

Report of the Cabinet member for Better Homes Submitted to the DMCs - September 2022

Introduction

Even in normal times the provision, financing and management of social housing has been described a “minefield”. One needs to be able to look into the future and not only predict problems, but predict reactions to a problem, and swiftly put in place the necessary mitigations.

However these are not “normal times”. The challenges facing social housing in a post pandemic, post Grenfell, and post Brexit climate are genuinely unprecedented. The cost of living crisis, spiralling inflation and fuel costs, the impact on supply chains and ability to secure the right expertise and parts, are all having a crippling blow, not just on Camden, but on the whole sector.

This national crisis is exacerbated by chronic shortage and decline in numbers of social rented homes. The size of waiting lists in places like Camden outnumber availability several fold, and often what is available is the wrong type of homes for the size of families in our demographics. Government housing policies dictated to local authorities have led to the more “vulnerable” being prioritised for social housing only. This is leading to a dominant demographic in Council homes, which in turn has led to a greater need for support, rise of ASB, and mental health issues, and unfair stigmatisation of social housing. At the same time there has been a marked underfunding for social rented homes. Compounded by the Government-enforced four-year social rent reductions, a form of rent control, all this has created the perfect storm in Camden which has resulted in a £180m gap on maintenance budgets.

My steer to officers has been to do whatever is necessary to ensure improvements are achieved through efficiencies in whatever we do for our residents. We need to embrace learning as part of everyday working, setting us on a journey towards being proactive in whatever we do. Undoubtedly, recent events have put a spanner in the works on how fast we have been able to progress with these strategies.

Notwithstanding this, being honest about failures, accepting there are problems, and then having effective strategies to eradicate those problems has been at the forefront of how I have been working so far. This also includes the need to have an **effective communication strategy** so that all those impacted can have the confidence that issues are genuinely being addressed.

Most of my submissions below relate to our recovery plans from the pandemic. I attempt to explain where we are in this journey and the challenges we face in housing, what my priorities are and my own vision for a housing service fit for our times. No doubt there will be further challenges down the road and they will be met with resilience and a determination to resolve them. And I am prepared to work with all my colleagues on the Council, officers, and residents who may have something to offer on anything I am doing or any new initiative I may have missed.

A “can do” proactive working culture

One of the most complex challenges in Housing has been to get closer to tenants, working with them on issues with their estates and homes and be easier to connect

with - and move to a neighbourhood-based holistic approach. Our Landlord Service is already modelled to provide this. I know our Neighbourhood Housing Officers, are all eager to establish positive working relationships with tenants in their patches so that we are seen to be providing a “one council” joined up efficient service, addressing issues proactively. One of the most challenging areas of work is dealing with antisocial behaviour. This takes up a great deal of officer resource, and it is reactive, mostly without practical resolution for neighbour disputes. I am working with Cllr Pat Callaghan in her new cabinet role, to see what else we can do to empower officers to deliver on our ambitions in providing a proactive holistic service as a “one council”, nipping emerging problems in the bud.

Improving the estates environment

I am already working with colleagues and officers on having a plan to improve the environment of each estate through our “Estates Mission” work. Looking at vacant spaces ie undercrofts, introducing parking for more sustainable transport (EV points, cycle parking etc) and using urban designers to create better environments and with food growing where possible. No doubt, my Cabinet advisor Cllr Eddie Hanson will be producing some interesting ideas here, and I am looking forward to work with him on this mission.

Grassroots resident engagement

Our TRAs do a fantastic job in representing their communities. However this can be taxing work for them. So I want to support them. I want to involve and engage and empower tenants at an estates level. To test this approach we have been running inclusive wide ranging engagement activity as part of the Chalcots major works project and we are also developing a participatory budgeting pilot at Hillgrove. So I know this works and the pay off for everyone involved is immeasurable. I want to devolve services into neighbourhoods so tenants can shape this, and frontline staff can work with them and make meaningful changes fast. I am keen to work with the Participation Team and with Cllr Anna Wright in Cabinet, as I have been throughout last year in shaping this.

The Housing Repairs Service has come under a lot of pressure in the past year, particularly as pent-up demand from the pandemic led to a peak in repairs. We have responded by restructuring the service – to bring down call waiting times, and to realistically prioritise work according to urgency and impact, and residents’ level of need.

My priority here is to improve the accuracy of diagnosing genuine emergencies, and to bring down non urgent repairs waiting times to pre-pandemic levels within the next six months. We also need to promote our newly created “damp and mould” team which is doing some fantastic work. I am also closely following performance of our Mechanical and Electrical contractors. In particular, I have asked to see an improvement plan for the performance of our Lifts and communal lighting contracts, closely followed by our two heating contracts.

