

Report of the Cabinet Member for Better Homes Housing Scrutiny Committee – 21 February 2023

Introduction

1. As the Cost-of-Living crisis deepened in 2022, the Council continues to prepare for the future, striving to deliver the best possible service to our residents. In my view, transformational change is essential, because I strongly believe the HRA and Housing Service must adapt and must improve if it is to survive and provide the services expected by our residents.
2. My priority is always to ensure that any “efficiencies” are from true improvements in ways of working, combatting silo work ethics, optimising good practice, and avoid front-line service cuts.

Housing management in the community

3. Our neighbourhood housing officers and other staff have stepped up support to tenants. In October they took on a new role helping tenants who need it to access support from the Council’s Cost-of-Living Crisis fund.
4. In November our tenant visiting programme began and is now in full swing. Our aim is to visit as many tenants as possible during 2023 and into 2024 to offer advice, help and support when it is needed. We are prioritising visits to our most overcrowded households, and at the same time, we are reviewing how we work with tenants who live in homes that are bigger than they need.

Enhanced support for our caretakers

5. One of the most notable innovations to come out of the 2018 Caretaking Review was the mobile Caretaking Support and Response team (CSR), tasked with supporting Caretakers by delivering enhanced cleaning and project work. This has continued to great effect in the last year.
6. Residents are keenly aware of the boost this team provides our estates and how it works closely with Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs) to identify and deliver work that is beyond the scope of Caretakers, but not enough of a priority for Capital works programmes. This team is a practical response to bridging that gap and delivers improvements for our residents quickly and in a cost-effective way.
7. The CSR have proven, time and again, to be a huge asset to the Caretaking Service and I am pleased to confirm that we are introducing a second team to increase our capacity and continue this success.

Tackling parking issues on estates

8. The first estate Traffic Management Order (TMO) was introduced on the Maiden Lane Estate in 2020, addressing health and safety concerns on the estate, which had been suffering from high pressure parking demand and non-compliant parking. There was a high degree of unauthorised parking and several incidents where the Fire Brigade reported being unable to access all parts of the estate in the time they needed to get to an emergency. In addition, there were frequent bin collections missed as the council's contractor was prevented from accessing some parts of the estate due to obstructive parking.
9. Two years on, the conclusion of the changes to Maiden Lane pilot has improved parking compliance on the estate, with emergency vehicles and waste trucks able to access the estate quickly, footways kept clear and legitimate permit holders, including disabled residents able to access parking and use their bays safely.
10. Following the success of this work, and the proven benefits to residents, we are proposing to extend the TMO model across the borough. Late in 2022 we held a borough-wide consultation to get residents views on TMOs, and while we are currently waiting for that report to be published, early indications are that residents are keen for this change to happen, to address the endemic issue of non-compliant and inconsiderate parking, and provide safer site layouts and better service-vehicle access.
11. Introducing a TMO is complex, requiring a very prescriptive process to be followed to meet regulatory requirements. It means however that when properly implemented, parking on estates becomes subject to the same enforcement legislation as is undertaken on the borough's highways.
12. At this time, we consider that not all estates in Camden will benefit from a TMO, however as we work through our list of priority sites it might become apparent that more estates should be included in the programme. We will continue to monitor parking on all our estates to ensure that all residents receive the best outcome from this programme.

Promoting our "meter reading service"

13. Due to recent uncertainty in the energy market, we know how important it is for our residents to have access to their electrical meter readings in order to manage energy consumption effectively for finance and budgeting. For many residents this information can be difficult to obtain, as in some older buildings meters are often located in electrical intake cupboards, where access is restricted for safety reasons and is limited to qualified staff and utility company personnel only.

14. Our Meter Reading service accesses these restricted areas on request and support residents with meter readings and provides access for top-up meters. They will also work with residents and their utility providers to relocate prepayment energy meters inside homes, helping to address fuel poverty, and facilitating smart meter installations and meter resets and access for other electrical works. We are monitoring service demand to ensure we continue to support residents and help to prevent fuel poverty.

Striving to reach out to vulnerable and disabled residents

15. Across the organisation, we recognise that our support must be accessible to all our residents and are working to better enable disabled or other vulnerable residents to engage with the Council.

16. For example, we recognise that how a resident initially engages with the housing repairs centre must be inclusive and accessible for all. For the past two years, we have rolled out many new contact-channel options. These include options for deaf residents and for those where English may not be a resident's first language. Furthermore, not everyone is comfortable or able to have a telephone conversation, so we now provide multi-lingual Live-chat, WhatsApp and SMS reporting options, which are already proving to be a massive success with very high customer satisfaction levels being recorded.

17. The team aims to have in place a new video calling platform that would enable deaf and other more vulnerable residents the opportunity to have a 'virtual face-to-face' conversation with one of the team with the ability to bring translators onto the call as well.

18. We are also keen to make sure that all our tenants have the opportunity to talk to their neighbourhood housing officer, and that's why visiting tenants at home and seeing them face to face remains at the heart of our service, if that's how they prefer to engage with the council.

19. We rely on residents to let us know about the issues in their neighbourhoods that need tackling. When their housing officer is a familiar face, tenants are more likely to contact us if they need help, or to let us know if they are worried about a neighbour.

