

Leasehold: What They Knew, When They Knew It

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These reflections are about safety and wellbeing for home occupiers, not the concerns about gatherings in Westminster two years back. Two residents helped develop my interest and activity trying to protect leaseholders; another alerted me to risks faced by park home residents, locally and nationally.

John Fenwick at Oaklands Court was the first hero. Around normal retirement age, he was perhaps the youngest resident. On behalf of older more vulnerable neighbours, he rightly questioned significant charges. Their landlord and freeholder were not bad but they were wrong. Additionally a simple issue was being kept from the property tribunal that could rule on what was right and wrong.

When brought in, I took advice from the remarkable journalist Sebastian O'Kelly and the computer services businessman Martin Boyd. With the assistance of pro-bono lawyers, the legal issue was decided. The victims accepted an immediate fair offer of compensation, without further legal costs. John now advises me that the Upper Property Tribunal has recently followed his case to the benefit of another group of south coast leaseholders.

There have been few constituency cases of either managing agents or landlords needing to be challenged. Around England there have been many battles, including the scandal of doubling ground rents, unjustified charges, the random justice and injustice of the legal system, and delays in implementing Law Commission proposals to make leasehold extensions and buying the freehold simple and affordable.

Sir David Amess led me on fire safety issues. We now continue his work. Before and after the tragedy and evolving scandal at Grenfell, my all-party parliamentary group for leasehold and commonhold reform has campaigned for flats to be safe and to be saleable.

It is no coincidence that five times as many flats as houses are now worth less than five years ago. I do not rejoice at recent average increases in home prices. That inflation does little good to occupiers and it creates a greater stretch for first time buyer and for growing households.

There was a cladding block issue in Worthing; the developer quickly gripped the issue and resolved it. In Arun, a developer with a reasonable reputation appears to be resisting a fair contribution to rectification for his deliberate decision to use soft wood instead of the safe, lasting metal and glass for balconies and supports he installed at two other groups of homes.

John Darling achieved a major contribution towards replacement costs from NHBC, the UK's leading independent provider of warranty and insurance for new homes.

Following Monday's announcement by Michael Gove, I will write once more to the developer with a reminder that he should pay too. Leaseholders do not own their home. Why were they left apparently with unlimited liability for the mistakes of others?

It has been right to fight again and again for justice in partnership with the National Leasehold Campaign, the Cladding groups, the campaigning charity Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and with brilliant constituents.

The political historians and parliamentary sketch writers do not need to understand the importance of these aspects of local and national public and political service. I see it rather as the daily and weekly work and compassion of the journalist, the teacher, the minister of religion and the general practitioner of medicine.

None of us needs national prominence; each of us can make a difference to the lives of those we serve. On fire safety, we still need to identify those who must have known the dangers but did not take action to build safety into the homes in which we live.