

Camden Tenant

Established
in 1972

Independent voice of Camden Council tenants

January 2010
No. 188

Published by the Camden Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations

Get organised to get improvements we need

Camden plan to refurbish over 6,000 council homes over the two years 2009-11. They are trying to get as many jobs as possible on site before May 2010 and are predicting possible cuts to the programme in later years. Executive member for housing strategy Councillor Naylor told Hampstead tenant reps that contractors' costs are spiralling, and the council wants to drive down costs.

Tenants have given mixed reports on work done so far. New kitchen or bathroom fittings are welcome, but for many tenants the works have been a problem. Contractors' work was viewed as generally unsatisfactory, at a meeting of Gospel Oak tenant reps (DMC meeting 3 December).

To head off problems you need to get organised. Hold a tenants' meeting, invite councillors, housing managers and Camden Fed reps, and demand to see plans for the proposed works and criteria for deciding who gets what work done. Make sure all tenants know this is happening.

Tenants are entitled to these improvements and have paid for them through rents and capital receipts over 20 years. We are opposed to the sell off of council homes to pay for this – but we do want improvements, and we want a say over what's done, how and when. These are our homes and we insist on a direct say.

“Improvement works include new bathrooms and kitchens, rewiring, and renewing heating systems; Internal works to 5,621 tenants' homes; Internal and external works to 1,981

tenants' homes; External works to 825 leaderholders' homes.”
(from *Investing in Camden's Homes – Decent Homes Years 2 and 3 HASC/2009/11*)

Find out if works are planned for your street or estate – see www.camdenfed.org and follow link on top right of page or go direct to list in Camden council report *HASC/2009/11*.

“MY BOSS? THE RESIDENTS” says new Housing Director

Camden Tenant interviews Camden Council's new director of Housing and Adult Services, Jim Wintour

‘Nine weeks in, I'm impressed. The estates look well managed and maintained – not perfect, but compared to other parts of the UK the quality is good.’

Jim Wintour's immediate priorities are to push on with Decent Homes and estate regeneration programmes, particularly Maiden Lane and Holly Lodge. He also wants to improve Repairs and customer service. The Repairs call centre misses 14% of calls, which he apologises for: ‘we need to improve on this’.

And he wants to see more residents involved.

The Council is trying to get as much work as possible on site before May 2010, ahead of expected cuts. They have put in a bid to refurbish 15 council homes on the Holly Lodge estate.

‘The people I'm working for, my boss, is the residents’ he says; ‘I very much welcome resident involvement’.

Tenants see our involvement as more than just a box to be



Jim Wintour, Director Of Housing

ticked – by keeping up pressure for improvements, and getting problems sorted, we can and do make them better. Jim Wintour agrees. From experience, he says resident involvement is vital.

Many years ago he was a council tenant in Glasgow. He had

been burgled 14 times in five years, and 48 flats were destroyed by arson, but an active and committed tenants association ‘turned that round’, and made it a safer, better place.

He accepts that tenants are an ‘independent voice’ and will sometimes challenge the housing department and the Council. But ‘Camden council is not a co-op’ and ultimate decision-making power is the Council's, he adds. For example on sell offs of empty council homes, a policy tenants democratically reject, Wintour says ‘my recommendation would be to continue with the sales, because I believe it's

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Camden
Fed

CAMDEN FEDERATION OF TENANTS AND RESIDENTS ASSOCIATIONS (CFTRA)

CFTRA is an independent voluntary organisation representing Council tenants and leaseholders. The Federation is managed by a Committee elected annually and is based in central Camden.

WHAT WE CAN DO FOR YOU!

- Help to set up Tenants' Associations, providing information and advice – Camden Council's Tenant Participation (TP) team registers new associations. CFTRA staff are available to help during the day and attend resident

association and other meetings in the evening.

- Access to a well stocked resource area with the latest housing publications including *Inside Housing*, computers with internet access, printing and photocopying facilities – please

phone CFTRA to ensure there will be someone to welcome you.

- CFTRA also acts as an independent (grass roots!) campaigning voice for Camden Council tenants on housing issues of local and national concern.

