

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE: Request for an Extraordinary Council Meeting	
REPORT OF: Borough Solicitor	
FOR SUBMISSION TO: Council	DATE: 20 th January 2025
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT:</p> <p>This report details the request for an Extraordinary Council Meeting submitted to the Mayor on the 6th January 2025 by Councillors Simon, Chung, Dixey, Kirk and Jirira.</p> <p>In addition, it supplies background information from the Executive Director Supporting Communities on the issues raised in the request, progress to date and future steps to be taken following the publication of the results of the Special Investigation by the Housing Ombudsman. It further places this into the wider context of both funding for social housing and wider financial pressures on the Housing Revenue Account. Finally, it details the Council's dealings with the Housing Regulator.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information There were no documents used in the preparation of this report which require listing.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Elly Shepherd Head of Housing Policy, Performance and Assurance Town Hall Judd Street London WC1H 9JE Tel: 020 020 797 45466 Email: Elly.shepherd@camden.gov.uk</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS:</p> <p>Council is asked:-</p> <p>(i) To note the subject of this item as detailed in the request for an extraordinary meeting at 2.2.</p> <p>(ii) To note the actions taken since the publication of the Ombudsman Report and those planned for the future.</p>	

Signed by:



Andrew Maughan
Borough Solicitor

Date: 9th January 2025

1. Procedural Background

- 1.1 There is a statutory right for any five members of the Council to request an extraordinary meeting of the Council. This statutory right is repeated in our Constitution. The request is made to the Mayor who has seven days from the date of the request to call a meeting. If they fail to call a meeting or indicate that they will not call the meeting then the Head of Paid Service (the Chief Executive) is requested to so call a meeting by the Members. In this case, having taken advice, the Mayor agreed to call the meeting.
- 1.2 Business at an extraordinary meeting is limited to
- the items of business for which the meeting has been called; and
 - any deputations relating to the item or items of business on that agenda which the Mayor agrees to hear
- 1.3 While always subject to the common law obligation to act reasonably, the Mayor may decide, as long as called within seven days, when the meeting will be and the duration of that meeting.

2. The Item of business for which the meeting can be called

- 2.1. The below was the request received by the Mayor on 6th January 2025:-

We write to request you call an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council to examine the council's plans for addressing the failures of the housing repairs service, as highlighted by the recent Special Investigation by the Housing Ombudsman.

The findings of the investigation should be a matter of grave concern for the council. It shows that despite frequent assurances over many years that the situation is improving, the service remains well below the high standards to which we should aspire here in Camden.

We would draw your attention to the Ombudsman's finding of a 'defensive complaints culture', of unacceptable long delays to repairs impacting vulnerable residents and a general failure across the full range of repairs issues.

At present the intention is for this vitally important matter to be discussed at Housing Scrutiny on 25th February, three months after the Ombudsman released its report. In our view, this does not treat the issue with the urgency or the importance it deserves. Housing Scrutiny has reviewed the repairs service on a regular basis. It has sadly failed to provide the impetus or ideas necessary to push the administration to substantially improve the service.

The purpose of the Extraordinary Meeting would be to give all members the opportunity to come together to:

- 1) *Examine the problems with the service, and the plans to improve it.*

- 2) *Debate the effectiveness of those plans.*
- 3) *Share and discuss ideas about how the council could do better.*

We recognise that there are many factors that have created a challenging situation for the council and the HRA, but we note that many other London councils face similar challenges and have not been subjected to the same criticism as Camden. We think Camden should aspire to have the best housing repairs service in London and believe an Extraordinary Meeting of the Council could provide the springboard for achieving such a standard.

