Tackling Disrepair in Islington

Ian Browne

(with and on behalf of the Advice Services Alliance)

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Introduction

This report examines the issues of disrepair within social housing in the London Borough of Islington. It provides the perspectives of those working to address disrepair in the borough, an overview of the evidence of the current status and recent trends in the condition of local social housing stock, and an explanation of the legal and regulatory context which governs housing disrepair. The research presented in this report aims to assist those who might be developing policy, delivering a service or otherwise supporting tenants with disrepair, both by illustrating a number of relevant issues and by providing some recommendations for action and focus.

The importance of ensuring decent housing standards is increasingly being understood and recognised. Beyond direct impact on an individual's health, disrepair can have much broader social costs, by disrupting a tenant's work, education, caring responsibilities and family life, and therefore often requiring an increased reliance on public services. This is as true for residents of Islington as it is more broadly, and given that the borough has higher rates of child poverty and income deprivation and a significantly less affordable housing supply than average in London,[1] its residents might be argued to be at particular risk from the negative effects of disrepair.

Property will inevitably deteriorate over time with use and occupation unless appropriate maintenance work is undertaken. To a certain extent, disrepair is therefore an inevitable fact of life, as are the resulting costs, time and labour associated with maintaining a home to a standard which is suitable for habitation. However, there is a particular tension in rented properties, where those living in the property and suffering the negative effects of the disrepair are not those who are responsible or even able to address its causes or symptoms. This creates an inevitable risk that a landlord may, whether consciously or not, avoid or delay the costs of remedial works, including by disputing the scale of the disrepair or by shifting responsibility for addressing it onto the tenants. Where there are disputes, the systems we have to resolve them, whether they be informal complaint systems, the Housing Ombudsman or the courts, generate new resource demands which threaten to detract or distract from fixing the underlying disrepair.

The scale of housing disrepair is an increasingly unavoidable crisis for social landlords – both local authorities and housing associations – despite broader economic conditions which constrain their

[1] Trust for London, *Islington Borough Factsheet*, https://tfl.ams3.dn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Islington_d5hgVK0.pdf

ability to act.[2] Recent figures from the Regulator of Social Housing show that social landlords are now spending £10bn a year on repairs and maintenance, which is expected to continue to rise over the next five years.[3] Islington Council's own annual repairs and maintenance budget is around £50 million,[4] with its Housing Strategy 2021-2026 recognising that "the standard of the repairs and maintenance service has the biggest effect on tenants' quality of life."[5]

Tenants will often turn to others to help them in addressing disrepair in their homes, either because there may otherwise be barriers to engaging directly with their landlord, because previous attempts to raise the issue with their landlord have been unsuccessful, or to assist them in a dispute. In Islington and elsewhere, this support is often provided by the advice sector: non-profit organisations which offer free assistance on a variety of social welfare issues, often including housing problems. Although inevitably limited in resources, advice sector organisations can be valuable in ensuring that those who cannot effectively advocate for themselves do not miss out on the repairs necessary for their home. Even where a tenant is able to more proactively engage with a landlord on their own behalf, support from an advice organisation can help mediate that relationship and allow for more efficient resolution, resulting in a more positive process for the landlord as well.

Greater recognition of the problem posed by disrepair has brought with it new reforms and new mechanisms for tenants seeking remediation and recompense, to either utilise themselves or with the support of others. Sadly, these reforms have at least in part been driven by tragedy, including the Grenfell Tower Fire and the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak due to exposure to black mould, but hopefully these will ultimately ensure a safer standard of housing for tenants in the future. These changes have included the implementation of the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, the increased powers of the Regulator of Social Housing and new mandatory timelines for social landlords

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[2] Kathryn Armstrong and Jemma Crew, 'Social housing complaints soar as watchdog warns of 'simmering anger'', *BBC News* (29 May 2025), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvg5q583glqo

