



## **CHAIRMAN'S CATEGORY COMMENTS**

### **FEATURE WRITER – John Yadoo**

We were very happy to see an increased number of entries and further encouraged to see the standard of articles to be high with a broad range of subject matters. This made the process of finding a winner that more difficult.

### **Winner: Martin Hilditch, Inside Housing**

All three articles submitted were well researched, succinct and to the point. They were written with confidence and sensitivity, where necessary and further demonstrated a good use of his contacts.

Features writer of the year – Martin Hilditch

From hard-hitting investigations to compelling individual stories, Martin's work set the tone for *Inside Housing* over the last year. His feature articles combined detailed research with powerful prose to illuminate some of the biggest issues affecting the magazine's readers.

His first piece, *The Enemy Within*, revealed for the first time the full story behind one of the biggest health and safety problems to hit the housing and construction sector in the last decade. His dogged pursuit of the details over a number of years enabled him to shed new light on the UK's largest ever gas safety prosecution and demonstrate how the saga linked to the death of a young woman from carbon monoxide poisoning several years previously. Martin obtained emails relating to the investigation and spoke to large numbers of residents to deliver the definitive account of one of the housing sector's darkest hours. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/home/analysis/the-enemy-within/7006769.article>

His second article, *Empty Feeling*, was the result of another detailed investigation in which Martin broke the news that a housing association had been forced to take a £4 million hit in its accounts after government welfare reforms left it with hundreds of empty homes in two villages. The homes were effectively worthless as the local council had refused to buy them for a knock-down price of £1 each. The piece tackled two of the biggest issues facing the magazine's readers – the impact of welfare reforms on their businesses and the challenge of regenerating deprived communities – and delivered a powerful individual story to boot. The investigation generated significant national attention and was followed up with a six-minute feature on Channel Four News, and pieces in *The Daily Mail*, *Mirror* and *Northern Echo*. The issue was subsequently debated in parliament, which saw the housing minister challenged about the impact of welfare reform on the problem. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/empty-feeling/7008061.article>

Martin's third feature, *Rent Rebellion*, revealed that large numbers of councils were ignoring the government's new rent setting formula. The article sprang from hugely detailed research in which Martin poured over hundreds of pieces of information from more than 100 individual council meetings to pull together a comprehensive national story. The changes to the rent formula had blown a hole in councils' 30-year business plans, which had been agreed with government just three years previously. It was the biggest single challenge faced by councils' housing budgets in the last year – and Martin's pursuit of the detail meant *Inside Housing* could reveal the scale of the rebellion. <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/business/finance/rent/rent-rebellion/7009004.article>

Martin's investigative journalism makes *Inside Housing* a must read publication. It is for this reason he deserves to win this award.

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The villages of Horden and Blackhall are near the beautiful Durham coast, so why are some homes there so hard to let? *Martin Hilditch* finds out

# Empty feeling

**A**t first glance, it's difficult to see why there are so many empty homes in the villages of Horden and Blackhall.

Located near Easington, the former mining communities have the picture postcard surroundings of green fields and the crashing waves of the County Durham coastline. It's hard to imagine a more beautiful environment.

Venture into the backstreets, though, and it becomes apparent that Blackhall and, in particular, Horden (pictured) have a major problem. A significant number of the terraced homes that snake through the villages are empty. Mostly, the vacant properties are sprinkled here and there. But several streets in Horden are particularly depressing affairs, with homes entombed behind iron shutters outnumbering the strangely incongruous doors and windows of the remaining properties.

Although some of these empty properties are owned by private landlords, most are owned by the 20,500-home housing association Accent. Out of the 220 homes it owns in Horden, 130 are currently empty. A further 30 out of the 141 homes it owns in Blackhall are also vacant. Demand for social rented homes in these properties is so low that on the day *Inside Housing* visits, Accent reveals that attempts to sell them to other social landlords have failed, and Durham County Council even rejected an approach to sell it the homes for £1 each.