SIGNED: *Cllr Tom Simon, Cllr Nancy Jirira, Cllr Linda Chung, Cllr Judy Dixey, Cllr Matthew Kirk*

3. Background to the Ombudsman Report

- 3.1 The Housing Ombudsman Service looks at complaints about registered providers of social housing and has the power to conduct special investigations where evidence exists that the provider in question may have wider issues than those related to one specific complaint. The Ombudsman conducts these special investigations as part of its wider role to encourage learning from complaints.
- 3.2 The special investigations produce reports providing:
 - Insight to help all landlords to strengthen complaint handling;
 - Awareness of the fundamental issues causing complaints; and
 - Recommendations to support the prevention of future complaints.
- 3.3 Since the first of these special investigations and reports in 2020/21, the Ombudsman has now conducted fourteen investigations and publicly published the reports and recommendations. Ten of these have been for either London local authorities (Islington, Haringey, Hammersmith & Fulham, Lambeth twice, and Camden) or large London Housing Associations (this includes large providers such as L&Q, Clarion, Hyde and Southern). This is reflective of the fact that around half of Ombudsman complaints are made by residents living in London postcodes, despite only 1 in 6 homes in the Ombudsman's membership being in the capital. The Ombudsman's reports into issues facing London landlords have surfaced reasons for the comparative over-representation of London providers in complaints to the Ombudsman including quality issues with homes, increased ASB complaints and complexities in managing issues like decants where housing need is so high.
- 3.4 The Ombudsman made the decision to conduct an investigation at Camden after identifying that the London Borough of Camden had 10 findings of severe maladministration between 1 April 2023 and 16 October 2023 in cases involving repairs and/or complaint handling.
- 3.5 The Ombudsman conducted an initial analysis into the Council's handling of complaints involving repairs was conducted on cases determined in this same period. This review found a notable increase in the maladministration rate from

previous years and compared to the national average. The maladministration rate for repairs averaged 91% compared to 73% nationally, and 86% compared to 84% for complaint handling respectively. The special investigation by the Ombudsman commenced in November 2023 and has now concluded, with the report published in November 2024. The full report is available online at the Ombudsman's website¹.

3.6 During the investigation, the Ombudsman:

- Reviews previous cases;
- Checks referrals arriving to the Ombudsman and cases open at the time of the investigation; and
- Asks the landlord for evidence (full list of what was provided is available in the report at the above link).

3.7 The special investigation looked at 52 cases at Camden. Twenty cases dated from 2021 or before, 27 cases were from 2022 and two cases were from 2023. It is therefore important to note that structurally, the report is a retrospective look.

3.8 In the report, the Ombudsman made 13 recommendations: 10 focused on complaint handling, 2 were related to disrepair concerning property conditions, and 1 addressed vulnerability. A summary of the recommendations and the Council's response is included as Figure 1 below. The Council have been asked to create an action plan to address these points, of which a draft summary is provided below. The ongoing work with the Ombudsman and this plan, will also be reviewed at February's Housing Scrutiny Committee.

4. Steps taken since the Ombudsman Report

4.1 Camden Council and our housing services are clear that residents deserve high-quality, responsive, and compassionate services, and the Council is committed to improving these services. Whilst we face a challenging financial situation for our Housing Revenue Account (HRA), we have committed resources and capacity to ensuring that residents can access support and services effectively.

4.2 The Council recognises that complaints are an important source of insight in how our processes and policies are working – and we have invested in our own “lessons learned” capacity and committed time to reflecting on them as service leaders on what they mean for how we are working and could work differently in the future. Housing senior leadership has worked closely with the Ombudsman since the initiation of the report to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to learn from the cases under review where residents were let down.

4.3 As noted in the Ombudsman's report, the Council did not wait for the report and recommendations to be published to start implementing improvement. Internal Audit were invited in to review the complaints process in housing and produced a report including findings of which services were already working to

¹<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/reports/special-investigation-reports/camden/>

implement when the Ombudsman report was published. Resourcing to handle complaints both in the Housing Team and Central Complaints has been increased since the time covered by the report. A dedicated learning lead role has also been created to ensure continuous improvement.

