

Losing your home: one day at Coventry County Court

By Rebecca Omonira-Oyekanmi



Jerome, a polite black man with plaited hair, pulls up a chair.

Lydia looks up, ready to ask questions, but Jerome speaks first: “If I lose my flat, I lose my kids. I don’t want to lose my flat or my kids.” He mostly lives alone and is separated from his children’s mother, but sees them regularly. A tenant since 2013, his arrears have fluctuated as he moved in and out of work. He lost his latest job at Christmas when the courier company City Link collapsed.

Jerome owes nearly £1,500.

Lydia picks up her notes on Jerome and heads to the rent officers’ room. One of officers knows this case. Jerome was offered money advice and ignored it, she says. She wants an outright possession order. The rent officers won’t back down, the judge will decide this one.

Back to the box room for more interviews. It takes almost three hours to work through the cases. There’s Bonnie, who owes a little over £1,000. Bonnie, 42, clothes crumpled and thick hair escaping a ponytail, sits at the desk and waits for Lydia to speak. She’s lived in her flat for four years and always struggled with rent because her income varies month to month. “I work for an agency,” she says, “and sometimes I don’t have shifts, then I don’t have money for my rent.”

Once Lydia has interviewed everyone, she clears her small desk and walks over to the usher’s desk in the waiting room.

An usher disappears to check the judge is ready. The tenants sit on low chairs, a few centimetres away, silent, watching. Bonnie gets up from her seat, glances at the clock, clasps and unclasps her hands, and nervously shifts her weight from foot to foot.

She walks over to Lydia to ask how much longer till the hearing. She needs to collect her son from nursery at noon or she’ll have to pay late fees. Please stay if you can, says Lydia, it will look good that you turned up.

The usher is back, the judge isn’t ready. Lydia asks, Can you move Bonnie up the list? The usher says yes, looks at her watch and disappears again. When she comes back and says the judge is ready, it is too late: Bonnie’s gone.

Read the full article [here](#)

Rebecca Omonira-Oyekanmi: Why I Write



How would you categorise the writing?

This extract is a piece of reporting/reportage. It is pulled together using on the scene reporting, background research, which includes interviews with solicitor to understand the court process and the law on social housing evictions, and policy research into the government's welfare reform.

Why did you write the piece?

I began with a set of statistics published by the Department for Communities and Local Government, which showed that the number of people evicted from social housing because they couldn't pay rent had increased dramatically in the last year. I wanted to know why.

I decided to investigate because I felt the statistic was striking (could someone really lose their social home which they'd secured because they didn't have any money because they didn't have enough money?) and social housing rarely featured in wider public debates about the so-called housing crisis. Instead the focus is usually on home owners or would-be home owners, and as a result policy solutions to the housing crisis tend to focus on homeowners.

To engage readers I chose to translate the statistics into human stories. I wanted to strip down my research (which involved reading reports and government legislation, interviewing policy experts, social housing tenants, solicitors and campaigners, and combing through statistics) to lived, relatable experiences.

It's hard to capture the coldness of court process and the lack of time for nuance or second chances, which is why I simply described the most compelling cases and how they were dealt with. In a way what I tried to do, by removing the distractions of statistics and political rhetoric, and by zooming in, uncomfortably so, on what happens to people when they face eviction in these circumstances, is to encourage readers to confront the reality that there is rarely a 'them and us', or 'shivers and shirkers', only people who fallen on hard times.

What do you think makes it an effective piece of writing?

An effective piece of writing leaves a reader changed in some way. Better informed, delighted, shocked, angry, inspired. Effective writing on social injustice can achieve even more; it challenges power by exposing lies and maladministration, it equips people with the evidence needed to campaign and agitate for change, and it can even provoke people to protest.