

The Housing Debate

Patrick Eade (Session Host): Good, well for the next hour it's your say, it's the housing debate and I know that you will wish to raise points that are relevant to your posting. House rules apply, can I ask that you have one person speaking at a time and that you identify yourself a la Blind Date, what's your name and where do you come from. And before putting your point that we try and stick to the generic. I think the first question is from Heather Terrington.

Heather Terrington: I'm from Blandford Camp. At the AFF Conference in 2004 the then minister said that there was no certainty about the future of Blandford Camp and thus housing upgrades could not be planned. This uncertainty has been going on for at least 12 years and service families continue to live in the most appalling conditions. Leaking roofs, damp ridden houses, and unsafe electrical wiring are common, not to mention the 1950's kitchens and bathrooms. We even had one family that for three months had to fill their bath using a garden hose from their downstairs sink. How long do service families have to wait until they are provided safe and basically serviceable housing?

Admiral Peter Dunt (Chief Executive, Defence Estates): I can't give you an honest answer as to how long because it will depend entirely on how much funding is actually given to upgrade the houses. I did 2 years ago as I mentioned when I had the opportunity say that we have actually increased the numbers of upgrades over the last 3 years but we have not done so nearly enough. I can only spend the amount of money that I am given against the priorities that are actually decided by ministers, but also for myself, I would dearly love to have the approximately £750 billion it would take to upgrade our quarters but it's not actually just about upgrading quarters because a lot of them and particularly I know Heather where you're from, Blandford need to be bulldozed, knocked down and to start again. That also costs a lot of money so I can't give you a date. What I can tell you is that I will do everything in my power to spend the money that I am given or indeed where I can generate money which I have already done, and the way in which I have generated that money is by being more efficient in the agency and indeed by disposing of some of the estate assets as well which I have put back into housing. But I agree with you it is not nearly enough and unless I have the money to do the upgrades I simply cannot meet those expectations for families.

Patrick Eade: But if we're getting back to money constantly the money has obviously got to come from somewhere, there is a choice but at the end of the day if you bulldoze the houses in Blandford that you say are not fit for purpose people have still got to live somewhere at extra cost that could have been put into the original problem.

Peter Dunt: Oh indeed, but if we bulldoze them we need to build new, and I'm sorry there is another issue there as well, and this is no criticism of the past, it happens to be a fact of history that we do not own the vast majority of our housing in England and Wales, they are actually owned by Anningtons because they were sold in 1996. Ah therefore if we do bulldoze those houses we actually at the MOD has to pay and indeed if we dispose of those houses across England and Wales, we the MOD do not get any benefit from that disposal, indeed, I have to pay on average seven and a half thousand pounds to get it up to standard to hand it back to Anningtons. So you can see

immediately a vicious circle there. There are other ways of providing houses through PFIs (Private Finance Initiative) mentioned for example Tidworth, Marchwood, Glencourse, actually Glencourse isn't PFI, that's actually a prime contract so there are other ways of doing it but at the end of the day it all costs quite a lot of money. But that is where the priorities have to be made.

Patrick Eade: But surely if people are paying for their properties they are giving money in affect to a landlord, the landlord has to surely morally maintain the quality of that and not just trouser the cash.

Peter Dunt: Indeed...Patrick it would be lovely if I could trouser the cash. The fact of the matter is, that we actually pay Anningtons rent for the houses that we sold to them back in 1996 and I can tell you that the income that actually comes from housing is less than the income or the rent rather that I have to pay to Anningtons, so there is a difference between the two that the MOD has to make up so it's not a matter of making a profit it is a matter of having to balance the books that at the moment don't balance either.

Patrick Eade: Heather did we answer your questions satisfactorily or are there any other points from Blandford that you wish to come to? Heather?

Heather Terrington: What about the safely issue about the electrical wiring and leaking roofs?

Peter Dunt: Safety is of paramount importance and I know from what we were talking about earlier on that certainly there have been a couple of instances and I know of some others: safety is of paramount importance and certainly we must do everything we possibly can but it's much more than safely it's the quality of some of these houses that is simply not good enough. There are some that are good but there are some that are not good enough right the way through the condition.

Patrick Eade: Rosie, can I ask you to join in are there any points that you wish to pick up from that?

Rosie Brown (AFF Housing Specialist): I know when we talk about the safety in terms of Blandford we have to point out that we are actually talking about women who were electrocuted there. You know it's not, it's a basic fact that we are living in housing that is shocking in some areas!applause

Sammie Crane (AFF Chairman): I think we must make the point there as well that Blandford is not the only place that has this sort of situation. I visited families in Hounslow the other day and met a woman there whose child had been electrocuted through the socket; I mean there is a major issue about the standard of the accommodation. It's interesting, Cherry Milne sitting in front of me and she did a lot of work in 1996 to say that the quarters should not be sold off and we haven't had any investment back in to them. People go on about the lack of investment and how difficult it is to raise enough money, just on Monday we were saying it would take about £2.5 billion to bring all the accommodation up to scale. I don't really care if it's £2.5 billion, I don't want a child electrocuted! I don't think that's acceptable (hear, hear) and we need to consider what we are going to doapplause.....

