

# Let Down in Wales

*Campaigning for  
Private Rented Sector  
reform*

## 'Letting Agents: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly'

### How private tenants rent in Wales

June 2014

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Let Down in Wales is campaigning for reform of the private rented sector. This report was compiled from renters' true stories in Cardiff, gathered on the Let Down in Cardiff website.

# The Problem with Renting

As part of the UK-wide Let Down campaign (see [letdown.org](http://letdown.org) for more details), we are very concerned about **the state of private rented housing in Wales**.

We started collecting people's stories from our website, our Facebook and Twitter pages. Renters who found out about our campaign (which was helped by Citizens UK members) would share stories of how their letting agent or landlord had treated them. The vast majority of complaints were about letting agents, some about bad landlords and some purely because renting is hard.

**Renting your home is a very insecure way of living.** Renters are not just young people anymore. We no longer think we will ever 'get on' the housing ladder, and we're simply too poor to qualify for a mortgage or save up for a deposit. This could be for many reasons, but the real problem is that buying a house is just too expensive for so much of society.

But renters don't always 'mind' renting. Some people might like the flexibility of only staying somewhere for a few months. Some people might have short-term jobs which means they just need to live in a city for 6 months. Some people like the security of having a landlord or letting agent pay for their costs of living (like included bills or fixing broken boilers).

Many people no longer live in the same house for longer than 1-2 years. Most young people and students will rent for 12 months at a time, moving every summer. Lots of students move accommodation twice every year (say, 10 months renting and 2 months living at home). Renting is a great way for people not sure of where to settle yet or need to move house a lot for family or employment commitments.

Furthermore, due to the changes in welfare reform and the lack of 1-2 bed social housing stock, it is expected that the number of private tenants will increase in the UK. These people, often in desperate circumstances already, are having to leave the security of social housing for the uncertain and often inadequate circumstances of private housing.

Despite this, **renting is a nightmare**. Everyone has a 'renting disaster' story. People share stories about not being able to have hot water for a month because their landlord wouldn't fix the pipes. They move into new houses that are covered in damp, with the electricity broken and no one to fix it. Landlords that only give you one month's notice to move out, because they decided to sell the place. Landlords saying that they want to move back in so demand the house back. Landlords that try and sue you for moving out of their property 6 months early, demanding you see them in court for 6 months rent.

**The Let Down in Wales campaign has been gathering these renters' stories, so that we can give politicians a real picture of the problems renters face.**

# A Vision for Housing

## What the Let Down in Wales campaign proposes

The Housing (Wales) Bill has so much potential for reforming the housing sector. It will help homeless people. It will help tackle domestic violence. It will build housing. It will reform social housing. And it will ensure that all landlords are registered.

However, for renters, this does not go far enough. **If you want to change the way the private rented sector works, you have to regulate it.** The Welsh Government is proposing that letting agents and landlords voluntarily register for a scheme which has to be regulated by local authorities. But it requires more capacity than many local authorities have at their disposal in the present climate.

With Welsh Government regulation, **a central register of landlords and letting agents could ensure that they could be held truly accountable.** When a tenant complained about their landlord or letting agent, this would get recorded. This could be via the Local Authority still, on to a Welsh Government register. If a landlord/letting agent received a certain amount of complaints, that could get investigated into by a Committee, a Tribunal or an Ombudsman.

They could hold a private inquiry into whether this person or organisation was taking advantage of their tenants. **They could decide if they were charging too much rent or letting their properties fall into disrepair.** They could decide if they were responsible enough and 'qualified' to be a landlord or letting agent. The register would also check if they had been on a course to teach them the 'rules' of being a private landlord.

In reality, there would be very few complaints that would warrant this private inquiry. A local authority could perhaps determine if a serious complaint should be put on the Central Register.

**A Housing Tribunal mechanism is being put in place in Scotland and it will be interesting to see how that works in practice. The Scottish Housing Minister said:**

*"Every year, huge amounts of time, money and resources are spent to no effect trying to resolve issues that arise between tenants and landlords. This is something I have experienced first-hand while helping people in previous roles, and it is absolutely vital that we come up with solutions to ensure that disputes are resolved as quickly and as painlessly as possible."*

In Wales, we could do any number of things. **A Housing Tribunal. Or perhaps a Housing Ombudsman. A Tenant's Commissioner.** Essentially, a complaints procedure for the private sector that will give a voice and a form of redress for tenants.

