

Why can't we build better quality homes in Britain?

Crumbling mortar and missing electrics — in brand-new homes. *Melissa York* reports on defective properties

The last thing anyone expects when they buy a newly built home is for workmen to be digging out the ceiling six months later. But that's what one buyer in Kensington was forced to endure once her husband, who works in building control, noticed that the smoke and carbon monoxide alarms were not wired into the electrics. "It's a half a million pound home," she says. "The show flat we were shown was pristine and doesn't resemble our flat at all."

Six years on, her bathroom extractor fan and video intercom system have never worked, and parts of the ceiling are hanging down in the car park. She cannot sell because she is also caught up in the fire safety scandal engulfing the housing market because fire-stopping cavity wall barriers are missing, too.

"We used our long-term savings on this property to get us on the ladder. Now we're stuck," she says.

Like many owners who speak out, she does not want to be identified because she fears that it would put negotiations with her housing association in jeopardy — and she desperately needs the



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problems fixed.

Even residents who leave reviews online often do so anonymously. They find themselves in a difficult position where they want to warn other buyers about poor standards of housebuilding, but they are trapped in homes they cannot sell or live in comfortably until their builder fixes them.

They are far from alone. Issues over the quality of the new homes built in Britain over the past few decades is a widespread and ongoing problem. It is why *The Sunday Times* launched the Hidden

Housing Scandal campaign that seeks to investigate and improve the quality of flats and houses in the UK.

While some mistakes are to be expected in a product as complex as a home, 97 per cent of buyers reported snagging problems or defects to their builder last year, according to the 2020 national new home customer satisfaction survey. One in four reported 16 or more defects. Yet 89 per cent of homeowners surveyed by the warranty provider NHBC, the Home Builders Federation (HBF) and Homes for



Scotland, said they would recommend their builder to a friend.

One reason for the discrepancy is that the questionnaire is carried out eight weeks after a buyer moves in when, new-build campaigners argue, they are in their “honeymoon phase” and haven’t had time to notice serious defects. There are also rumours of pressure from the builders themselves. However, a spokesman for the HBF says: “The [survey] is a robust measure of builder performance and strict rules are in place to ensure builders cannot influence customers.”

Snagging, poor communication and delays

While the number of snags per property varies, data from HouseScan, a snagging company, found 157 defects on average in every new-build inspected in 2020, which suggests there could be as many as 12.6 million snags across Britain every year.

Many of these statistics don’t include communal areas and landscaping, which buyers often do not think to put on their snagging list. LM, who has lived at a Bellway Homes development in Staffordshire for three years, posted on HomeViews, the property world’s Tripadvisor, that the estate is still poorly lit and signposted, there were no traffic calming measures, the facilities were “poor” and the children’s play park “awful”.

“Bellway are great until you submit the home report. Once that’s submitted it’s a battle trying to get snagging rectified or main problems fixed,” LM wrote. “Lots of residents have major problems with their drains.”

In response a Bellway spokesman said: “We pride ourselves on being a reputable housebuilder and delivering exceptional quality as standard to all customers throughout the construction process, which is reflected in our five-star builder status with the Home Builders Federation. Bellway takes any and all specific customer service claims very seriously when buyers raise them directly, and ensure we action any issues quickly and efficiently.”

A common theme in HomeViews’ upcoming Owners Report, which surveys more than 2,000 verified owners, is the lack of communication from housebuilders. They report having to chase for months or, even years, to resolve problems and management frequently changes hands, which leads to confusion over who is accountable.

“Communication is nonexistent. They are slow to respond to the inevitable snags that are present in all new-build places, and they treat buyers with an attitude that borders on contempt once you have signed on the bottom line,” says an anonymous reviewer at a Catalyst Housing

scheme in Uxbridge, west London.

Catalyst said: “We’re sorry this customer hasn’t felt we have communicated well or lived up to their expectations on this occasion.”

