

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Update from Cabinet Member for Better Homes	
REPORT OF Cabinet Member for Better Homes	
FOR SUBMISSION TO September DMC cycle	DATE September 2024
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT</p> <p>Councillor Sagal Abdi-Wali, Cabinet Member for Better Homes, provides an update on several areas across the portfolio for the September DMC cycle.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information</p> <p>No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report.</p> <p>Contact Officer:</p> <p>Gavin Haynes, Gavin.Haynes@camden.gov.uk Director of Property Management</p> <p>&</p> <p>Glendine Shepherd, Glendine.Shepherd@camden.gov.uk Director of Housing London Borough of Camden 5 Pancras Square London N1C 4AG</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>DMC are asked to note and comment on this update report.</p>	

The Better Homes portfolio takes responsibility for delivering various missions, ambitions and challenges within We Make Camden. The portfolio continues to work

to ensure homes in Camden are safe, well-managed and maintained, while recognising the obstacles we face to deliver such services with limited funds from central government. Despite this, officers across housing have been working with a great deal of care and attention to detail, to deliver the services so many of our Camden residents rely upon.

The cost-of-living crisis has had a huge impact on communities across Camden, which has meant some of our residents have had to reach out for council support for the first time, and many of our communities already in poverty have had their hardships exacerbated. Having a safe and habitable home has become more relevant than ever. These are not only the spaces where people eat, sleep and keep warm, but they are the homes where families come together, young people find their independence and individuals work and study to reach their goals in.

We strongly believe that everyone in Camden should have a place they call home, which is why the Council will continue to prioritise not only helping residents to find somewhere accessible and affordable to live, but making the necessary improvements to resident's houses so that they may become homes.

In *We Make Camden* we set out an ambition for Camden to have enough decent, safe, warm, and family-friendly housing to support our communities. But we know we are facing a national housing crisis, which is particularly acute in London with lack of affordable rent in the private sector, historically poor quality of stock and increasing numbers on our waiting list. We are also experiencing a changing regulatory environment with a more active Regulator for Social Housing. While we welcome increased expectations on how landlords should deliver for their tenants, we are operating in a significantly challenging financial climate. The previous government failed to develop a coherent strategy to fund social housing and through a range of austerity-driven policies, it undermined the basis of the self-financing regime, introduced in 2012. This has left the Housing Revenue Account in Camden, and those across the country, under severe financial pressure.

The roots of this pressure go back to the previous government's austerity policies, the most significant of which were the enforced rent reductions in the period 2016-2020. These rent reductions are estimated to have resulted in a cumulative loss in rental income by 2023/24 of £135m and the HRA's annual rental income is now £30m lower than it would otherwise have been. These are resources that could have been invested to maintain our current stock or to support our house-building efforts.

It should also be noted that the HRA received no direct financial support from government to mitigate the impact of covid.

This means that it has become increasingly difficult for the HRA to remain within its financial means on an annual basis. In recent years, we've been forced to use reserves to balance the books. The use of reserves to fund overspends is not a sustainable approach and has led to their depletion. The Council's strategy is to rebuild the HRA's reserves to a more sustainable level in order to be financially resilient.

Recognising the financial challenge ahead and the need to bolster our financial sustainability within the current funding system, Cabinet agreed as part of 2023/24 budget and rent setting a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to deliver cumulative savings of £2.93m in 2023/24, £6.03m by 2024/25 and £7.51m by 2025/26. The 2024/25 budget agreed by Cabinet added a further £3.9m of savings to the MTFS programme to ensure that we can live within our financial means.

Despite these efforts, there remains significant pressure on our finances. The provisional 2023/24 outturn of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) shows a £1.6m overspend; this will be the fifth year running where we have an overspend. This overspend while significant, would have been substantially higher if corrective actions had not been taken – for example limiting the type of repair work we do, and also looking at how quickly we complete repairs. The pressures faced mainly relate to damp and mould surveys and remedial works, disrepair legal fees and compensation, insurance premiums and interest payable on borrowing.

Looking ahead, our latest medium term financial forecast predicts continued pressures from damp and mould, building safety works and regulatory costs, high interest rates on HRA borrowing, ongoing inflation pressures, insurance, the need for investment in infrastructure such as communal heating and supporting retrofit projects. It also includes increased contributions to reserves essential to secure the long-term financial sustainability of the HRA. We regularly update our forecasts but in all likelihood our current savings programme won't be enough to balance the books for 2025/26.