Peter Dunt: Patrick if I may, I would just like to simply agree I'm not going to be defensive about this one little bit because I absolutely agree of course we need to invest more - it is a matter of priorities and it is right at the top of my priority list.

Carolyn Mackay: What about the fact that there's apparently enough MOD funding to waste £6 Billion on the Apache helicopter but very little to make service accommodation habitable for families?

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: If DE could only obtain £750 million we could make a real difference to SFA.

Patrick Eade: I was speaking to some girls at the AFF gathering last night and some girls from Bulford were telling me that they were extremely concerned that their husbands were away and had been away, the world has changed so much in the last three years and if they have a number of problems that they are trying to battle on with at home the last thing that when you do finally get a phone call back to the UK or Germany from an operational area is to hear that the boiler that broke down when you left three weeks ago still hasn't been fixed and there comes a time when perhaps people start to vote with their feet, does that concern you?

Lt Gen Freddie Viggers (Adjutant General): It certainly concerns me, it certainly concerns the whole of the Army chain of command and we lose no opportunity in ensuring that everybody understands just how important in particular getting Modern Housing Solutions and the maintenance of quarter right is but there are two issues here, the second was to do with maintenance of quarters, the first issue was to do with the overall investment in the programme. The second issue is I think a matter that we can sort out ...the first issue is a defence issue as I said.

Patrick Eade: Just going back to the point made about things that go wrong, is there any way Peter, that you can take something of a pragmatic approach and that if something has gone wrong and if you've got no where with calling Speke (the MHS call centre), then you do perhaps have a drainage system whereby people can phone locally. Somebody else told me that they had phoned Speke and got not very far, no one was speaking to them in Speke and then when they did finally get through the girl said, "Well, if you've got a gas leak why don't you phone an emergency service and shout 'gas, gas, gas' and they'll be round in a moment!"

Peter Dunt: and they were, I heard that too.

Sammie Crane: And then they cut you off!

Peter Dunt: There are a whole lot of issues here and I will try and address some of them as quickly as I can. Firstly, as far as the help desk is concerned it's got off to an appalling start which I absolutely understand and acknowledge because it was overwhelmed with a number of calls. It is actually doing much better now, the target is to answer 95% of the calls within two minutes and we were almost achieving that but they took a drop over the last couple of weeks for a number of reasons. It's actually back when I saw the statistics yesterday to around 90% with about 70% being answered

within 30 seconds so I am actually confident that that side of it we can do. The other issue which is a question of local engagement which you mentioned which I think is very important, I partially addressed in my speech, we are actually going to now have the local area managers more involved in scheduling. I also in mentioned in the letter which those of you who are in SFA if you haven't already received it you will soon, will lay down for you a staged complaint system so that you actually know who to approach and that ends with me. I mean clearly I want these complaints to be dealt with in an orderly manner but actually there is recourse to me and in fact I have seen a huge number of complaints over the course of the last three months and they have been very instructive to me. The first letter I sent out, I thought, "Oh damn, I've put my email address and telephone number on top of it", but actually in retrospect I'm very glad that I did because I've actually personally answered the phone to a lot of people and a lot of people have emailed me. But what became apparent is that I need to have a system so that the people can actually go to the people because I don't know the answer very often but there are people in the organisation who do. And I want to make sure that you can contact those people if things go wrong. If I may, just the final point - none of these things will need to happen if appointments are kept and that is what I am aiming to do. I want to achieve a 100% of appointments being kept and I know that Modern Housing Solutions are working towards that as well, because if we can achieve that then a lot of the problems go away because simply they just disappear overnight. And then I can concentrate on some rather more important issues because we will have solved that very big problem. So it's missed appointments like the minister mentioned and its getting houses ready, two things that I know that my colleagues are really, really concentrating on at the moment and we will do better.

Patrick Eade: I think a point from the Adjutant General at the front

Lt Gen Freddie Viggers: We're all live to the strategic issues here and they are going to take time to get right, but I think there's a practical thing we can do and that is to empower people at the local level and give them a level of budget spend so you can put the garrison commander together with the head honcho from the families federation together with the plumber and you can work the issues. My concern is that it's too centralist and not enough authority delegated down. In our own house we can get our favourite plumber around inside 24 hours if we have to. That is not unreasonable but you can't do it if you have to ring the other end of the country and speak to someone who doesn't understand your accent. (laughing, applause).....