The association wrote down the value of its housing assets by £4.1m in its 2013/14 financial statements - mostly relating to its properties in Horden. This means it now views the homes as being worth nothing when it records their value in its accounts.

So what has caused the decline? And why do some members of Accent's management think the story sheds light on a wider issue that some landlords in the north are reluctant to talk about?

The fall in demand has its roots in the closure of the surrounding mining industry in the 1980s (a small, drab industrial estate has since replaced Horden's colliery).

The two-bedroom terraced homes which make up the majority of Accent's stock in the villages became increasingly unpopular as the popu-

## In numbers

**£4.1m**  
Amount Accent wrote down the value of its housing properties by in 2013/14

**130**  
Number of empty homes Accent owns in Horden

**30**  
Number of empty homes Accent owns in Blackhall

**£7m**  
Amount Accent would need to spend to bring the homes up to its quality standard

lation aged and families moved for employment reasons.

By 2008, Accent was letting the two-bedroom houses mainly to single people. 'That was the only market,' states Claire Stone, director of communities and assets with Accent.

## Impact of bedroom tax

The introduction of the bedroom tax in April 2013, which cuts the housing benefit of people under-occupying by up to 25%, put paid to this solution.

'When the bedroom tax came in, that ceased to be an option,' Ms Stone says, acknowledging that filling the homes with single people was 'never a long-term sustainable option'.

**"Our responsibility is to social residents. We need to make the right decision for them."**

With growing numbers of empty homes - Accent estimates the vacant homes are costing it £600,000 a year due to costs like council tax and security - a new answer was needed. Given the homes are worth on average £30,000 (in theory, at least) and need about £20,000 of investment to bring them up to Accent's typical standards, it's easy to see why other social landlords weren't clamouring to buy. Accent came to the conclusion that the only answer was to sell the homes privately. Ms Stone says the decision was tough but adds, 'Our responsibility is to our social residents and we need to make the right decision for the group as a whole.'

It has consulted residents and typical concerns are about whether the

homes will be sold to private landlords, Ms Stone adds.

There may be an alternative to selling largely to a new generation of buy-to-let landlords, however. Accent is planning a homesteading initiative, where would-be homeowners buy a property at up to a 50% discount in return for promising to live there for at least three years. It is currently working on the detail as part of an application for the Homes and Communities Agency's consent.

## Opposition to initiative

Not everyone is happy with the decision. Sarah Robson, head of economic development and housing with Durham County Council, said it is 'extremely disappointed'. It was unable to take ownership because it is currently transferring its homes to a housing association and the Accent homes require 'at least £7m-worth of repairs to meet the decent homes standard'.

Accent's Ms Stone says a better solution would be for wider regeneration work that would see some properties demolished and replaced with more modern, desirable homes. But with national policymakers focused almost entirely on new builds rather than regeneration of communities, this is currently a non-starter.

Some social landlords in the north of England are even reluctant to talk about these issues, she feels, in case policymakers decide they don't also need investment in new homes. It prompts Ms Stone to refer to low demand as an issue that currently 'dare not speak its name'. Research by *Inside Housing* in January certainly hints at a wider problem - revealing a number of landlords in the north saw an increase in the number of void properties following the introduction of the bedroom tax.

As the day draws on, we visit Billy Hill a Horden councillor and Accent tenant who proudly shows off reams of certificates from various bodies commending him for the community work he has carried out in the village. So what does such a dedicated member of the community feel about the decision to sell the social homes?

'The decision has been taken with a sad heart,' Mr Hill states. But he accepts there are few other options available.

'They haven't got the money or investment they would like,' he adds. Accent's proposal might not be perfect, but it is the best solution it can currently deliver.



Left, inset: Accent tenant and Horden councillor Billy Hill



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# Rent rebellion

Why have many councils ignored government guidance in setting their rents? *Martin Hilditch* investigates

The government could not have made its intentions clearer when it changed its guidance on the way social landlords should set their rents in May last year.