20. As Camden faces significantly higher rates of mental ill health than the national average, we have a team of mental health professionals working alongside our neighbourhood housing teams. The team support our housing officers to work with

tenants who struggle with mental health issues, improving the services they receive and strengthening links between housing teams and specialist mental health services

21. As part of our visiting programme we are asking tenants to let us know if they would need help if they needed to evacuate their home in an emergency. Improving our records on this will help services to respond more quickly to keep people safe. At the same time, asking tenants to let us know if they struggle with their mobility provides an opportunity to also establish if they need support with aids or adaptations in their home or advice about disability benefits, or signposting to appropriate help with blue badge applications.
22. All housing services will continue to explore more ways in which the provision we offer focuses on addressing all our residents' needs, including by working closely with colleagues across the Council, such as Contact Camden, to share these experiences and best practices.

Money

23. The events of the past few years have created an almost perfect storm for Camden's Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The period from 2016-2020 saw enforced annual rent reductions of 1% as part of the government's efforts to reduce welfare expenditure, even though, this did not include the private rented sector. This resulted in a cumulative loss of rental income stream amounting to just under £70 million, and it meant that the HRA entered the current period of economic volatility with its finances in a weakened state. Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine have all contributed to inflation reaching a 40 year high with CPI at 11.1% in October, which has put unprecedented pressure on the costs of energy, repairs, maintenance, and housing services. This is alongside increased regulation for fire and building safety and increased legal compliance required of social landlords in the Social Housing Regulation Bill introduced to Parliament in the last year. Alongside this we are actively addressing instances of damp and mould that are constantly emerging.
24. At the same time funding for the HRA has consistently failed to keep pace with these rising costs. With no central government support available, the Council will need to make some difficult decisions to secure the long-term viability of the HRA.

My focus for the next year

25. In the recent Joint Meeting of District Management Committees (DMCs), a key theme that I heard was a perception of poor and disjointed communication from the Council, both internally and externally. A second key message I took away was a perception of wastefulness, and inefficiencies in how we do things.

26. It is clear to me that there is a lot more we can do to improve these two areas in how we work. However, I also know there has been a lot done to improve things, and we must recognise and acknowledge this work as well, as I have tried to set out some of this work in this report.
27. But to do that effectively, we must be better communicators. For instance, if residents are unaware of why the repairs service has been slower to react, or why scaffolding remains up for months and years, then, they will come up with their own reasons for this.
28. Residents need to know that our repairs service has had to catch up with more than half a million backlog of enquiries due to the shutdown in the pandemic without extra resources. They need to know that, this has also meant the way we live, combined with increased leaks from above and roofs, has led to a significant increase in damp and mould, and as we are now proactively seeking out damp and mould cases, our workload in this area has shot up more than tenfold. They also need to know that capital spending has had to be diverted away from routine Better Homes works so that we could comply with the extra regulatory safety requirements in fire safety works. And they need to know that, when there is masonry falling off our buildings, we need to put up scaffolding to protect those below while we scope and cost remedial works, set out to identify increasingly depleted funding sources to do the necessary works, consult leaseholders and tenants, and then go out to tender and appoint a contractor. All this takes time, especially when our reserves are under pressure. We live in a climate in which a government can still raid HRA funds through the front door by placing unfunded legislative burdens and rent caps to reduce welfare budgets in its own Treasury coffers. All this adds to delay, and that means scaffolding will unfortunately have to remain in place for far longer than we would like it to. But we need to explain this and while I strongly believe officers are leaving no stone unturned, we also need to be open to suggestions on how we might be able to improve this.
29. Having said this, I agree that these two areas are giving rise to increased dissatisfaction to residents and will be my focus for the next 12 months.
30. As well as focusing on effective communication with our residents, responding to their emails within acceptable protocols and throughout the ranks, I do firmly believe that our transformation agenda will lead to working in more efficient and effective ways maximising available resources and extracting the most out of every pound we spend.

31. Our two directors, Glendine Shepherd and Gavin Haynes, are leading on this and I thank them for their hard work in this past year. However, helping me drive this change have also been tenant representatives on our DMCs, fellow councillors, and our frontline officers, some of whom have recently agreed to defer their holidays to help colleagues address the increased demands in our damp and mould cases. I would like to particularly thank them for their thoughtfulness.
32. Finally, I pay tribute to our DMC representatives who tried to grapple with the harsh difficulties of maintaining a healthy HRA and recognising the need to pay for the maintenance of our homes at a decent standard. Increasing rents, service charges and energy prices to keep up with high inflation and rising costs at a time of cost-of-living crisis is a painful exercise, and I witnessed this pain etched in the faces of our DMC reps when they contemplated the available options in our January DMC meetings. Ultimately, those decisions were tight with a number of abstentions, and the majority supporting the recommended increases was very slim. It was the heavy caveats attached on more efficiency and limiting waste, which has influenced my decision to focus my attention on these areas. Change does not happen quickly. It takes courage to recognise what does not work so well. But once this happens, improvements do follow. My personal commitment, and that of our officers' will ensure that improvement comes.

Report Ends

Cllr Meric Apak – 9 February 2023