This would regulate landlords and letting agents and safeguard all renters from bad practice. Local authorities would not have to take on the burden of all the administration and the Welsh Government could create a regulatory framework which specified how much training landlords/letting agents need and how many complaints warrant an inquiry. This could also make it much easier to share best practice across Wales and to create a private rented sector that renters deserve.

**This is our proposal for the Housing (Wales) Bill and we urge AMs for a debate on the issue.**

# Stories from Renters

Let Down in Cardiff, a newly formed branch of the UK-wide Let Down campaign for private rented sector reform, has been gathering stories online to share tenants' experiences of renting with landlords and letting agents in Cardiff, in order to help tenants avoid the bad ones and to promote the good ones. Here is a small selection of some real and common problems that tenants encounter.

## **Renters talking about Imperial Lettings:**

*"This letting agent is notorious for bad service. My partner and I rented off them for 10 months – where they repeatedly failed to top up the boiler (heating being included in the rent) and left us freezing for weeks at a time. They didn't care when we have mice and never responded to our complaints. They advertised the flat as a 6 month contract with electricity included too, but when it came to signing the contract, they decided it should be 12 months without electricity included. My partner negotiated them down to 10 months, but still a lot longer than planned and we still had to unexpectedly pay electric on top of the extortionate rent.*

*Worst of all, when they couldn't find new tenants to replace us, they gave our flat's address to other multiple letting agents, who spent months knocking on our door with absolutely no warning at all, with people coming to view the property. Imperial did nothing and we had to give our phone number to half a dozen estate agents, and ask them to contact us before barging into our house (as many of them seemed to have keys). When we finally moved out, they tried to charge us for an imaginary soap dish that we never had, and wouldn't pay back the deposit for 2 months. We had to threaten various courses of action before they'd give us the full deposit back.*

*Would never recommend them to anyone. Avoid at all costs. They're also notorious for changing a medium sized house into tiny bedsit flats. They're not good places to live."*

## **Renters talking about CPS Homes:**

*"They were absolutely terrible, we had our roof leaking and they were very slow to do anything about it, but now they are finally doing something about it. My wardrobe was falling apart when I came in September, and it took them 2 days to come and fix it. The house is very cold, we have no insulation. When we arrived our house was on business tariff which meant our gas and electricity ended up being £100 more for 2 months. Which is the landlord's fault but she would not pay the difference. The reason I give them two stars is because one day I got locked out my room and they came out in 10 minutes to unlock it, which is pretty good."*



# Stories from Renters

## **Renters talking about the StarFlats website:**

"This website is hard to work out, as it seems to be almost an open forum for landlords to post flats across the country. I only have experience of the Cardiff section, but my experience is that of an absolute, total SCAM. Please AVOID at all costs. It seemed too good to be true, but I went ahead and enquired about a nice looking flat on Newport Road anyway – the landlord emailed back and forth convincingly for a day or two, but said they were away at the time so couldn't show me the flat straight away. Then they asked for the deposit to be transferred via Western Union immediately to secure it, and luckily before I parted with any money, I realised that it was a scam and they dropped contact entirely. DO NOT send anyone money before you've met them and seen the property.

Who knows if everything on this site is a scam or not, but it's a terrible website for allowing even one of its properties to be fake."

## **Renters talking about Imperial Lettings:**

*"Absolutely terrible, to be honest. These guys are absolute crooks, and we feel totally let down by their (lack of) service. I am currently renting a 4 bed upstairs flat and we have had endless problems. Our problems began the day we moved in, when we found our flat had not been cleaned at all over the summer – dirty bathroom, dust everywhere, mouldy food in the fridge, and the freezer was so frosted up it was unusable for over a week. Most recently we found a problem with damp and mould in our bathroom, and after ringing them repeatedly to investigate it, they sent 3 guys round who were extremely rude to us, slagged us off and made fun of us while we were still in the flat, and then managed to break our shower and mad to effort to fix it. I would say only go with this company if you want to live in dilapidated housing, have your complaints ignored for weeks at a time and have viewings and "maintenance" barging their way in whenever they like with no warning. 100% learnt our lesson! This company treats students with absolutely no dignity, and we have learnt our lesson never to go with this pigheaded agency ever again.*