It told councils that from April 2015 it expected them to increase rents 'by no more' than the level of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) as it stood at September of the previous year plus another percentage point. This marked a big change in direction and, to cut a long story short, the result for many councils would have been a smaller rent increase in 2015/16 than was factored into long-term business plans.

Only the story doesn't end there. A major piece of research by *Inside Housing* has revealed that many councils have rebelled against the restrictions of the government's formula.

In fact, out of 104 English councils surveyed, one-third - 35 councils - have chosen to raise their rents by a higher percentage than the 2.2% average increase that the new approach would deliver. One council set rents six percentage points higher.

So why have so many councils chosen to throw off the shackles of the government formula? And is rebelling likely to have any negative consequences for them?

## Firm formula

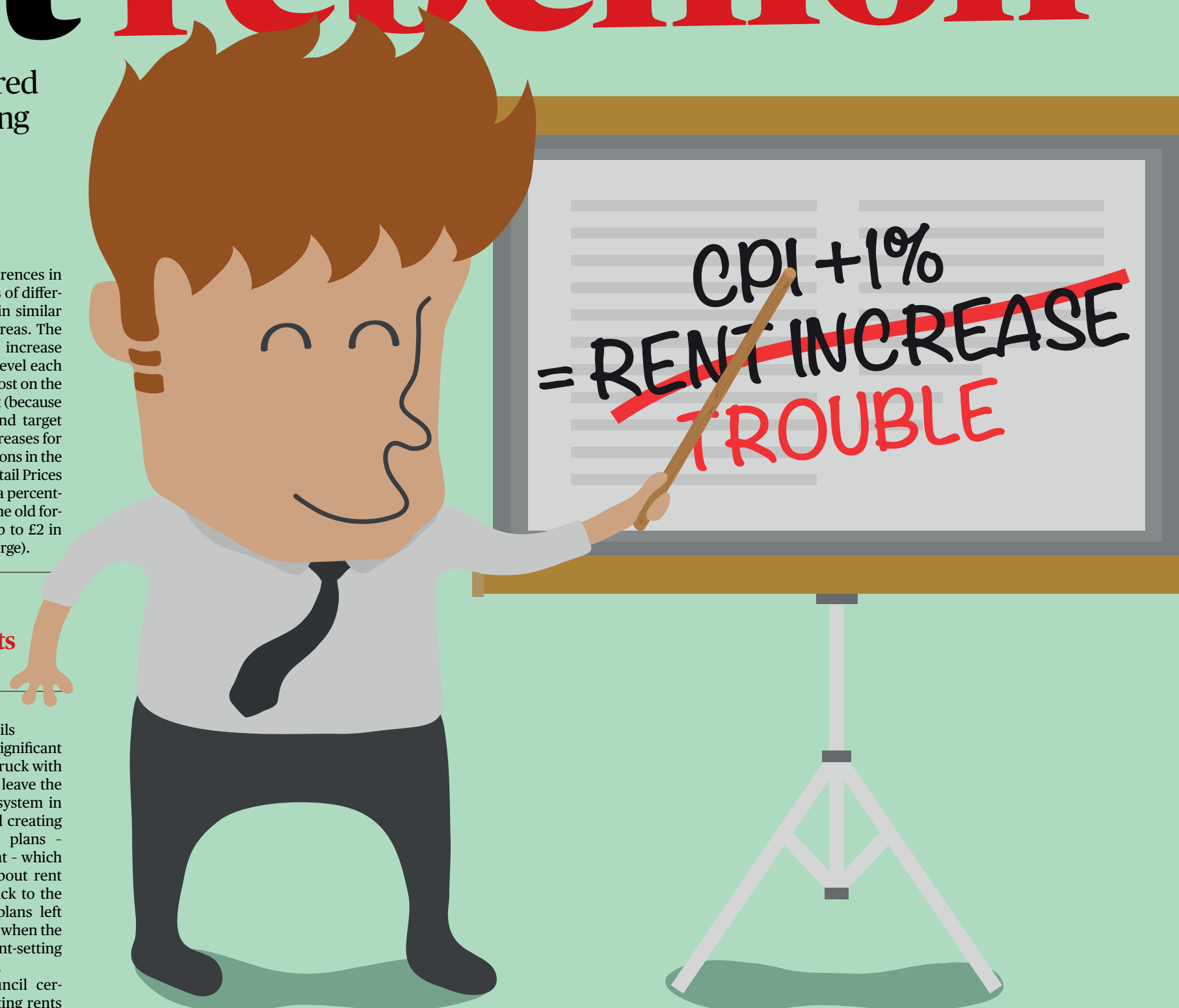
The new guidance effectively killed off a policy known as 'rent restructuring' that landlords had been following since the turn of the century. This was designed to align social housing rents