Our forecast also includes increased contributions Major Repairs Reserve (MRR) which is the primary source of funding for the HRA capital maintenance programme, prioritising investing in the blocks and estates that have the most need. However, MRR alone is unlikely to sufficiently fund the capital programme which is why the council is developing an Asset Management Strategy to be considered by Cabinet later in the year, which will set out a 5 year capital investment plan and how this will be funded.

We believe the national funding system for social housing is fundamentally broken and flawed. A root and branch review of the whole system is required. We will look after our finances locally while working with new government to improve the system. We recently collaborated with other major council landlords to produce a report which sets out concrete solutions to the current crisis¹.

These financial pressures make it imperative that the Council uses HRA resources in the most effective way possible. Based on feedback from our tenants and leaseholders, we are commencing an ambitious Housing and Repairs Transformation programme. We need to ensure we are getting the basics right and are compliant with the new consumer standards while managing our financial envelope. But we also want to change the way we relate and interact with our

¹ <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/assets/attach/279027/Securing-the-Future-of-Council-Housing-Interim-Report.pdf>

residents, so that our staff can really focus on those residents who will need quality human relationships and support.

As I take over the Better Homes portfolio, I have identified the following priorities:

- **Regulator for Social Housing:** From April 2024 all social landlords are expected to meet the new consumer standards introduced by the Regulator for Social Housing (RSH). We have undertaken work to understand our current position and have an action plan in place to work towards compliance across the board. Part of this work will be incorporated into the Housing Transformation programme.

We have also submitted 20 Tenant Satisfaction Measures to the RSH in line with the 30 June deadline. These cover key management information such as safety checks and complaints handling as well as a tenant perception survey which was carried out between Quarter 3 and Quarter 4 2023/24. Details of the outcome of this survey and our performance on the management measures have been published on our [website](#).

- **Temporary Accommodation and homelessness:** Across London we have seen an increasing number of homelessness presentations, with 1,246 (17.4%) more in January 2024 compared to a year earlier, based on data from 27 councils. This is true in Camden where we currently have 808 households living in temporary accommodation and with only 2.3% of rental listings across London affordable to those on the Local Housing Allowance, households are staying in Temporary Accommodation for longer than ever. In addition, the numbers of those rough sleeping has increased hugely with the number of those rough sleeping on a 'single night count' in February 2024 (our last count) nearly double the numbers seen in 2023, 2022 and 2021.

We have taken steps to increase the supply of temporary accommodation, securing £20m grant funding from central government to deliver Round 3 of the Temporary Accommodation Property Procurement (TAPP3) scheme. We have already completed the purchase of 37 properties and have agreed purchases of 13 more, making a total of 50. We have also recently conducted a review of the rough sleeping service, the recommendations of which are being shared with the committee separately. This will inform a review of our homelessness and temporary accommodation provisions to ensure we are able to fully support those who are homeless in our community.

- **Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour:** In response to feedback from tenants around our handling of anti-social behaviour, we have been working on a new Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) policy, which covers our response to ASB both as a landlord and in the public realm. The new policy will be launched in August, and training rolled out to staff. The new policy takes a 'victim-centred' approach to ASB through the use of Risk Assessments, ASB Action Plans, and a strong focus on support and was tested with the Housing and Property Residents Panel.

We also have had a new ASB Taskforce operational since November 2023. Prevention and early intervention ambitions have been incorporated into the taskforce's main aims. This will mean having a longer-term aim of introducing evidence-based system change to include a more holistic approach to understanding and addressing ASB, looking at drivers of ASB and the preventative and de-escalation interventions required for different population cohorts. A lot of this work will build on existing initiatives and services that already contribute to prevention, for example 'designing out crime' initiatives, Estate Action Days, and youth support services / provision of youth spaces.

- **Repairs:** We continue to receive casework on repairs and a high level of disrepair claims for Council residents, and recognise the fundamental importance of preventing and addressing disrepair so our residents' homes are suitable for living in. However, the continued pressure on the repairs services, along with the need to stay within budget, has impacted the average repairs completion target times. To help rectify this, we are focussing on productivity and have applied new reporting tools, increased monitoring by managers across the service and introduced additional controls to limit the level of replacement work being carried out reactively. The overall approach remains to make sure the service stays within its budget so that it can accommodate the pressure's placed on it by new regulatory requirements, disrepair and addressing damp and mould. We are also focussed on how to make sure the asset management strategy and capital programme we are developing is best targeted so that pressure can be relieved on the repairs budget.