[3] Regulator of Social Housing, Press release: Regulator of Social Housing 2025 Global Accounts published (15 January 2026), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/regulator-of-social-housing-2025-global-accounts-published

[4] Islington Council, *Contract Award for General Build Repairs and Maintenance Works* (14 May 2025), paragraph 10.2.2, https://democracy.islington.gov.uk/documents/s41259/Contract%20Award%20General%20Build%20and%20Maintenance%20Works.pdf

[5] Islington Council, *Housing Strategy 2021-2026: A home for all* (July 2021), page 9, https://islington.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s25366/Appendix%201%20-%20Housing%20Strategy%202021.pdf

to address hazards, known as 'Awaab's Law',[6] which is currently being rolled out. Given the ongoing implementation of these reforms, the present is an opportune moment to consider how the inefficiencies and system failures on disrepair issues might be better addressed on a local level in Islington.

Executive summary

This report examines housing disrepair in social housing across Islington, drawing on interviews with advice workers and social landlords, secondary research, and local data to understand the scale of the problem, its impacts, and the systems used to manage it. It recognises that tackling disrepair remains a complex problem, but one for which there are possibilities available to mitigate its impact.

The report highlights several recurring themes. Communication failures, repeated surveys, missed appointments, lack of access, and inconsistent follow-through all make disrepair harder to resolve and can erode trust between tenants and landlords. Vulnerable tenants are often hit hardest, especially where poor housing affects physical health, mental health, work, education, or caring responsibilities, and where digital or language barriers make it harder to engage with repair systems. The advice sector is an important resource for tenants who need assistance in managing their relationships with their landlord and understanding their rights. At the same time, the social housing sector is being subject to additional layers of regulation and must adapt its approach to addressing disrepair in its stock.

In response to these themes, this report makes the following recommendations:

1. **Better understanding and accommodation of tenants' vulnerabilities**: Tenants may have vulnerabilities, such as disabilities or language support needs, which might either heighten the risks they face from poor housing or negatively impact their ability to engage with their landlord to have the disrepair addressed. Recording, understanding and accommodating the particular needs of vulnerable tenants is therefore an important objective for social landlords as they aim to maintain the necessary standards within their housing stock.

2. **Careful development and adoption of technological tools:** Technology, and especially digital tools like online portals, offers potential improvements for the effective management of the landlord-tenant relationship. However, care must be taken to avoid exclusion of those who

[6] Both of the latter being contained in the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023.

lack the relevant language or digital literacy skills and the overreliance on systems which might suit the needs of a large majority, but allow others to fall through the cracks.

3. **More advertisement and encouragement by landlords of ways to report disrepair:** Landlords should do what they can to ensure that tenants are familiar with their reporting and complaint systems, which would help to encourage early resolution of issues, avoid the resource implications of a dispute escalating and protect the trust and confidence within the landlord-tenant relationship.

4. **Better connection and collaboration between the advice sector and social landlords:** The social landlords and the advice sector organisations in Islington have a shared aim in supporting local tenants, and should build on existing formal and informal relationships to collaborate on improving housing conditions within the borough.

5. **Reconsideration of the boundaries between the responsibilities of capital works and the repairs teams and budgets:** Poor housing conditions can sometimes be the result of structural issues within properties, which require significant work to address. Often, this kind of remedial work will be beyond the scope of a social landlord's disrepair service, which risks ineffective sticking plaster solutions, unless a more flexible approach is implemented.

6. **Further research into Islington Strategic Advice Partnership (ISAP)'s shared areas of focus:** ISAP should utilise their collaborative partnership to identify further issues within Islington where research may assist with campaigning or policy development. A joint research strategy could allow for effective forward planning to address mutual priorities.

7. **Further research into the implementation and impact of Awaab's Law:** Awaab's Law should make a significant impact on the way that social landlords respond to complaints of disrepair within their housing stock. This report offers some insight into how social landlords are adapting to the new regulatory requirements around damp and mould in Islington. However, further research would be beneficial to help understand how the new rules were being rolled out and implemented elsewhere, and to a broader range of disrepair issues.