- 4.4 For the first time, resident members of the oversight panel will conduct quality assurance checks on some of our Stage 1 responses. While all cases will be fully anonymised, we want the panel to collaborate with the case management team to ensure our replies effectively address residents' concerns and expectations. Also for the first time in Camden, we will review the current Property Services compensation policies with the oversight panel members. Our aim is to create a policy that accurately reflects the impact on residents.
- 4.5 In quarter 4, Camden will host a housing complaints forum for other London councils to discuss how we can learn from best practices, allowing us to adopt similar approaches in our area.
- 4.6 We will maintain a focus on improvement and learning going forward, including via regular communication with the Housing Ombudsman Service throughout 2025 to ensure that the promised actions are being implemented and regular updates to the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Our resident-led Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel will continue to support us with this work and provide regular feedback directly to Council senior leadership. The reports and meetings of this panel are available on our website: [Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel - Camden Council. Regular updates on the improvement work will also go to the Housing and Regulatory Board chaired by the Executive Director for Supporting Communities.](#) The Cabinet Member for Better Homes is overseeing and leading this long term work which benefits from the continued involvement of the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

4.7 Action Plan:

Ombudsman Recommendation	Actions completed and in development
COMPLAINT HANDLING	
Work with the Housing Ombudsman to ensure its complaints policy and related documentation is compliant with the Code, to help embed a positive complaint handling culture.	We continue to work with the Ombudsman constructively on individual cases and compliance with any orders made. We are also responding strategically to their recommendations
Review complaint handling processes:	
Identifying and acknowledging a complaint	The Case management system has been updated to allocate a complaint within 5 days of receipt and to include a summary of the complaint back to the resident as part of the acknowledgement process. This also includes the named case officer and sets out the 10 day target date. Calls are also handled with a similar approach acknowledging the complaint, clarifying mutual understanding and ensuring the resident understands who their contact is going forward.

Identifying and acknowledging escalation requests	A similar approach to the above has been implemented but with a twenty day target reflecting the further work to be done on escalated complaints.
Ensuring appropriately thorough investigations	We have conducted training with Central Complaints and Housing caseworkers on complaint definitions and key issues. Further quality assurance processes are being introduced.
Quality, timeliness and tone of responses	<p>An amendment to the process to ensure a full 10 days is available for investigation at Stage 1. There is daily monitoring of complaints which are at stage 1 and 2 to ensure timescales are monitored. Template letters have been updated for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 to improve the structure and tone of the responses.</p> <p>Plain English training attended by staff as well as attending Housing Ombudsmen online complaint handling training . In house effective Complaint handling training attended by central complaints and CMO caseworkers.</p> <p>Further work is planned to roll out Camden focused effective complaints handling and how to identify a complaint.</p>
Resident communication when complaint response and/or resolution is delayed	<p>A template letter has been drafted and implemented for communicating with resident about the delay.</p> <p>Training delivered to Complaint Caseworkers in autumn 2024 which included the importance of keeping the complainant informed</p>
Review its approach to 'Business as Usual' enquiries to distinguish those that are service enquiries from those that are complaints. Make it a requirement that a rationale must be recorded as to why the complaint was closed as 'not a complaint' to provide the resident with a reason, to monitor these enquiries for themes, and to ensure this approach is not a barrier for residents making complaints	Processes are being reviewed to make sure this recommendation is implemented – it will also form part of our transformation programme and our work to introduce a new "front door" for the housing service which is backed by a new Customer Relationship Management system (CRM).
Review the standard template letters to ensure they are compliant with the Code and remove the 'Sorry you felt the need to complain' standard wording from all templates.	This sentence was removed from our templates in Summer 2024.
Create and embed a process to ensure any actions promised in complaint responses will be tracked through to completion, including clear guidance on closing the case on its case management when there are outstanding actions.	Housing Case Management team use a shared calendar to log when visits are due to take place and check that works go ahead to proactively manage appointments. Further work is planned to develop training videos on how to log outstanding actions and ensure they are monitored. Reports are also being developed to regularly monitor outstanding actions both at Stage 1 and Stage 2. Our lessons learned lead will also be working across teams to