We have also made operational changes and held service improvement workshops across repairs, housing, the repairs contact centre and case management teams in response to reviewing Housing Ombudsman case outcomes. This has been supplemented by its self-assessment against the Ombudsman's spotlight reports on damp and mould and Knowledge and Information Management (KIM). The Council also introduced a Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel to help evaluate complaints and discuss the changes that need to be made to service delivery. This work will support the wider housing and repairs transformation project and will improve how we deliver services to residents.

- **Overcrowding:** Nearly one in ten households in Camden are overcrowded, although the level varies across the borough. This is because we do not have the right sized homes for the families living in our borough. To tackle this problem, we have been delivering a family friendly purchasing programme. We plan on purchasing 280 family sized homes (with two or more bedrooms) over the next five years, funded by the disposal of properties that do not meet the needs of our tenants and prospective tenants. By the end of May we had made 4 disposals and acquired 8 new properties. We have also been increasing the amount of affordable floor space through our Community Infrastructure Programme with a

50% increase at Agar Grove once the project is complete. At Godwin and Crowndale we are currently building ten new four-bed social housing properties.

But we know that despite our best efforts to increase the number of family friendly properties, many residents will still be living in overcrowded conditions. After working with a group of overcrowded families last year, we have committed to supporting families with purchasing space saving furniture as well as with arranging storage solutions. We also encourage households to consider 'mutual exchange' where those living in under-occupied properties can swap homes with those who are overcrowded. There have been 26 mutual exchange requests approved so far this year.

- **Fire safety:** Keeping our residents safe in their homes remains a key priority. Last July we received a regulatory notice from the RSH relating to the time we were taking to close actions raised within our Fire Risk Assessments. In response, we drew up an action plan and by May 2024 closed all overdue high-risk actions (down from 400 last June). We also completed the installation of Carbon Monoxide detectors and installed smoke detectors in more than 93% of tenanted homes (the remainder are either due to be delivered or undergoing a 'no access' process). This is a huge achievement by the team although we are continuing to work through the backlog, prioritising the highest risk and oldest actions. We also need to manage resources to ensure we continue to address new arising from ongoing Fire Risk Assessments. The latest update on the voluntary undertaking with the regulator will be shared with the Resident Housing and Fire Safety Advisory Panel.

We are also working to ensure that we are compliant with the new requirements under the Building Safety Act. We have submitted our first five building safety cases for high-rise buildings (those that are over 18 metres high). Under the Building Safety Act we are required to submit Building Safety Case Reports (BSCR) for all high-rise buildings in Camden to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), who are the Building Safety Regulator. We anticipate may be as many as 188 by 2028. It is positive we have a strong team in place ready to undertake this work. We recently shared an update on our Fire and Safety Building Charter with all residents, and are working towards an update for 2023/24 to be shared with the Resident Housing and Fire Safety Advisory Panel. We will ensure that residents will have access to all our fire and building safety advice and information in one place.

- **Improved contact between the Council and tenants:** We know that we residents want to be able to contact the Council easily and to have a good understanding of Council activity in housing and repairs that may impact them. Housing repairs continues to maintain a separate customer service contact centre, and over the last two years has been encouraging channel shift from phone calls to using formats such as WhatsApp and live chat. In May 2024, 84% of all repairs

requests were raised through non-telephony channels, a similar proportion to the preceding months in 2024.

Contact for the majority of housing services is delivered through Contact Camden which has undergone significant transformation in recent months. The implementation of a new target operating model and a new contact system have notably reduced call waiting times. The contact centre now separates simple, transactional queries from more complex calls, meaning the council is able to adopt different strategies for these very different types of enquiry as well as better align resources. Answer rates have increased, with some housing services seeing increased levels of accessibility in the region of 30%. Contact Camden continues to undergo a huge programme of staff training, which will end at the beginning of August and further improvements including an integrated email solution and live chat are scheduled for over the summer. Alongside this work in Contact Camden, we will be reviewing the 'front door' for housing and property services to improve the customer experience and customer journey as part of the Housing Transformation Programme.

- **More open and inclusive participation:** In recent years we have made huge progress in establishing new forums for tenants and leaseholders to have a say in the way the Council delivers housing and property services. In 2022 we launched the Housing and Property Resident Panel which meets six times a year to discuss topics they have decided interests them. The panel has successfully influenced the way we deliver our services, including shaping the job descriptions of Neighbourhood Housing Officers and Caretakers as well as suggested we develop DIY repairs videos. This success informed the creation of the Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel earlier this year.