8. **Reintroduction of Legal Aid for housing disrepair claims:** The limited availability of Legal Aid for disrepair claims represents a significant problem for access to justice; either inhibiting tenants from using the law to help them address poor conditions in their home or pushing them towards controversial claims management firms and no-win, no-fee solicitors. The full

reintroduction of Legal Aid would reduce the current problematic incentives around disrepair claims and allow for more proactive support to be provided by the advice sector.

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent the views of the authors of this report but are drawn from the proposals and experiences of those working to improve housing conditions in Islington on a day-to-day basis.

Each of the interviewees was asked about the barriers which hamper those in the sector from addressing issues of disrepair, how they might remove them, and what elements of good practice they have witnessed from other organisations.

Some of the suggestions related to proposals that could be actioned, and in some cases were already being proposed, within Islington, while some would require action from decision-makers well outside of Islington, and without a narrow focus on housing conditions.

Many interviewees, from across the sector, mentioned that better funding for maintenance for existing social housing and for the construction of new, high-quality stock would reduce the pressures on existing homes, particularly overcrowding, and therefore reduce the rate of disrepair. Participants from advice organisations also argued, perhaps unsurprisingly, for a better-funded advice sector. While both suggestions have the support of the authors of this report, they are not discussed in detail below, given that they would require policy decisions and funding trade-offs which are well beyond the scope of this research.

Actions within Islington

The following recommendations focus on action which could be taken by those organisations which work directly within the London Borough of Islington.

1. Better understanding and accommodation of tenants' vulnerabilities

The large majority of disrepair issues are addressed effectively and without incident. However, where the process does break down, often there will be a link to a vulnerability experienced by a tenant, which limits their ability to effectively report disrepair, chase up remedial works or otherwise engage with their landlord and advocate for themselves properly.

Recording, understanding and accommodating the particular needs of vulnerable tenants is therefore vitally important for landlords. It is also important for landlords to keep an open mind when tenants appear to behave in ways which seem obstructive, rude or uninterested, as these can often be the manifestations of vulnerabilities of which the landlord will not necessarily be aware.

This was an approach that social landlords were conscious of and were making efforts to adopt, but more could be done to allow for housing conditions to be maintained in a way which safeguards the experiences of those tenants who might otherwise find standardised approaches difficult. Potential ideas for implementing this proposal would include having more localised and specialised services; the personal assignment of housing officers; and the allocation of specific caseworkers to manage complex disrepair issues (with the latter being something that one social landlord mentioned had been implemented with success).

2. Careful development and adoption of technological tools

The development and implementation of technological solutions potentially offer the significant upside of being able to address a key theme raised in this report, that of effective communication. In particular, better communication of the disrepair problems from the tenant to the landlord should allow for better and more timely diagnosis of the issues, which should reduce the incidence of 'over-surveying', as fewer visits to the property will be wasted by those who are not in a position to address the problem. Further, better communication from the landlord to the tenant will help avoid frustration building up around the timescales for repair work and should help prevent tenants missing appointments with repair operatives.

However, overreliance on technological tools risks alienating vulnerable tenants — particularly non-English-speaking or non-digitally literate tenants — and so efforts need to be made to offer wrap-around support to ensure that those who are not able to make effective use of digital tools do not suffer from digital exclusion. Beyond the implementation of efforts which are aimed at supporting vulnerable tenants generally, specific efforts could be made by social landlords to identify those tenants who might not be able to make effective use of technology and either support them in developing the necessary skills, access the right equipment or provide alternative methods of engagement.

