carrying them out. This story is fully documented in our recently published report *Not Fit for Purpose: Residents’ Experiences of E.ON’s District Heating System on the Myatts Field North Estate and Oval Quarter development in Lambeth, London.* [2]

District heating

District heating is common to all of these estates, and indeed to a high proportion of the estates that are springing up under regeneration schemes. New heat and power centres and piped-in heat come with the promise of replacing expensive fossil fuels with lower carbon emissions and lower bills. We believe district heating *can* achieve these aims, and of course new housing *can* be built that is sound, affordable, and produces little or nothing in terms of carbon. Instead we see multiple layers of contracts and subcontracts, inadequate regulation, laughable inspection and enforcement mechanisms, and a commission-based procuring process that incentivizes corner-cutting and market-gamesmanship. Residents are locked into the schemes for generations and cannot switch; the suppliers of heat take advantage of this: even customer service and care for vulnerable customers is appalling, and metering and billing are commonly chaotic and exploitative, despite the fact that this is one aspect of district heating that is actually regulated, as required under European law. And other than that, the industry is entirely unregulated, as the government has not yet accepted the need.

Fire safety

In the wake of the Grenfell catastrophe, the appalling inadequacy of UK fire safety regulations, inspections, and enforcement are widely known. One aspect that as yet has been little publicized is the openings for pipes and cables in walls and floors, allowing the spread of both fire and smoke. The rules laid down in building regulations (see c p 36 [here](#)) are probably breached routinely: cladding is visible to all, but holes in the cupboard floor are hardly visible, and we understand that a thorough investigation of a building’s compartmentation does not form part of a standard fire risk assessment. This is an issue both for new buildings and retrofits: Grenfell Tower had recently been retro-fitted with a district heating system, requiring pipework to be punched through floors, ceilings and walls. The rules on sealing such gaps around pipes of all sorts, and electrical cables, can easily fall by the wayside where savings are demanded and work is done on the cheap, or where inspections are lax. We do not know yet what the seals were like around the pipes and cables in Grenfell Tower. If they were poor, this would inevitably have facilitated the fire spreading *inside* the building, greatly diminishing residents’ chance of escape.

On Orchard Village estate have been looking at their own pipes and have made this

worrying [video](#), as yet to be assessed by experts.

On Myatts Field, the alarm was sounded years ago; the history below exposes the mechanisms by which residents are put in danger.

Whistleblower accuses Regenter [consortium] of deliberate health and safety non-compliance

In April 2014, a former Rydon Maintenance Ltd employee working on the Myatts Field North PFI project sent a series of emails to the RAMB [Residents Association and PFI Monitoring Board] making very specific allegations about health and safety breaches along with more general allegations about the inadequacies of compliance monitoring by both Regenter and Lambeth. The person made clear their feelings about Rydon and Regenter's conduct:

"I have never worked for such a bunch of cowboys in my career... I could write a book about their shortfalls."

Among his allegations were that Regenter was breaching fire safety legislation as no Fire Risk Assessments had been carried out in relation to either council owned properties that had been refurbished by Rydon or new mixed-tenure properties being constructed by Higgins, and that a Rydon manager had actively prevented them being carried out to save money. He also alleged that water safety regulations were being flouted through failures to properly chlorinate new water supply pipes and inform the regulator. Finally, he alleged that compliance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System on the refurbished homes was in doubt because the homes were being incorrectly signed off by the Independent Certifier, the Sweett Group.[3]

I hope these points and examples are useful. I am sure you will agree that the whole situation is deeply unacceptable.

The result of the lack of accountability is lives ruined, and many thousands of lives lost, from cold, and from fire. Residents battling year after year to get homes fit to live in face a brick wall: they are ignored. In practice there is no accountability and no meaningful consultation, either at planning stages or later when the problems are clear to the naked eye.

This reality is increasingly well-known and documented. I was very glad to hear you acknowledge the problem of enforcement. **We are anxious to hear what the government plans to do about it.**

In particular, please let us know what can be done for these four particular estates. On Pembroke Park, Nick Hurd is pursuing A2Dominion -- but the fact is that he has been doing so for years, and they are not even responding to him now, despite the risk of fire.

I am copying your letter to residents of the four estates cited and the relevant MPs, and making it more widely available, as the issues are common, and are pressing. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Ruth London

[1] Eg see [here](#)

[2] <http://www.fuelpovertyaction.org.uk/research/>

[3] https://docs.google.com/document/d/18Hre1c-zMX3wWr1wNyoJCTNTFtxQ_RubXElpgHyT3dA/edit--

