

Report to DMCs – December 2023 – Final Cabinet Member for Better Homes

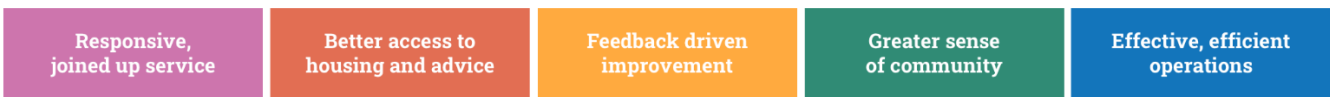
My last substantial report to DMCs earlier this year talked about the direction of travel in the state of Housing Revenue Accounts across London and a consistent pressure borne out of the events since 2016, which began with Government cuts, targeting our only source of income stream and is a cumulative loss to the HRA.

I also reported that we were embarking on a Housing Transformation journey. A vision rooted on principles delivering a service based on transparency, empathy, which is relational, and one which measures success, aligned to the consumer standards measured by the Housing Regulator.

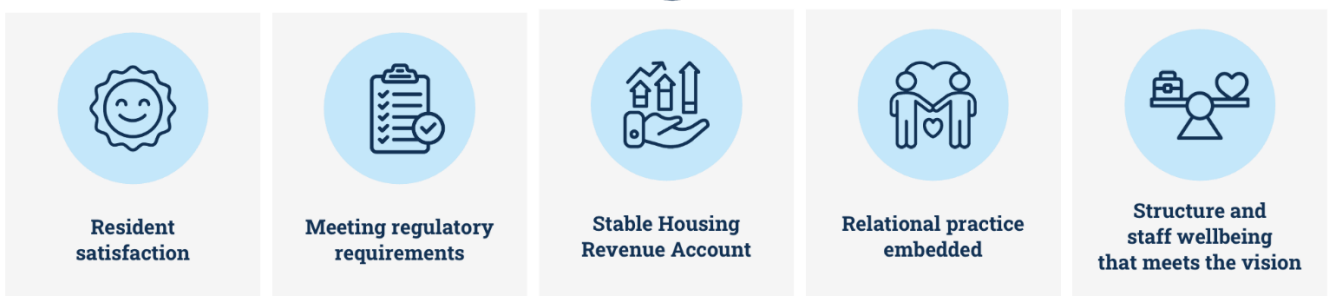
The figure below is a summary of these Principles being developed:



How will we know we have been successful?



Suggested measures of success:



In fact, it is fair to say that the transformation journey has already started and there have been several changes within the repairs and housing services designed to improve our services and to make us work better.

We have been listening to our tenants through tenancy visits, and the intensive tenant participation programme, where over 4,750 homes have had personal contact, and the pop-up events on 15 council estates where we have been able to respond to immediate issues for residents and provide information they have been able to use for themselves.

Officers have also been responding to feedback about difficulties in raising repairs orders by introducing a host of options to make the reporting experience easier for residents and more efficient. This will include reporting options such as online, webchat, text messaging and WhatsApp, where residents can also easily upload photographs. These options will not work for everyone, and we are still on a journey to perfecting these relatively new processes. Despite this, efficiency has already been realised, because more than 80% of residents are now using these methods, therefore freeing up the telephone lines for those who have no option but to make contact by phone.

A series of 10 **“How to” repair videos**, have been produced offering helpful tips and advice for home repairs that fall within tenant responsibilities, or give information on how to identify matters that need to be reported. Early feedback has mentioned how helpful these videos have been. And they are very accessible as they’ve been translated into Bengali, French, Somali, Spanish and British Sign Language. They are available on the council’s own YouTube channel: <https://www.camden.gov.uk/home-repair-videos>

We have made structural changes within the repairs service and have some planned within Housing so that our teams are better set up to proactively provide services in an empathetic way, and are more easily able to use feedback to drive improvements.

Temporary teams were set up to focus on rent arrears work which has been very challenging, and to focus on voids where we’ve seen a 21% reduction in the average time it takes to let a home over the past year. There is also an action plan to improve how we carry out repairs work to voids; and there is work underway to look at certain areas of our allocations process.

Our **Neighbourhoods way of working pilot** in Kentish Town means staff from estate management, tenancy management and other council and local services are located together in order to more effectively provide co-ordinated services for residents.

In response to feedback, we are trialling a new **antisocial behaviour task force** which works across council departments to tackle issues and jointly improve processes such as the case escalation procedures and how the Council maintains contact and communication with residents reporting ASB.

Finally, we have taken a range of measures to improve the safety of our homes and our residents.

Other upcoming areas of work that need a very quick mention are:

- working to achieve Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) accreditation
- reviewing how we respond to complaints and enquiries
- increasing options for residents to be engaged in their services
- responding to overcrowding
- improving our use of systems and data to enable us to provide better services
- and generally changing the culture to be much more focused on outcomes for residents.

Ensuring we have a stable Housing Revenue Account will be key in all this, and it is worth reminding ourselves that we are embarking on this transformation with both hands tied behind our backs.

Previously, I reported that the Government-enforced rental income loss stood at around £79m in 2020. However, because of its cumulative nature, this effective disinvestment stands at around £125m to date which represents around 65% of our annual total revenue spending. This, while Gove has had to hand back £1.9bn to the Treasury because it could not administer the process in a timely manner, moneys which was earmarked for the maintenance and repair of crumbling council homes.

I also reported on inflationary impacts from the war in Ukraine, the effects of Brexit and the pandemic, the impact of increased fire safety works following the Grenfell fire, and more lately the cost-of-living crisis. Combined, these pressures alone amount to some £300m which we had never planned for and had to be paid for either through reserves or by deprioritising other planned expenditure.

The sad reality is that the financial picture is getting worse for housing. Our repairs budget is projected to be overspent by at least £5m (we are looking at options to reduce this). And the gap between what we need to spend on major works to maintain our buildings, and what we have available, is predicted to grow from £180m in the stock condition survey around five years ago, to well above £200m. The analysis will be firmed up by officers in December and January and we will come back to DMCs early 2024 with the details.

It is important to note that inflationary rent and service charge increases do not improve the fiscal position. Even in a world without the latest seismic events, these increases only help the Housing Department to keep its head just above the water while the tide keeps rising. And as for energy charge increases, we must continue to insulate our homes wherever possible, speed up heat metering and installing heating controls with every heating upgrade to stop wasting energy and bring costs for residents down.

Given the fiscal backdrop and the enormity of the tasks ahead, it is not surprising that some HRAs in London and beyond are reportedly teetering on a precipice and may run out of their reserves at current spending levels. This is not sustainable, and all Councils will be looking at how they can curtail spending where possible, while we coordinate efforts across London and lobby for the additional funding, particularly for the new burdens we are required to undertake by the Government. This will of course mean that Camden, like many other local authorities, won't be able to do some of the things we normally would do for our residents.

Notwithstanding all the doom and gloom, officers and I, are determined to bring about a change in the way we work, creating an environment in which what we do revolves around the needs and priorities of our residents.

REPORT ENDS - as at 7 November 2023

Cllr Meric Apak