

Two-year-old killed by household mould exposes UK-wide public health crisis

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Last month, a coroner ruled that the death in December 2020 of two-year-old Awaab Ishak had been caused by “prolonged exposure” to mould spores in his family’s rented flat.

Awaab was initially hospitalised with flu-like symptoms and difficulty breathing. He was readmitted to urgent care two days after being discharged, suffering respiratory failure, and died of cardiac arrest. A pathologist told the inquest into his death that Awaab’s throat was swollen enough to hinder his breathing, with exposure to fungi the most likely cause.

The child’s parents, Faisal Abdullah and Aisha Amin, had complained about the mould to landlords Rochdale Boroughwide Housing (RBH) for three years, even requesting rehousing. A health visitor also raised concerns, asking for the rehousing request to be prioritised.

RBH were dismissive, writing the problem off as “unsightly” but not a serious risk, and placing what senior coroner Joanne Kearsley called “too much emphasis... on the cause of the mould being due to the parent’s lifestyle.” The housing association failed to address the lack of adequate ventilation in the property.

Awaab’s parents have called for the entire board of RBH to resign, warning that tenants remain “in danger” so long as the current leadership is in post. The housing association’s head Gareth Swarbrick was eventually sacked by the RBH board, but only after public outrage at his refusal to step down.

Awaab’s unsafe home was one of many on the estate run by RBH.

According to the *Mirror*, the association received 106 complaints about mould and damp in the year after Awaab died. An investigation by *Manchester Evening News* this August found another three households on the same estate who said their children had been

hospitalised with issues related to damp and mouldy homes, with reporters shown letters from GPs advising families to move. The BBC described other properties with mould that resembles “black slime on the walls”.

The inquest into Awaab’s death unleashed a torrent of similar reports from across the country, in council, housing association, social rented and private rented properties under local authorities of all political stripes. The common factor is that they are occupied by working-class families left to rot by negligent landlords in poorly built, insulated and maintained homes which they can barely afford to heat.

A woman with a potentially terminal lung disease she believes was caused by mould told the *Guardian* she was taking her private sector landlord to court after years of inaction. She pays £1,400 a month to live there.

The BBC reported the cases of Noorullah Hashmi in a housing association property, whose two young children have suffered multiple chest infections since they moved in, and Vicky McLaughlin in a council house in Birmingham, whose three children suffer from asthma—believed to have been brought on and exacerbated by their living conditions.

Selenawit Asfaha was ignored by her private landlord for five years, reported *Bristol News*, before the Environmental Agency intervened. She also developed asthma while living in a mould-ridden house.

According to the latest English Housing Survey, 3.5 million occupied homes did not meet the Decent Homes Standard in 2020, with two-thirds having at least one Category 1 hazard—the most severe, indicating a risk of death, paralysis or permanent loss of consciousness—and 941,000 serious damp.

Mould is rife, affecting an estimated 120,000 social housing households, and 176,000 private renting

households. The problem is so serious and widespread that the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health now suggests doctors ask about living conditions when presented with a child with a respiratory condition, describing this as a “critical issue for child health.”

These health hazards frequently go unaddressed by landlords. In a 2021 report, housing ombudsman Richard Blakeway reviewed a representative 410 mould and damp complaints and found maladministration in more than half of the cases.

Blakeway told BBC Radio 4 last month that his office had seen “a significant increase in the casework on damp and mould,” publishing the 2021 report “because we were so concerned about what we were seeing”.

This public health crisis is a symptom of a housing system in which the basic human right to shelter is subordinated to the rampant profiteering of private landlords and cost-cutting of central and local government.

The social housing system has been run down by Tory and Labour governments alike, with the loss of 24,000 homes a year on average since 1991, leaving one million households on the waiting list. Families have been forced into the crippling expensive private rented sector which has more than doubled its share of the housing system in the last two decades. Just in the last year, average rents have increased 12 percent to £1,078 a month, according to property website Zoopla.

Both sectors leave huge numbers of people in squalid conditions. Roughly 13 percent of social rented homes and 21 percent of private rented homes are rated non-decent nationally.

An already bleak situation will be made far worse this winter, as soaring energy prices leave families unable to heat their homes. Professor of Environment Engineering for Buildings Catherine Noakes, wrote the BBC, “warned that mould conditions could be made worse this winter if people don’t put on the heating because of high energy bills.”

Just two months before the verdict was given on Awaab’s death, the Institute of Health Equity (IHE) published a report titled *Fuel Poverty, Cold Homes and Health Inequalities*. Looking at their impact over the last eight years, the authors wrote, “If fuel poverty and cold homes were a concern in 2014, now, with the rapidly increasing price of energy, they are likely to become a significant humanitarian crisis.”

Lead author Professor Ian Sinha, Consultant Respiratory Paediatrician at Alder Hey Children’s Hospital, Liverpool, commented on its release that he had “no doubt” children would die this winter as a result.

The report noted, “Cold homes are more prone to damp and mould, both of which contribute to developing asthma and acute asthma attacks. Damp and mould may contribute to approximately 10–15 percent of new cases of childhood asthma across Europe.”

Furthermore, “it is estimated that 1.7 million school days are missed across Europe due to illnesses associated with damp and mould. UK children miss more school days due to disease burden from damp than any EU member state, with rates over 80 percent higher than the EU average.”

The government’s response to the inquest into Awaab’s death has plumbed the depths of cynicism. Housing Secretary Michael Gove mouthed support for “Awaab’s law”, championed by his parents, to require landlords to investigate the causes of damp and mould within 14 days of complaints being made and provide tenants with a report on the findings. A petition in support has gained over 150,000 signatures.

Even as Gove spoke, the government was planning to instruct councils to examine “behavioral factors” when deciding whether to take action against landlords, giving license to the excuse used by RBH against Awaab’s family.

Stephen Battersby, vice president of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, told the *Guardian* he worried that “the draft guidance will provide an even greater opportunity for landlords to blame the tenants for dangerous housing conditions, such as dampness and mould.”



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