For more info about services and help we can provide, please contact CFTRA:
11-17 The Marr,
Camden Street,
London NW1 OHE;
Tel 0800 652 3140 (freephone)
website: www.camdenfed.org
email: office@camdenfed.org

TENANTS SPEAK OUT *Dorian C*

A tenant rep gives a grassroots view in a new regular column

What prompted you into being a tenant rep and how are you finding it?

I have only been a tenant rep for a year so it is all fairly new to me. There was a general feeling on the estate that things weren't being done, so I went to speak to the neighbours. There was positive feedback to setting up a TA but we really didn't know where to start.

Who did you turn to?

We were introduced to the TP team and then to Camden Fed. The Fed were logistically helpful and helped setting up a constitution, organising meetings and guiding us on how to improve issues on our estate. Camden Fed helped us set up our own website.

What are the main issues on your estate?

Anti-social behaviour, vandalism

and graffiti, cleaning, caretaking services – typical concerns most people living on estates in Camden can relate to.

What do you feel are the barriers to participation?

On Barrington Court there are about 55 homes; lots of one-bedroom and studio flats. At times it can be a transient community. Also there need to be more engaging ways of trying to increase

participation from black and minority ethnic communities.

How would you compare Camden Fed and the TP team?

The Council's Tenant Participation (TP) team are still finding their feet, but from past experiences they had a habit of passing your enquiry on to different people. For example, we had an ongoing issue with revenue grants which wasn't handled efficiently. I understand

Regeneration – make it benefit us

The Kings Cross Railway lands group, in a response to Mayor of London Boris Johnson's draft London Plan, are calling for guarantees on housing, and for regeneration that benefits those living in and around the area. Tenant reps across Camden, and especially in areas facing small or large scale 'regeneration' will have the same concerns, and may want to take up the argument locally.

Housing and Employment Targets

'We consider that these [housing and employment] targets should be evaluated critically ... Those for King's Cross were simply accepted by the previous Mayor from the highly controversial proposals Camden had suggested. Local consultation and critical analysis would probably have led to higher housing targets and lower employment targets... targets for those not yet finalised (including Euston) should be the subject of full local consultation before they are embodied in the London Plan.'

Regeneration

'there is now mounting evidence[1] that much of the "regeneration" practiced in London produces precious few benefits and often adverse effects for the "deprived" populations in whose name the programmes are launched and in whose localities they happen. We thus object to the policies as currently phrased and propose changes as follows:

'Policy 2.13 A (add new sub-section c) [The Mayor will...] Consent to development only when it has been shown that established populations living in and around the areas will benefit and will not be subject to displacement or displacement pressures except where there is full mitigation.

Housing Tenure mixing:

'King's Cross is typical of the many areas in London where social rental housing is extensive but still

in desperately short supply, and where the remaining supply is under continuing pressure from the right to buy, from stock transfer and (in some cases) from demolition to make way for new building in other tenures. Even worse, it is sometimes argued that less social rented housing should be included in new building in such areas on the grounds that this tenure is somehow "over-represented" in the area. Exactly this argument was used against us by Camden and Argent in the recent Triangle Site public inquiry.

'There may be some merit in the introduction of some social rental housing in solidly owner-occupied areas (though the London Plan sees no need to plan for this) and, until better means can be found, it remains essential to oblige developers of private housing schemes to make some of their units available through social renting. But in areas like ours the call for the insertion of other tenures is seen by most of us as threatening to the supply of affordable rented housing and as condescending. It is often based on stereotypes in which it is assumed that council tenants are idle folk who need role models, weak organisers who would benefit from more educated community leaders and so on. It is an insult. There is no evidence base to support this...

'We propose that at least [Policy 3.10] subsection B [A more balanced mix of tenures should be sought particularly in neighbourhoods where social renting predominates] be simply deleted. We further propose that the entire policy should be deleted pending research which might form the basis for an evidence-based replacement. Many consequential adjustments would be needed in other parts of the Plan.'

● **Contact the Kings Cross Railway Land Group**
info@kxrlg.org.uk for more information.

"My boss? The residents"

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the only way we are going to get Decent Homes.'

He accepts that tenant reps should be chosen by tenants, but is keen to get more people involved, especially from black, Asian and other minority groups. He suggests shorter meetings, more focus on basics, 'something people can get involved in'. He knows tenants also want to get everyone involved, and that it isn't simple. He is 'not putting down' existing tenant reps, Wintour says: 'If you aren't active, please join – and to those that are, please make new people welcome', he says.