Lt Gen John McColl (Commander Regional Forces): I note and agree with Peter Dunt that there has been improvement in the Modern Housing Solutions but we also need to put that in context the current level of responses that we are getting for emergency is about 73% and for urgent is about 63%. The process it replaced had a response in those two areas of about 90%. At the current level of progress it is going to take a considerable amount of time to get back to where we were so I think that we need to be quite clear that there is progress but progress is slow so don't expect things to improve dramatically overnight. The second point I make is really to echo what's been said by the Adjutant General which is I think that in parallel with improving MHS there's also a requirement to look at the overall plan. And that plan needs revision in a couple of areas, firstly the idea of local involvement particularly in the scheduling, scheduling from Liverpool for as far north as the Scottish Borders and as far south as Cornwall, clearly is going to be difficult. The second point is that we need co-location for the

Modern Housing Solutions, the allocation process and Defence Estates not only at regional level but at local level to make sure that the complete progress is properly co-ordinated. And another point, and sorry those two issues reflect the way in which the Scottish prime contract is organised. The Scottish prime contract is fundamentally different to Modern Housing Solutions and we need to get closer to that model I think before we see significant progress. And the final point is that we need a point of accountability, Peter Dunt mentioned the very positive move to have a single point of accountability on his own board and what we now need is that run out across the country, that we have at a regional level and a local level so that you can find somebody who is responsible for delivering a coherent housing service right down at the local level. I think that is what we need to do: I think Peter agrees with that. I'm encouraged by the process the strategic route that has begun but I also think it's going to take some time to get to where we need to be in delivering the quality of service that we once enjoyed and we need to improve on that service.

Patrick Eade: Good, Lizzie Iron at the front has got a question I think.

Lizzie Iron: Lizzie Iron, I'm a trustee for AFF. I'd like to raise the danger of statistics. First of all Admiral Dunt, you started by saying that you underestimated the state of repair of the estate. How can that possibly be when you have been in a programme of development for the last however many years, since we sold the properties to Annington? How can you say that you underestimated the state of repair? You should know exactly the state of repair of this estate! May I suggest that it was an underestimate of the volume of complaints. I cannot remember how many times we used to say to the DHE and the DE that their statistics do not seem to reflect the complaints on the ground that we receive through the office. The complaint system was blind to the actual situation. Can I ask what it is that is now going in place to make sure that that measurement is accurate? Thank you.

Peter Dunt: Lizzie I will address those, there are two main points there. Statistics, and I absolutely agree with you that statistics are hugely dangerous, not least of all because the statistics which we sometimes have to base evidence on depends on the number of people who actually fill in forms which is very low and so that is dodgy for a start. I mean you could actually say that either people who don't fill in the forms are so peeved off by what's happening that they are not going to bother or on the other hand they could be satisfied so it's difficult and I absolutely agree with that. How are we going to improve that and this is actually where I'd asked for some help. We are now and I know we didn't from the start I apologise for that, but we are now actually leaving behind for all emergency repairs and then posting on questionnaires which are asking whether or not it was done on time, what the quality of work was and so on and that is what we will use. And I have to say that will be far more powerful both for you and for me in the future in terms of whether or not we are delivering. But it will depend on please people actually filling those forms in and telling us. On past evidence, and I know in my own home I've put most of those things in the bin, but actually it's very, very important that we can measure that. Can I just return and this is not in a defensive way at all but really to try to inform you as to why we were not so sure about the condition of the estate and this is actually very fundamental because this is why we are going to a prime contract. The reason I didn't know was because nobody had done a survey of all of our quarters and we didn't know the precise condition they were being maintained by hundreds of little contracts around the country. Part of this contract during the course

of the first year is for Modern Housing Solutions to survey, they've started, they are doing it as of now - and I can see Hugh beside you nodding he may like to comment in an minute - they're doing a survey so that we will know. Now the other reason is that during the last probably six months of the previous contracts that we had the service tailed off horribly. Now we didn't have any specific way of knowing that until the contract was up and running. I mentioned that I had had a lot of personal letters and complaints, I've read them all and I have responded to most of them - a huge number of those, I would say at least 75% started off that this has been bad since I would say August 2005 or sometime since August 2004 which is long before Modern Housing Solutions came into being. And it wasn't until we sort of opened up the flood gates that - and yes we should have anticipated and I hold my hands up and I'm sorry we didn't - that this has caused a lot of problems. We should have anticipated more but actually that was the backlog that suddenly came in as soon as the help desk opened and that's what led to the vicious spiral. If I may very quickly just go back to the Scotland issue and this question of local and again something that Hugh would want to say something in a moment. This is where we have listened and are going to have much more local and regional input and management of these issues which is more on a par with Scotland which is working well. The other big difference with Scotland of course is first of all the quality of the housing stock in Scotland is generally far better certainly that a lot of the Army estate around Salisbury Plain. And secondly, there are only four thousand quarters in Scotland as apposed to the 43,000 that we've got in England and Wales. But I don't know, Patrick if you would allow Hugh...

