

To: Kent Regional Resident's Panel



3rd October 2024

Dear Panel Members,

Subject: Serious Safeguarding Failures and Inadequate Support for Vulnerable Tenants by Southern Housing Group/Ongoing Failures of the "Basics".

I am writing to bring to your attention several distressing examples of safeguarding and care failures by Southern Housing Group, which have had a devastating impact on the vulnerable tenants involved. As the Chair of the Kent Regional Resident's Panel, I have encountered repeated cases where Southern Housing has not only failed in its duty of care but also left tenants in situations that could have been avoided with better communication, quicker responses, and stronger internal processes. These failings are not isolated incidents; they reflect deeper issues within the organisation that require immediate attention.

It has been suggested by a panel member that we, as a group Panel, submit a statement to the organisation which outlines all serious concerns that we have both individually and as a Panel. When I asked the question "What would the statement look like in terms of content?", I was asked to provide further information regarding some case studies which detail my own observations. Please find below anonymised case studies, I have included 3 case studies but can provide many more on request.

Whilst it is not always Southern Housing Group's fault that tenants find themselves in crisis, there is a legal responsibility and a duty of care that SHG have to carry out effectively.

I will be blunt - we are talking, in some cases, about life or death.

The one main takeaway point I have is that I don't currently feel like a Chair within a Governance structure; moreover I feel like an untrained housing officer who is trying to tell trained housing officers that they are going about their work in completely the wrong way - sometimes in dangerous, life threatening ways.

Tenant A: An Average Day In The Life Of A Vulnerable Tenant Exploited and Failed

Tenant A is an elderly, terminally ill vulnerable tenant who has been subjected to violence, neglect, financial exploitation and theft over a prolonged period. Tenant A reported that while staying in hospital, their property was unlawfully accessed by a supposed friend and unofficial carer, "Ms L," who stole valuable items and even broke into Tenant A's safe all while Tenant A was an in-patient. Despite Tenant A's best efforts to secure their property and their attempts to alert the bank, they were left feeling violated, powerless, and exposed. Tenant A requested help from SHG to change the keycode of Tenant A's keysafe, which was

not actioned, meaning that Ms L was free to continue accessing Tenant A's property. Ms L has also forged Tenant A's signature on numerous occasions, even having a signed Power of Attorney for Tenant A which Tenant A has found hard to have cancelled/reversed. Tenant A also requested assistance with changing the locks, as Ms L had spare keys cut and withheld them from Tenant A - again, SHG did nothing to help Tenant A which enabled further access to the property by Ms L. This neglect and abuse has been estimated to have been carried out for 6 years, with numerous cries for help from Tenant A being ignored.

Tenant A's case was referred to Southern Housing for safeguarding action by myself using the usual contact channels on **24th August 2024**. However, Southern Housing did not act swiftly. Although the case was logged, there was no immediate follow-up to offer Tenant A the support they desperately needed. **This inaction left Tenant A feeling abandoned and isolated**, particularly given that their vulnerability was well-documented, and local authorities had been involved previously. I was told that SHG Safeguarding teams would contact Tenant A by telephone and was given a reference number for the report. However, Tenant A reported a worsening in their circumstances and that they had not been contacted. On **3rd September 2024**, I had a telephone call with Eloise Garton (in Debbie's absence) to highlight my ongoing concerns and that Tenant A had heard nothing from SHG. Eloise agreed to pass this on, and after consulting with Sam Fagg it was agreed to pass this urgently to Tony Hughes. On **11th September 2024**, Tenant A again reported a worsening of their health and that they still had heard nothing from the SHG Safeguarding referral. Tenant A then reported feeling suicidal as a direct result of being ignored repeatedly by SHG, and Tenant A started to discuss plans as to **how they planned to commit suicide**. At this point, I again raised an internal referral and copied in as many email addresses as I could along with contacting the SHG contact centre and calling various management mobile phones. SHG contact centre advised me to email the "contactus@" email address, which can take 5 working days to receive a response from. I found staff to generally not take any of the safeguarding concerns seriously, until I was contacted by Brea Attrill, Safeguarding Lead at SHG. Brea confirmed that there are indeed multiple safeguarding concerns for Tenant A, with a multiple agency reaction required to support the tenant. What should have been 1 email to report my concerns turned into many emails and many phone calls, completely against SHG's own safeguarding policies. I also found SHG contact centre staff knowledge around safeguarding to be somewhat insufficient. I am glad to say that Tenant A has now been contacted by telephone, and has had face to face visits from SHG staff at Tenant A's home.

Had Southern Housing acted with urgency, offering practical support such as regular welfare checks and working closely with the police and local safeguarding agencies, Tenant A's ordeal could have been significantly mitigated. Tenant A should never have been left to fend for themselves while dealing with this level of trauma. Southern's policy clearly outlines a **zero tolerance** approach to abuse, but in practice, Tenant A was left **vulnerable, isolated and unsupported** during their most desperate moments.

I still have ongoing concerns that SHG are just doing the "bare minimum" to support Tenant A, and have felt the need to raise this issue further outside of SHG.

