

Secretary of State statement on social housing standards

Members across this House and people across the country will, of course, have been horrified to hear about the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of Awaab Ishak.

Awaab died in December 2020, just days after his second birthday, following prolonged exposure to mould in his parents' one bedroom flat in Rochdale.

Awaab's parents had repeatedly raised their concerns about the desperate state of their home with their landlord, the local housing association Rochdale Boroughwide Housing.

Awaab's father first articulated his concerns in 2017 and others, including health professionals, also raised the alarm, but the landlord failed to take any kind of meaningful action.

Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's repeated failure to heed Awaab's family's pleas to remove the mould in their damp-ridden property was a terrible dereliction of duty.

Worse still, the apparent attempts by Rochdale Boroughwide Housing to attribute the existence of mould to the actions of Awaab's parents was beyond insensitive and deeply unprofessional.

As the Housing Ombudsman has made clear, damp and mould in rented housing is not a lifestyle issue and we all have a duty to call out any behaviour rooted in ignorance or prejudice.

The family's lawyers have also made clear that, in their view, the inaction of the landlord was rooted in prejudice.

The coroner who investigated Awaab's death, Joanne Kearsley, has performed a vital public service in laying out all the facts behind this tragedy and I wish, on behalf of the House, to record my gratitude to her.

As she said, it's scarcely believable that a child could die from mould in 21st century Britain or that his parents should have to fight tooth and nail as they did – in vain – to save him.

I'm sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to Awaab's family for their tireless fight for justice over the last two years.

They deserved better. Their son deserved better.

As so many have rightly concluded, Awaab's case has thrown into sharp relief the need for renewed action to ensure that every landlord in the country makes certain that their tenants are housed in decent homes and they are

treated with dignity and fairness.

So that's why the Government is bringing forward further reforms. Last week, this House debated the Second Reading of the Social Housing Regulation Bill. The measures in that Bill were inspired by the experience of tenants leading to the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell fire.

The way in which tenants' voices were ignored, and their interests neglected in the Grenfell tragedy, is a constant spur to action for me in this role.

However, before I say more on the substance of those wider reforms, I would first like to update the House on the immediate steps my department has been taking with regards to this case.

Firstly, as the excellent public-service journalism of the Manchester Evening News shows, we are aware that Awaab's family was not alone in raising serious issues with the condition of homes managed by the local housing association.

I have already been in touch with the Chair and the Chief Executive of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing to demand answers. To explain to me why a tragedy like Awaab's case was ever allowed to happen. And to hear what steps they are now undertaking immediately to improve the living conditions of the tenants for which they are responsible.

I have also been in touch with the Hon Member for Rochdale and indeed the Hon Member for Heywood and Middleton, both of whom are powerful champions for the people of Rochdale, and I have discussed with them finding suitable accommodation for tenants in Rochdale who are still enduring unacceptable conditions.

I also hope to meet Awaab's family and those who live in the Freehold Estate so that they know that government is there to support them.

And it is right that the Regulator of Social Housing is considering whether this landlord has systematically failed to meet the standards of service required to provide for its tenants.

They have my full support in taking whatever action they deem necessary.

And finally, the coroner has written to me. And I can assure the House that I will act immediately on her recommendations.

Madame Deputy Speaker, if I can turn to the broader urgent issues that this tragedy raises.

Let me be perfectly clear, since some landlords apparently still need to hear this from this House: every single person in this country, irrespective of where they're from, what they do, or how much they earn, deserves to live in a home that is decent, safe and secure. And that is the relentless focus of my department and I know everyone across this House.

And since the publication of our Social Housing White Paper, we have sought to raise the bar on the quality of social housing while empowering tenants so

that their voices are truly heard.

We started by strengthening the Housing Ombudsman Service, so all residents have somewhere to turn when they are not getting the answers they need from their landlords.

In addition, we have changed the law so that residents can now complain directly to the Ombudsman instead of having to wait 8 weeks while their case was handled by a local MP or another 'designated person.'

One of the principal roles of the Housing Ombudsman Service is to ensure that robust complaint processes are put in place, so problems are resolved as soon as they are flagged. It can order landlords to pay compensation to residents whom they have mistreated.

They can also refer cases to the Regulator of Social Housing who, in future, will be able to issue unlimited fines to landlords that they find at fault. And, of course, all decisions made by the Ombudsman are also published for the whole world to see which landlords are consistently letting tenants down.

It's clear from Awaab's case – which sadly did not go before the Ombudsman – that more needs to be done to ensure this vital service is better promoted and that it reaches those who really need it.

We've already run the nationwide 'Make Things Right' campaign to ensure that more social housing residents know how they can make complaints.

But we're now planning, and I think it is necessary, another targeted, multi-year campaign so that everyone living in the social housing sector knows their rights, knows how to sound the alarm when their landlord is failing to make the grade and knows how to seek redress without delay.

Where some providers have performed poorly in the past, they have now been given ample opportunity to change their ways and to start treating residents with the respect they deserve.

The time for empty promises of improvement is over and my department will now name and shame those who have been found by the regulator to have breached consumer standards or who have been found by the Ombudsman to have committed severe maladministration.

And while there is no doubt that this property fell below the standard which we expect all social landlords to meet, Awaab's death does make painfully clear why we must do everything we can to better protect tenants.

So our Social Housing Regulation Bill will bring in a rigorous new regime that holds landlords like these to account for the decency of their homes.

At the moment, as I've mentioned, the system has been too reliant on people fighting their own corner and we are determined to change that. The reforms that we're making will help to relieve the burden on tenants with an emboldened and more powerful regulator.

The Regulator will proactively inspect landlords – and of course issue the unlimited fines I have mentioned. And it will be able to intervene in those cases where tenants' lives are being put at risk and, of course, in the very worst cases, it will have the power to instruct that properties are brought under new management.

Landlords will also be judged against “tenant satisfaction measures” – allowing tenants, indeed all of us, to see transparently which landlords are failing to deliver what residents expect and deserve.

But it's the right of everyone to feel safe in the place where they and their loved ones sleep at night, which is universal. That's why both our Levelling Up and Private Rented Sector White Papers set out how we will legislate to introduce a new, stronger, legally binding Decent Homes Standard in the Private Rented Sector as well for the first time.

We've recently consulted on that Decent Homes Standard and are reviewing the responses so that we can move forward quickly.

It's a key plank of our mission to ensure that the number of non-decent homes across all tenures is reduced by 2030 with the biggest improvements occurring in the lowest performing areas.

Madame Deputy Speaker, although the legislation that we're bringing forward is important, we hope that no family ever has to suffer in the way that Awaab's family has suffered.

We hope that we can end the scandal of residents having to live in shoddy, substandard homes – like some of those on the Freehold Estate. And we want to restore the right of everyone in this country, whatever their race or cultural background, to live somewhere warm, decent, safe and secure. A place that they can be proud to call home. And I commend this statement to the House.