Patrick Eade: I would be delighted and everyone else would be delighted if Hugh Porter the Managing Director of MHS would like to come back to the points that you have already made - Hugh in the front here.

Hugh Porter: Hello, thank you for allowing me to come along to your conference. First of all can I apologise on behalf of Modern Housing Solutions for the performance that we have provided in the first few months of this contract. We are doing our utmost at the moment to rectify that. And as the Admiral says, by the end of this month we are planning to eliminate the missed appointments that so many people have suffered from. Also to repair houses to move in on standard so that they are clean and they value the families that live in those. In terms of the surveys we have already commenced those - in fact Blandford I know is one of the ones on the list that have actually started doing surveys at that location. But it's not the only one; we are looking at other places including High Wycombe. We only have so many resources to do that across the country, it's not a matter of funds for this, it's a matter of making sure that they actually do the job correctly. And meeting the demands that we have in order to plan the works affectively. We are also getting much, much closer to our suppliers. Our suppliers are very much part of our organisation and we need to understand their issues and how we can help them better and get more in touch with how we can help them deliver the service. So at a very senior level within all the organisations we have we have put additional recourses in from all the share holders that form part of Modern Housing Solutions and from our suppliers to work on this all around the clock at the moment and that's what we are trying to do.

Patrick Eade: Hugh, thank you, are you confident that your plans will work?

Hugh Porter: I am very confident that our plans will work. We've got some very dedicated people. Many of these people have been on the estate. Many of the people who are the suppliers have been on the estate for some time and that is an issue in itself, under TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) regulations we need to take those people on board, we need to train them to what is expected of them in the new world and make sure this happens. I have to say this is taking longer than we had anticipated but our plans are showing an upward trend in many areas and I know that statistics are statistics. There were 17 people who phoned up the help desk yesterday because they didn't have appointments made on time and each one of those is important. The people who have spoken to me prior to this conference about appointments missed last Friday - we will follow up every single one of these and the root cause of it and prevent it happening in future.

Patrick Eade: Hugh, thank you. Loads and loads of questions that came in that I think will be answered in the AFF website but I would really like to make the questions live for the next half an hour, so some more questions please. The lady at the back with her right hand raised sitting next to the lady in the purple top! That's you!

Kate Jackson: I'm Kate Jackson from Edinburgh. As we are put through lengthy march ins and march outs I am surprised there is no detail on what's wrong with our quarters. There lies your answer; it's totally at local level. I'm sorry I'm slightly cross about all this. The other point is DHE, we are given the impression are given a budget at the beginning of the year why at the end of each financial year do we have suddenly a glut of kitchens being replaced, and bathrooms being replaced and why is it no scheduled list of works carried on through out an entire year as opposed to something just thrown in and suddenly when it gets to your house it's sorry we've run out of money you'll have to wait until the end of the next financial year to have any repairs done to your property? There doesn't seem to be any coherent scheduled list of works carried out and filtered down to us, we don't know what you are doing next. And so you suddenly get a letter through your door saying - this is going to happen in 6 weeks time and your husband's on an operational tour and do you think that having a kitchen ripped out when your husband is away for 6 months is a suitable time to do it? Where is the liaison between DHE and family that is what we need and we need to know what they are planning to do at a much more low level.

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: Kate, your points are very well made and let me answer them in turn. First of all in terms, as you put it, the sort of glut at the end of the year of the budget. Yes, that is actually how the DHE did operate and Kevin Pellett who's here I think would acknowledge that. Because the DHE when it was on its own before we merged actually had its budget and couldn't overspend it and very often they would have a million or 5 million or whatever at the end of the year and they would try and spend it. I have to say not only is that a very inefficient way of spending money but also it causes the exactly the sort of disruption that you've explained. What we've managed to do over the course of the last two years and we're doing this year is actually to have a programme of upgrades, and we have one, I've got it right here for this year which has been in evidence now for some while. And that programme is a programme to achieve this year 1200 upgrades because I have actually managed to put some more money into it from disposals that I am making elsewhere in the estate. DHE never had the ability to

do that in the past. The reason I have actually doubled the number of upgrades over the last two years is because I have been able to inject that money and to plan it. So there is a programme, not as much as I would like to do but there is a certainty of a programme. But the important thing is that the programme as with any programme needs to be flexible enough to take account of changing circumstances. We've already heard this morning from Heather from Blandford and I'm very aware that the upgrades in Blandford have been promised for years but actually in terms of priorities sometimes priorities change - we have heard about Invicta Barracks earlier on. That has suddenly become a higher priority now. I have got enough money to do 1200 upgrades but if the priority suddenly changes I need to be able to adapt and do that. Bad for the people at Blandford, good for Invicta Park but that is what I have to operate under. But what I can guarantee and I know because I have got the programme here, there is now a programme for this year and it is better than it has been before but it is still not enough and I would like to do more.