Tenant B: A Victim of Domestic Abuse Left Without Essential Support

Tenant B, who fled domestic violence with 2 young children, was relocated by their local council from emergency accommodation to temporary accommodation. The temporary accommodation is provided by SHG. Despite the urgency of their situation—they were fleeing an abusive ex-partner who located the emergency accommodation address —Tenant B found themselves placed in a property that lacked even the most basic amenities, in a poor cosmetic condition and with electrical faults present. No white goods were provided, leaving the tenant struggling to provide for their children in a home without a fridge or cooker.

Whilst it is not for SHG to provide furnished properties - we do need to explore this issue for tenants who are moving from emergency accommodation. When in emergency accommodation, the local authority will usually supply white goods and some help/advice/funding on buying furniture such as sofas and beds (although some emergency properties also come completely fully furnished in some cases) However, this furniture must remain with the emergency accommodation and is all handed back along with the property and the keys when it is time to relocate.

Tenant B's address was located by their ex-partner through no fault of the tenant, this led to a rather urgent relocation to a temporary accommodation provided by SHG instead of the local authority. Tenant B had no white goods or furniture of their own, apart from beds and toys for the children. Just imagine being told at short notice that you're moving to a new property, you find out that there are no white goods at the property as there is at the property you're leaving, and the first question that occurs is "How do I feed the kids tonight?". Without access to a large chunk of money, tenants are being set up to fail in these types of circumstances.

Southern Housing's failure to help Tenant B with these essential items immediately added to Tenant B's stress and sense of **isolation**. They were already traumatised from their domestic situation and needed support in getting back on their feet. Rather than receiving assistance, they were told to apply for the Household Support Fund, which was closed at the time of wanting to apply. In this case, Southern Housing's **failure to ensure basic living conditions** for Tenant B only compounded their trauma.

Tenant B has reported the following property issues, likely present due to insufficient pre-letting inspections:

- Kitchen light not switching on, rendering the kitchen unusable at night unless Tenant B uses a torch.
- Doors falling off of hinges due to not being secured to the wall properly.
- Large gaps in floorboards, rusty nails poking up through the floorboards meaning Tenant B & children wear shoes when inside the house. One of the children has already sustained a nail injury to their foot.
- Damage to paintwork, holes in the walls, damage from previous tenants. The property was dirty and had not been redirected prior to re-let.

Southern Housing staff failed to identify that Tenant B was a key tenant to refer internally to the Fresh Vision charity that we hear about in quarterly meeting updates. There was also a failure to identify that a referral to the "Helping Hands" charity would have also helped Tenant

B. Signposting that was carried out led Tenant B to incorrect information and schemes that are currently closed to new applications.

Tenant B has also raised some serious concerns regarding the Resident Liaison Officer that completed the tenancy paperwork with Tenant B. The tenant found the staff member to be “**overly familiar**”, “**unprofessional**”, “**flirtatious**” and commented that the staff member discussed their personal life at length with Tenant B. As someone who was fleeing domestic violence and with much larger concerns going on at the time, Tenant B found this encounter to be **uncomfortable and just largely unprofessional**. Tenant B also stated “if the liaison officer spent more time helping me instead of just chatting about their personal life, maybe I would have got some help sooner”. Unsolicited attention from a professional member of staff, towards a tenant and survivor of domestic violence, is wholly inappropriate and has given Tenant B a very poor first impression of SHG.

Had Southern Housing coordinated effectively with support services or provided access or adequate signposting for white goods at the outset, Tenant B’s sense of **helplessness and failure** as a parent could have been avoided. This situation exemplifies how Southern Housing’s lack of proactive care leaves tenants in precarious circumstances when they should be receiving immediate and meaningful support.

Tenant B has now received appropriate support, but only after I raised repeated operational failures directly to Tony Hughes. However, Tenant B is still residing in a property that is currently unfit for habitation. Tenant B still feels completely let down and is now approaching their MP.

Tenant C: A Survivor of Trauma Further Marginalised

Tenant C, a survivor of both sexual assault and domestic violence, was relocated to emergency accommodation provided by SHG. Tenant C’s experience was marked by Southern Housing’s failure to ensure the property was fit for habitation. The property lacked central heating, an area for cooking and preparing food, and even the basic means to prepare care for the children. Tenant C was left in a property that **compounded their trauma** rather than aiding in recovery.

Tenant C expressed that they felt **disconnected and forgotten** by Southern Housing. The lack of follow-up, combined with the poor state of the temporary housing, left the tenant feeling that they were not worthy of proper care or attention. The **emotional impact** of being placed in such dire conditions was profound, leaving them to question their value in the eyes of Southern Housing.

Southern Housing should have ensured that the accommodation provided to Tenant C was fully functional, or at the very least, equipped with essential items such as heating and cooking facilities. By failing to do so, Southern Housing exacerbated the tenant’s existing vulnerabilities. The emotional toll of this neglect cannot be overstated; survivors of trauma need stable and supportive environments, not homes that create further hardship.

