

It was more than eight years ago when THT carried out a major refurb at Stretford House, a 23 storey single staircase Trafford Housing Trust property where I live on the 8th floor.

The works planned initially included:

- New windows - the existing being past their life span were, in some cases, leaking
- Insulating the building with an external rainscreen cladding system
- New flat entrance doors and fire doors throughout the common areas
- New bathrooms
- New kitchen
- New communal heating & hot water system

When the heat output of the new heating system was specified it was expected that it would be working in flats with new insulation and new windows. Following completion of all of the works except the windows and cladding the programme was discontinued. Not only did this leave residents with a system operating without expected insulation improvements, the system was not functioning correctly for in many flats.

It took three years to get the heating system working correctly, it required the installation of new major pumps (indicating an incorrect specification in the first instance), extra filters (debris in the pipework was blocking heat exchangers) and the whole system needed to be flushed out to remove debris from inside the system (something that should have been done as part of the commissioning process when it was installed).

Many of the complaints over the three year period were not formally logged as complaints. At one point there were so many issues arising that the trust's heating manager was in the foyer noting issues from individual tenants on paper, these issues were never logged as repairs. This means the trust's published repairs and complaints for this period remain wildly inaccurate and never reflected the nightmare that us tenants in Stretford House were enduring.

During the period that the system wasn't operating as it should it struggled to heat flats that were intended to have new windows and insulation to complement it. This resulted in some tenants having their heating on permanently and yet reporting that their flats never reached an acceptable temperature. Having the heating on for extended periods saw tenants receiving vastly increased energy bills. Some residents became so concerned about being able to pay bills that they were relying entirely on the small fan heaters that the caretaker was distributing free of charge (even though this presents a fire risk residents were not advised of the increased risks) in acknowledgement of the issues.

Meanwhile the energy charges set by the trust ignored the issues and having initially priced the unit cost at 2p/kwh, providing the energy cost saving that was promised to tenants before they were forced to accept the new system (although some leaseholders had opted to keep the old warm air systems) the trust now had a monopoly providing our energy (we're unable to switch suppliers and are forced to buy from them if we want heating and hot water) and swiftly doubled the cost to 4p/kwh without even bothering to inform residents. Falling gas prices meant that residents were now paying significantly above the average consumer rate being charged by the bog domestic energy suppliers. The following year they doubled it again to 8p/kwh.

Residents now had a heating and hot water system that didn't work, they were without the planned efficiency improvements of new windows and insulation and were paying in excess of double that of their neighbours on the ground in houses in the surrounding streets.

I am a former GMFRS Fire Safety Officer, inspired by the work of Stuart Hodkinson and Fuel Poverty Action I wrote to my MP Kate Green detailing my concerns surrounding the adequacy of fire risk assessments (https://manchestersustainablecommunities.com/?page_id=351), especially

compartmentation that had been penetrated hundreds of times throughout the block with the installation of the new heating systems' pipework, and the energy prices being forced on residents by our energy-monopoly landlords.

I'd previously exhausted Trafford Housing Trust's formal complaints procedure to no avail, twice. Eventually, some two years later, the trust agreed to bring in an independent energy consultant to examine the energy price because, it claimed, the person that had doubled the tariff to the 8p/kwh super-rate was no longer with the trust and they could therefore not explain it. If anybody is doubting whether the attitude of landlords, dubbed by Baroness Doreen Lawrence as “Institutional Indifference” (

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/02/doreen-lawrence-grenfell-tenants-faced-institutional-indifference>), really does have a negative affect on residents' daily lives and living costs should understand that this situation is not unusual for residents in social housing tower blocks and flats in England that have been forced into community or district heating schemes (

<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2017/feb/05/district-heating-fuel-bill-regulation>). Thousands of people on low incomes across England are being overcharged by landlords seeking to put their profits before people for years and face only institutional indifference as their landlords ignore their plight and their desire for nothing more than a warm and safe home.

We are routinely ignored even when their behaviour is arguably criminal. Residents are being robbed by their landlords that frame their public image as “Profit for Purpose”, some have been on rates three times the price charged to ordinary households for gas. It's been going on for years and nobody is doing anything about. Highly paid CEOs schmooze politicians with stories of finding people work and other antics that make them appear like heroes while they're knowingly ripping off thousands of low paid and vulnerable people. Their claims of ethical excellence don't wash amongst those of us that have no choice but to fight for years to fend off their attempts to force us into fuel poverty and routinely ignore the serious problems directly caused by them, that blight the lives of their residents.

At the start of 2018 the independent external review concluded that the price could not be justified. The price was dropped from 8p/kwh to 3.9p/kwh and all of the 126 flats received a refund amounting to the unnecessary charges paid for the last 12 months (in most cases this ranged from between £200 and £350 per flat).

However residents had been paying the super charged energy rate for five years. While they await to see whether they'll receive the full refund to which they are entitled, Trafford Housing Trust have brought in another independent consultant, presumably in an attempt to justify charging residents far in excess of what the trust are paying for the gas, again. Residents are wondering whether they'll get the money they are owed, whether other tenants across the trust have also received a refund to which they are entitled and whether they'll have to switch to fan heaters again that carry an increased fire risk and are expensive to run but are at least easily controlled, to keep at least one room warm.

Below is the poster I put up in the foyer in February to let my elderly and vulnerable neighbours know that the price had dropped and that they could once again put their central heating on at what was the coldest spell of weather of the winter – but the trust made me take it down.

Your Energy Price has Reduced by More Than 50%

From 8p/kwh to 3.9p/kwh

- Two years ago members of your old residents' committee took up the price issue with THT
- Two formal complaints with THT were raised regarding it, in that time
- Two times we engaged our MP Kate Green over the issue
- Two lengthy investigations were carried out

While negotiating the management take over last year, the old committee forced THT into a corner and insisted they bring in external independent investigators to examine and justify the price we were being forced to pay.

The investigators found that THT could not justify the rate being charged to tenants of Stretford House.

At midnight on Wed 17th January, as you can see below, the rate you pay for your heating and hot water was reduced by 51%.

Other high rise tenants in similar schemes to ours across THT have also seen their cost reduced like this. We're waiting to hear if we might get a back payment of some description. **Most consumers pay less than 4p/kwh** for their gas and it was unreasonable of THT to charge us so much. We have now proved that.

It was a long hard fight to get this injustice recognised but we hope you agree that it has been worth it.



Date/Time	Reading/ Payment	Payment (£)	Credit Level (£)	Emergency Level (£)	Tariff (p/kWh)
18/01/2018 01:11:15	READING		£9.06	£5.00	3.90p
17/01/2018 10:42:04	READING		£11.20	£5.00	8.00p