- eradicating often big differences in the amount paid by tenants of different social landlords living in similar types of homes in similar areas. The policy allowed councils to increase their rents to a 'guideline' level each year - effectively a staging post on the way to the overall target rent (because galloping straight to the end target would have meant huge increases for some tenants). The calculations in the old formula also used the Retail Prices Index, currently more than a percentage point higher than CPI (the old formula was RPI+0.5% plus up to £2 in order to allow rents to converge).

**"The problem is authorities have seen the goalposts change."**

The new policy was problematic for many councils because they had taken on significant amounts of debt in a deal struck with government that saw them leave the previous housing subsidy system in 2012. This process involved creating detailed 30-year business plans - agreed with the government - which factored in assumptions about rent increases. The desire to stick to the promises made in these plans left councils in a tricky position when the government changed its rent-setting policy barely two years later.

London's Havering Council certainly thought so. It is putting rents up by an average of 8.6% - the highest



increase out of the councils surveyed. It is moving all rents to the target rent in one go.

A report considered by the council's cabinet on 11 February is clear about the reasons why. It states that applying the government's CPI+1% guidance immediately 'would have lost the council's business plan £100m over the life of the plan'. A spokesperson for the council points out that it has historically had relatively low rents and the increase will help deliver new social housing.

Hinckley & Bosworth Council posted the second highest increase of 6.5%. A spokesperson said it had consulted its tenants' panel and 'it was the tenants' representative who suggested the 6.5% increase, so that more tenants would be able to benefit from an accelerated refurbishment programme'.

Welwyn Hatfield Council is putting rents up by 5.75%. The council's rents hadn't been due to converge until 2020 and its housing revenue account business plan and corresponding loan finance 'were arranged taking account of the original system', a spokesperson states. 'In order to maintain high quality services for our tenants and repay the sizeable debt, we have implemented a rent increase of 5.75%'.

It's easy to see why councils have been tempted to rebel - even when you look at the ones that haven't. Birmingham Council is sticking to the government formula in 2015/16. Minutes of a council meeting in February make it clear it is doing so partly because it is close to 'limit rents' imposed by housing benefit rules. Abandoning convergence comes with a substantial cost, however. 'It is esti-

ated that this represents an annual cost to the HRA of up to £10m per annum', the report states - and a likely £60m over 10 years.

Other councils make similar calculations. Lewisham (raising rents by 2.61%) calculates that following the formula would cost £26.3m over its 30-year business plan. Great Yarmouth thinks its 2.7% increase will generate £3.5m over 30 years.

A report to Hammersmith & Fulham Council's cabinet in January delivered the starkest summary. It said sticking to government guidance 'results in debt never being repaid and in repairs being unable to be funded'.

It is putting rents up by CPI+1% plus an additional £1 per week for tenants who are not yet paying the target rent.

## Open to interpretation

Some councils fear there may be consequences of disobeying, though. A Cornwall Council report suggested that 'failure to adhere to this guidance may result in future rent regulation'. North Tyneside Council also worried about continuing towards convergence because of the 'potential for the government to bring in some form of penalty, as this is not a policy they endorse'.

