

Emotions, policy and collective action in housing safety crises

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Contents

Executive summary.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Methods.....	7
Part 1: The building safety crisis in England	9
The impacts on home for those affected.....	9
Government action and impacts on emotions.....	11
Experiences of collective action	13
Mobilising emotion in collective action.....	14
Part 2: The defective concrete block crisis in Ireland	17
The impacts on home for those affected.....	18
Government action and impacts on emotions.....	19
Experiences of collective action	21
Mobilising emotion in collective action.....	23
Conclusions	25
References.....	27
Appendix	29

Executive summary

"The language is always 'the building', 'the cladding'...but...my home is unsafe...the media, the government, they never use that language"

(Rosie, England)

"It's not like a humanitarian crisis where a specific thing happens like...an earthquake, and you know that's the damage, that's how many people are affected...This is...just kind of unfolding...in slow motion"

(Lucas, Ireland)

Introduction

This report explores policy, emotions and collective action through two case studies of housing safety crises. Both reveal failures of regulation, Government, and private sector interests, and have also driven widespread and long-term collective action on the part of affected residents to seek redress for the problems in their homes.

- The building safety crisis in England, affecting multi-storey blocks of flats – this is characterised by problems identified after the Grenfell Tower fire, related to flammable cladding and insulation, missing fire breaks, and other safety problems. Progress to tackle these issues has been slow, with hundreds of thousands of households stuck in homes affected by building safety problems. Government funding schemes to fix problems have gradually broadened, but exclusions to support for some buildings and individuals remain.
- The defective concrete blocks or 'mica' crisis in Ireland – this is characterised by the deterioration of concrete blocks, resulting in cracking and crumbling walls. In some cases, homes are also badly affected by damp and mould. There are estimated to be 5-6,000 homes affected in Ireland. A Government grant scheme to remediate defects opened in 2020. Amid concerns about the cost of accessing the scheme and shortfalls in funding, an enhanced funding scheme opened in 2023. Despite increased provision, there are important exclusions, for example relating to foundations and holiday homes.

The report draws on interviews with 28 individuals living through these crises.

Disruptions to home

The housing safety crises discussed here have fundamentally disrupted individuals' experiences of home as safe, secure and stable. For many, home was now a place of unsafety,

anxiety, and insecurity. Material safety concerns were more prominent in Ireland, where the physical manifestation of unsafety was more immediate due to the visibility of cracking and crumbling walls, and living with severe damp and mould. In England, whilst some participants felt unsafe and had plans to escape, others found that a sense of risk and unsafety only developed later – for example following a fire, or once poor construction practice had been revealed as walls were opened-up. However, in both cases, there was a sense that problems were inescapable precisely because they affected the home – both as somewhere to live day-to-day, but also its wider financial and cultural associations.

In both cases, financial anxieties were prominent. There remained considerable uncertainty over the financing of remedying defects in the home, and what costs would fall on residents. Many of those affected had been living with knowledge of problems for many years, during which time life was often on hold. Participants expended considerable energy managing the uncertainty of what could happen, and trying to anticipate and navigate the potential futures that they now faced as a result of building problems. Home therefore became implicated in future insecurity, returning some to a sense of precarity that they thought they had long since escaped.

Government action and impacts on emotions

Many participants had been living with the impacts of safety problems at home for years. In living through a prolonged crisis, individuals were faced with a seemingly paradoxical condition in which they experienced severe impacts on everyday life and the experience of home, yet the policy context did not respond with action at an equivalent scale or urgency. Whilst policy measures – particularly relating to financial support – had developed over time, these were in many respects viewed as a significant under-reaction. Small actions could give the impression of progress, whilst more significant and comprehensive measures remained elusive.

Almost all participants expressed frustration related to Governments' communication of these policy measures and 'spin'. Dominant narratives often gave the impression that a complex problem had been 'solved', with participants experiencing hope and followed by disappointment in the detail of measures. Households repeatedly countered what they viewed as inaccurate public discourses, which itself carried an emotional impact.

Whilst those affected were appreciative of support for resolving housing safety problems, and those who were eligible for support recognised that they would personally benefit, the piecemeal evolution of policy and the caveats on eligibility were also viewed as part of a strategy by Governments to do as much (or as little) as required to solve a

political problem. This created groups of 'winners' and 'losers' and thus served to fragment collective action. A number of campaigners were adamant that though they may benefit from measures, the problem was not solved whilst reported exclusions and limitations remained.

As well as direct emotional impacts, the failures of policy to urgently tackle the crises fuelled a wider sense of disillusionment. Some participants set their experiences within the context of wider scandals and injustices – in England, although research was conducted prior to the most recent TV dramatization, participants referenced the Post Office scandal and the Grenfell Tower inquiry. In Ireland, participants related the search for justice to the Stardust Inquiry and Magdalene laundries. This highlights that ineffective Government responses to the crises extended building problems into a more fundamental crisis between citizen and State, associated with a sense of moral shock and injustice. This has been an important driver for collective action to seek a more just outcome, and affected communities drew strength and made connections to other groups and movements.

of their own stories to countering stigma and blame. This enabled more people who were affected to come forward alongside others from the wider public, and to recognise themselves in others' experiences and to sympathise with their situation. Campaigners made extensive use of traditional and social media in order to build connections with others within and beyond the movements.

Although sharing personal stories could be used strategically to generate feelings of connection and empathy, it also placed a burden on the subject of the story. As well as publicising personal details, discussing the issues they were facing could also hold individuals within a traumatic experience. Some participants were exhausted, and it was not uncommon for people to cycle in and out of involvement and engagement. Nevertheless, many were determined to remain active in campaigning in order to focus on existing and future challenges, for example associated with the process of rebuilding and longer-term outcomes.

Experiences of collective action

Many participants highlighted positive benefits arising from the collective nature of the crises. A sense of solidarity with others going through the same problems was valuable in tempering any sense of blame, shame, or stigma associated with the experience of safety problems. There was value in sharing experiences, knowledge, mutual understanding, and a sense of power and possibility that came from collective action. Many participants were driven by a need to do something to try and change their situation, and to force public attention and therefore greater policy action related to the issues they faced.

However, one of the major challenges of collective action was growing movements and encouraging others into active campaigning. In both cases, the burden fell on few shoulders and – as volunteers who were living through stressful experiences – there were many reports of frustration and tiredness. Putting themselves at the centre of action to challenge Governments to address safety problems also pushed people into highly visible positions which they may not otherwise have chosen, exposing the intimate details of their lives, mental health, and finances to public scrutiny.

Mobilising emotion in collective action

The inadequacy of Government responses and the negative emotions that the policy context has fostered has been an important driver of collective action, as individuals have sought to use their own emotions to counter Government and media narratives. Therefore, emotions have been mobilised as a countervailing pressure to influence politics and policymaking. Having 'experts by experience' at the heart of collective movements has given a particular shape and mood to action. Many recognised the central importance

Introduction

This report explores the role of emotions in people's engagement with policy processes and collective action related to living through housing safety crises. Following this introduction, there are two main parts to the report, presenting empirical data relating to:

- 1. The building safety crisis or 'cladding scandal' in England, affecting multi-storey blocks of flats
- 2. The defective concrete block or 'mica' crisis in Ireland

A concluding section reflects on connections and differences across the cases in light of wider literature.

The housing safety problems that are discussed in the report are international exemplars of prolonged crises within national housing systems, affecting large numbers of property owners. In both cases, individuals who are living in affected homes are living through a profound reshaping of their relationship with the home, as conventional understandings of home as a safe, stable, controllable sphere are disrupted. In the case of the building safety crisis in England, individuals are living with fire safety risks due to flammable cladding and insulation, missing fire breaks, and other building defects in multi-storey flats or apartments. By contrast, Ireland's defective concrete block crisis is primarily focused on single family homes, in which deleterious materials in concrete blocks cause walls to progressively crack and crumble. As well as compromising the structural integrity of homes, many households are living in damp and cold homes due to the poor condition of walls, resulting in extensive mould problems (RTE, 2023).

Both cases have also generated widespread financial insecurity and anxiety because of the costs of remedying the problems. Whilst some Government support schemes are now available relating to both cases, many campaigners argue that significant gaps and much uncertainty remains. Collective action by communities of those affected by these housing safety crises has been an important driver of this policy change, and of wider public awareness of the problems. Over a number of years, affected individuals have sought to generate support for Government action to address their building defects, particularly through the implementation, and widening, of financial support schemes. Campaigners have also sought to hold those responsible to account, for example the manufacturers of defective concrete blocks, through greater testing and regulation of quarries (Mica Action Group, 2022), which Government was warned were still producing defective products (Gataveckaitė, 2022), and action against developers failing to fund work to remediate cladding defects (Wright, 2023).

Collective feelings can scaffold the way that people experience and engage with particular social problems, as studies of affect – or emotion – have highlighted (Anderson, 2016). This research focuses on the emotions associated with the experience of housing safety crises, and the role of emotion in subsequent policy processes and outcomes. It seeks to foreground the relationship between Government policy statements and action, people's lived experiences of

the crisis, and their collective action to seek redress.

The disruptions to home – or unhoming (Baxter and Brickell, 2014) – that people experience through these safety crises can be understood as generated through State responses (or non-responses) to unfolding housing disaster. Therefore, thinking about the role of the State is crucial. Looking more widely, in a range of social policy fields across history, States have been shown to produce and mobilise negative emotions to create hostile conditions towards particular issues or populations, with the moods that they generate resulting in a negative impact on target communities (Mills and Klein, 2021). For example, the State may dismiss problems as being of little significance, may delay action on an issue, or divide groups into those who are 'deserving' of assistance and those who are not. These actions will result in emotional impacts, and this is also the case in the example of individuals living through housing safety crises.

However, the construction of particular emotions and feelings is not solely the preserve of the State – by studying emotions we can gain a deeper understanding of the operation of power within policy processes, and the ways in which (sometimes negative) emotions can catalyse communities against forms real and symbolic violence (Anderson, 2016). In both the cases presented here, the research will explore the countervailing pressures from citizens, which challenge State framings of the crises. In doing so, it considers the way in which collective emotions can be harnessed by citizens as a form of power to influence public opinion and policymaking (Huijsmans, 2018). This recognises the process through which 'micro-emotions' stemming from policy interactions feed into collective dynamics to become a 'collective currency' and tool of policy and political change (Jupp, 2021). In these cases, those affected by housing safety problems have deployed their own stories and personal experiences in order to generate solidarity, empathy, and a wider recognition of the injustice associated with these crises.

The presentation of the cases follows a common structure. An introduction provides background to the housing safety issues, after which a range of impacts on people's sense of home are discussed. The Government's role in shaping particular emotions is then outlined, through participants' narratives of policy action and framings of the crisis from Government actors. Experiences of collective action – the benefits and the challenges – are then discussed, and a final section considers how emotions are mobilised by the communities of those affected in order to seek a resolution to the crises. After each major case has been discussed, an overall conclusion works across the two cases to reflect on points of connection and contestation.

Methods

The research on which this report is based was carried out in phases over the course of 2023. The two empirical cases were explored using semi-structured interviews with those affected by either fire safety problems in apartment blocks in England, or defective concrete / Mica in Ireland. The research project and a call for participants was promoted on social media channels such as Twitter, including by organisations and individuals who were involved in campaign activities related to the research topic. The call for participants was also posted, with permission, on a Facebook group for those affected by defective concrete. Potential participants completed a brief survey form, providing some initial details to enable contact from the researcher. The survey asked about the types of campaigning activities that individuals had been involved in, and a purposive sample was taken to achieve a range of types of involvement. In England, diversity of building height was also sought because this was a key way in which different forms of policy action was targeted. Initial contact was made with potential participants via email, with a follow up contact made if no response was received. After this, if no response was received, another potential participant was selected for contact. Participants who consented to be part of the research then had an interview scheduled, and demographic details were collected.

