Short life housing is meant to be a temporary solution. But what happens when tenants have to leave after staying more than a decade? **Caroline Thorpe** finds out.

‘It just seems unfortunate that to have one group of people in social housing you are making another group of people homeless who would not be able to get social housing,’ complains Paul Jones. ‘It’s a shame of robbing Peter to pay Paul, in order making Peter homeless.’

Mr Jones is co-ordinator of Alamo Housing, a co-operative in north London, and he is talking about the problem with short life housing.

Short life housing sounds great in theory: social landlords license empty properties, awaiting refurbishment, demolition or sale to housing co-operatives like Alamo, which then rent them as temporary accommodation to tenants who are typically on low incomes but don’t qualify for social housing.

But short life housing is less secure than conventional temporary housing. The co-ops are not legally allowed to grant assured tenancies and landlords can ask for the property back at any time. When it does, the tenant understands that the co-op must serve them with a notice to quit.

‘The tenant then has 28 days to leave the property or it goes to the courts,’ explains Andriana David, housing officer at Brent Community Housing, a co-op in north west London. Since short life tenants – who are often single people – don’t qualify for social housing, the council has no obligation to rehouse them.

In practice, the short term fix often turns into a long standing arrangement. In cases where the council can’t afford to renovate or refurbish the properties, tenants may remain in them for well over a decade. When the council comes, they are understandably reluctant to leave.

‘It was an outrage,’ says former Alamo tenant Cordelia Molloy, of being forced to leave her home of 14 years. She argues Ms Molloy, a freelance photographer who is living temporarily with a friend. ‘People had brought up their children there. When I first moved in the property situation was convenient for all, times have changed. ‘It wasn’t short life because if you’d been there for 15 years, it is not short life. Regardless of what you were told 10 years ago, you have developed an emotional connection to the property.’

Jonathan Ellis, chief executive of the Empty Homes Agency concurs: ‘This is where the whole issue gets corrupted in my view. If someone has been in a property for 10 or 15 years it is not short life. Regardless of what you were told 10 years ago, you have developed an emotional connection to the property.’

‘It wasn’t short life because if you’d been there for 14 years,’ argues Mr Jones, a freelance photographer who is living temporarily with his wife. ‘People had brought up their children there. When I first moved in the property situation was completely different. By the time they asked us to leave there was no way I could afford private rents.’

Ms Molloy’s home was one of 21 properties which Alamo handed back to Islington Council last May. ‘The council gave us a shopping list and said, “we want these properties,”’ recalls Mr Jones. A total of 17 tenants lost their homes. Some of those people had been in the same property for 15 years.

Of the 17, seven were returned by Alamo, two were entitled to council housing, one is squatting, one ‘disappeared’ and the co-op doesn’t know what happened to him. The rest went into private sector accommodation or went to stay with friends.

Mr Jones believes the council was wrong to tell the tenants live in the properties for so long before effectively making them homeless. ‘It was obviously explained to people that short life housing is temporary, but the problem is that the council should have moved quicker, he says. ‘It’s not so bad if you say, “all right, you’ve got two years, and when the two years is up you’ve got to move on.” When you’re talking 15, 17 years and it’s short life, it’s a bit of a misnomer really.’

Jonathan Ellis, chief executive of the Empty Homes Agency concurs: ‘This is where the whole issue gets corrupted in my view. If someone has been in a property for 10 or 15 years it is not short life. Regardless of what you were told 10 years ago, you have developed an emotional connection to the property.’

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