Gillian Wheeler: Hi I'm Gillian Wheeler from Blandford Camp. I'm a registered child minder on Blandford Camp in a supplier service for working personnel in the Army. My garden is at a 45 degree angle in the front and back door and therefore it is unsafe for me to use my garden. When phoning DEHD as it was back in September I was told I would have to pay for a fence round my own house. Why should I have to pay for the fence so that my toddlers can go out and play in the garden?

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: Jenny, if it was Jenny, if I caught your name, I have no idea because you shouldn't have to and if you could please come and see me at lunch time and give me your name and address and we will try and sort that.

(Applause)

Jill Tomlinson: Hello, I'm Jill Tomlinson I'm a 16 year long Army wife and I also work for the HIVE Information Service. And as part of my job for the HIVE Information Service I've been on the receiving end of many briefings and presentations by DHE and DE and for which I am very grateful. I am left however with the very sinking feeling in both my personal experience and through work that what is being told to us is generally very pessimistic, I have yet to understand what the benefits have been of the sale to Annington Homes. In any of the briefings that I have ever been to nobody has ever told me what has been the benefit to the forces community of that particular sale.(applause)..... and sorry, my second point is because of this I feel an immense amount of cynicism about what the panel can tell me today. This is my third AFF conference and every time the same tired phrases, the same tired apologies have been trotted out. I think the panel underestimates the amount of cynicism in your audience that anything you say will have a measurable effect on the ground because that's not how people on the ground are seeing it. If you can perhaps tell me what the benefits of the sale to Annington Homes beyond providing the then government with a large sum of disposable income was, that would be great. Thank you.

(Applause)

Sammie Crane: Jill, I think I've already mentioned that Cherry is sitting in the front, she went to the House of Lords, she went to the House of Commons Select Defence Committee, she went, she did everything she could, in fact I think she was threatened with being gagged by the end of it, to try and prevent that sale. It was a political decision. There is nothing we can do about it. A lot of us curse it a lot of the time. But to actually go back over it is a bit of a red herring because we are wasting time. We are where we are and we have to move forwards. And it's something that we are going to curse forever. The tired apologies, I think you're right, maybe that's the tired system, maybe hopefully people will listen today and put something else in place. Can I just go back to the question before about local liaison because I thought we slightly glossed over a really important point there about how all these changes affect the local person. In your house, who do you now talk to? Who now cares about what happens to you? To me this is one of the most worrying things about all these changes. MHS is one side of the story, but the other side is the care for us as a community. The attention for what's going on for what's happening to us and I believe that is the point you were making Kate. So where shall we go with that?

Patrick Eade: The lady here has a point to make which I think follows on?

Paula Anderton: My name is Paula Anderton and my husband is based with the Household Cavalry Regiment in Windsor but we live in the Hounslow district. I have sent several letters and emails to you, Sgt Edwards, who I believe is your PA Vice Admiral, and I have now been put in the position where I do have a local services person who contacted me last week. He was to ring me on Monday morning with appointments to be scheduled for tomorrow and I have not heard from him. And this is after 6 months of having a broken window in my house, a gas fire which doesn't work, no central heating for a one month period, a despicable condition of a garden - I have got a copy of the letters which have been sent to you. Nobody is addressing my issues, it gets escalated to MHS, yes they are very, very helpful, very nice people on the phone but nothing is getting done and I have been in that property for nearly 6 months and my window is still broken and my husband is in Afghanistan. I don't feel secure, my son has been taken into hospital, he's asthmatic, he came down with a chest infection due to the cold and windows broken in the house. It's not on, it's not fair. Perhaps if any of these problems were fixed, we could save money by not taking our children to hospital when they get sick and the NHS can give some money back to the Ministry of Defence!

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: May I apologise unreservedly for clearly what has been a very, very poor performance as far as you are concerned. And again, please can we have a talk at lunch time as I would like to do that but I really mean it, I am hugely apologetic and you are not alone, there have been others. May I just say, picking up the earlier point though, that actually I am certainly not tired, I can assure you of that and I am actually very optimistic and if I have not actually conveyed that message today I would like to put that right now. I am enormously optimistic that this prime contract is going to deliver you with a better service than which you have had before, it is not at the moment but I can assure you that it will. So there is no shortage of optimism, there is going to be a lot of hard work, and we will deliver a better service for you.