In total, 28 individuals were interviewed (14 per case), with interviews lasting for approximately one hour, but with a range of 45 to 90 minutes. Most interviews were carried out by video conferencing or phone call, depending on the preferences of the participant. One interview was carried out in person. Some participants also shared images associated with their experience of housing safety problems, which were either discussed during the interview, or were sent to provide additional context afterwards.

Table 1 presents the overall characteristics of the sample across the two case studies. Overall, participants in Ireland were more likely to be female, older, and living with children in the household. Most participants in Ireland were living in Donegal, with one second homeowner not living in Ireland permanently (but with a home in Donegal), one participant in Clare, and two from bordering counties in Northern Ireland also living with defective concrete. In the English case, all participants were leaseholders (including two shared owners), but living in different types of building by height.

Interviews were guided by a topic list and initial set of questions, with the interviewee guided through the topics, but with the flexibility to take the conversation in the direction of the issues they felt were most important to cover.

Table 1 Participant characteristics

	England	Ireland	Total
Gender			
Female	6	10	16
Male	7	4	11
In another way	1		1
Age			
25-34	3	0	3
35-44	6	3	9
45-54	2	5	7
55-64	2	3	5
65+	1	3	4
Tenure			
100% leaseholder	12	N/A	12
Shared owner	2	N/A	2
Homeowner - with mortgage	N/A	8	8
Homeowner – owned outright	N/A	6	6
Household characteristics			
Living alone	4	2	6
Living with spouse / partner	7	3	10
Living with spouse / partner and child / children	2	6	8
Living with child / children	0	3	3
Living with friends or non-family members	1	0	1
Occupancy			
Living there now	12	10	22
Moved out due to safety problems	1	0	1
Moved out due to fire	1	0	1
Second / holiday home	0	1	1
Moved out due to condition or rebuilding	0	3	3
Building height			
18m +	7	N/A	7
11-18m	6	N/A	6
<11m	1	N/A	1

All interviews were fully transcribed to enable analysis of the text. Analysis of transcripts proceeded in stages. First, transcripts were read through and sections of text highlighted and coded to specific topics. Then, these topics were nested under broader themes. These themes highlight the key issues that came from participants' narratives in response to the broad questions the research sought to explore. All participants have been given pseudonyms here to protect their identity.

Part 1: The building safety crisis in England

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017, there were widespread concerns about high-rise, multi-storey buildings with cladding. Subsequent investigations revealed a wide range of fire-safety related problems in blocks of flats, from flammable cladding and insulation, to missing fire breaks, inadequate compartmentation, flammable materials on balconies, and other poor construction practices (Apps, 2022; for the Australian context, see also Cook and Taylor, 2023). Whilst many of these issues have come to prominence in the post-Grenfell period, they are the manifestation of much longer-running problems in building construction and regulation, and already implicated in other serious fires (Apps, 2022, Hodkinson, 2019). The problem of fire safety in multi-storey buildings continues to be a significant international concern (see, for example Oswald et al, 2021, 2022) and there have been several serious cladding fires in residential buildings, for example in Milan and Valencia (Apps, 2021, Symonds, 2024).

Leaseholders¹ living in affected buildings have reported considerable negative impacts on wellbeing, and problems such as anxiety and depression (Preece, 2021, Preece and Flint, 2023). Because of safety problems and uncertainties over liability for remedying defects, many mortgage providers greatly restricted lending on potentially affected buildings. In practice, this has meant that individuals have been unable to sell flats until they can confirm through a building assessment that they do not require remediation work. There is some evidence that lending may be considered on buildings which have a remediation contract and funding in place to support remediation (Wilmore, 2023), but this remains inconsistent and the value and saleability of homes in buildings about to undergo major building works may also be negatively impacted (End Our Cladding Scandal, 2024).

Overall, whilst there is recognition that many buildings are likely to be affected by a range of safety-related problems, progress in tackling the issue has been slow. Hundreds of thousands of households remain stuck in homes affected by these issues, seven years after the Grenfell Tower fire (Lees, 2024). This is partly because of the scale and cost of assessing buildings, the cost of – and responsibility for – remedying defects and bringing buildings in-line with required standards, fragmented ownership of buildings, the complexity of the leasehold system and the responsibilities and powers of different parties, and the availability of competent specialised assessors and contractors. Without a centralised assessment of buildings at risk, there has been limited prioritisation of work, save for – in the immediate aftermath of the fire – high-rise buildings over 18 metres in height with Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding systems most similar to those at Grenfell Tower.

At the heart of many debates has been the question of how costly works to remedy defects will be funded. In England, the policy approach to tackling the issue can be broadly characterised by a gradual opening out of Government-led funding schemes for the remediation of different kinds of buildings and defects. However, the way in which proposals have sometimes been announced then reversed, and the exclusions applied to support, have caused considerable anxieties for those living in affected buildings. Table 1 (see appendix) summarises building safety policy announcements and demonstrates the gradual extension of Government support, as well as eventual legislation through the Building Safety Act to limit the costs which can be applied to qualifying leaseholders, and attempts to ensure developers contribute to costs resulting from widespread failings in building industries.

Campaign groups have played an important role in raising awareness of the problems experienced by those living in affected homes. The UK Cladding Action Group and the End our Cladding Scandal campaign, as well as numerous local groups, have achieved a significant extension of Government support towards the ultimate aim of remedying building problems. However, gaps remain – there is no financial support for buildings under 11-metres in height, despite evidence of fires in such buildings. When the research began, a pilot scheme of funding existed for buildings 11-18 metres in height, which had been excluded from previous Government funding schemes, and in July 2023 this scheme fully launched as the Cladding Safety Scheme (Homes England, 2024). Not all leaseholders qualify for protection from costs being passed onto them (set out in the Building Safety Act); for example, if an individual owns or co-owns more than 3 properties in the UK, they would be excluded from the £10,000 cap (£15,000 within London) on leaseholder contributions for non-cladding defects. Some developments may contain significant numbers of buy-to-let leaseholders, and if they are excluded from protection due to their property portfolio, but still cannot pay, it is unclear how remediation will progress in these buildings.

The impacts on home for those affected

Feeling unsafe

This section outlines the ongoing impacts on leaseholders of living with building safety problems. At the time of the research in 2023, most participants had been living with safety concerns for several years. Whilst mitigation measures such as sprinkler systems, fire alarms, or patrols may reduce material levels of risk and how people felt about the safety of their home, for those living with problems day-to-day the slow pace of progress remained a significant source of frustration. Whilst not common in this sample, there were cases in

¹ Leasehold tenure in England is common when purchasing dwellings (such as flats) in buildings for multiple occupancy. While many leaseholders equate purchasing a lease with ownership, leasehold tenure actually confers the right to live in a given dwelling for the period specified in the lease. The building is usually owned by a freeholder, who collects ground rents and other charges from leasehold occupants. While leaseholders do not own the building, they are generally liable for the cost of repairs through an annual service charge.

which individuals had moved out due to safety concerns. For example, Fiona (age 45-54) had moved out of her apartment because she was “so stressed out, I couldn’t stop thinking about it, I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t concentrate on work”. Moving provided some relief because “I didn’t have the ‘being killed in a fire’ worry”, but because she rented the property out there was also guilt “about having tenants in a fire trap, but... they don’t have to worry about being bankrupted...we’re sort of splitting the worry” (Fiona).

Others managed safety concerns by creating strategies for escape in the event of a fire. For example, Lindsey (age 25-34) explained that “I know how I would jump out a window. I’ve planned how I would tie bedsheets together or have a rope ladder...that’s the coping strategy for potentially being in an unsafe building”. Perceptions of risk were not static, however, and particular events could reshape understandings of safety. For example, although Ruth (age 35-44) had “sort of dismissed [Grenfell]...like it didn’t apply to us” and did not have “any inkling that there was anything unsafe with the building”, a devastating fire later destroyed her home. Rosie also explained how perceptions of risk changed when she saw the building being deconstructed:

My head couldn’t get round what could happen because it hadn’t happened...Until they took [the cladding] off...could see how shoddy the workmanship was underneath...I can now see that’s what would have caused the fire to go up the outside of the building, which you can’t see it until they take it off

(Rosie, age 35-44)

Risk perception and the emotions that arise from this are therefore dynamic rather than static, responding to new information and experiences.

Financial worries

In this sample, safety still remained a less prominent concern than issues related to financial impacts and the slow pace of work to resolve defects. Despite changes to Government action and legislation since an earlier study in 2020 (see Preece, 2021, Preece and Flint, 2023, Preece et al, 2023), lack of clarity around potential financial impacts and uncertainty over resolving building problems remained significant divers of adverse impacts. As Bethan (age 55-64) explained, “I can’t tell you how deeply it affects me. It’s in my soul and my bones. It’s there all the time. And it has been for years. And most of the time I just have to put a lid on it, because there’s nothing I can do”.

Each individual had their own story, but there were commonalities in the emotional journeys. This was characterised by:

Different waves...so, initially, it was the fear around the actual safety, you know 72 people perished,

in their homes, so you’ve got, ‘oh my god, look at that fire’, watching clips of the fire...Then it’s the financial element, where we still are really concerned...And then, now, it’s the pure feeling of anger and frustration, of being completely let down by Government

(Elizabeth, age 25-34)

Similarly, Robert (age 65+) explained that “[emotions have] kind of ebbed and flowed...There’ve been times when we’ve felt quite high levels of anxiety, and other times when we’ve been more resigned to what’s happening, and more relaxed in a way”. Whilst fewer people reported acute financial anxieties as a result of, for example, demands for payment (see Martin and Preece, 2021; Preece, 2021), there remained much uncertainty about how problems would be resolved and any costs that would fall to leaseholders. As will be explored next, a lot of the feelings experienced by people in the present therefore related to potential future impacts, including financial.

Anticipation and futures

Many participants described living in a state of permanent temporariness (Watt, 2021) in which futures were lost or uncertain. Ruth illustrated this through the loss of one object – her dining table – during a building fire:

It doesn’t matter what you spend your time creating, it’s gone...The losses aren’t just things you can tot up on a calculator...And it was never just a dining table. It was that I was creating somewhere where I thought, at the time, that maybe I’ll have a family, maybe I’ll live here, maybe I’ll get married here...When you’re creating those things, you’re thinking about it as...your vision for the future

(Ruth, age 35-44)

This loss represented a particular set of potentialities that had been wiped away and therefore had profoundly disrupted Ruth’s sense of home and anticipated future. Indeed, many of the negative impacts experienced by participants related to the disruption of futures, as Elizabeth (age 25-34) also explained: “You think ahead, of all these things you hope to have by a certain age...that certain milestones would be achieved by a certain time, and you find yourself thinking, ‘oh my God, am I still going to be here...three years ahead, still stuck here?’”.