	make sure actions are implemented and where needed changes are made to prevent issues recurring (noting that some condition issues will be addressed through the Housing Investment Strategy)
Create a clear escalation pathway for residents for when actions proposed in complaint responses are delayed beyond agreed or expected dates.	A template letter has been drafted and implemented for communicating with resident about the delay. Training delivered to Complaint Caseworkers in autumn 2024 which included the importance of keeping the complainant informed
Create clear guidance for staff on compensation and a process to monitor compensation payments to ensure consistency, accuracy, and transparency in amounts offered.	Officers follow the updated (July 2024) Corporate Remedies policy and procedure as guidance when awarding payments. The Case Management Team have to discuss any payments with management first to ensure consistency and accuracy Further work is planned to develop a consistent matrix of compensation payments.
Review recording of complaint cases, to ensure data captured and performance reporting is transparent and accurate.	Processes are being reviewed to make sure this recommendation is implemented
Provide the Ombudsman and the governing body with an update on the quality assurance process which forms part of the landlord's wider review into its complaint handling	The Council has developed a suggested quality assurance process that is due to be trialled and discussed with the Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel for review in January 2025.
Provide the Ombudsman and the governing body with the key findings of the internal audit into complaint handling, including any risk related management plans.	This is completed and will be shared at the next review meeting with the Housing Ombudsman.
Share this Special Investigation report with its Customer Experience Oversight Panel and its Housing and Property Residents Panel.	Completed – the report has been shared with both Panels.
DISREPAIR	
Create a process to monitor outstanding repairs through to conclusion, ensuring residents are kept updated on the progress of their repairs and informed of repairs that are delayed beyond agreed or expected dates. Ensure there is a process for contacting and updating residents that are digitally excluded.	We have implemented new digital systems to support the repairs service and the processes used by the teams to better report, track and monitor repairs. We have trained all staff on new systems and processes.

<p>Create a Knowledge and Information Management framework for all stages of the repairs process, including how it reviews previous disrepair cases to identify any links between issues, how it records repair visit outcomes and to ensure teams have access to information when needed.</p>	<p>We have implemented new digital systems to support the repairs service and the processes used by the teams to better report, track and monitor repairs.</p> <p>We have trained all staff on new systems and processes.</p>
<p>VULNERABILITIES</p>	
<p>Provide the Ombudsman and the governing body with an update on its review of its approach to vulnerability. To include updates on its proposed Vulnerability Policy including reasonable adjustments, how the landlord will use its vulnerability information to improve its 'enhanced' service to residents with additional needs, and its strategy for longer-term system and data improvements</p>	<p>We have completed a review of our Housing and Repairs service as to how residents with vulnerabilities can access our services. We have co-designed a draft Vulnerability Policy with residents which outlines how Camden defines vulnerability. This is currently going through the internal sign off process.</p>

- 4.8 The reasons for complaints in this area are complex and multifactorial (as explored below in regards to repairs improvement). The actions above will take time to bear fruit and must be supported by delivery of the Housing Investment Strategy and the transformation programme, which will also include staff training (see section 5).
- 4.9 This year, for complaints relating to Property Management (including repairs)- an increase from 1150 to 1676 which is 526 complaints (46%) compared to a 58% increase in 2022/23 so the rate increase has slowed. The total number of repairs undertaken in the same period was 125,000. Satisfaction on all jobs is tracked and this performance information is published online.
- 4.10 Property Management continues to see a rise in the upheld rate from 36% in 2021/2022 increasing in 2022/2023 to 43% and in 2023/2024 to 62% (includes partly upheld). This means that in a high proportion of Stage 1 complaints, the service agreed that there had been a service failure that needed to be put right. This can be seen as a positive with the service having both greater empathy with the customer and a greater understanding of what good service should look like, and a move away from the defensive complaints culture challenged by the Ombudsman in the report.
- 4.11 The Council welcomes scrutiny of these figures and provides monthly data on complaints in property management and other areas of housing to ward councillors and publishes this data on the District Management Committee microsites.