David at a Milton Keynes development by David Wilson and Barratt Homes acknowledged that the process of buying was “simple” and the team were “very helpful” throughout. However, “this changed as soon as we’d moved in, and we found ourselves having to continually chase the site manager for updates on our snagging list.”

A Barratt spokesman said: “We are sorry to see this review, on the same website 94 per cent of customers at [the development] rate it as either very good or excellent and while we don’t always get everything right first time we work as hard as we can to fix any issues as quickly as possible.”

Why are we still building homes with so many defects?

Poor quality housebuilding is not a new problem, but it is one that is in the spotlight due to the Grenfell inquiry and the campaign by leaseholders and some MPs — and *The Sunday Times* — to fix other unsafe homes.

It has brought to national attention the structural defects hidden behind the attractive facades and seductive marketing suites most of



TOP SNAGGING PROBLEMS

The most common defect that the snagging company HouseScan sees in new-builds is badly fitting windows and doors. After that it is ducting that is disconnected from tile vents and fans; poor brickwork pointing that can lead to

damp; and incorrectly installed trickle vents. Decorative snags due to shoddy plastering is common too. Its inspectors often see badly fitting or missing loft insulation, sealant inconsistencies in the kitchen and bathroom, and blocked —

or missing sections of — guttering. “It’s the early issues that a customer might miss that they have the most trouble getting their housebuilder to rectify,” says Harry Yates, HouseScan’s founder.

which are not visible to the average prospective purchaser or owner. Geoff Peters, a solicitor who litigates on behalf of new-build owners at legal firm Wingrove Law, cites a case of four buyers who came to him with a claim of £16,000 because the steps leading up to their £1.5 million new-build houses were uneven and they wanted them rebuilt. Six months and a surveyor’s report later, the claim was closer to £1.8 million — a 1,240 percent increase. “We found that some of the houses were close to collapse and the owners didn’t even realise. The mortar was cracking and the stonework was actually moving and about to fall on their head.”

In a 2010 academic study by Chris Wood for Anglia Ruskin University, Martyn Maxwell, managing partner at Brickkickers new home inspections, says the speed at which properties are built and the lack of quality control and inspections were the main causes of substandard building. The snagging company said it found 160 defects on average, but quality

was improving before the recession hit. “Budgets are being slashed... contractors are asked to cut prices but still undertake the same works ... something has to give and it’s usually quality,” Maxwell is reported to have said.

The market share of volume housebuilders almost doubled from 31 per cent in 2008 to 59 per cent in 2015, according to a parliamentary report, as smaller firms went out of business. Productivity in construction fell by 14 per cent, yet profits were at an all-time high, “possibly due to decreasing competition”, said the Bennett Institute of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge.

Thirty years ago, 30 per cent of housebuilding was done by small businesses; today, only 12 per cent is. A complex planning system and high land prices have also made housebuilding too expensive and risky for would-be competitors. “In general, the less competition there is, the less likely firms will innovate and improve product quality,” says Thomas Aubrey, from consultancy Credit Capital

Advisory.

At the Paragon development in Brentford, west London, builders reportedly spent only 21 months on site and one five-storey block was built in just six days. Surveyors deemed it such a fire-risk in October that residents were forced to flee to nearby hotels.

Notting Hill Genesis apologised for the disruption and uncertainty caused and offered to buy back residents’ properties while they investigated further.

In south London, Cass B, a HomeViews reviewer at a development in Elephant & Castle in London that’s managed by Notting Hill Genesis, the same housing association that oversees Paragon says: “The amount of issues/defects we’ve had is staggering. From a shattering shower screen (due to poor fitting) which resulted in a trip to A&E, to today when the wardrobe door handle fell off in my hand”.

A spokesperson for Notting Hill Genesis said: “We work closely with our partners to create safe, well-designed and high-quality homes at all our



developments. Of course, with the number of homes built each year there will occasionally be follow-up repairs required and we work closely with original developers to ensure these are carried out quickly.”

What redress is there for new-build owners?