Rosie Brown: Can I just say something as well I think having been in my job for 6 weeks, I am really struck by our capacity to put up with rubbish, quite frankly. And I think we need to be more determined to be better customers, to actually tell people when we are upset about things and to get a better service for ourselves. And we do have a responsibility in that in terms of filling in forms and I know that at the moment that seems a bit of a pointless exercise given the fact that many of us have done that, many of us have spent hours on the phone talking to MHS, but we do have a responsibility as well and we need to make these things work for ourselves and use our voice, and get things done.

Claire Bain: Good morning. My name is Claire Bain and I am from Hermitage in Berkshire. Two issues; I'd like to highlight the importance of a local representative in support of what hopefully you may do. In September last year I moved into a quarter that had no heating. It took my local representative in DHE office over 8 weeks to get my central heating fixed. I had a year old baby and a three year old son. I could knock on her door, and I knew because every time I knocked on her door and complained, she got onto the phone in front of me and always called me back and always came down with updates. It never changed anything but I felt secure that they were doing something. Recently I've had no cooker for a 6 to 8 week period of which I've phoned MHS 50 times, I have a record of it taking 18 minutes to get someone to speak to me and yet you say that that's changed. I can't see that it's changed that quickly. Appointment after appointment was cancelled, one day I was getting a brand new cooker, no the part had arrived, nothing ever happened. I then had to involve my husband's unit whilst he was away in a matter that I would like to have sorted out myself. But I had to go in and complain to the unit, where I'm sure they had far more important things to do than worry about my cooker. However, with two young children I was very concerned that I was unable to provide them a healthy diet they deserved. I also had one young man tell me there was more than fish fingers I could cook under a grill! People promised to phone me and never ever phoned me. I was left extremely frustrated and very concerned. Since then I've had a tap that broke and various other things of which have all now been solved, I was promised a brand new cooker, it has been repaired, but because of my overuse of the grill, the grill door broke... (laughter and applause)... and when the engineer finally came to fit it he said it was unsafe for my now almost two year old to be walking around the kitchen with the grill now that the security bit doesn't attach to the main grill. I still have that problem, he phoned his line manager there and then and on that day he promised within a three week period I would have a brand new cooker. Guess what? I don't have a brand new cooker! I've cancelled days at work, got people to cover for me and it's never been fixed. It isn't acceptable and I cannot believe - I have a copy of your letter that you sent out to all our occupants - It states here that urgent maintenance, loss of oven function, the target is to carry out repairs within 5 working days by the end of July. The gentleman on the phone to me told me that if I was lucky to have a working oven within 3 months to think myself lucky, he then rudely put the phone down on me. How can that have changed so drastically?

(Applause)

Nick Collins: Could I just add to that please, I'm Claire's welfare officer, and as such, now I am appalled by the fact that you are removing customer care officers, customer care officers!... (applause)... what you are actually doing is then imparting that

problem over to me as the Unit Welfare Officer. I already, as a unit who sends a lot of people away on operations, have a fairly full day. I'm quite content to take on that responsibility but why are you removing a tried and tested system when it's working and taking it away, I just cannot understand.

Sammie Crane: Claire, that's a horrendous story, and I mean you are not the only person here with a story like that, that's the really shameful thing and I think that is very sad. What I would like to go back to is your original point about the local connection I have already said it. Peter, what is the plan, what is going to happen? Claire's just made the point, we need someone locally who can come back to us I mean you can see how valuable it is to have someone who is interested in how we are.

Peter Dunt: There will be local connection. May I go back please to what we are aiming to do with the housing prime contract, which is actually to make sure that people do come to the times that are stipulated? That they actually turn up as well. Now we will get that to work I promise you and if we do not then we certainly will. The previous system could be said to be better, but we will not then need so many people because you will not then be complaining. However we are not getting rid of all of the local people and that is a misapprehension if that is understood to be the case.

Patrick Eade: Do you have a time frame for that because I think that people would like to see local help for local people because at the moment the computer says no.

(laughter and applause)

Peter Dunt: And that is perfectly fair comment. We do, the time scale as mentioned in my speech is actually to get the housing information centres and the 40 plus housing officers are actually arranged and in place by April next year. (exclamations from the crowd) I mean they are there now but ...

Patrick Eade: If they are there now could they not identify themselves because it is a long time to the 1st of April 07!

Peter Dunt: Well to be fair actually they have identified themselves and a lot of the people are out there. Also what I did say earlier on which I think is very important is that we are now going to bring together the different elements of the repairs and maintenance and the allocation which is more akin to the old organisation I admit and that is good so that actually all of the people in Defence Estates are joined up to deliver that particular care that is required. It is also a fact that we have got to do it with a lot of the other people who are actually down there on the ground including Unit Welfare Officers. Now we are also actually introducing and MHS are introducing some other people who are now making contact with the Unit Welfare Officers so that we've got a chain of communication open there as well.