5. Planned action with regard to the Repairs Service

5.1 Nationally, the 2016-20 social rent cut alone reduced council landlords' rent revenue by £2.4 billion over four years, amounting to an estimated £40 billion by 2042. Further rent caps have reduced revenue by a further £900m. London boroughs are facing a specific gap of £700m over the next four years. Pressures are so acute that boroughs are budgeting for £170m of cuts to spending on supervision, management, maintenance and repairs over the next four years to balance their HRA accounts, focusing only on the most urgent repairs and delaying much-needed improvements.

5.2 In Camden, these sector wide issues are compounded by the unique profile of the stock:

- Average home is 74 years old
- 188 High Rise Buildings (25% Homes)
- 10% Homes in Listed Buildings
- 19% Street Properties
- 33% Built pre-1945
- 20% with single glazed windows
- 35% with Energy Performance Certificates below C – meaning homes are inefficient and hard to heat

5.3 However, while the context is extremely challenging, landlords must deliver appropriate and fit for purpose services including repairs. A major factor in improvement will be the Housing Investment Strategy which comes to cabinet for decision in January 2025 as this sets out how we will manage our homes and provide appropriate investment within the challenging financial context.

5.4 We also have to improve the day to day service in repairs. Improvements to the repairs service over and above the recommendations identified above by the Ombudsman are therefore also in train, and identified as an essential part of the Council's improvement journey on housing. The vision of this work is that:

*Tenants will experience a **reliable, simple, and relational** repairs journey from reporting and tracking to resolution. When on the job, trades will be equipped with all the **necessary skills -and information** about the home and the tenant's needs -to complete work **efficiently and cost-effectively**.*

*Repairs carried out will be of **high quality**, with both in-house team and contractor partners **maintaining our service standards** and providing a seamless experience for residents. And where repairs or maintenance is outside our remit, we will work closely with the communities, empowering them to **take action** in their homes and estates.*

5.5 It is important to acknowledge that over the last 6 months, Repairs colleagues have been moving improvements, of which the impact has not necessarily been felt by residents. This includes:

- Introduction of new IT systems in the repairs service to improve reporting and appointment booking process
- **Recruited to front-line trade staff posts**, introducing new specialist roles to focus on key areas such as fire safety and lessons learnt manager
- **Reduced sub-contractor dependency** to 13% of current position (this was as high as 40%+ post-pandemic)
- **Closer scrutiny of Legal Disrepair cases.** The Lesson Learnt Lead has been working closely with the Legal Disrepair Team since August 2024 and reviewing each letter of claim which we have received.
- **Monthly reporting to Head of Repairs & Operations**, following up with the relevant repairs team to investigate what can be done to reduce issues
- Internal processes are being reviewed, including reviewing the **Disrepair Policy and Procedure** to be implemented, alongside the appointment of a new Disrepair Programme Manager and **pro-active communications** encouraging residents to contact us about any unreported issues or potential disrepair
- **A HR lead** has been working with repairs managers to improve workforce productivity and our response to sickness absence
- The service has now implemented a "60 Second round up" where operatives ask residents if there are any other works needed. This was something that used to be part of the process and residents raised that they found it helpful so it has now been reinstated – an example of the shift towards a more proactive service responsive to residents' feedback.

5.6 These actions should start to impact on residents over the next year. Further improvements to the service are prioritised as part of the Housing Transformation Programme following an initial discovery phase of work which will shortly report back to the Housing Transformation Board.

6. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

6.1 This is the report of the Borough Solicitor and comments are incorporated within the body of the report

7. Finance Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

7.1 The Executive Director has no comments.

8. Environmental Implications

8.1 There are no environmental implications.

REPORT ENDS