On Tenant participation structures he says 'I don't think we want to get rid of some meetings with tenants who've been democratically elected – but I am not wedded to every committee there is at the moment'. He would also welcome ideas about 'how to reorganise Tenant Participation.'

Wintour has worked for housing associations, helped set up housing co-ops, and worked for several Councils in London and Kent. He believes council hous-

ing is important: 'Council housing has broken the connection between low income and bad housing. By keeping rents relatively low it means families on low incomes in areas like London can work, without falling into the benefit trap'. Otherwise working can mean losing housing benefit, a 'massive disincentive to work' Wintour says.

He thinks the next few years will be tough financially: 'My guess is public finances are going to face a bigger reduction over the next few years than I've seen in my life time.' It will mean 'massive disagreements' over cuts in services, and conflict with tenants which he regrets. 'I'd welcome ideas to save money or increase income' Wintour says.

He was born in Camden, though the family left when he was still young. He now lives in Eltham, south London (and supports Charlton Athletic!). He has three step children and describes his 17 year old passing her driving test as the best news he's had recently. Instead of driving her to school she is now driving him to the station.

TENANTS NOT

Tenants are challenging Camden Council's sell off of council homes. On behalf of the No Sell Offs campaign, Camden Tenants Fed has written to the District Auditor to say: 'We are concerned that Camden Council is selling off much needed council homes irresponsibly, without due regard to ensuring the best financial management of public resources, including human and financial impact on those on the waiting list and in dire need of these homes.'

The District Auditor is appointed by the Audit Commission to examine how the Council uses public funds and to investigate complaints.

Evidence presented to challenge Camden's sell off policy includes:

- adapted disabled properties

Gardening: a blooming

There's growing interest in gardening, especially for producing food.

Camden has 196 allotment plots for the Borough's 230,000 people – you could wait 40 years for one. So tenants and residents are starting to look at making use of spaces on estates or their street instead.

The Council, the Mayor of London and charities have realised the target-hitting potential of gardening: social, environmental and health-wise – as a result there is more funding and support on offer. So consider if you want to do



by Clare Hill, Kings Cross

something small on your own (straightforward and achievable) or get together with neighbours and/or TRA members and find a shared space to use on your estate (more involved but potentially bigger rewards). Most of the funding is for groups rather than individuals.

As a group, your gardening project will be limited by your imagination and the estate environment. Is there a sunny spot? Who uses the space now? Could plants be grown on the roof? Or fruit trees planted to grow flat along a wall? Who lives right next to the growing area, and how will they feel about the

Courtesy of Barrington Court

they have appointed a new communications officer to mediate between TRAs and the TP team. This seems to be working slightly better.

I see the Fed role as more informative for example, keeping people informed about selling off of council housing and rent increases. I view Camden Fed as an organisation which monitors Camden to see whether they are keeping on track.

What are the key components of running a successful TRA?

Commitment and time. Being chair of the TRA can really cut into areas of your life. I am more fortunate than others as I am a cab driver; a lot of people don't have flexibility for commitments in the day. You need to be approachable and have good communication with tenants as they need to feel that things are being done and

their concerns being voiced.

What do you think about plans for regeneration in Gospel Oak?

I grew up in Queens Crescent. The post-war housing in the area has remained the same for about fifty years. The suggestion to knock down a whole area for re-build and re-house tenants sounds like a bit of a nightmare. What really needs to be done, is immediate

work on improving the structure and appearance and improving the gardens.

Finally, what's next for Barrington Court?

We need to refurbish the Tenants Association hall, and are in the process of applying for money to do this. We envisage a party in the summer or late next year, but there is a bit more work to do before we are at the party stage!

New Regulator for Council Housing

The Tenant Services Authority (TSA) was set up in December 2008 to take over regulation of housing associations/Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). It is extending its remit to council housing from April 2010 (parliament has not yet passed this in law). For council housing this is in addition to existing regulation by elected councillors, parliament and the Audit Commission.

Statutory consultation on this began last November and closes 5 Feb 2010.

The current consultation sets out the principles TSA will work to, details the standards they will judge landlords by, and how this affects tenants.