Following this, leaseholders described a range of anticipatory emotions, associated with managing the ‘what ifs’ and unknown possibilities associated with their altered futures. Commonly this related to ongoing financial uncertainty, or the expectation of living through major building works. Potential future stressors therefore created emotionally damaging impacts in the present, with leaseholders living in a prolonged state of anticipation and uncertainty. For example,

Lindsey (age 25-34) explained that although their liability for non-cladding defects should be capped at £10,000 under the Building Safety Act, “you have this real pressure all of the time... Is it going to be £200,000, or is it going to be £10,000... There’s nothing to say that we can’t go backwards from this point... That uncertainty over everything has been the worst for me”.

The day-to-day emotional management of uncertainty created tangible impacts in the present. This is exemplified by Ryan’s case – his building’s assessment had recently been revised, meaning that costly remediation works would no longer be required:

I'd like to say I felt like elated and happy...but I didn't really. It more just felt like it was just a relief and a whole layer of stress just slowly seeped away...It was a thing I didn't have to worry about, because honestly, it was just in my head like every hour for three years. I started going to a counsellor because I was struggling with it. I had...stomach issues, which I thought were physical and then honestly, the day we got that form, I instantly felt better...now I realised it was actually stress-related...It's been really nice just to have it out of your mind...It was really hard going back home at the end of every day, to your place where you want to be like relaxed...You get home, when you walk in the door and you're just constantly then thinking about what's behind that wall, and that potentially this is worth zero, yet I've got a massive mortgage on it...It was a depressing place to be. And I would go away loads, almost to not be at home

(Ryan, age 35-44)

Whilst the risk had therefore been wiped away through the reassessment of the building, the impact of facing a potential financially devastating event had still been a daily lived reality. For some, this anticipatory impact was beginning to move from financial loss to actually living through building remediation works. As Rosie (age 35-44) explained, “I know it’s going to be awful when...works start. It’s going to be quite loud, there’s going to be no light...there’s going to be dust everywhere...I feel so angry that I have to go through that”. Similarly, Margot was concerned about remediation:

They said it will take about three years...Then the lack of light and the lack of air flow and all of that is very worrying for us...First they said that some of us would have to move out...Now...I think the building safety fund has come back to them and said, “We’re not going to cover that,” so they found a way of saying it’s not necessary

(Margot, age 35-44)

These stressors often had a significant impact on the ability

to feel at home, with Charlie (age 35-44) describing his flat as “a bit of a prison”. Rosie (age 35-44) explained that the way in which problems were discussed minimised the importance of these disruptions: “The language is always ‘the building’, ‘the cladding’...but...my home is unsafe...the media, the government, they never use that language”. This meant that there was a lack of connection to the meaning home has for many individuals. As Ruth (age 35-44) described, “it’s the loss of stability, certainty, feeling of ownership, feeling you can close the door and it’s your space and no-one can come in. Also, just that...it was like the one thing in my life I was proud of...my home was very central to...my identity”.

Government action and impacts on emotions

This section considers how leaseholders viewed the Government response to building safety problems. It highlights four main themes classifying policy responses and discusses the emotional impacts of the policy context on those affected.

Delaying policy action

Most leaseholders had been engaging with the policy context around building safety issues for several years; living with uncertainty about if and how policymakers would act generated a particular set of emotions. The length of time that individuals had been affected meant that “changes happen, but it’s so glacial and it’s so incremental that it’s hard to get too excited or confident about things” when policy announcements were made (Harry, age 25-34).

The incremental evolution of policies generally involved a gradual extending of support to more types of buildings and different approaches to funding remediation work, creating a space of delay in which “they [the Government] kind of said a few warm words and they were kind of chucking a little bit of help here, a little bit of help there...It was like cladding only, and only over 18 metres...It was like blood out of a stone” (Ryan, age 35-44). This was contrasted with other times of swift action in times of national crisis: “With...Covid...it wasn’t perfect...but they did something, they took control. So, it’s the knowledge that it can be done...Even the idea that nobody’s quite taken a grip of it, six years on...How many more years until they do?” (Ruth, age 35-44).

Leaseholders could be in the paradoxical state of facing a risk that was seemingly urgent, but also something with which they could live for an extended period of time. Rosie (age 35-44), for example, found after Grenfell that they had a different type of cladding that apparently did not need remediation at that time, but three years later it was considered problematic and flats in the building were not able to be sold because of it. Three years on from this, she was still “pretty much in the exact same position”, facing a situation in which “you can’t remortgage, it’s so unsafe...you might die” but also being asked to “just live in it while we go really, really slowly” (Rosie). The slow pace of meaningful change meant that key life transitions were deferred and household circumstances

changed as people waited for resolution.

Over-simplification of the problem

The way in which policy responses were presented by Government and in wider discourses also had an impact on how those affected by building safety problems felt. Many individuals experienced conflicting emotions – even if the complexity of problems was acknowledged by Government, proffered solutions were sometimes over-simplified and presented in public narratives as having ‘solved’ the issue. This masked important nuances, including how suggested solutions would work in practice, and the effect they would have on people’s lives. This simplification generated cynicism about policy developments:

I’ve become much more cynical because...they announce something which is obviously going to be unworkable, or they announce something and then you read the small print...what they’ve announced isn’t remotely the truth...When [Secretary of State for Housing] Michael Gove was standing up and saying ‘all leaseholders will be protected from these costs’...that’s not all leaseholders...I personally qualify and that’s great, but if there’s one person in the building that doesn’t...then fixing the building will not happen

(Fiona, age 45-54)

Although policy action may initially create a sense of progress, participants became increasingly cautious when seeking to understand what this meant for their own lives. As Ryan (age 35-44) explained, “every time there’s an announcement... you think ‘oh yes, we’ve got some real progress here’. And then every single time you read the detail and you find out it doesn’t apply to us”. This meant individuals experienced “frustration, and ups and downs, and disappointment” (Harry, age 25-34), because “changes that have happened that have got our hopes up, and then nothing has really happened” (Charlie, age 35-44). As Tom (age 35-44) explained, “there’s been so many different decisions over the last few years... you don’t have as much faith as you should... because... what will it mean in reality for us, and when will we be able to move on with our lives?”. This then created its own emotional labour as individuals encountered these narratives – and the hope and disappointment they generated – in their daily lives.

Dividing groups

Many participants felt that Government framings of the crisis were used as a tool to split leaseholders apart from the wider population. For example, the notion of ‘buyer beware’, alluded to by one Government minister, remained prominent in the minds of many leaseholders who were “angry” (Fiona, age 45-54) and “enraged” (Elizabeth, age 25-34) by the implication that they were at fault. This linked to concerns at various times that taxpayers should not be burdened with the cost of remediating buildings. This “taxpayer versus leaseholder debate just wasn’t particularly helpful because...we are

taxpayers, we’re not some kind of alien group that exists outside of taxpaying people” (Lindsey, age 25-34).

However, many participants also noted a shift in Government action and narratives about the crisis, aligning with a change in leadership:

It makes a huge difference that Government starts to say, ‘Leaseholders are the victims here’... whether they’ve done it because they see a moral imperative, or...because we’ve just got to get the market moving again...by hook or by crook, they’ve come round to saying, ‘We can’t let this happen to leaseholders, we will do everything that we can in our power to protect you, and make sure...other people have to pay’. But, as great as that is, and as much as we feel that people suddenly understand it’s not our fault, the big question is, ‘Well if we’re not paying, then who is?’

(Tom, age 35-44)

Many credited Michael Gove with this change in tone. However, in practice, policies still created distinctions between those eligible and not eligible for different types of support. As Harry (age 25-34) explained: “I’m not ungrateful, and I’m relieved with some of the improvements...but the whole process is still a patchwork of questions and gaps and uncertainty, which is not good”.

The worst thing for me, when there’s any policy announcement, is that obviously the government are able to utilise tools that they have...to kind of suggest that they’re solving the cladding crisis. And every single time...people reach out to me and say, ‘Oh my God, it’s amazing news...you’re going to be free...when can you sell?’ And every single time, I have to say like, ‘No...It doesn’t cover all buildings. It’s not my building’. I’m in arguably a worse situation because...you’re picking off leaseholders... but actually, for many thousands of people, it’s not going to be any better

(Lindsey, age 25-34)

As well as having negative emotional consequences, the way in which policy action ‘picked off’ different groups could also be used as a wedge to divide the wider community of affected individuals; this creates particular challenges for sustaining collective action, as will be discussed later. Margot (age 35-44) highlighted that Government had taken “a piecemeal approach” in which the existence of leaseholders who do not qualify for financial support was “a divide and conquer kind of approach...you satisfy some people, and some people will continue voting for you...forget about everyone else”. Similarly, Ruth (age 35-44) framed the Government’s response as partly driven by political calculation: “What can we calculate that works right now

to get us through this political problem?'. . . Small bit, small bit. . . It's not thinking about the actual lives. . . I find that very difficult".

Disillusionment with Government

This lack of connection by policymakers with the day-to-day and year-to-year lived experience of being affected by such significant problems created a deep sense of disillusionment from some participants. As Bethan (age 55-64) explained, "it's the impotence. . . I'm a mushroom, I'm left in the dark and fed little bits of shit whenever it feels like it; fed little bits of rubbish. . . propaganda by the media, to make the government look better". As in previous research (Preece and Flint, 2023), some participants discussed their own experience alongside that of other prominent national scandals. This gave a sense of connection to the stories of others: "It has made me. . . far more emotional when I hear stories like the Post Office scandal. . . That was more personal against individuals, which is terrible, but it feels like I can understand. . . if only a little bit, how that must have felt, because it's like screaming into a void" (Rosie, age 35-44). Charlie described feeling:

Completely let down by the Government. I'm very shaken. . . very little faith in the Government. . . You'd think that they would do everything they could to avoid. . . anybody becoming a victim in their country, that their whole goal is to protect their citizens. . . This should have been a kind of urgent, resolve overnight, issue. . . If they can just say. . . 'I don't care because I live in my mansion and I've got these other properties. . . You're filth to me!'. . . I know it sounds a bit extreme, but that's kind of the impression that I get. . . We're peasants and. . . they've got their three or four properties. . . and they're happy enough. Now, if their buildings had cladding on, I'm sure it would have been resolved by now. . . They would be first on the list, you know? Animal Farm

(Charlie, age 35-44)

Charlie likens his experience to the novel *Animal Farm*, reflecting on the inequalities and divisions between the governed population and those governing. Many leaseholders also expressed frustration and disappointment in Government action; while recognising that changes to policy and legislation had been made, the response had been extremely slow in terms of achieving a meaningful change in their lives.

Experiences of collective action

This section considers the ways in which leaseholders experienced their place within a collective crisis, particularly unpacking the perceived benefits and challenges of collective action.

Benefits

Many participants expressed positive feelings about the solidarity that has been borne out of building safety problems. In some buildings, residents had "become a much more united group" (Fiona, age 45-54), because "you have a very strong support group of people who are going through the same thing as you" (Lindsey, age 25-34). At a national scale, the wider network of those affected generated a sense that "we all suffer together" (Charlie, age 35-44), which was not necessarily how people experience the earlier phases of the crisis:

At that beginning point it really was terrible because. . . you've got all this bombshell of like, 'you might die in this building. Oh, and you can't sell it. Oh, and it's worth nothing. Oh, and you have to pay to correct it'. . . And then just finding out it wasn't just you, it was very important. . . It's shocking but also in a weird way, comforting, because then I thought well, the Government's going to have to do something

(Rosie, age 35-44)

Whilst individual impacts varied, the fact that many leaseholders experienced similar worries and anxieties at the same time, across different places, adds an important collective element to the experience of this housing safety crisis. For many, "collective action has been absolutely invaluable" (Tom, age 35-44), providing not only practical advice but also emotional support. For example, attending a protest could be "quite therapeutic. . . it felt good. . . you're not alone in this crisis" (Ruth, age 35-44).