If defects are not covered by their warranty, new home owners currently have no independent way to challenge developers for poor builds. “The only thing that works for homeowners is legal action but the trouble is that you’ve just spent all your money buying a house,” says Peters. “Help to Buy is there because people can’t afford the deposits that lenders now require. If you’re dealing with people who haven’t got the money to buy a house in the first place, they’re not going to be able to afford legal fees to take you to court or to get a proper survey done.”

The government has acknowledged the problem. Concern started rising after the number of buyers who said they would recommend a new-build home fell from 91 per cent in 2013 to 84 per cent in 2017.

A year later, ministers announced that a new homes ombudsman would be set up to raise standards in the industry. More than two years on, it still hasn’t arrived, but a new homes quality board is up and running to appoint members to the ombudsman

and it is expected to be operational by the end of the year. There is set to be a code of practice that will place more responsibility on developers up to two years after a sale, set timescales for dealing with complaints, and the ombudsman will have powers to compensate owners and ban rogue developers. It will be compulsory for builders to sign up in order to sell homes under the revamped Help to Buy scheme starting in April.

There is scepticism over how independent these bodies will be — there are representatives from the housebuilding and finance industry, warranty providers and consumer organisations on the new board — and the ombudsman will not cover retrospective cases, only homes that are reserved from the date the developer signs up.

Peters also points out that snagging and repairs contracts are often conditional. “Non-disclosure agreements are a problem in the new-build industry. They’re bad news. It happens in every single case,” he says.

A HBF spokesman said: “Non-disclosure agreements are legal agreements that are used by businesses across all sectors. They are not widely used by housebuilders and when they are it tends to be with regards to details of compensation payments, often at the request of the customer.”

What can prospective

new-build buyers do?

Reviewers on HomeViews give two main pieces of advice; if it’s important to you, get it in writing in your contract of sale or lease, and get a snagging survey. There’s no professional qualification for snagging, but there’s a free snagging checklist available through the New Build Database (nbdb.co.uk) to do your own visual check. Surveys can cost from £300 up to £1,200 for more intrusive probes that may use thermal imaging or carry out cavity barrier checks.

To inform new-build buyers and help with their research, grassroots campaigns have sprouted up to bring greater transparency to the industry. Phil Waller has been campaigning for a statutory new homes ombudsman for six years and has extensive information for buyers at brand-newhomes.co.uk.

Others, such as Nichola Venables, campaign following their own bad experiences with new-builds. Her four bedroom detached house in Barry has cavity barrier issues. She set up the New Build Database, a data hub for the industry and consumers, and she already has four snagging companies on board to feed their data into the project.

Last week, another unhappy customer John Gaskell set up Homebuyers Fightback (email homebuyersfightback@btinternet.com or follow [@Homebuyersfigh1](https://twitter.com/Homebuyersfigh1) on Twitter) to lobby the



government to uphold better standards for housebuilders.

His new home in Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire, has a snagging list running to 150 items that will cost an estimated £35,000 to £45,000 to resolve including problems with plumbing, electrical wiring, underfloor heating, fixtures and fittings, and the poorly laid path has led to water ingress.

“We bought our house in September 2019 in anticipation of retirement. We feel hugely distressed and it’s become a part-time job that keeps me awake at night,” Gaskell, 66, says.

“You’re assessing people who don’t know there’s anything wrong, so the [survey] stats are nonsense.

It’s like asking people whether an aircraft is any good when they can’t take the engines apart,” he says.

Gaskell recommends buyers get a survey done before exchange of contracts so they are not obliged to complete the sale if it comes back with extensive defects. Data from HouseScan shows that only 7 per cent of new-build buyers carry out a snagging survey.

Gaskell wants to see an independent ombudsman and a new standard that builders have to meet that would mean builders have to essentially survey their own product before they can sell. “The burden of proof must be on the seller and not the buyer,” he says. “It’s like economic serfdom and the industry is

living in the dark ages. Who buys a toaster, gets electrocuted and then has to prove that the toaster was dangerous before they take it back?”

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