TSA regulation will not apply to councils' finances or overall management (the Audit Commission is responsible for overseeing local authority finances and governance). TSA will however apply a 'Value for money' standard, and refer concerns on councils' financial management of housing to the Audit Commission.

Currently:

- 'only one in two tenants is satisfied with opportunities for involvement'
- 'only one in six tenants feels their landlord takes a lot of notice of their views' (p3)

The TSA have set out ten principles for regulation. These include

- 'co-regulation' – self-regulation by landlords involving their tenants
- based on agreed national standards – saying what they expect but not how it should be done
- Landlords must work to local standards agreed with tenants
- All tenants' needs must be taken into account, including ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age, gender and religion/belief
- Annual reports to tenants of how landlords meet or aim to meet standards, including tenant scrutiny of performance
- TSA will begin by targeting the worst-performing landlords to improve these
- Sector-led 'self-improvement' is the aim

National Standards

There will be five national standards that apply to council housing: on Tenant involvement and empowerment; Home (repairs, maintenance, quality); Tenancy

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TENANTS: SAYING NO TO SELL-OFFS!



We need more council housing – not sell offs

in purpose-built council homes at Aspern Grove which are less than 20 years old and in good repair have been earmarked for auction

- A flat in Holborn (central London) sold after only one bid for £180,000

- Surveyor's evidence showing that 'far from needing extensive work – a key claim made by the council – the flat in Nigel House

needed only around £10,000 to make it suitable for use. This estimation was made by an independent surveyor' (*Camden New Journal* 17.9.09)

- A block of three flats in Russell Nurseries Estate, Belsize Park, sold together for £560,000 in August 09, and were back on the market at £250,000 each by September 09

- National Association of Valuers and Auctioneers say auction properties sell for up to 20 per cent less than normal sale price, and 400 homes sold by London councils raised around £32 million less than the potential value according to the *Evening Standard* (29.10.09)

Camden's 30 homes sold by McHugh and Co Auctioneers in 2007-9 raised £22,416,000. To raise £243 million for improvement work to other homes Camden plan to sell hundreds more much-needed homes.

The letter also challenges Camden's mandate for the Sell Offs. All the formal tenant consultative bodies (District Management Committees, CASP) and focus groups rejected sell offs to pay for improvement works to other homes (the controversial

Decent Homes work – see page 1). Instead the Council relied on 'what we regard as manipulative techniques to obscure the reality of tenant opposition to this policy.'

In 2005, Kathleen O'Donoghue was moved out of the home she grew up in, 'temporarily' while repairs were done. Four years (and three sets of squatters) on and still displaced from her home, no works have ever commenced. The council intend to sell her home off. She says 'It is a disgrace. I was conned, just as the people of Camden are being conned out of what belongs to us. The council could have led a campaign with tenants behind them, to demand help from Government and the London Mayor to pay for decent homes in Camden. Instead they have let government off the hook – and we pay the price.'

ing great idea for us all

idea? (Even if they don't want to be involved with the gardening their concerns will need to be taken into account.) Is the soil contaminated? If so, maybe 'grow bags' or raised wooden beds on top of the soil could be the solution. There'll be lots to discuss. And the more room you allow for consulting and involving other residents, the better.

You will need to talk to your estate officer or estate services manager in regard to permission. Community organisations working in your area might have advice, support and knowledge of funding. The Council's

Sustainability team may also be able to help.

Setting up a community gardening project will take more than a reasonable measure of patience, time, planning, networking skills and consensus, but the potential rewards are large. How many places can offer the opportunity to bring together people of different generations and backgrounds, grow exotic herbs and vegetables unavailable in the supermarket, improve the appearance of the estate or streetscape, save money on food, get some fresh air and learn some new skills – all in the same plot?