Others reflected on the positive role that collective action and the scale of the crisis had played in achieving policy goals. Margot (age 35-44) concluded that collective action "works. . . It really does. Really, really slowly, at a snail's pace. . . But, it takes a lot of work and it takes a lot of energy and it takes a lot of outrage to continue with it". This reveals the way in which negative emotions (outrage) could be harnessed to drive forward calls for change and campaigns for Government action. The action – or inaction – of Government and the framing of the problem itself can therefore be a factor in generating the necessary conditions for those affected to develop mechanisms of collective action. As Elizabeth explained:

I've obviously got a lot of resilience and a lot of fight in me, that I guess I didn't know I had. It's not that I ever sleepwalked through life. . . but I've never really engaged with politics to the point where I've pushed myself to understand it. . . With the Government we've had. . . they're very much hopeful that that is going to be how that continues. . . that they're going to get a bit of a soundbite in one of the newspapers. . . and hope that we sort of sleepwalk ourselves through this acceptance. . . of, 'ah, this is the way it is'. . . So, I think it's made me ask a lot more questions of the

people that govern us, and not just be accepting it as 'it's the way it is, it's never going to change'

(Elizabeth, age 25-34)

This suggests that the negative experience of being the subject of policy interventions, created a new and more critical political consciousness, which extends beyond the specifics of building safety to wider citizen-State relations.

Challenges

One of the major challenges of collective action was growing the movement and encouraging others into active campaigning. Ruth (age 35-44) explained that it was "quite difficult to mobilise other people", whilst Tom (age 35-44) was "frustrated that we don't hear from leaseholders". However, there was also recognition that "people are just...getting on with their lives...There are some who are burying their heads in the sand about it" (Tom).

For those who had been immersed in the issues for several years, the realisation that there were still individuals who were unaware of building safety problems could create difficult emotions. As Elizabeth (age 25-34) explained, "I find myself screaming, on the inside...I can't understand how people can...tap themselves out so easily...You find yourself doing all the work...it's enraging". This was a very common source of frustration for those involved in collective action. Difficulty in engaging others therefore meant that a significant burden was borne by a small proportion of those affected, resulting in "a huge mental toll" (Elizabeth). As Margot (age 35-44) explained, "it's been extremely frustrating because nobody wants to do any work. One or two people who actually do things and the rest are just happy for somebody else to do the work and profit from it...You're angry with people all the time".

The particular approach to campaigning, which is discussed further in the next section, also generated a unique burden. Many campaigners used their own stories to engage the media and wider public in the issues, however with not enough people involved, "you feel like you're the one that's constantly forcing yourself to tell your story, externally, and it can be quite embarrassing" (Elizabeth, age 25-34). Elizabeth explained that she was putting herself in "a really uncomfortable position...And you're grateful for these opportunities, because you want to tell this story, but...I'm still, three years later, speaking about the same things...I'm tired, I'm exhausted". Others explained that because of the slow pace of change and the need to keep the issues alive, "you're keeping yourself stuck...you're in this constant anxiety of talking about fire and loss and homes...[But] as hard and stressful as I'm saying it is, there's a compulsion to do it...you can't walk away" (Ruth, age 35-44).

Sometimes those involved in drawing attention to problems through their campaigning activities could also face negative reactions from neighbours who asked "'why are you talking about this so much?...Why are you having to publicise this?'" (Lindsey, age 25-34). This could damage established relationships, for example Tom (age 35-44) explained that

"there are leaseholders here who prior to all of this I would have considered my friends, who I will never want to speak to again...Because we have fallen out over the approach". Because leaseholders involved in campaigning were generally living in – and sometimes involved in the management of – affected homes, there was little respite from these negative feelings. This meant that "anger comes towards us...that is actually the worst part...the neighbours start turning on you instead of the people they should be turning on, who's the Government...and [the developer]" (Rosie, age 35-44).

These fractures demonstrate the challenge of developing and sustaining collective action over time. It also illustrates the impact of a differentiated policy approach, which makes distinctions around eligibility for different types of building and individuals. As Bethan questioned:

Why aren't leaseholders filling the streets with placards and banners?...It's actually an incredibly complicated...issue...there are building heights, there are safety issues, there are...shared ownership issues...So there's not one side...it's not that they're all leaseholders like they're all teachers, all railway workers...I wish there was a vehicle by which we could all come together and everybody collectively show somebody that enough is enough

(Bethan, age 55-64)

The hidden nature of some of the action also made it difficult to convey an outward sense of momentum, as Ruth (age 35-44) explained: "There's a lot of...diplomacy behind the scenes...but that doesn't do the keeping other people energised and mobilised quite as well as you possibly would if you were a big, proper campaign organisation". Those involved in collective action were all volunteers, and although they could deploy the skills and resources from within the movement there were also limitations on infrastructure and capacity.

Mobilising emotion in collective action

Participants described a range of mechanisms used to influence different groups. This included writing to local representatives, such as Councillors or MPs, organising petitions, participating in demonstrations, forming residents' associations, and engaging with traditional and social media. The range of action responded to the perception that "raising awareness and actually fixing the problems is two totally different things" (Paul, age 55-64), requiring different approaches.

Whilst some action was public and open, other important aspects of collective action were hidden, as Lindsey explained:

How many meetings have happened between campaign groups and Lords and MPs and Ministers of housing...private secretaries...At times...it's been more like press coverage and getting noise...But I think, since Gove's been around, it's been more focused on like actually having those conversations with the politicians...to the point where we kind of understand each other. And it's a very like mutual respect relationship as opposed to before where...we felt like we were shouting into the abyss, and we were kind of thrown some scraps every now and then

(Lindsey, age 25-34)

However, experiences of engagement 'behind closed doors' had not always generated positive feelings. For example, Ruth described a meeting in which a Government representative "laughed at this joke he made" about the building, and then:

...heckled us the whole time, 'hurry up, hurry up'. He even said at one point 'you're wasting my time'... There's a sort of dismissiveness...like it's ok if we help...enough people to get through the political side of the problem, but sorry...we can't help those other hundred thousand people

(Ruth, age 35-44)

Collective action was also focused on maintaining profile of building safety problems, which had a two-fold motive in generating political pressure, and drawing more people into action. An important part of this was media engagement via personal stories and experiences. Tom (age 35-44) explained that in meetings with a housing association landlord, he involved other residents which was "very much thought through...to talk to them about their experiences", with emotions central to generating understanding: "I had residents crying, saying, 'I think I'm going to lose my home'" (Tom). Wider work with the media also often foregrounded the human impact:

It was important that the stories were forced into public consciousness, to be like, 'look, these are normal people, who bought flats, who are now facing hundreds of thousands of pounds in remediation bills'. The human impact of that, for me, was really important...That's generally how, I think, people will engage with a story, and feel connected to it...Maybe some of those people have experienced...other things in their lives, whether it be anxiety, or struggling with debt, that that's a key way to engage with the public

(Elizabeth, age 25-34)

This story of normalisation, positioning those affected as

ordinary, was central. Individual cases were used as exemplars of the wider crisis. For example, through talking about her own case, Lindsey (age 25-34) explained that "what I get across now, rather than...the impact on my life and the depression and the anxiety, it's more like I want people to see that it's not a unique case, this is literally about millions of people". In this way, leaseholders sought to generate positive identifications – the recognition that this could happen to others, to anyone.

These strategies sought to generate collective feelings – Fiona (age 45-54) explained that when she talked to people about the issues "I want them to get angry". Similarly, Margot (age 35-44) argued that "it's a sense of outrage that I would like to inspire...[My MP] already has a lot of outrage about this... fortunately, so he's very supportive". Conversely, the absence of strong feelings could be frustrating:

Nobody's getting angry. It feels like when I speak to people they're like 'Oh, that's terrible, isn't it', but they don't get how terrible. I feel like saying, 'how would you feel if you bought a car...and they said it might kill you, and you have to drive around in it for four years, and no-one's going to do anything or care about it?'. That's effectively what they've done

(Rosie, age 35-44)

Developing this ability to empathise was seen as important in generating support and pressure for policy change. As Charlie (age 35-44) explained, "I'm hoping that people can sympathise with...what's happening with us...Try to put yourself in that situation. How would you feel?". This involved generating a feeling of connection with leaseholders that enabled people to see their own potential to be caught up in the crisis. Elizabeth (age 25-34) argued that, "it's just about reminding people...that it could happen to anyone, that it could happen to your child, that you're trying to help get on the property ladder...I want these people to recognise it's normal, average people". This message could be effectively conveyed through "those real-life stories, so they recognise that this is affecting real people's lives and stopping them from doing the things that everybody would hope to be able to do" (Tom, age 35-44).

Recognition of the impact on their lives was particularly important for many participants, because their experience of policy action created an atmosphere in which the reality of living with building safety problems had not been adequately recognised. As Rosie explained, sometimes the goal was just to generate a sense of being seen and heard, of having your experience validated:

The beginning...was the hardest because, even though it's gone on so long...it was not being heard...That was the hardest part...So the message really was 'listen to me, listen to...what we're all screaming at you'...so the [contact with the] MP, it was like, we just wanted somebody who

had...power or influence to hear what we were saying and go 'you know what, that's awful'

(Rosie, age 35-44)

For some, this connected to issues of justice, injustice, and redress. As Elizabeth (age 25-34) explained: "I want people to see the complete injustice of it. I want them to feel like this could happen to anyone, that this could happen to anyone that was just trying to buy a place to live".

Recognition was also related to the way in which homes are valued as more than just dwellings. Having lost her home in a fire, Ruth (age 35-44) was in a particularly unique position to reflect on the entangled understandings and emotions that she sought to generate: "My home has gone...Wanting answers, and wanting justice...really for me it's about saying 'I don't want to be brushed under the carpet, I don't want us to say that people losing their homes doesn't matter'". This was, therefore, a wider sense of recognition than might be generated through financial compensation, because it required an emotional connection:

Wanting compensation, and wanting justice, and... responsibility taken...for a lot of people...it is about money, it is about recovering a lot of things they lost...But for me it's about saying...if nothing changes, then what they're saying is my home didn't matter...that homes are disposable

(Ruth, age 35-44)

Through stories and messaging that encouraged more individuals to connect to their experiences, therefore, one aim was to build a sense of outrage at the situation people were in, in order that this might shame the Government into action. As Rosie explained:

In going to the press...I just want to be heard...I want something to be done, but I almost know that...[the Government] sometimes only do things by being shamed into it...The narrative has changed to 'It's shameful, it's disgusting'...and it's almost like just having that admittance from some people...to go '...you've all been wronged, it's terrible', is almost what I want to be honest

(Rosie, age 35-44)

Although sharing personal stories could be used strategically to generate feelings of connection and empathy, it also placed a burden on the subject of the story. As Lindsey (age 25-34) explained, "it's so personal...I talk about...anxiety and depression...everything about my whole life is online". The particular currency that individuals had in the media sphere was often focused around their story, whilst other expertise may be marginalised. For example, Lindsey described frustration with doing an interview about "how we got into

this situation...the government...regulations...building control...And then they'd say 'and how do you feel?'....And then they will get...an expert on to cover the detail and I'm kind of playing the upset girl...it's almost like I'm wheeled out to be that person".

