

Annual Report to members of CFTRA

Our independent voice

The CFTRA 'year' started with the AGM of 2009 with the then council leader Cllr Keith Moffit putting on record his respect for the work of Camden Fed: 'We fund you as an independent voice...I really appreciate the relationship we have with you. I know it is quite fiery at times, but it is healthy and I really appreciate that'.

True to our word we have continued to work as that 'independent voice' and the highlight of the year has been the Fed's work against the sale of much needed council homes. We worked hard to help bring together tenant reps, District Management Committees, trade unionists, campaigners and homeless reps to form the very vocal 'No Sell-Offs Campaign'. Throughout the year councillors from all political parties were continually lobbied, letters written to the press, leaflets distributed, and campaigning events were held to win public sympathy to the cause that it was wrong to sell homes to private property companies when so many people in Camden were still waiting for the housing that they need. We are very pleased to see that the first act of the new Council elected in May 2010 has been to cancel all the sell-offs still outstanding.

Camden Fed's independent work has been underpinned by a great deal of research. Being aware of what is going on is the strength of Camden Fed. The information so gathered has allowed us to run a workshop that helped tenant reps to hold the Council to genuinely involve and consult TRAs and tenants on planned improvements works under the Decent Homes programme. Following on from this the Fed has been monitoring the progress of Decent Homes work and obtaining the views and experiences of tenants on the quality of work that has been carried out. The Fed also lobbied councillors to join us in a Joint deputation to the housing minister to demand funding to pay for improvement to council homes.

One of the terrible events of the last year was the tragic fire in a council block in Camberwell. Camden Fed helped to coordinate the demands of tenant reps for action on fire safety and we were pleased that Camden conducted a review of their blocks and reported to us on their progress and the situation that they had found.

Nationally the previous government proposed changes to the regulation of council housing by bringing in the Tenant Services Authority (who already had the role of regulating other social landlords) to introduce a new regulatory framework for council housing. We held a very interesting general meeting on 18th January 2010 when Adrian Peacock of the TSA gave a presentation and then responded to questions and views from tenant reps. What the future holds from the new coalition government is yet to be seen. Whether the TSA will survive the 'bonfire of the quangos' is not known so the future regulation of council landlords is again in doubt.

During the year we interviewed and looked forward to working with a new director of housing, Jim Wintour, but just as we got to know him he went. We are looking forward to working with whomever the new Council leadership recruits in his place.

Camden Fed also played its part in helping tenants hold their candidates at the local elections to account by providing a hustings event. We thank Andrew Marshall, Chris Naylor, Julian Fulbrook and Maya De Souza for agreeing to put themselves under the spotlight.

Supporting tenants organisations

Much of the work of Camden Fed goes un-noticed by those not immediately involved but each month your Management Committee met to discuss and direct the affairs of the Fed. During the year we successfully negotiated another year's funding from Camden council that will ensure our funding until March 2011. We were disappointed that the funding period could not have been longer and that we were not able to obtain a contingency for inflation which despite the economic recession is likely to be more significant than originally thought.

The Management Committee held two 'away days' to discuss the future of the Fed over the next three years. Much work was done on updating the business plan (although there is still much to do), and the Management Committee looked in detail how the Fed could obtain other sources of income rather than relying upon Camden Council. The discussion pointed towards utilising the experience and qualifications of staff and members to sell our services as consultants to other community and social organisations. A small start has been made by working closely with Sahil Housing – a Somali community development and housing group – and income has been obtained from this arrangement. There is likely to be further work with this group and other opportunities are eagerly examined. The other direction is to work with other social landlords where there is a principled reason to do so i.e. when tenants associations request our help, or in areas of mixed tenure where it makes sense for tenants to speak with one voice. The other new business area is really building upon our existing expertise but needing further funding to do so. It has been the case for a while that some TRAs find it difficult to keep going because they find it hard to attract new officers. Also the training programme on offer from Camden Council does not always address needs. The Fed's Management Committee is looking at attracting funding to provide a resource for TRAs (more workers) to help tenants do more face-to-face work and events within their communities.

The regular cycle of TRA support continued throughout the year. Our outreach worker, Cauline, attended 24 TRA annual general meetings as the independent observer. Other Fed staff and members of the Management Committee, chairs and vice-chairs of DMCs, and local councillors carried out similar roles. Cauline assisted in the creation of four new TRAs (Oakshot, Palgrave, Barrington Close, and Denyer), and helped to revitalise 'ailing' TRAs at Agar, College Place and Bacton Tower. There is great scope in Camden for more proactive work in helping tenants form new organisations and launching new community projects but we need more resources in the shape of staff or volunteers to do so.

We have continued to provide a website but recognise that we need to do some more work to update information and make it accessible to members (again time and resources have been against us). We also continue to provide a tenant's resource room at The Marr where research documents, periodicals, reports, and books are provided along with internet access. At the moment not enough people use the facility so if you have never been along do make a point of doing so in the next few months.