Patrick Eade: There's a gentleman straight in front of me with a blue polo shirt on in the middle at the back.

Capt Don Buds: Thank you. I am currently a serving welfare officer serving with the proud but enviable task of taking 147 wives from Aldershot which had a fantastic standard of accommodation, and they are now living in Cyprus in pits. I commend Rosie

for the statement that she made. I'm living in a house that hasn't been touched for 50 years. However, what is in place out there that I think is vital as the gentleman said earlier, is the contact is that care and customer officer. It's there and it works. The girls have somebody that they can report to, to get the job done. And what happens when the modernisation in Cyprus happens? Who are they going to phone? Because the standard of work in Cyprus of the tradesman is well below what you would accept in Britain anyway. That's why I'm living in a house that's 53 years old, no air conditioning, no central heating, and yes, it does get cold in Cyprus - minus 2 in January and plus 5 outside my house. Now I've got families with young kids moving from central heating in Aldershot to literally living in caves. It's not acceptable in this modern age, I'm sorry.

(Applause)

Roger Parr: I'm Roger Parr, I'm the Assistant Chief of Staff for Cyprus and I can give you a little bit of an update for housing programme. It was mentioned earlier that next year we are going to get about 250 new houses built in Akrotiri and then there is a plan to refurbish 1051 quarters in the Eastern Sovereign Based Area and in the west. Sorry Western Sovereign base Area and the east. You're quite right the condition of the quarters is awful, there's no two ways about it. But what we are doing with the new houses that we are building, they will have central heating, so they'll be warm in the winter, ah, not sure whether they'll have air conditioning, that's all part of the assessment survey, so there's a real move there to take things forward, as far as repairs are concerned we are actually pretty good at getting our repairs done fairly quickly actually a lot better than we are in the UK, certainly from my experience. As for future repairs, the Defence Estates have actually gone out to contract and that's just recently been awarded and certainly the indications that I'm getting is that we will actually get a better response than we have now. And I think better than we have in the UK. Does that answer your question?

Previous welfare officer: I agree, there's not a problem with the response, it's the standard of work. However what I will say, and I will defend them to the hilt, they work to the best of their ability and if there is a problem they will get it done and I would just like to iterate it's that interface between the wives, they can go there and they can speak, and especially if they flutter their eyelashes they'll get the job done. No and it does, and it works. I just wish the labour was a little bit better.

Helen Hall: I'm Helen Hall AFF Coordinator in Cyprus. This refurbishment of SFAs (Service Family Accommodation) across British Forces Cyprus - is there any guarantee or ring fencing in place to keep this funding? The start dates for the work keep getting pushed back and we're concerned that the funding will be lost. There's hardly been any improvements made to these married quarters for over 50 years. And they are badly in need of refurbishment as Capt Don Buds has said.

(Applause)

Roger Parr: I can answer that question again, certainly the funding is in for the refurbishment, sorry the new build for next year, the refurbishment that is subject to an assessment study at the moment. That assessment study is going to look at two things, refurbishing the houses or actually indeed new builds. If the cost of refurbishment is at roughly at about the 80% point then I think we will look at new build. Now that line as

far as the start work is concerned, it is later on next year, October time, September/October time when we have the results of the assessment study, Helen, we will have a better idea. But I'm very concerned, what I don't want to do and I have been saying ever since I've been in Cyprus is that I don't want to give a specific date for when we are going to start because I don't want to disappoint people by constantly going back and saying it's being delayed a month, delayed a month and delayed another month. I want to give firm dates when we are ready to go. But the funding lines are there and they still remain CBS priority for works services.

Nicole Silvie (from Tidworth): I am one of the lucky ones in one of your brand new build houses. I would call them cheap and cheerful, considering nearly everybody has got trouble with them and it starts off with leaking roofs. I've got tiles falling off the walls and I've now got mould behind my shower. I've reported it, I've got allergic asthma, I can't go in my own bathroom because I get an asthma attack. And it was done as a not even booked in when I called up. After my families' officer calling up they moved it on to an urgent which just gets, nothing has been done! And it's going on with everybody in my neighbourhood. So, new houses, if they don't get checked and not done properly you might as well not build them and just do the good old ones up.

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: I mean it's a perfectly fair point which I accept. I have actually visited the houses at Tidworth and I personally thought they were rather good. I don't see anyone else here from Tidworth, the new houses as indeed the ones at Glencourse that I have been to and the ones at Marchwood and some other places I mean I have not interestingly heard criticism of the new houses. The old ones lots of it but not the new ones before.

Tara Brown: We have the same problem in Aldershot as well, I am the AFF co-ordinator for Aldershot and we do have the same problem with the new houses there.