In turning to the future, there was low confidence that building problems would be adequately addressed, leading to anxieties about the future safety of homes. As Bethan (age 55-64) explained, her developer had confirmed that "we will fix all life-critical issues"...of course we've got no idea what they define as life-critical...the developer decide for themselves what they're going to fix, so it's all just a joke". Paul's case illustrates this concern – his building was due to be remediated under a Government scheme, but the developer then agreed to undertake the works directly and "it's now going back out to tender". Paul (age 55-64) was concerned about how work would be regulated and verified: "I'm not seeing any independence anywhere that comes in and says 'we'll do the marking now'...this [crisis] has already happened once". Whilst in some cases the developer "has said that they... won't jeopardise the quality of the remediation...I'm not sure how transparent those negotiations [about the scope of works] are" (Robert, age 65+). This means that as well as immediate concerns about living through works, participants were also anxious about the extent to which all problems would be effectively resolved through remediation, or whether the impact on their lives would continue.

Part 2: The defective concrete block crisis in Ireland

Introduction

Homes in Ireland, particularly in Donegal, Clare, Mayo, and Limerick², have been affected by deterioration of concrete blocks used in construction, commonly manifesting in cracking of internal and external walls. This has commonly been referred to as the 'mica crisis' – named after a mineral found in aggregate – although recent scientific investigation suggests that the actual cause of damage is internal sulphate attack (Leemann et al, 2023). Most affected homes are single family dwellings, thought to have been built in the period between 1999 and 2008 (Expert Panel on Concrete Blocks, 2017). However, there are also reports that non-residential commercial and public buildings are also affected (BBC News, 2024). The crisis has been highlighted as a key governance failure by the Irish Government (Doherty et al, 2022).

Those living with defective concrete problems experience a common set of problems affecting the appearance, structural integrity, and safety of the home. The issues are progressive, with minor cracking commonly developing into more severe cracks, and crumbling, collapsing walls. Many of those affected report being unable to heat the home and living with severe damp and mould (RTE, 2023). Whilst it is difficult to know the precise number of homes affected, it is estimated at around 5000-6000 dwellings in Ireland (Mica Action Group, nd.). It is notable that there is also evidence that problems extend to Northern Ireland, with Derry City and Strabane District Council (n.d.) seeking to collect data on the number of homes which may be affected.

In 2016, the Irish Government commissioned a desktop study to establish the nature of the problem, estimate the number of dwellings affected in Donegal and Mayo, and outline options for remediation. The panel concluded that cracking was primarily due to "the excessive amount of deleterious materials in the aggregate used to manufacture the concrete blocks", primarily muscovite mica in Donegal, and reactive pyrite in Mayo (Expert Panel on Concrete Blocks, 2017, p.79). The presence of deleterious materials was also argued to be exacerbated by the exposure of homes to extreme weather conditions in 2009 and 2010 winters.

However, recent analysis argues that the mechanism of damage occurring in the 'mica crisis' is internal sulphate attack triggered by pyrrhotite oxidation, with frost damage excluded as a main cause of observed damage (Leemann et al, 2023). Further analysis by Brough et al (2023) indicates that elevated free mica and elevated reactive sulphides (predominantly pyrrhotite) appear to play a critical role in the deterioration of concrete blocks, with internal sulphate attack particularly important in serious degradation. It is important to fully understand the cause of the failure of concrete blocks in order to develop durable remediation options.

Local and national campaign groups have lobbied

² The Government financial support scheme for remediation is currently limited to these counties, but homes in other parts of the country are likely to also be affected, see Doherty et al, 2022.

³ The Pyrite Remediation Scheme relates to the swelling of hardcore under ground floor slabs, see <https://www.pyriteboard.ie/>

Government for assistance in tackling the defective block crisis. The Mica Action Group was formed in 2014 by individuals who were affected by defective concrete; since then, a range of local and regional campaign groups such as the Clare Pyrite/ Mica Action Group, the 100% Redress campaign group, and prominent individuals, have called for more comprehensive Government support. At the time of the Expert Panel on Concrete Block's report (2017, p.81), it was acknowledged that there were "very few, if any, realistic options available in order to obtain redress".

In 2020, the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme opened; this was "not a compensation scheme but a mechanism for the State to help ordinary homeowners to remediate defects to their principal private residence and return their homes to the conditions they would have been in had they not been built with defective concrete blocks" (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021, p.4). The scheme had five remediation options, from demolishing the dwelling to the foundations and rebuilding, to demolishing and rebuilding outer leaf affected walls only. Grants covered a maximum of 90% of a maximum approved cost – €275,000 for demolish/rebuild (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2021).

However, there were concerns about the prohibitive cost of accessing the scheme, and shortfalls in funding which left homeowners to fill gaps (Schnedl, 2023). Many of those affected argued that the scheme, which purportedly covered 90% of the costs of rebuilding actually left homeowners with around 40% of the costs of restoring the home, a prohibitive sum (Mica Action Group, 2022). The cost of testing the home for mica in order to access the scheme – about €5,000 (The Journal, 2021), or €7,000 for a full engineer's I.S.465:2018 report (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2023) – was funded by homeowners. Furthermore, only homes in Donegal and Mayo were eligible for the scheme. Many compared the scheme (unfavourably) with the Pyrite Remediation Scheme in which the remediation of homes was managed by the state Housing Agency, generally with like-for-like replacement and limited cost to homeowners (Doherty et al, 2022; Mica Action Group, 2022; Pyrite Resolution Board, 2020).³

The Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 led to an enhanced grant scheme, covering 100% of the costs of remediation works under the grant rates (determined by property size), with an overall cap of €420,000. Grants included costs for storage of belongings and alternative accommodation, as well as building assessment, demolition and remediation works. Homes in four counties were eligible to apply, and under the five remediation options, if works other than full demolition and rebuild (options 2-5) were recommended, the Government guarantees access to a second grant if required within a period of 40 years (Department of Housing, Local

Government and Heritage, 2023). In 2023, a delegation of MEPs travelled to Donegal on a fact-finding visit, following up on several petitions from affected residents (European Parliament, 2023). The Committee's draft report stated that whilst ambitious and comprehensive, this enhanced scheme should be widened and bureaucracy reduced (Meskill, 2023).

Impacts on home for those affected

Feeling unsafe

Whilst many individuals had been looking for answers about the cause of problems in their home, confirmation that they were affected by defective blocks also brought devastation. Irene (age 65+) explained that "I did not want to think that my beautiful house could possibly have it. . .it's like cancer. . .I didn't want to acknowledge it". Others likened the process to grieving: "You're numb and then. . .you don't believe it, and then you believe it...then you get depressed or. . .angry. . .And then sort of acceptance...the way grief is" (Susie, age 65+). The loss of home was inherently emotional; Irene recalled the testing company manager explaining that "we are bringing people what's almost like a death. . .people fall to pieces, they can't bear it...My guys, they're not counsellors, they don't know what to say" (Irene).

For many, the crisis unsettled conventional associations of home as "security. . .my safe haven" (Ellen, age 65+). This loss of safety held particular significance for individuals whose biographies were affected by conflict and insecurity relating to the home:

We had to evacuate the bedroom [in the house]. . . So we just put the mattress on the floor. . .but it was on the bad gable wall. . .I didn't want to sleep there. . .I grew up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. . .that's why I didn't want to sleep beside windows. . .if there was an explosion, I was thinking of all this splintered glass

(Sarah, age 45-54)

Sarah described a process of moving around her home, trying to find a safe location in which they would not be vulnerable to a collapsing wall or the effects of the cold penetrating the damp walls – this brought echoes of childhood into the present. She was just "trying to find somewhere that felt a bit warmer, a bit safer" (Sarah). Changing relationships with the home also impacted wider social relations. For example, Marie (age 45-54) explained that her daughter wanted a sleepover but "I've said to her, 'I'd be worried that our chimney might fall down whilst you were staying', but yet we're living in the house. . .day-in day-out?...And. . .it just looks terrible. . .I don't want my daughter put in a position where she feels embarrassed" (Marie). This highlights the multiple impacts of defective concrete, from safety to shame.

Perceptions of safety were often related to the extent of deterioration, which was variable. Stephen (age 35-44) was worried that "the house might collapse", whilst Laura (age 45-54) explained that "the blocks are so crumbly. . .you put your hand on it and it's all coming away. . .our back door is only just held together with pretty much nothing". The extent of deterioration and the weakening of external wall support was sometimes only really made visible once homes were being demolished. There were also other impacts, for example Sarah (age 45-54) was living with "clothes and everything. . .all covered in mould. . .I opened up my. . .kitchen cabinet, there was even mould on the plates". Laura's (age 45-54) home also had extensive mould, and her son's bedroom was "basically condemned because it's damp, mould, cracks. . .The engineer, he told us we needed to move out or just not use the rooms, but every single room is damp, and every single room is cracked".

Given these conditions, moving into temporary shelter in preparation for rebuilding could be a relief. Deborah (age 45-54), for example had moved into mobile homes on site, which provided "a sense of relief that we're safe, I feel safe". Other participants reported physical health improvements from moving into temporary shelter, as they had escaped damp and mould. This material degradation could be slow but also proceeded with a sense of inevitability. As Lucas (age 55-64) explained: "It's not like a humanitarian crisis where a specific thing happens like. . .an earthquake, and you know that's the damage, that's how many people are affected. . .This is. . .just kind of unfolding. . .in slow motion".

Those affected were constantly reminded of the problems with their home because "you sleep it, you eat it, you think it, it's non-stop. People are tired of listening to you" (Ellen, age 65+). Even though "you're trying to escape it. . .you have to go home to it. I have to drive up to my shit-looking house every day" (Susie, age 65+). As well as the visual presence of defective concrete, Ellen also described "you hear this 'phh!' [popping cracking noise] during the night. . .This is the bricks disintegrating or exploding inside". Sarah (age 45-54) similarly recounted a "boom noise", realising that "your blocks are falling apart. . .so every time we heard one, we would try and go. . .to see has something split apart worse again".

Numerous participants described living in a permanent state of temporariness – as Sarah explained, "life had stopped from the minute that we found out". Being stuck means that individuals could not undertake the usual maintenance and home making activities associated with creating a comfortable place. As Susie (age 65+) explained, "there's a part of me that is screaming. . .I'm not going to put a penny into the house'. . .people do up their houses and paint it. . .I'm not even doing that. . .You're living in it and it's deteriorating. . .the engineer told me it has to be demolished". Even day-to-day tasks seemed futile: "Every day you look at the house. . .I've just spent the morning. . .hoovering and mopping. . .but you literally do not want to do anything to it, because you know it's going to just wreck itself" (Emily, age 45-54).

Financial worries

The financial burden was a considerable source of anxiety

for many participants. There were several sources of financial stress, including paying for testing, covering shortfalls in Government funding schemes (calculated on a fixed amount per square metre, and not including foundations, upgrades to current standards, fixtures and fittings, etc.), and the cost of temporary housing. Adam (age 35-44) explained “we had to go and get somewhere else to live, so I took another mortgage out...It’s £1200 and then we pay £900 on a house that’s sitting there waiting to get demolished”. Renting out the home affected by defective blocks would often not be feasible in such a scenario due to property condition.

