



Inequality in the PRS - Case Study

Name or pseudonym: Anonymous – Sarah

Location: Wales

Date (or from-to): June 2015-Present

Sarah is a 37-year-old woman who moved to the UK in 2015 from Portugal. She started working right away and has been in work since she arrived. However, she has recently been diagnosed with a chronic health condition meaning she is not currently able to work. Sarah is a single mother who lives in a privately rented flat with her daughter, who is in college. Sarah would eventually like to move back to Portugal but will wait until her daughter completes her studies. She has been learning English since she arrived in the UK, and now has a good working knowledge, but still considers herself a learner and requires a translator in some situations.

Moving in

Sarah's landlord is an individual who owns several properties across South Wales and does not use a Letting Agent to manage the properties. He used to be the owner of a taxi company but sold this business and now works for another taxi company alongside being a landlord. When Sarah moved in, her landlord didn't ask any particular questions – he simply showed them the house, gave over the keys and they moved in. The landlord was friends with Sarah's ex so they found out about the flat through word of mouth rather than an online advert. The landlord did not carry out any affordability or referencing checks before Sarah and her daughter moved in. When Sarah's circumstances changed and she began to receive benefits, the landlord said it was not a problem.

Understanding rights and managing the tenancy

Sarah received support with managing her tenancy from a tutor who she met via the council's free English language lessons. This person proved instrumental in helping Sarah to understand her rights in renting and to ensure that everything was in place correctly when she moved in. For example, this person checked that the landlord was registered on Rent Smart Wales and that he had drawn up an occupation contract for Sarah to sign at the start of the tenancy.

If this person had not been on hand to support Sarah, she would not have been able to understand her contract or know her rights (e.g. to have a landlord who is licensed). Sarah's landlord did not attempt to offer support with translating the OC, but simply sent it to her by email. The contract was 25 pages long and Sarah just managed to check how much she had to pay and what her responsibilities were.

There have been 3 increases in rent since 2015 amounting to more than 50% increase since the start of Sarah's tenancy. With the support of her tutor, Sarah appealed the latest increase, as it was so much in one go, but she did not succeed and ended up having to pay the increased rent. Sarah's tutor told her about services like Shelter and Citizen's Advice, which are designed to help with housing issues like rent increases. However, Sarah called CA and was on hold for so long that she had to cut the call. She also struggled to understand how to engage with these services due to her lack of English.

Repairs and maintenance

Throughout the tenancy, if Sarah has reported a repair or maintenance issue, the landlord has usually responded by saying that she needs to sort it out herself. For example, when she needed to replace the washing machine, the landlord suggested Sarah go out and buy one of her choice. When the boiler stopped working through no fault of Sarah's, it took 3 months for this to get sorted – this was in the middle of winter. Generally, Sarah described the landlord's response as very slow when dealing with any issues in the flat. Sarah spoke to a friend who had had similar experiences, and they both agreed that it seemed as though the landlord does not expect Sarah to nag or complain as he knows that Sarah is afraid he will kick her out if she does.

Sarah's overall impression – through evidence over the years – is that the landlord is trying to spend as little money as possible on the flat and on her – he implies that the less he spends, the better. She has never had the sense that he is prioritising her wellbeing or welfare, but just wants to collect the rent and not spend any money on the flat. His attitude comes across as very 'laissez-faire'. Whilst she is grateful that he doesn't interfere or bother her, she also finds it hard that he doesn't offer help when she needs it. He does the bare minimum (e.g. gas safety certificate) but does not do anything beyond that (e.g. no in-person visits or checks on the house, saying that knows he doesn't need to check as it's always clean and in good condition).

Wider issues

This case echoes a wider issue of tenants with English as a second language or those who have recently moved to the UK having to deal with inferior treatment and responses from landlords and letting agents. Many tenants report waiting significant lengths of time for repair or maintenance issues to be resolved, and of being afraid to speak up, complain, chase or make repeated requests for fear of being evicted. Furthermore, many tenants report not being able to access services due to lack of translation or support in reaching out.