Having said that, I am pleased with the determination of the team to improve and get things right. We are exceeding our expectations with our covid recovery plan:

- Channel shift to reporting using our online form, webchat and now SMS, has not generated a single formal complaint as it has freed up telephone lines for those who cannot report using these other methods. Furthermore SMS and webchat incorporates a live translation service, our next innovation will be video calling so people can show us their repair issue if that would help
- As we progress dealing with the massive backlog following lockdown, telephone lines are being freed for those who have genuine emergencies and/or have some sort of vulnerability
- Average daily call volumes down from around 650 to just over 100
- Online reporting up from 3% to over 40%, all in one year

As I said earlier, it is important to recognise failures and strive to improve things continuously.

However we also must acknowledge that the Council has responsibility for around 23,500 tenanted homes and over 9,000 leasehold properties. I am incredibly proud of our frontline operatives in repairs, for stepping up during lockdown who were redeployed delivering food to vulnerable residents, and then came back to an avalanche of backlog, and managed to bring numbers down methodically and resiliently.

Chalcots

The two contracts are proceeding as planned with cladding and windows replacement programme. Blashford Tower is on a design and build contract due to the complexity of the structure and corner windows. The show-flat has now been viewed by all but five households who have mobility or other reasons and all residents who viewed the show-flat have left satisfied with what they have seen.

The remaining four towers are on a build only contract and crucially now the tested and approved methodology of installation of windows mean lack of access will no longer hold up works. Scaffolding is already going up in Bray and Taplow Towers, which we anticipate works would be accelerated due to the revised installation methodology. I have asked officers to report on any time slippage for completion of works for Dorney and Burnham Towers.

Addressing fuel poverty

We are progressing a number pilot retrofit projects which target our most inefficient homes. This will see grant funding and Council resources used to install insulation and heat pumps. This autumn we will be bidding for more grant to expand this programme. We have also completed our analysis and built our programme to reach net zero and are proactively working with a range of industry experts and other boroughs to test and evaluate new funding models. These models are partly self-funding and if pilots are successful will be rolled out on a larger scale in the next five years.

Empty homes

In June last year I gave an undertaking to halve the average number of days a flat remains empty, and I am pleased to say that we are on course to reach that target, which is saving the Housing Revenue account £1 million in lost rental income. We do need to bring this down further and I have been working with officers to achieve this.

Our new target is to achieve a further £500k savings for each of the two following years in lost rental income by improving turnaround and letting properties faster.

Overcrowding

We need to look at our Housing Allocations Policy to ensure we are not missing a trick and that our priorities reflect the changing circumstances of our times. When we last reviewed our policy, this resulted in hundreds of more children to be lifted out of overcrowding. I think we need to go further but we need to be mindful of “winners and losers” when setting new priorities. I have already brought housing management and allocations together under one Director, started the process on reviewing whether there is more we can do with the allocations service and importantly change the service to an empathetic one, focused around the person, and helping them in other ways if rehousing is not an option.

I will work with other colleagues in children services or social care on this as I already have with Angela Mason when she was on the Council.

The Cost of Living crisis and developing a rent strategy

Rents and service charge increases have been always linked to inflation. This is the rent convergence government formula which comes to an end in 2025. With inflation at runaway levels we need to develop a rent strategy to ensure we have a coherent and evidence based way of increasing rents, reflecting spending needs and pressures together with efficiency savings, instead of making annual decisions based on short term reactive way of working. This will need to be developed working with all stakeholders and tenants.

I am proud of our energy procurement team who have managed to keep energy costs down for our own residents who are on bulk gas and district heating systems. Our bulk and forward buying strategy has resulted in up to 30% cheaper energy which has been passed on directly to our residents in these difficult times.

Leaseholder services

Improving efficiency in the way we implement our major works in maintaining and improving our homes will undoubtedly reduce complaints from our leaseholders. However we also need to improve our communications and processes in the service, to implant more empathy in the way we work and interact with our leaseholders and be better communicators.

The Private Rented Sector

We have been leaders in London and in England in holding rogue landlords to account. I am keen to progress with the expansion of our licensing regime beyond HMOs to cover all private rented properties if the research and evidence supports this.

Leasehold Buyback Scheme

I am proud of this initiative which saw hundreds of council homes lost to right-to-buy come back to Council ownership which is either another safe and secure home for a family, or a temporary home tackling homelessness and keeping families in Camden. I am keen to expand this further.

Closing remarks

I am committed to attend the meetings of the DMCs and answer any emerging questions, at the same time providing regular updates. I will normally focus on one theme per meeting in my reports, however I would welcome any steer from the DMC members on areas they might wish me to update on in future meetings.

Cllr Meric Apak – report submitted on 16 August 2022