Financial stress affected the whole household, for example Marie (age 45-54) described her son being given €2 by a neighbour at Halloween: “He turned around and said ‘here mummy, you take this...to help with the house’...That’s what he’s thinking about when he had the €2 in his hand...I thought he was oblivious to the situation...It’s my fault that I’ve...put that burden on them” (Marie). Several participants also described being confronted with a recurrence of financial precarity that they thought they had long since escaped: “There was three in a bed when I was growing up...You’re thinking...I’m a grown-up...We’re both working. We’ve been working for years. We work full-time...You just think...‘when is life going to get better?’” (Sarah, age 45-54). Similarly, Deborah (age 45-54) argued that despite having “good jobs...we’re right back to where we were in our 20s, scrimping and saving” so that the house could be fixed.

Anticipation and futures

For many, the financial impact was felt in the present through saving for testing or paying for alternative housing, but it also loomed large in the future, with considerable uncertainty around the cost of temporary housing and rebuilding. As Marie (age 45-54) explained, “this house will be knocked down. I will have nothing. And then, when I’m rebuilding this house, I’m going to have to get €60,000, that’s a cautious estimate of debt...And...all the stress of trying to rebuild the house”. Similarly, Emily (age 45-54) estimated that “for the size of the house...it will cost us on this scheme...about another €80,000 [above the Government funding]...And that’s with keeping your kitchen...reusing everything...Where do you get that from?”.

This anticipated financial insecurity had a significant impact on current lives. Sarah explained how an error in calculating the cost of their rebuild set off a domino effect as she anticipated key pillars of her life collapsing:

I was planning to take my husband and myself down to the water...I basically burst into tears and told him, my husband, what was going on and he says, ‘ring them back to make sure. Ask them to send it [the estimate]’...And do you know what happened? It got mixed up with somebody else’s... And I says to him [the surveyor], ‘do you know what, I had my husband and I ready...I wanted to just take us out of this world’...The thing was, I couldn’t leave my husband behind, because do you know if you commit suicide or something basically they

can’t get a penny as well [from life insurance]...so I thought, ‘right, I’m going to have to convince him to do it with me’...I was just thinking, ‘I can’t leave him’

(Sarah, age 45-54)

The anticipated shortfall in funding had driven Sarah to formulate a plan for ending her life, but the narrative also highlights the repercussions for family members of having no way out of the crisis. Others were also concerned about wider, inter-generational, impacts as Ellen (age 65+) explained: “If I was to die, my children are responsible...to demolish my home. So, I’m leaving them debt rather than something I’ve worked hard for...to...leave them some little thing”. Helen (age 55-64) similarly worried that “my son lives here, with me...I would like to feel that I could leave something of value to him”.

As well as potential financial impacts for individuals, there were also anxieties around how people would live through rebuilding, especially finding alternative housing in predominantly rural areas. As a number of participants explained, “there’s no homes to let” (Martha, age 55-64), and as a result people were “just make-shifting a place to live” (Ellen, age 65+), sleeping in living rooms or moving into mobile homes in the garden. All the while, life was expected to continue: “We’ve still got our normal lives going on...our children, they’re revising for exams...And it’s like, well, are they going to be revising in the shed?...Are we going to have to move to a different place altogether?” (Emily, age 45-54). There was therefore much uncertainty over the process of living through rebuilding, as well as the finances.

Government action and impacts on emotions

Delaying policy action

Many participants had experienced defective block problems for years, but there was dissonance between their lived experience of the severity and urgency of the problem, and Government action. As Stephen (age 35-44) argued “it’s really urgent to me, but I’m not really sure of the Government”. More than one participant explained that “some of these people are going to die” before their homes were fixed (Helen, age 55-64). Recent experiences during the pandemic revealed that Government “can move very quickly...But yet on this issue they seem to be putting as many barriers...in the path...it’s painful” (Helen). This created a mismatch between the felt experience of the crisis and the pace and scale of Government action. Irene (age 65+) explained that “nobody’s really bothered...and that makes me angry...that they can treat their own people like that...It’s a scandal. It’s a humanitarian crisis”. Being unable to see a way out of the crisis created daily pain and anger, with emotions at the heart of accounts: “The inertia here, the complacency, the lack of foresight...I don’t understand why they’re [Government] not ashamed of being so inefficient” (Marie, age 45-54).

Delay was seen by some as a tactic to exhaust campaigns; as Susie (age 65+) reflected that she was tired but this “serves the government too...they don't have...people screaming and yelling”. Stretching out policy processes, working with natural inertia and bureaucracy, can therefore be positioned as a conscious strategy:

It does feel a little bit like...we're building a famine road...During famine times the British government got...the Irish people to build roads that went nowhere because it kept them busy and...it stopped them, you know, causing trouble...And I feel that's a...very apt analogy that the Irish government is...leading us down these blind alleys...All the protesting and everything: let them have a march, won't that keep them busy... let them plan... a sit-in, or let them plan...a town meeting...Won't that keep them busy for another few weeks?...And the irony of it is that at least in the famine it was the British government...who were misleading the Irish people and now it's the Irish government who are misleading their own people...It's a bit tragic all round

(Helen, age 55-64)

Helen reflects on the way in which enabling some small gains and action on the part of campaigns can co-exist within an overall policy process in which significant action is consciously avoided by Government over the long-term.

Over-simplification of the problem

Almost all participants expressed frustration related to Government communication when policy progress was made. Fostering the impression that a complex problem had been ‘solved’ put affected households in the position of repeatedly countering what they felt were inaccurate public discourses, which itself carried an emotional impact. As Ellen (age 65+) explained, the Government may say “‘we’ve set aside a billion Euros to help with the defective houses’, so the whole population think that...we’re getting looked after...It’s just pure misguidance”. Announcements created an atmosphere which diverged from lived experiences of the crisis: “[the Minister] was on...one of the shows, and he said...‘And now that we have Donegal sorted...we can...go back and look at other things’, and sure it was lies” (Martha, age 55-64). This created tensions, as Helen (age 55-64) explained: “people have said...to me...‘Why are you still going on about it?’...It is very hard to explain to somebody who doesn’t know all the facts and the details...Nobody wants to hear about that”. At this point, a number of individuals expressed that “we’ve absolutely lost hope...our hopes have been up so many times...and we’ve just realised Government do not care” (Deborah, age 45-54).

One common misconception was that households would receive the maximum allowance for rebuilding, rather than the amount of grant being linked to property size: “The people that listen to it on the news...think we’re all going to

get handed like €420,000...and we’re all moaning about it” (Emily, age 45-54). By contrast, many participants felt funding schemes were “all about exclusion” (Adam, age 35-44), either from accessing the scheme in the first place, or the eligibility of different elements for grant support. Whilst the “big gloss and...big spin” (Lucas, age 55-64) of policy announcements created the impression of substantial progress, those affected were left explaining that “it’s not the reality” (Deborah, age 45-54). Confronting misunderstandings then generated negative feelings: “It’s all done, in my view, quite consciously [by Government]...it does dissipate your energy and it kind of directs it in a negative way...and then it does make you feel kind of isolated” (Lucas).

Holiday homes were also excluded from grant funding, which has the potential for significant impacts in some communities. As Irene (age 65+), who was a holiday homeowner, argued, “the county [Donegal] could end up being littered...with properties that are just falling down”. Other participants explained that neighbours who worked away but spent holidays in Ireland may end up letting “the place just fall apart...in Donegal...What’s the...situation going to be like here if that actually happens?” (Lucas, age 55-64). Viewing defective concrete as an individual problem ignored its existence as “a community problem...a societal problem” (Lucas). Similarly, funding schemes are only available in particular geographical areas (initially two counties, then expanded to four), but Adam drew a comparison with the building safety problems in England: “They don’t say, ‘well, Yorkshire isn’t part of the thing...It’s only people who are London’...[Here] they don’t want to spend the money to fix it, so that’s why they went ‘it’s in Mayo and it’s in Donegal. It’s fricking nowhere else’” (Adam, age 35-44).

Dividing groups

Many participants highlighted Government narratives that stoked division between different groups. As Sarah (age 45-54) explained, “the victims were vilified by the Government and the newspapers, about living in the mansions”. Helen (age 55-64) similarly highlighted the portrayal of those affected in the national press: “People think that we’re...money grabbers...we want new houses...You have to sort of explain...we just want our houses fixed”. Several participants traced this narrative back to Government:

It comes from our own politicians...It comes from the civil servants...Their attitude to the homeowners was...‘why do you expect us to pay to rebuild your homes?’...There was one civil servant in particular... and he’s like, ‘well...you’ve got these mansions... why do you expect us to repair them?’...He actually used the term, ‘we’re not going to pay for any betterment of your houses’. So, that attitude came from government...to the media

(Deborah, age 45-54)

This framing of those affected as somehow unworthy of support seeped into the wider public mood and left

individuals feeling that “you’re there to blame” (Deborah). Lucas (age 55-64) explained that the Government mobilised the language of ‘the taxpayer’ as though they were “protecting all you other taxpayers away from these...greedy taxpayers in Donegal”. This created a sense of stigma towards those calling for support, with Government and media representations of collective action trying “to tarnish...to...taint” (Marie, age 45-54). By blaming the behaviour of individuals or particular groups, Lucas argued that this resulted in attention being “deflected away from the Government and the State and the system – the way it operates”.

Some distinctions were rooted in enduring feelings of political marginalisation. It was very common for participants to place their experiences within a longer history of conflict between the urban and political centre around Dublin and more rural regions. Susie (age 65+) explained that “we think of ourselves as the forgotten county...that things just don’t get done here...Policies are more urbanised than ruralised”. Comparisons were frequently drawn with defective apartments in Dublin in which there was “100% redress to get them fixed” (Ellen, age 65+), “they moved them to an apartment, they done everything in the house, and they moved their stuff back in...they walked back into the...perfect house” (Martha, age 55-64). This created a collective feeling that “there’s no fairness...discriminated against, that’s how I feel” (Ellen). Similarly, Marie explained:

We are discriminated against...it's almost like...out of sight, out of mind. We're not...in the heart of Dublin, where we're given that priority...There might be a kind of ethos of ‘they're just all culchies’...farmers...plebeians...they'll be none the wiser that we can discriminate against them

(Marie, age 45-54)

However, others argued that this view was too simplistic: “Sometimes I hear...‘Those people in Dublin...they’ve been well looked after’...but...even though you feel...far away from say the centre of power...I know friends in Dublin that are literally living like, a ten minute walk from Leinster House...and there’s terrible deprivation” (Lucas). Just as collective identity could be formed partly by positive connection to others who were affected, it could also be formed ‘against’ other groups who were seen as having received much greater support from Government.

Disillusionment with Government

As well as direct emotional impacts, the failures of policy to urgently tackle the defective concrete crisis fuelled a wider sense of disillusionment. During the development of legislation, a series of amendments were proposed by those affected by defective concrete, but many participants noted that these received scant attention in parliament. Ellen explained that this left them “hopeless and helpless...I feel so let down”:

They sneered, they jeered [in parliament]...you could hear

one woman [member of the public] screaming...‘what about my children? What about me?’...It’s heartbreaking, and the anger...I never thought I’d be capable of killing somebody. That’s the anger I feel. I hate these people, the Government, so much...It’s cruel...And we will be like every other scandal, it’ll be 40, 50 years and my grandchildren might be watching a documentary on this (Ellen, age 65+)

Multiple participants set their own experiences within the context of wider national scandals, in which individuals had waited decades for justice. At the time of the research, the Stardust inquiry into the deaths of 48 young people in a nightclub fire in 1981 was taking place, with several participants referencing this in relation to Government inaction. Deborah (age 45-54) reflected that “people have lost a life there...So if the Government had been ok to deal with that...at 40 years [on]...they are in no rush whatsoever”. Similarly, Ellen explained that “the government is doing an enquiry into the Stardust...it’s taken 45 years for that to come...It’s like...the babies, the Magdalene Homes...This is what is going to happen to us”.