3. More advertisement and encouragement by landlords of ways to report disrepair

In addition to the potential technological methods outlined above, social landlords should make efforts to ensure that their tenants are regularly reminded of the appropriate channels to raise issues of disrepair and, if necessary, how to complain if remedial work is not completed within a reasonable time or to a reasonable standard. This could include signage in communal parts of social landlords' buildings, leafletting, engagement with organisations like residents' associations and even direct outreach to tenants.

Making these efforts to ensure that tenants are appropriately empowered to take action on the disrepair in their homes would not only mean that problems could be addressed sooner, but would reduce the risks of breakdown in the landlord-tenant relationship.

The implementation of clear and effective reporting and complaints procedures would also allow more tenants to resolve their own issues, and so reduce reliance on the advice sector in Islington. Furthermore, this would allow disrepair issues to be resolved efficiently, with less encouragement for tenants to instruct lawyers and instigate expensive litigation.

4. Better connection and collaboration between the advice sector and social landlords

There was a recognition from interview participants across both social landlords and in the advice sector that they shared the aims of supporting tenants in Islington who were experiencing poor housing conditions.

However, despite these shared aims, some of those at social landlords lamented what they saw as a sometimes overly antagonistic approach by the advice sector when attempting to resolve issues. This is perhaps inevitable, as advice workers are typically obliged to push for the best interests of their clients, rather than advocate for an outcome which is ideal for the landlord, or even play a neutral facilitating role. However, from the perspective of advice sector workers, there was often recognition of the difficult circumstances in which social landlords operated in, and while there was certainly frustration expressed by advice workers about particular practices, the harshest criticism was more likely to be addressed at contractors, rather than the social landlord itself.

Advice workers tended to support the idea of working more closely with social landlords, including on an informal basis, and spoke positively of existing projects and relationships. Advisers thought that, in some cases, even the complaints process was too slow and overly formal, and an issue might be more

effectively and efficiently addressed if it could be escalated directly within the repairs team of the landlord. This was particularly the case in instances where it appeared that a tenant had perhaps fallen through some crack in the landlord's services, or had a complex problem which needed better project management than a typical case. Advice sector workers reported that these relationships were in place with some landlords, and could be highly effective, but that they were somewhat patchwork and relied on the relevant members of staff staying in post.

Advice workers also play a part in assisting tenants with vulnerabilities and who might otherwise not be able to effectively utilise the landlord's typical routes of reporting disrepair and raising complaints. This allows advice workers to act as trusted intermediaries, which can minimise the costs and resources which would otherwise need to be allocated to ensure the rights of vulnerable tenants are protected.[7]

It is therefore recommended that social landlords and advice sector organisations in Islington develop a formal network where systemic issues can be discussed and casework can be escalated, when necessary, to avoid the unnecessary deterioration of the landlord-tenant relationship, which would result from longer and more drawn-out dispute resolution mechanisms. A formal network would also provide the opportunity for more informal connections to develop, which would likely ease relations and avoid unnecessary antagonism.

5. Reconsideration of the boundaries between the responsibilities of capital works and the repairs teams and budgets

Another key theme in this report is the tension between undertaking repairs which are essentially sticking plaster solutions to larger underlying problems and the more significant and more expensive work completed for the long-term maintenance and renovation of housing stock.

These two functions – responsive repairs and capital works – risk being siloed within social housing providers, and it appears that many of the more serious and/or long-standing instances of disrepair fall somewhere on the boundaries of the two areas of responsibility. The archetypal example of this problem is perhaps a damp and mould issue caused by water ingress from a leaky roof. Regeneration and replacement of the roof of a housing block would fall within the remit of the capital works team,

[7] Dr Tara Mulqueen and Dr Lisa Wintersteige, *Understanding Local Legal Needs: Early Intervention and the Ecosystem of Legal Support* (March 2025), page 19, https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Understanding-Local-Legal-Needs-Early-intervention-and-the-ecosystem-of-legal-support.pdf

but they may have only allocated the budget and time to do the work at some relatively distant point in the future, leaving the repairs team to try to implement works which will address the symptoms of the leak, rather than the cause.