# Stories from Renters

## **Renters talking about being kicked out of short tenancies:**

*"I signed a short-term agreement with a letting agent, and about two weeks before the end of the initial two-month tenancy I got in touch with the agency again, surprised that they hadn't contacted me, and asked to arrange an appointment to re-sign our contract and continue the tenancy for another 6 months or a year. I was told that the property had already been let to someone else from the end of my two months. This had never been mentioned when we initially talked at the start of the tenancy about extending it, and no-one had been to view the flat while we were living there.*

*The incredibly rude staff were completely unsympathetic and deliberately unhelpful in this process. I wasn't offered assistance in seeking an alternative property to move into, I was just told I couldn't stay and that was that.*

*Thankfully I did manage to find a flat in the bay to move to for not much more than I was paying before. So I scraped around, borrowed some money from my dad, used my overdraft to pay the £100+ fees and credit check fee and moved there. And the cycle began again."*

## **Renters talking about broken boilers**

*"My husband and I's landlord is great, always comes to our flat to check out any problems. But at the moment we have a problem that isn't his fault; there is huge amounts of water coming down from the flat above us. It's saturated all our insulation and is even making our floorboards bow. It's because it's a new block of flats and with ours at the bottom, so some water problems - literally - trickle down to us.*

*Now there's water in our electrics and we need to get a whole new bathroom fitted because of the damp and mould that has grown. Our landlord wants to help, but with it being the fault of the flat above us, another landlord needs to pay or at least get their insurance to cover it. We've no idea how many repairs we need or if their insurance will cover it, but for the foreseeable future we have to live with leaks throughout our flat and mould rapidly developing."*

# Let Down in Wales

These people have been 'let down' by their landlords. We need to rent but are continually over-charged and treated badly in our homes.

There are so many other examples we've gathered of bad practice from letting agents. Such as:

- A medical student in Swansea who was sued by his landlord for moving out early (his new hospital placement meant it was now too far commute and had to move closer). The landlord created a year's worth of stress and court summons, until a judge finally ruled that the landlord was at fault. The student had to ask for a legal charity's help to ensure he was represented
- The London letting agent, Foxtons, who kept a £750 deposit for 3 months until the tenant finished a complete, 3-month long complaints process through the local branch, national branch and the CEO, which triggered allowance to use the English Housing Ombudsman. Foxtons finally returned the deposit the night before the Ombudsman could have acted
- The Cardiff Student's Union letting agent, who tried to charge money off the deposit for not mowing the lawn. At the beginning of the tenancy they said it was not necessary to maintain the garden. At the end, they told us tools should have been used in the shed (note: the property did not have a shed)

Please listen to renters and help them to get a fair deal and a fair voice in the Housing Bill and the Renting Homes Bill.

**We'd also like to thank other organisations that are trying to show the bad conditions we rent in. We've had many discussions with Shelter, Citizens UK and the Let Down coalition across the UK about what our priorities should be for the private rented sector. We need better tenancy agreements, regulated landlords and improved housing conditions. In the first instance however, we are calling on the Welsh Government to consider our request to provide a competent vehicle for our right to complain and a right to tenant protection.**

**The Housing Bill is aiming to transform the private sector; these proposals would fit in with this agenda and could enshrine tenants' rights in statute or at least put them at the centre of these vital reforms.**



# Find out more about the campaign



[@letdowncardiff](https://twitter.com/letdowncardiff)



[Let Down in Wales](https://www.facebook.com/LetDowninWales)



[letdownincardiff.wordpress.com](http://letdownincardiff.wordpress.com)

*Other useful information on reforming  
the Private Rented Sector in Wales:*

[Shelter Cymru 'Fit to Rent' report](#)

The biggest survey ever carried out of private tenants in  
Wales, March 2014

[Tenantiaid Cymru/Welsh Tenants response to the Renting  
Homes White Paper, August 2013](#)

[letdown.org.uk](http://letdown.org.uk)

A coalition of private tenant groups organising actions to  
bring down rents and keep them under control; longer  
secure tenancies; banning fees for tenants; proper  
regulation of letting agents and no discrimination against  
housing benefit claimants