For some, the battle for redress created a deep and long-lasting impact, a felt and embodied experience. Deborah explained that “I’d be crying on my way to work because...you can’t understand...how your Government would...leave you like that...how your own people would leave you in a situation like that...It...brought me to a very dark place”. Similarly, Ellen described feeling her own insignificance:

It’s a weight on you...You literally feel like a piece of gum, you know, on the bottom of the shoe. Like you’re just disposable...At the end of the day, the Government will always look after where the populus vote is...it’s always going to be party before people...When I lived away from Ireland, I used to romanticise...‘oh, Ireland’s such a lovely place’...But...I tell you, I took the blinkers off when this happened...The corruption is just unreal...You’re basically trying to tell me that that white wardrobe is black...I know that’s not the truth...The bottom line is they don’t care and...there’s no security whatsoever

(Ellen, age 65+)

For these individuals, their experience of Government failure to act quickly and comprehensively to address the problems associated with defective concrete led to a wider sense of crisis and disillusionment in the relationship between citizen and State.

Experiences of collective action

Benefits

One of the key positives stemming from involvement in campaign groups and activities was enabling those affected

to see that “you’re not alone” (Marie, age 45-54). As Sarah (age 45-54) explained, seeing campaigners on social media “sparked in me a sense of hope. . . And then I started like going mad on Facebook. . . doing campaign stuff”. Several participants drew value from the recognition that others were going through similar experiences. Marie recalled taking her children to protests so that “they felt that sense of unity with all the other individuals who have been affected. . . and that was a nice feeling”. Even when reaching a resolution seemed impossible and policy action was frustrating, Deborah (age 45-54) described feeling “very much sort of left on our own. . . with everybody else”; this seeming contradiction aptly reflects a crisis which has both individual and collective characteristics.

Some participants had been heavily involved in campaigning, turning the inescapability of the crisis into a defining characteristic, drawing value from the recognition that came from a collective identity. As Marie explained, “it gives you an identity. . . you’re with other people who’ve had similar experiences. . . fighting the same fight. . . or who have the same sense of loss. . . that sense of helplessness”. This identity function was key to some experiences:

It’s nearly become an identity for us that we’re a mica family. . . There’s that immediate. . . understanding of what you’re going through. . . With the protest march. . . I remember just standing there and just crying and being overwhelmed looking around me. And there was nearly a silence. . . you know when you go into church, there’s that silence. . . I started meeting people. . . and it was kind of, ‘ok. . . we’re not all. . . a group of dirty people with a dirty house. . . We’re all people, from all walks of life here’. . . By the end of it, everybody was chanting ‘100% redress’. . . More and more people were coming out and saying, ‘we have it’. . . and I was amazed at the number of people I knew that had it, but hadn’t said anything. . . Why do people keep this. . . a dirty little secret?

(Deborah, age 45-54)

An ostensibly negative experience could therefore also have positive characteristics and generate valuable emotions of solidarity and recognition. The collective element also generated power; as Emily (age 45-54) explained “you do feel like you’ve got a little bit of backing behind you”. Whilst problems often felt inescapable, this did not necessarily have to be a negative emotion. Lucas (age 55-64) reflected that “it’s with me all the time, but not in a. . . negative way. It’s with me in a positive way in the sense that. . . you feel part of a movement of people that are resisting”. Working together could serve both practical and emotional functions: “When I’m volunteering. . . I find that therapeutic, just to be with. . . other individuals who can understand. . . that sense of empathy and sort of shared experience. . . Plus we’re being productive and constructive, we’re doing something worthwhile” (Marie).

Challenges

Although for many individuals there were clear positives from being involved in collective campaigns, there were also challenges. Several participants noted difficulties in growing the collective movement when there was still shame and fear about defective concrete. As Adam (age 35-44) explained, “There’s a lot of talk about it [defective concrete]. . . Some people don’t want to talk. . . and bury their head in the sand”. Similarly, Irene (age 65+) reflected that “a bit like me, some people don’t want to know. . . they can’t acknowledge it. . . they cannot face the thought that. . . they’re going to lose their house”. There was a temporal component to this, with more stigma early on and judgements that “you must have bought something cheap” (Deborah, age 45-54). This could cause people to distance themselves from those affected by saying “it’s not us. . . we look after our house, we paint our house. . . we repair our house” (Deborah). In the earlier years particularly, campaigners were “ploughing a lonely furrow, because most people were in denial. . . so they didn’t really have that mass support. . . It’s easier just to psychologically cope to kind of think there’s not really a problem” (Lucas, age 55-64). Many participants understood this sense of denial, given the prognosis for people’s homes; as Irene explained, “if I’d been talking to you a year ago. . . I’d have probably been telling you my house is fine”.

For campaigns, this resulted in a significant burden, particularly associated with “time. . . the campaigning, meeting people, talking to people, documenting, going to meetings. . . And then I just shut down. . . It’s a. . . rollercoaster of. . . purpose, of motivation” (Helen, age 55-64). It was not uncommon for individuals to step back from activities, “because you do get burnt out. . . and part of it is, you don’t process it” (Deborah). Having been involved in collective action for many years, Ellen (age 65+) reflected that “the fight’s not there. . . people that were strong and that were fighting. . . A lot of people after 13 years have just thrown their hand up in the air because. . . it’s hopeless”.

Collective action also suffered from its own success in generating new and more expansive proposals from Government. This policy progress was implicated in fracturing collective action with the result that “a lot of people just went quiet thinking that they were alright. . . They weren’t supporting the rest, and that was divide and conquer by the Government” (Sarah, age 45-54). As Lucas argued, “that’s what the government play on. They introduce a scheme, they know there’ll be a certain amount of people that won’t be 100% happy but can kind of work with it. . . The. . . campaign got a little bit fragmented. . . it caused these little cracks”. This means that groups were “splitting each other, and so now it’s very hard to. . . rally the troops” (Susie, age 65+).

There were also emotional impacts from collective action, for example, constantly telling your own story:

It drags it all up and because you have to go quite intense. . . you’re just reliving the kind of horror of it over and over. . . It’s like my body is being covered in cuts and bandages and being slowly taken off and put back on again, taken off and back on again, do you know? It’s quite horrendous

(Sarah)

Others explained that they were constantly exposed to their likely future as they worked alongside others who were experiencing the same progressive deterioration of their homes: “you can see the path of deterioration that your house might take...so in one respect it’s really depressing... it’s devastating to see that, because...this is what’s going to happen to your house” (Marie, age 45-54).

Mobilising emotion in collective action

Many campaigners were involved in a range of action to seek redress for the problems with their homes. This included “standing outside Leinster House...every single day for the month of September...protests, letters, emails, the EU involved, US TV, BBC...France 24” (Ellen, age 65+). Groups and individuals had met with local, national and international politicians, and many had engaged with the media. Social media was a key tool to share information and learning with the community of those affected, as well as strategically build momentum for action. Traditional media also remained crucial to sustaining involvement, because seeing stories in the press could “sustain you, to know that...there is still an interest and that...reporters...are on your side...keeping it alive...in the public mind” (Helen, age 55-64).

Through growing public awareness, campaigners sought to create policy change, to “work with the Government... move with the Government” (Susie, age 65+). There was a focus on “drawing in more members of the Government” (Lucas, age 55-64), including thinking beyond housing, for example approaching Ministers for health and children to try to generate initially a sense of “enquiry” so that they “want to know more”, and once this had been achieved they could shift towards generating “empathy and...solidarity” with people’s experiences (Lucas). However, drawing in wider Government representatives was challenging because of perceptions that “this is nothing to do with us...this is housing” (Irene, age 65+).

For some individuals, campaigning was a completely new experience:

[Engaging with Government]...doesn’t come naturally...I’m naturally quite naïve and also...not... very argumentative...I don’t like confrontation...I suppose when we first started meeting...people in authority...I would have been...quite, you know, reticent...took things at face value...But now...I’m a lot more demanding because...it’s obvious that they’re just feeding us a line

(Helen, age 55-64)

Whilst Government ministers had “seen the houses, they’ve put their hands into the cracks, they’ve crumbled the blocks...

they’ve seen children who are crying”, this did nothing to influence “the civil servants in the background...it’s all about the numbers...they’re totally removed from it. To them it’s theoretical” (Helen). Engagement with Government could therefore be a difficult experience, characterised by fluctuating emotions: “At first, I thought it was positive, because...we’re getting a seat at the table...And then you get to see how Government works, and they can...run you over” (Susie). This was “a hard life lesson...This is a battle, and it’s a 20, 30-year battle...We’re prodding the government and saying, ‘we’re not going away, you still haven’t done it right, get on with it’” (Deborah, age 45-54).

Personal stories were again a key tool for those affected by defective concrete to engage and influence others. In telling their story individuals were trying to provide insight into the day-to-day experience:

The hopelessness...the devastation...You just feel robbed...You don’t have a life, because your life is consumed with it. And there’s nothing brings you joy anymore, you know?...You go out [for a walk] now and everything just feels grey...I’m stagnant...I’m robbed...I feel cheated, and I was cheated by this government because they know who the culprits are and they won’t go after them

(Ellen, age 65+)

Speaking out publicly and taking stories to the press was also a form of boundary work – setting the stories of ‘victims’ against those with responsibility for creating problems and the failures of Government to resolve the crisis:

I was doing something productive...campaigning... You can’t fight with the people who have done it to you...you can’t actually physically fight with them... But what you can do is...get all that dirty laundry and fly it around the air and then stick up for all the people who are being condemned... because this has happened to them, and this is obviously through no fault of their own...I particularly like to let it all rip out there on Twitter...that kind of releases all that pent-up energy and frustration

(Sarah, age 45-54)

However, in telling their stories individuals had to navigate a range of emotions, including the stigma of being affected, particularly in the years before mass action. Laura (age 45-54) for example had initially been “very quiet” following their mica test, but faced with her son sleeping on a mattress on the floor of the living room decided “right, that’s it. I don’t care if the world knows’...There isn’t just me. It’s just family after family after family”. The concern shifted from shame and worrying what the neighbours would think about speaking publicly, to using her story to try to benefit others who were facing the same problems.

Campaigners recognised that “it’s necessary to use that emotional angle for the media...because you’re only getting so far with the head...you need to pull on the heartstrings... it is reality” (Marie, age 45-54). Others explained that even if speaking out did not result in policy change, telling their own story was also “about standing up for yourself...you can’t just lie down and let this happen...not even just for us, but for other people as well...for our kids” (Deborah, age 45-54).

However, it sharing experiences could also be difficult, particularly in small communities in which individuals were relatively easily identifiable:

You have to sort of figure out...what you’re going to share...because you don’t want everything about your whole life known...I don’t want particularly people knowing...we’re on disability... It’s not their business...In a normal world, they wouldn’t know...In a small community, everybody knows everything about everyone. You have to hold a little bit back...It’s hard to share your full life...what every day means, because it is hard, it’s horrible

(Emily, age 45-54)

Trying to create stories for people to connect to meant that “you’re having to sell your soul because...the worst story is the best thing...I don’t see why I should have to...But you feel like...that’s the only way that anything’s going to happen” (Emily).