This problem suggests that there needs to be close integration between the repairs and capital works function at social landlords, which those interviewed recognised was an issue that required further collaboration within their organisations.

6. Further research into ISAP's shared areas of focus

Hopefully this report demonstrates how the members of ISAP might collaborate, as well as work with others, to undertake research into their shared objectives.

The support for this research received from the Cripplegate Foundation and Cloudesley both in terms of funding and facilitating communication with potential interviewees demonstrates the value of local collaboration and place-based funding.

It is recommended that ISAP continues to engage in research and that it develops a forward-looking research strategy, which could identify potential areas of enquiry and facilitate collaboration on data-sharing, evidence collection and research production.

Beyond Islington

Many of the realities of disrepair in social housing in Islington are formed by structural issues which extend far beyond the local area and its decision-makers. As such, the following recommendations are focused on issues which are either national in scale or otherwise extend beyond the borough.

7. Further research into the implementation and impact of Awaab's Law

One of the more striking differences in experiences reported by social landlords and advice sector workers was the impact of the introduction of Awaab's Law. Its implementation was dominating the work of those in social landlords, whereas those in the advice sector did not report noticing any practical impact on their casework (at the time of interviews in early 2026).

Given that Awaab's Law represents a significant shift in how social landlords are required to manage reports of disrepair and will continue to be extended up until its full implementation in 2027, further research could be conducted, which could assess the practical impacts derived from the new regime. This could make use of in-depth case studies, as well as information provided under the new Social

Tenant Access to Information Requirements system. Although this could focus on Islington, it could also be broader, given the national roll-out of the new rules.

8. Reintroduction of Legal Aid for housing disrepair claims

The reintroduction of Legal Aid to include disrepair damages claims would allow law firms to be paid from public funds and not from the compensation awarded to tenants who had been living in substandard conditions. This was suggested by those in the advice sector as a way to provide access to justice for tenants while also removing some of the structural incentives which might encourage no-win, no-fee solicitors to encourage tenants to engage in obstructive behaviour.

This would also deter aggressive claims management firms from encouraging tenants to make claims rather than using the landlord's own reporting and dispute resolution mechanisms, and so could help protect the landlord-tenant relationship from breakdowns in trust.

Given that the Government is currently considering the evidence provided as part of its consultation into housing disrepair claims, it will hopefully at least give thought to this increase in the scope of Legal Aid.

Conclusion

The research conducted for this report has demonstrated that housing disrepair remains a significant and complex challenge in Islington, despite the hard work and progress achieved by many working locally. Although social landlords are making significant efforts, particularly in response to an ever-changing regulatory landscape, more can and should be done to improve the housing conditions of social tenants.

Islington faces its own unique array of challenges, but is also subject to broader national trends which have propelled poor housing conditions up the political agenda. Given the large percentage of Islington residents who make their homes in social housing, meeting those challenges is vitally important.

The advice sector in Islington, and elsewhere, is vitally important in supporting tenants in challenging instances of disrepair, either where they have vulnerabilities which limit their ability to advocate for themselves or where the increasing complexity of legal and regulatory disputes means that access to legal support is essential for a fair resolution. Where appropriate, social landlords and the advice sector should work collaboratively to further their shared objectives of supporting tenants.

The findings in this report would not have been possible without the time, candour and expertise of the interview participants. We are grateful to all those who agreed to contribute to this research. Their reflections were thoughtful, honest and generous, and they provided invaluable insight into both the successes and the limitations of current approaches to housing disrepair in Islington and beyond. We appreciate that many participants spoke from the perspective of demanding roles, often while working in services that are themselves under significant pressure. Their willingness to share experiences, identify problems and suggest improvements has given this report much of its value and should hopefully be the foundation for further improvements in the housing conditions of Islington residents.

Acknowledgments

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SCAN ME

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