Ken Lee, chair of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's housing panel, suggests this isn't something councils should worry about hugely. 'It [government policy] is a guideline,' he states. 'Unlike a referee at a football match, it is open to interpretation.'

As Simon Smith, director (financial consultancy) with CIH Consultancy, says, councils have been put in a difficult position.

'The problem is authorities have seen the goalposts change,' he states. 'The government has said that you can't charge the rents that you allowed for [in HRA business plans]. Secondly, welfare reform has come in. Thirdly, we are in a period of lower [than expected] inflation as well.'

Mr Smith agrees, however, that ultimately - barring difficulties caused by limit rents - local authorities are in 'control in terms of what they actually do'.

For large numbers of councils this year, that control means the government's stated policy is one that simply has to be ignored.

## Top 5 rent increases

Council	Rent increase % 2015/6	Average rent £ 2015/6
Havering	8.6	99.31
Hinckley & Bosworth	6.5	N/A
Welwyn Hatfield	5.75	107.18
North-West Leicestershire	5.41	83.21
RB Kensington and Chelsea	4.66	123.81

Source: Council reports

# The enemy within

Following the death of a young woman from carbon monoxide poisoning, *Inside Housing* has spent the past six years investigating life-threatening dangers on housing estates. Today, in the wake of the UK's largest ever gas safety prosecution, *Martin Hilditch* tells the full story of one of the construction industry's darkest hours

The events that led to the UK's biggest ever gas safety prosecution began when a single carbon monoxide detector was activated in a housing association flat in Poole, Dorset on a freezing cold winter's day back in 2009.

Up to that point, the recently-completed 340-home Harbour Reach development had been seen as something of a triumph. Built between 2005 and 2007, the *Daily Mail* was moved to refer to it in 2008 as 'the most luxurious' social housing scheme in Britain, due to its prime waterfront location.

But on 27 January, 2009, everything turned sour when a detector was switched on in flat 7 of a 16-home block called Shearwater House, owned by Raglan Housing Association, which was undertaking a programme to install detectors in all of its properties with gas heating.

'It became clear very quickly that things were not right,' Christine Haberfield, inspector of health and safety at the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), summarises.

A Shearwater House resident puts it even more directly. 'He [the engineer] put the detector on and it just went off the scale,' he says. The level of carbon monoxide recorded was so high that it represented an immediate threat to safety.

**"It became clear very quickly that things were not right."**

After the worrying level of carbon monoxide was found in flat 7, the HSE was contacted straight away and further work revealed problems with gas flue systems (the pipes that take fumes away from boilers) in other properties. In some cases the faults discovered meant the boilers represented an 'immediate danger' to people's safety.

Over the next couple of days, the supply to 149 homes was turned off because it was thought to be dangerous. After receiving an emergency report from a CORGI engineer, Southern Gas Networks then visited the site, built by developer Taylor Wimpey, and the decision was made to turn off gas to the entire Harbour Reach estate.

As the investigations proceeded, the scale of the problems uncovered was staggering. Faults were discovered with the boiler flue systems in every single one of Raglan's 60 homes at Harbour Reach. Over time, investigators found that 90% of the properties on the estate - 309 in total - contained some kind of flaw.

'A significant proportion were immediately dangerous,' Ms ▶



Deadly gas found at new housing

Flues cause carbon monoxide alert at flats

## The death of Elouise Littlewood



Main picture: Alan and Sally-Anne Littlewood. Inset: Elouise Littlewood



ROGAN MACDONALD

In winter 2008, Alan and Sally-Anne Littlewood's world collapsed around them. At 3pm on 27 February, Mrs Littlewood received a call to say that her daughter Elouise had failed to turn up for work.


The absence, without a word of explanation, was completely out of character for the 26-year-old, who was employed by Hawk Training as a tutor and assessor for children's care, learning and development.

Her mother was so worried that she left work and dashed to Elouise's flat in Wooldridge Close on the nearby Bedfont Lakes estate, near Hounslow. She became even more concerned when she spotted her daughter's car outside the flat but got no answer after knocking on the door.

