

Deputation to Housing Scrutiny Committee 22 Feb 2024

From: Camden Leaseholders Forum

Re: Cllr James Slater report on Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders (Agenda item 9)

Camden Leaseholders Forum represents leaseholders and has collaborated with Cllr Slater on the consultation within his report. We are satisfied that his research has been thorough, with over seventy leaseholders attending in person meetings and many others submitting information by email. We concur with his findings, and provide commentary under four headings: (paragraph references in square brackets, quotes are direct from the report)

1. Culture - leaseholders feel like "second class citizens", "not listened to", and told by Camden staff "it's your responsibility" even when it is not. "Camden communications are aimed at tenants", and leaseholders ("especially in street properties") feel it's a "one size fits all" approach. [4.8, 4.14, 4.37, 4.38, 4.39, 5.11]

2. Repairs/Major Works - concerns about quality of works, the need for repeated visits and inconvenience of no-shows. Inadequate records per property mean leaseholders must explain history repeatedly to Camden staff and contractors. Limited institutional memory means when a staff member leaves, their knowledge is lost. [4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12]

3. Siloed information - teams at Leaseholder Services don't have access to detail on repairs or Major works. They issue bills with limited backup information, and when Leaseholders query bills, they have to go back to other departments. This slows the process of answering leaseholder questions. [4.15, 4.17, 4.20, 4.24]

4. Poor communications - LS are too quick to resort to legal threats when leaseholders raise genuine queries on Service Charges/Major Works bills. Camden is a "very aggressive managing agent" - this underlines point 1. (Culture). "The Camden Account is clunky" with little detail on the basis for charges. There is no correspondence management system for leaseholder queries so many end up in a black hole. Data is not easily accessible or shared. Too much is sent by post - a waste of paper and postage for e.g. contractor agreements, and risk of delays and missed deadlines for consultation. 80% of leaseholders use email and almost everyone has a mobile phone. [4.18, 4.22, 4.28, 4.30, 4.35, 4.40]

We agree with the recommendations.

We believe it is essential to have the new **formal councillor role specifically for leaseholders (Rec 7)**. Housing is too large a portfolio for one councillor to cover. We welcome the suggestion of an annual progress report [5.10] to be shared with CLF and suggest interim updates in addition, e.g. quarterly.

We have additional comments on the other recommendations:

- (Rec 1) Working group to connect Repairs/Major Works and leaseholder services – share their findings with CLF. And focus on how to connect data sources across departments and spot issues and trends.
- (Rec 2) Contractor accountability – ensure quality assurance takes place and leaseholders have their say. Consider deductions for poor quality work or no shows and rectify errors FOC.
- (Rec 3) Correspondence management system – using a third party system like Netcall rather than developing an in-house system which has lost us a year

- (Rec 4) Transparent written communications. More information on service charges and major works bills – ideally via Camden Account e.g. copy of invoice/Bill of Quantities attached to main bill
- (Rec 5) Better information on Camden website
- (Rec 6) Annual audit of best practice from other boroughs
- (Rec 8) Provide online info of different Camden teams

The broader issue, which will require a concerted effort across all Directors, Officers and staff is **changing the culture**. Not seeing leaseholders as obstacles to Council programmes (and an open cheque book), but instead as collaborative partners in improving the quality of the built environment and residents' lives in Camden. And treating leaseholders as citizens and voters.