Tenant C had no option but to relocate again and move into a family member’s home, feeling **completely unsupported** by SHG and left in a property that was **not fit for purpose**.

Broader Failures in Southern Housing's Response

The case studies of Tenant A, Tenant B, and Tenant C all illustrate serious failings by Southern Housing. These tenants, each dealing with complex and traumatic situations, have been failed by the very organisation tasked with providing their housing and support. Southern Housing's inability to act quickly, offer appropriate support, or even maintain basic living standards has left tenants feeling **isolated, neglected, and vulnerable**.

Tenants mentioned in case studies have all been flagged as vulnerable/in need by the local authorities. This should automatically trigger SHG to recognise that these tenants may need additional support and that a further emphasis on the duty of care responsibilities may be required. In all cases I have heard of, there are **fundamental failures** to the basic legal responsibilities that SHG has as a social housing landlord.

Across all cases, the central issue appears to be **poor communication and lack of internal follow-up**. Tenants and external agencies alike have struggled to reach Southern Housing, with unanswered phone calls, long wait times, and inadequate responses from customer service. Safeguarding concerns, particularly those as serious as exploitation, domestic violence, and trauma recovery, should be treated with the utmost urgency. Yet, Southern Housing has failed to provide even the most basic interventions in these cases, such as ensuring working heating and that homes/re-lets are fit for habitation, access/signposting to white goods, or timely welfare checks/telephone calls.

Legal Failures and Breach of Duty

Southern Housing's actions, or rather inactions, point to a **breach of its legal responsibilities** under safeguarding legislation, including the **Care Act 2014** and the **Children's Act 2004**. Both Acts place a duty on organisations like Southern Housing to ensure that vulnerable individuals are protected from harm. By failing to act swiftly in these safeguarding cases, Southern Housing has neglected this duty.

Furthermore, Southern Housing's failure to ensure habitable living conditions in emergency and permanent housing breaches their basic obligations under the **Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018**. Tenants should not be living in properties that lack heating, cooking facilities, or essential appliances. By neglecting these duties, Southern Housing has directly contributed to the hardship and distress experienced by these tenants.

Also, under the Landlord and Tenants Act 1985, tenants have the "Tenant Right To Repairs".

Current Situation Report - Other Areas

Whilst not relevant to the major safeguarding concerns, there are also ongoing concerns regarding repairs (accessing repair services and repair standards), complaints, customer services and the rent/income teams. The basics are just not there, they are in policy but not in practice.

I am concerned personally that I am largely unsupported in my role as Chair, even more so when I come across a tenant who has been majorly failed. Governance staff now regularly take every opportunity to block scrutiny, saying the issue is "out of remit" or "overstepping

boundaries". Scrutiny staff have also refused to pass these concerns from myself onto the Panel in an anonymised fashion, which I see as an attempt to gag the Chair from communicating with the Panel. Due to the seriousness of my concerns, I have therefore sought the email addresses of all Panel members so that I can communicate with you all directly. This has led to further pushback from SHG, who have now called me in for a meeting with the Director of Governance.

I will not stay silent, all the time I am in this role. There are tenants out there, in huge numbers, suffering because of SHG's inactions. However, the time I have remaining in the role of Chair is in question.

HEART Values

The Southern HEART values are as follows:

Staff will demonstrate our HEART values in their behaviours:

Honest - Be authentic, open and transparent in your actions and words.

Efficient - Believe that by working together we accomplish more, and work hard every day to improve services, efficiency, and value for money.

Accountable - Take responsibility for delivering excellence and own your own actions.

Respectful - Embrace difference, and put our residents, colleagues and our partners at the heart of all you do.

Trusted - Do what you say you will and be relied upon to keep your promises.

When dealing with SHG, ask yourself if they have kept to these 5 values. Ask your neighbours and the tenants you represent if they feel that SHG keep to these values that they have pledged.

Conclusion and Call to Action

The examples provided above highlight serious systemic failures within Southern Housing's safeguarding and tenant care practices.

Vulnerable tenants are being let down, left in unsuitable housing without basic necessities, and placed in situations that compound their trauma rather than provide the support they need. Southern Housing must take immediate steps to address these issues, including:

1. **Immediate review of internal safeguarding processes** to ensure that vulnerable tenants receive timely and appropriate support.
2. **Immediate review of past safeguarding cases** to ensure that SHG has fully carried out its duty of care to all vulnerable tenants.
3. **Consider the provision of basic household necessities** (such as white goods, heating, and cooking facilities) in all emergency and temporary accommodations.

4. **Improved communication and follow-up procedures** so that tenants and external agencies can easily contact Southern Housing and receive swift responses to urgent concerns.
5. **Improved signposting** so that tenants are redirected to the most appropriate place for support, the first time round.

I hope the Kent Regional Resident's Panel will support these recommendations and advocate for immediate change within Southern Housing Group. It is essential that we hold Southern accountable to ensure that no more tenants face the failures that have been so painfully illustrated in these cases.

Richard Brittain, Chairman
Kent Regional Resident's Panel (Kent RRP)