By now she had called her husband, who left his workplace and arrived at the flat soon after. They were then joined by the brother of Elouise's lodger, Simon Kilby, who said Simon had not been seen by his colleagues all day - again without calling in sick. The families decided to phone the police. When officers arrived the families gave them permission to kick open the front door.

'They realised straight away that the chain and locks were on from the inside,' Mr Littlewood says. 'That's when they sent me away.'

Mrs Littlewood simply states: 'That was the beginning of the nightmare.'

 **Read the interview in full at**  
[www.insidehousing.co.uk/  
no-one-should-go-through-  
this/6506679.article](http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/no-one-should-go-through-this/6506679.article)

Haberfield states. 'As a generality there was a lot wrong and it wasn't just a little bit wrong. There were some cases where the flue terminated in the [internal] void and didn't go outside [the property] at all. Some flues had actually started to come apart.'

So how did things go so wrong at Britain's 'most luxurious' social housing scheme? And why did these initial findings turn into a sprawling five-year legal case that affected the lives of residents in two blocks of flats 90 miles away from Harbour Reach in Reading?

*Inside Housing* has carried out a detailed series of investigations over the past six years into problems relating to concealed flue systems across the UK. Today we reveal how the frightening discoveries in Harbour Reach led to the first successful prosecution relating to the installation of such systems. And following the conclusion of the legal case

**"I can't believe that a gas inspector would have passed something like that."**

**Residents 'at breaking point' over Harbour Reach gas crisis**

at the end of September, we can also tell the wider story of one of the UK construction industry's darkest hours - and Harbour Reach's position in it - in full for the first time.

As stated, all the problems at Harbour Reach related to a common type of boiler system, known as a concealed flue. This means that the pipes leading from the boiler are hidden from sight and do not exit the home directly through an external wall. When they were installed - mainly in the first decade of this century - it was almost impossible to check for faults in some cases. This was because for aesthetic reasons inspection panels weren't

inserted along the length of the walls and ceilings that the flues were placed behind.

*Inside Housing* has learnt that concerns about concealed flue systems had been raised nationally in 2007. In April of that year the National

House Building Council (NHBC) had issued a technical newsletter, which dealt with the issue of access to gas flues.

Its guidance stated that: 'CORGI, and others within the industry, are concerned that with this type of flue, building designers may be tempted to route flues through the structure in such a way that they are not accessible for inspection and maintenance.'

Then, in June 2007, CORGI issued guidance that stressed 'it is necessary to be able to visually inspect the flue system throughout its route, both prior to the initial commissioning of the appliance and subsequently during routine servicing.'

Nevertheless, the issue had a low profile outside of the gas fitting industry until the dangers were exposed in the most tragic way possible.

### Fatal flaw

On 27 February 2008, dance teacher Elouise Littlewood died from carbon monoxide poisoning (see box). The 26-year-old had only recently moved into the newly-built flat she part- ▶

owned with Notting Hill Housing at the Bedfont Lakes development built by Barratt West London. While there are no links between this and the legal case involving Harbour Reach, both developments contained concealed flue boiler systems, which had prevented engineers from seeing the full length of the pipe.

**“None of the scheduling for trades has been thought through at all.”**

Barratt launched a massive inspection programme following Ms Littlewood’s death, visiting all of its developments started since April 2007 that had concealed flue systems - 1,986 homes in 65 housing schemes. In the majority of cases it didn’t find any issues but there were a few estates where it found ‘one or two problems’. These included two developments in Colchester - 179-home Balkerne Heights and 79-home Horizon - and its 50-home Brewery Wharf development in Leeds. Its checks uncovered two main issues - either brackets supporting flues were not put in place properly or inspection panels weren’t properly installed. It immediately remedied any issues it found.

Persimmon was another developer that took action, looking at how many of its homes had been fitted with the system since 2007 and discovered that 1,096 could be affected. It wrote to all relevant homeowners and established that 384 homes ‘did not have access panels in accordance to safety requirements’.