Patrick Eade: Time for just one more question, I'm sorry if we've run out of time. Please keep talking to people over lunch.

Kate Rose: My name's Kate Rose, I'm the Garrison Welfare Support Officer for Tidworth and Bulford and I made a promise to a lady from 22 Engineer Regiment that I would bring her question to this conference. In your opening address, Vice Admiral, you mentioned three main priorities that you would address. Houses must be up to standard and on time, missed appointments must be brought to an acceptable level or at least obliterated and a level of professional advice given for all works completed. I'd like to bring attention to that second point on missed appointments and actually throughout this entire morning that point has been brought up again and again. But what has not been brought up and it has been confirmed by MHS at a conference on the 18th May that compensation will be paid to families who lose through economic loss. I have a lady, I have a bill in my bag outside, for £2,500: she is a self employed lady, she could not be here today and I am here speaking on her behalf. I would like to give you that bill please, at lunch to pass on to DE. That lady is just the tip of the iceberg, the Army Welfare Service has three contact houses in Tidworth and Bulford and we have lost over a thousand pounds in income that is for a non-public account that we then put back into maintaining the community for service families. That income has also had a bill raised

and sent through 3 UK Div for the same type of compensation and I would like an answer on that as well please. Thank you.

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: I was unaware certainly of what MHS might have said, I don't know whether Hugh wishes to but I can tell you quite clearly there is not a system in place I can tell you what we do do in some instances and what we have done is to downgrade quarters where things have not been done and should have been done. But at the moment there is not a system of compensation in force, unless Hugh you are going to tell me something different.

Patrick Eade: Hugh, can you tell us something different?

Hugh Porter: I can clarify the issue here. Where we have clearly been at fault at Modern Housing Solutions, we have already taken on board people's applications for missed appointments and we have been paying people out against those where we have clearly been at fault. And so we will deal with those - we have quite a few in place at the moment. And we are actually contacting people and making sure that we are dealing with those. It's quite a distinct issue, quite separate from anything that Defence Estates might do in terms of housing downgrade etc which is still in force. This is where we have explicitly missed appointments and we are taking those on board and reviewing those and taking action.

(The panel were then asked to sum up)

Chris Baker (DG Services Personnel Policy): Clearly the concerns in the audience are very much about delivery of housing. Just to say very briefly on the policy side we are doing a few strands of work to help improve hopefully access for service families to their own accommodation. We've got the long service advance of pay in, that's had its terms and conditions rationalised between the three services last December. We know from the feedback to the Armed Forces Pay Review Board that a lot of you consider that it is not a sufficiently large sum to address the realities of the modern housing market and we know that that is very fair comment. We are looking at other ways that we can improve home ownership packages through something called the strategic remuneration review about which you'll here much more as it moves ahead during the course of the year. We're looking to be as innovative and explorative as we can in that. We're also trying to get access for service families for the government's key worker living programme which supports those on lower incomes who provide valuable support to the community. The previous minister, Mr Touhig had a very useful and helpful first meeting with his opposite number in the Department for Communities in local government and we think we've got a strong case to add service families to the list of those who can qualify for the key worker living programme shared equity schemes. We've also been working with Shared Equity Services a private venture company which is constructing a package targeted at service people which has been advertised in the most recent edition of Housing Matters and will shortly be finalised for launch we think around July. So just to let you know a few of the things that are going on.

Lt Gen John McColl: I take away 2 issues, the first one is to improve the current delivery and I think the big thing to come out of that from the body of the floor is local

interface, local control (applause) and the requirement for a single point of accountability for housing, not splitting it up. And the second point I have is to do with investment and that's a separate issue, a defence issue rather than a DE issue I would suggest and raising the profile of it.

Sammie Crane: it's been very emotive. I think we only really scratched the top of it here today. Sitting here we've really felt how bad it is for you out there and I think that's what I take away. It makes difficult listening actually and let's hope that what people hear today will move forwards.

Rosie Brown: I'd just like to leave you with the thought that if this was the fire service or the police service it would be a national scandal. Somehow it is acceptable for people who are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for their families to cope with this and I think that is a very clear message, we need to send to people.

(Applause)

Peter Dunt: There have been a lot of shells and I am honestly grateful to have been here to hear that. There are two essential issues here. One John has mentioned is resources and I will certainly champion as much as I can to do whatever I can to get more resources to put into housing, but its not just that the other key issue is to make this housing prime contract work. I can assure you that this situation is not acceptable to me, any more than it is to any of you. I am listening, we are listening collectively as a team I can assure you of that. I can assure you too that we will act and I can assure you thirdly that it will get better.

Patrick Eade: thank you all for your time I think we can come to the conclusion that communication is definitely a two way street.