We have also sought to actively engage with as many of our tenants as possible through our Intensive Tenant Engagement Programme, launched last summer. To date we have knocked on 6070 doors and spoken to 1786 residents. We have received very positive feedback from additional Council presence on our estates therefore a priority will be ensuring this type of engagement is embedded in the way we work in the future. We have convened a group of tenants and leaseholders not engaged in more formal groups to co-design a Resident Action Day which will be held in September (delayed due to the election) and have tested other forms of participation, including participatory budgeting on Hilgrove Estate in Swiss Cottage. These tests will inform a new approach to tenant participation which will be designed as part of the transformation programme to be embedded throughout the housing and repairs service. We need a resident-led approach that is deliberative, democratic, and diverse to lay the foundation for meaningful and active participation to take hold.

- **Leaseholders:** Following the report of the Cabinet Advisor on Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders, we know that we need to do better when working with our leaseholders. A review of our

leaseholders is already underway, with the aim of better understanding how they interact with different services across the Council and identify improvements that can be made.

In a more detailed response to the report which will be shared with Cabinet on 17 July 2024, we set out how we work to guarantee value for money for our leaseholders especially on major works. But more work needs to be done to improve the way the Council communicates with leaseholders and we will be making changes to written communication as well as reviewing the content available on our website. The Housing and Repairs transformation programme should also lead to improved quality of service for leaseholders.

- **Damp and mould:** Tackling damp and mould also remains a priority for the Council. Since we adopted our proactive outreach campaign on Dec 22, we have had over 9000 conversations with our residents on damp and mould. We continue to regularly reach out to over 1000 high-risk households. The number of new requests continues to fall, with current requests totalling around 12 a day. Our dedicated team of 12 full-time Mould Marshalls are achieving to meet our targets of a visit of one working day for emergency requests and ten working days for all others and we have less than 500 active cases. To support our residents better, we have introduced Saturday appointments, which have been very successful, and we offer many ways for residents to report this to us, including multi-lingual options on WhatsApp, SMS, Livechat, video calling, and telephone.

To ensure damp and mould remains front and centre of the Council's priorities, all members of Corporate Management Team have been out on home visits with mould marshalls and over 500 front-line housing and property services staff received damp and mould awareness training in April. Officers are also engaging with other external stakeholders, such as local healthcare providers, to offer more joined-up support in tackling this issue. More detail about current numbers of requests was included in the report shared with Housing Scrutiny in July.

- **Better management of our homes:** The Council is operating within a constrained financial envelope but we also know that parts of our housing stock need significant investment. Therefore, our new housing stock condition survey has been designed to shape a new asset strategy for the Council's homes with the overarching aim of bridging the gap between available resources and required investment. As part of this, the Council will review its five-year capital programme to make sure it targets the most acute priorities, taking pressure off the repairs service, and making best use of our available resources.

While we have, and continue to, make real progress across the better homes portfolio, the scale of the challenge in front of us after years of chronic underinvestment from Central Government is significant. While I welcome the new Labour government and the ambition they have to tackle the national housing crisis, I will be working to push the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

to deliver on that ambition and address the very challenging policy context we are operating in.

As mentioned, we have published a report, along with 19 other Councils from across the UK, setting out five recommendations to the new government. Alongside proposals to address the problems we face in the Housing Revenue Account (as set out above) we have also recommended reforming Right to Buy policies to better support councils to replace council homes that are sold; the government to reform the Affordable Homes Programme and move towards fewer, flexible funding allocations focused on investing in existing homes and building new and replacement homes; and the government to introduce new Green and Decent Homes capital funding programme to address the shortfall in Council funding for the works required to ensure all council housing can meet the standard of safety, decency and energy efficiency we know is needed by 2030.

However, I do remain confident that our council team's dedication coupled with the commitment from our tenants and leaseholders will support us to overcome these challenges.

I am excited to be taking on this portfolio and intend to lead on the priorities set out in this report, in particular championing our social housing work. Resident participation and scrutiny involvement is built into our housing processes so that our measures reflect the needs of the community. In addition to being shared with scrutiny, I have asked that this report be shared with the September DMC cycle to demonstrate my personal commitment to working closely with members, officers, our tenants, leaseholders, representative groups and all residents to ensure the feedback we receive is listened to and acted upon.