Shortly after Ms Littlewood’s death

the HSE issued a stark warning that 1,200 homes with concealed flue systems could be ‘immediately dangerous’ and a further 4,800 were potentially ‘at risk’. The figures were estimates based on the work carried out by Barratt and other developers following the tragedy.

This was certainly a risk to life at Harbour Reach. Richard Wisely, a Raglan tenant from Kittiwake House, said that after his flue was inspected it was found to have ‘sagged in the middle’. ‘It should have been suspended and fixed at certain points,’ he states. ‘It was very shoddily done. I can’t believe that a gas inspector would have passed something like that.’ Back in early 2009, Mr Wisely says his flat had one inspection hatch. Today there are three installed in his ceiling.

Ernie Hiddleston, who lives in Shearwater House, says that on the day the first fault was found: ‘We were told it was a dangerous situation or it could be a dangerous situation.’ Today, he says he feels it was ‘lucky that there wasn’t a fatality’.

This view from the ground is shared by the HSE’s Ms Haberfield. ‘I think it is very, very fortunate that nobody was hurt,’ she says. ‘There were defects that were immediately dangerous that could have caused people to be ill or blown up actually. There were gas leaks.’

As the HSE began to undertake a painstaking examination of homes at Harbour Reach, the size of its case was about to increase. In 2009, Taylor Wimpey started to check another of its developments - two private blocks of flats, Malcolm and Jeffrey Place, in Caver-



**Andrew Church, pictured top, and Robert Percival, pictured below**

sham Road, Reading. The same firm, DSI Plumbing and Heating Limited, had been contracted to undertake the plumbing and heating work on both the Reading and Harbour Reach developments (it had then employed a number of other engineers to commission boilers at the sites). It quickly became apparent that there were similar problems with the Reading blocks - defects were discovered that affected about 75% of the homes. The HSE then extended its investigation to include the Reading site.

The scale of the problems and the number of systems that had to be checked meant the HSE was now faced with ‘the biggest gas investigation we have ever done’, involving checking 5,000 exhibits (such as bits of pipework) and working with at least 200 plumbers.

One Harbour Reach resident, who wants to remain anonymous, states that in 2009 ‘you couldn’t move on this estate for gas fitters’. Even so, it took almost all of 2009 to fix all of the defects at Harbour Reach and install the appropriate number of inspection hatches in the homes.

**Facing charges**

In 2013, after years of on-site investigations, sifting through the evidence and conducting interviews, the HSE decided to prosecute DSI Plumbing and Heating, along with two individuals, Robert Percival, of Legion Road, Poole, and Andrew Church, of Ensign Drive, Gosport for breaching the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Mr Percival’s charge related to the commissioning of the gas installation at one property in Harbour Reach. And Mr ▶

**Guilty: plumbers who put residents’ lives at risk after faulty gas installations at new homes**



Church, who was in charge of heating and plumbing installation work at Caversham Road, for making false entries into documents.

The case of Mr Church gives some clues, perhaps, as to how things went so wrong at Caversham Road. The Crown Court at Bournemouth heard that in 2006 construction work on the Caversham Road development had been running behind schedule. Mr Church had written an email to DSI's management in which he said he was working 16 to 20 hours a day and sleeping in his van some nights to try and get the work done. He suggested that the 'timelines and targets' that Taylor Wimpey wanted to meet were 'too much' and that 'none of the scheduling for trades has been thought through at all'. He asked for help and said that he was 'not Superman'. Doctors told him that he was suffering from exhaustion.

### Technical guidance

Mr Church's charge related to him signing documents stating that a number of boilers had been commissioned (installed and checked), which in fact had yet to be commissioned.

September this year marked an historic moment as DSI Plumbing and Heating, of The Square, Fawley, was fined a total of £10,000 after pleading guilty to two breaches of the Health and Safety at Work Act. It was also ordered to pay £1,000 in costs.