Protesting and awareness raising was another key focus of action. For example, Susie had done “a little tour of Ireland...I would stop in different towns and set up my political signs and...just spend the day talking to people”. Protests could generate a feeling “that we were going to get somewhere... there definitely was...a feeling of hope for the big one in Dublin” (Martha, age 55-64). However, attempts to grow the movement and bring more people into collective action could also create disappointment, and it was not always a positive experience, as Helen explained:

We held a march...We all sort of set ourselves a target of each trying to get ten people... Friends, neighbours, you know...The biggest disappointment for me personally was that...I asked...anyone I could think of...And on the day...I probably had eight...It’s very hard to muster people...I was very demoralised after that...you feel very alone...Thank God for the [campaign] group... through the group you get the sense that there are other people...who’ve got the problem

(Helen, age 55-64)

Despite that disappointment, Helen was driven by different motivations at different times to continue. As she explained,

“you’re angry, you’re frustrated, you’re...determined...There’s...a sense of justice needs to be...achieved...somebody has to fight the cause...If not me, then who?” (Helen). Protesting could also take people away, physically, from the problems that surrounded them at home: “We took part in...the marches...Even though the Covid was around, I actually felt safer going out into the streets with other people rather than staying in my home and doing nothing” (Deborah).

However, sustaining campaign action was a significant challenge. Some felt that they were at the end of their involvement.

I’m tired...It’s just robbed me of my retirement. I know I’m probably not going to see my house rebuilt...I have to try and salvage what bit of life I will have left...I’ve done the protest, and I’ve done the radio, and I’ve done a few interviews, and I’ve stood up in front of a crowd in public...But...you just feel as if you’re banging your head against a brick wall

(Ellen, age 65+)

Similarly, others were trying to balance what they hoped to achieve with more immediate priorities such as the importance of holding the family together through the crisis: “There’s more important things...in life than your house... Family is...I don’t have the passion for the justice...Keeping our family together...is key...I have to...live in the here and now” (Deborah). The passion that had sustained collective action was therefore being eroded when confronted with some of the more immediate day-to-day challenges of sustaining family life through the crisis. This created an urgent need to focus energy on the present, rather than potential future gains.

Many individuals remained worried about the future – even if they could navigate the process of rebuilding their homes, there were anxieties about this in a context in which regulations were still viewed as lax. This meant there was very low confidence in the suitability of concrete blocks for rebuilding. As Adam (age 35-44) explained “I would be very reluctant to buy concrete in the south of Ireland. I have no faith in concrete product manufacturing in the south of Ireland, none whatsoever”. Similarly, Irene (age 65+) argued that “I wouldn’t build with concrete in Ireland. I wouldn’t build a hen house”. This meant that people were exploring “different types of blocks...timber frame...They just don’t want to deal with...the whole issue of blocks again” (Susie, age 65+). Others had been told that alternative materials would not be feasible, and so they “took a photograph...taking a record of...the date, the time, that that block came into my home” (Sarah, age 45-54). Nevertheless, there were still concerns that Government had not been thorough enough in exploring the root cause of the deterioration of the blocks – as Adam (age 35-44) noted, “you can’t find a cure for something if you don’t know what’s causing the problem”. This meant that as well as anxieties about the financial impacts and the process of navigating rebuilding, participants were also concerned about the potential for reoccurrence of building problems post-rebuild.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to consider the role that emotions play in different experiences of housing safety crises, to understand the impacts on people's sense of home, and to explore how collective action related to experiences of the policy process and policy discourses. Using interviews with individuals who were affected by fire safety defects in England and defective concrete blocks in Ireland, the research highlights the profound and damaging impacts on people's ability to feel at home. Negative feelings were often amplified by Government narratives about the crises and the delay and under-reaction of policy proposals. The collective action which has been so central to moving on policy proposals in England and Ireland has provided those living through these crises a crucial sense of connection, a feeling that they are not alone, and not to blame for the problems they face. However, reliance on volunteers to scrutinise, challenge, and nudge policy development over a long period of time has left many people tired and disillusioned. Despite this, and with the knowledge there is no quick solution to all of the complex issues involved, some remain determined to continue to work towards justice and redress.

The housing safety crises discussed here have fundamentally disrupted individuals' experiences of home. The normalisation of home as a safe space, a refuge, a site of control, and a stable foundation which supports the fulfilment of other parts of people's lives is undermined when the home becomes a daily source of stress and worry. Whilst problems with building safety in multi-storey residential buildings in England, and defective concrete blocks in Ireland, are to some extent technical problems – associated with the materials and construction of buildings – these are experienced as social and emotional problems by residents. The undermining of the core functions of the home has wider impacts beyond the building, with damage to mental health and wellbeing, relationships, finances, work, schooling, and major life transitions/decisions. The emotional experience is central to so many stories and offers important insights that enable the impact of housing safety problems to be understood in the round.

The cases also highlight the way in which emotions are central to policy processes and shape particular dynamics between different groups (Maor and Capelos, 2023). Many participants reflected on the length of time that they had been living with safety problems and trying to find answers. Discovering that their individual experience was replicated by the experience of many others was often accidental, for example by seeing coverage in the press or talking to neighbours. This was often a first step into long-term engagement with a sometimes bruising policy process. Although in both countries the State response to their respective crises has shifted over time, for many of those affected the response was painfully slow and inadequate. The evolution of policy, particularly relating to financial support, is for many participants reflective of the strategic under-production or under-reaction of policies (Maor and Capelos, 2023) to problems with impacts that are both severe and widespread. For some of those affected, the absence of proactive action by Governments to get to grips

with the crises has created a sense of moral shock (Jasper, 2014) and disillusionment. In this way, what is ostensibly a housing problem has ripple effects which shape how citizens relate to the State and wider society.

For many, the negative feelings that they have experienced as a result of safety problems with their home has been compounded by a drawn-out and often adversarial and restrictive policy context. It is clear from the participants who have taken part in this research, but also from past evidence that language matters (Preece, 2021, Preece et al, 2023). For people living through these unsettling experiences to feel dismissed, marginalised, and marked out as different by those in positions of power has compounded an already negative experience.

However, this negative atmosphere also motivates action (Preece and Flint, 2023), with feelings of powerlessness, frustration and anger acting as core drivers of journeys into collective action. Whilst anger may commonly be positioned as a negative emotion, it is also productive, as individuals harness the experience of social norms being violated and use their desire for justice to drive group action (Jasper, 1998, Pierce, 2021). Those involved in campaigning for a resolution to housing safety problems have often sought to counter dominant narratives about the crises. The emotional impact of the crises have been central to influencing public opinion and achieving a more just policy settlement (Huijsmans, 2018). The felt, everyday experience of living in a home affected by safety problems can therefore be seen as a form of 'collective currency' (Jupp, 2021) within policy processes.

The use of personal stories about experiences of crisis is an example of the strategic use of emotion (Jasper, 2014, Ruiz-Junco, 2013). Individuals sought to grow wider public engagement and awareness of the problems, and in particular to highlight the durability of problems despite reports of Government action. By highlighting the lived, everyday impact of facing safety problems in their homes, a key strategy of this emotion work was to build empathy, connection and recognition among wider publics. This work to normalise people's experience, to see their situation as something that – but for chance – could have occurred to anyone, helps to counter a sense of blame or stigmatisation that has come from other narratives, and to build a wider coalition of support for policy redress.

However, there are also points of complexity across the forms of collective action discussed here. Whilst being part of wider social movements enabled many people to realise a sense of control that could otherwise be lacking, much action has also been driven by a vacuum in leadership from central Governments to understand and address these problems at a pace commensurate with the scale and severity of the issues. Reliance on volunteer efforts to scrutinise, hold to account, and press for policy settlements that address all problems, for all those affected, places a significant burden on individuals who are already negatively impacted by the everyday experience of safety problems at home. The need

for those affected to tell their stories in order to highlight the complexity of problems and the extent of impacts, to build a coalition of public and policy-maker support, also requires individuals to relive and make public details of their lives and feelings that would otherwise be private.

Looking to the future, many participants in the research remain concerned about how all the problems they face will be resolved, and whether sufficient measures have been taken to prevent them recurring. Both crises reveal failures of regulation and there is considerable anxiety about the future. In England, there are concerns about oversight of developer-led remediation, and whether work will fix all the problems affecting buildings. In Ireland, there is uncertainty about whether rebuilding options leave a risk of problems recurring, and concern over rebuilding again with concrete blocks. Affected communities are also painfully aware that they have yet to live through fixing the problems, with the impact of living in-situ through extensive building works in many multi-storey buildings in England, and of having to find alternative accommodation in areas in which there is little housing available in Ireland. These issues require urgent attention to ensure that living through fixing the problem does not compound the existing impacts of living with housing safety issues.

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Appendix

Table 1: Summary of building safety policy announcements (for more detail see Wilson, 2023)

Date	Policy measure	Explanation
May 2018	Social sector ACM cladding fund	Government announces it will meet the cost of remediating unsafe Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding by councils and housing associations in buildings over 18 metres
May 2019	Private sector ACM cladding remediation fund	Government announces it will fund the replacement of unsafe ACM cladding on private buildings above 18m in height, where building owners have not undertaken work
March 2020	Building safety fund	Government announces £1billion to support remediation of unsafe non-ACM cladding in residential buildings above 18m, in the social and private sectors. April 2021, Government clarifies funding applies to cladding systems, including insulation where it is integral to the system.
Feb. 2021	Loan scheme (abandoned, Jan. 2022)	Long-term loan scheme announced to fund cladding remediation in buildings 11-18m, with payments of £50 per month per leaseholder.
Feb. 2021	Extension to building safety fund	Additional £3.5 billion towards cladding remediation for buildings above 18m in height.
Feb. 2021	Developer levy	A new tax is announced for the residential property development sector from 2022, expected to raise £2bn over ten years to fund cladding remediation costs.
Jan. 2022	Developer contributions	Government announces expectation that industry will make financial contributions to a dedicated fund for the remediation of unsafe cladding on buildings 11-18m in height (estimated £4bn.), and to fund and undertake remediation of buildings over 11m that they have developed.
April 2022	Building Safety Act	Building owners cannot pass on the cost of remediating external cladding to leaseholders in their building. Building owners must draw on the Building Safety Fund (buildings above 18m) or a future industry contribution fund (buildings above 11m). Some leaseholders do not qualify for protection (e.g. if a landlord owns more than three properties; those in buildings under 11 metres). For non-cladding remediation work on buildings above 11m in height, the Act introduces a 'cascade' of responsibility for working out who is responsible for costs, with leaseholder contributions capped at £10,000 (£15,000 within Greater London; higher cap for highest value properties over £1m & reduced cap for shared-owners, proportionate to equity share).
Jan. 2023	Developer remediation contract	Government contacts major housebuilders and developers, requiring them to sign contracts which specify that they will carry out work to address life-critical fire safety defects in buildings over 11 metres high that they have developed or refurbished in the last 30 years, and reimburse government for funding spent remediating their buildings.
July 2023	Building Safety (Responsible Actors Scheme)	Eligible developers who do not join the Responsible Actors Scheme and comply with its conditions (i.e. to meet the terms of the developer remediation contract, above), will have planning and building control prohibitions imposed.
July 2023	Cladding Safety Scheme	Pilot for cladding remediation for buildings between 11 and 18 metres in height, where the developer could not be traced or held responsible. £5.1 billion allocated by Government and Building Safety Levy on new development.