Mr Percival pleaded guilty to a single breach of the same legislation for his commissioning of gas installations at one property in Harbour Reach and Mr Church for making false entries into documents relating to the Caversham Road site. They were both given a two-year conditional discharge and were each ordered to pay costs of £250.

There had never previously been a successful prosecution relating directly to problems with concealed flues. Indeed, the decision to bring charges was taken shortly after the failure of all prosecutions related to Ms Littlewood's death and the Bedford Lakes estate - a plumber was found not guilty of both manslaughter by gross negligence and causing grievous bodily harm and his employer was cleared of failing in its duty to protect non-employees from risk back in June 2012. Neither had any connections to the Harbour Reach case.

A spokesperson for Taylor Wimpey emphasised that it was not involved in the legal action relating to Harbour Reach and Caversham Road and did not want to comment on the issues raised by Mr Church in his mitigation.

She states: 'All gas flues that were installed by the subcontractors used at Harbour Reach have

## Problems in Borehamwood



Kellie Simpson and her family received a terrible shock in the middle of July 2012.

Gas engineers told her that the boiler system in her flat, in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, was potentially unsafe and would have to be shut down immediately. Left without access to hot water she was immediately re-housed, along with her partner and seven-year-old daughter, in a nearby hotel.

Across the estate, other

families were packing their bags and leaving their homes after receiving the same worrying news. Overnight many of the properties, which were only built five years previously, were emptied as boilers were shut down.

'The engineers said "we are really, really sorry but it is the way it [the boiler system] has been put in", Ms Simpson recalls. 'They said it would have to be condemned.'

Ms Simpson, who is a

private tenant, says she was told that while there had not been a carbon monoxide leak in her home, the engineers discovered that the flue pipes were not connected as securely as they should have been. This presented a risk to the family if left unchanged.

It was almost two months before Ms Simpson and her family returned home, due to the time taken to get replacement parts. 'I feel like I have lost seven weeks of my life,' she says when *Inside*

*Housing* meets her, still unpacking bags and cleaning the flat, the day after she has moved back in.

She says she was frantic with worry when she discovered there might be a problem with the gas system in the home. The concealed pipes ran through the ceiling in her daughter's bedroom.

 [www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/silent-killer/6524066](http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/silent-killer/6524066).  
article

**“All gas flues that were installed by the subcontractors used at Harbour Reach have been inspected and we no longer use extended gas flues in any of our new build developments.”**

**Homes tested after fumes alert**

been inspected and we no longer use extended gas flues in any of our new build developments.

'In addition, Taylor Wimpey has written to all home owners on all of its developments with extended gas flues from 2000 and completed follow-up inspections where necessary.'

The developer did identify issues on two other estates - the 791-home Grand Union Village, which straddles the London boroughs of Ealing and Hillingdon, and a 182-home estate in Borehamwood (see box). In February 2012 it told residents of Grand Union Village that it was focusing attention on the estate's Harborough and Brecon House 'due to our inspections identifying significant issues relating to the gas flues within these blocks'. It had initially acted after 'elevated levels of carbon monoxide' were discovered at one apartment.

It's important to emphasise that no developers have faced any charges as a result of problems with concealed flue systems.

A spokesperson for Raglan says that it had also checked other properties it owned with concealed flues,

following the problems at Harbour Reach. It discovered no further faults although on two developments 'it was necessary to install inspection hatches to allow a visual inspection of the flues as part of the annual servicing programme'.

As a direct result of the problems, new technical guidance was developed and since January 2013 engineers carrying out annual checks have told householders that their boiler is 'at risk' if inspection hatches are not fitted - even if they have passed previous checks.

The whole story represents a cautionary tale for social landlords and developers alike. The scale of the problems with Harbour Reach were mind boggling, but it was far from unique.

Elouise Littlewood died as a direct result of the flaws with her boiler but in many ways it is a miracle that there haven't been a number of other casualties. The residents of Harbour Reach were lucky - nothing more. Developers and landlords alike need to make sure that their residents are never again left relying on similar good fortune.