Information and support

- **Camden Council's** page on community food growing is a good starting point, and includes information on funding. There are also tips for growing food at home. See: <http://bit.ly/7DqSZ1>

- **Capital Growth** (supporting the creation of 2,012 community food growing spaces in London by 2012) offers advice, networks and some funding. www.capitalgrowth.org

- London Foodlink and the Women's Environmental Network have published **Growing Round the Houses** – on growing food on estates, with inspiring case studies and lots of useful tips and ideas. www.sustainweb.org/pdf/food_growing_&_social_housing.pdf

- **Federation of Community Farms and Gardens** – advice and information, and guidance on nearby community gardens, city farms and other organisations who may be able to help you. www.farmgarden.org.uk

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(allocations, tenure, rent); Neighbourhood and community (management); Value for Money and Local Standards

Landlords will be judged against local agreements reached with tenants on standards;

'responsibility for meeting these standards lies with the governing bodies of providers' [Camden council]. The TSA will require 'greater accountability of providers to their tenants for the quality of the services.'

Repairs – Your legal rights

7.1 Section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 imposes a repairing obligation on the Council to keep in repair its tenanted properties. (The Council's standard right to buy leases contain a similar provision.) The obligation is:

(a) to keep in repair the structure and exterior of the dwelling-house (including drains, gutters and external pipes)

(b) to keep in repair and proper working order the installations in the dwelling-house for the supply of water, gas and electricity and for sanitation (including basins, sinks, baths and sanitary conveniences, but not other fixtures, fittings and appliances for making use of the supply of water, gas or electricity), and

(c) to keep in repair and proper working order the installations in the dwelling-house for space heating and heating water.

7.2 The Council must carry out repairs within a reasonable period of time of being notified of the disrepair or becoming aware of the disrepair...steps should be taken to remedy any item of disrepair promptly to avoid claims.

7.3 If the Council breaches its repairing obligations tenants and leaseholder can sue the Council for damages and an order for works of repair to be completed. The Council has to date paid out thousands of pounds in damages and costs to tenants / leaseholders and their respective solicitors for breach of the Council's repairing obligation.

(from Camden council: Investing in Camden's Homes – Decent Homes Years 2 and 3 HASC/2009/11)

These proposals put new duties on Camden Council. Tenants must have opportunities to be involved in management of homes, to influence strategic priorities, measure and scrutinise how effective involvement and empowerment policies are.

Self-assessment must be evidence based and subject to tenant scrutiny. Camden must provide tenants with clear accessible performance information.

By October 2010 they have to publish a report for tenants set-

ting out how they meet or plan to meet each national standard as well as their plans for developing local standards in consultation with tenants. This includes local performance targets, how these are monitored by and reported to tenants and what will happen if they are not met. Complaints must also be reported, with information on what has changed as a result.

This year's general election outcome could make the future of TSA uncertain. But tenants will

use any opportunity to hold Camden accountable and to get the best for council housing.

Camden Fed has organised a meeting with the TSA to ensure tenants have enough information to respond to the consultation.

● The Tenant Services

Authority: What will it do for Camden tenants?

**With Adrian Peacock, Tenant Standards Advisor
6.30pm Monday 18 January
11-17 The Marr, Camden St
NW1 0HE**

'It's the ordinary person who is suffering'

As the new year starts, 18,000 households are on Camden's housing register, and the council continues to sell-off properties.

Karen Averies, 42, spent her seventh Christmas squeezed into a two bedroom apartment with her partner and four children.

'We can't even sit in the same room to enjoy Christmas lunch together. The kitchen's really narrow, so the two eldest sit at the table. My next daughter, Natasha, perches on the work surface, and my partner and I eat off our laps in the room next door, with the little one on the floor,' Karen said.

'There's no space to do anything. We can't even put up a Christmas tree.' Karen's three girls are squeezed shoulder to shoulder on the sofa. Her eldest balances homework on her knee whilst Kieran, her three year old, is bouncing off the bars in his playpen.

Karen opens the sliding door to the balcony so her daughter can show me her rabbit. 'Camden council told me that my daughter would have her own bedroom by the time she was 11 years old. She's going to be 14 next Friday and we're still here with the three girls all sharing a room and Kieran, the little'un, in with me.'

'I don't know what the council is doing selling off houses when it's people like us who are suffering. We've been waiting for seven years now. It makes me sick to think about it. I'm appalled and disgusted.'

Housing charity Shelter say it would still take 7.52 years to clear Camden's housing register if present conditions remain and no new names were added. Shelter expressed their concern at the cur-

Rachel Smith talks to families on Camden's housing waiting list

rent housing crisis in Camden: 'The sell-offs seem ethically dubious,' they said.

'At a time when 18,000 people are on the housing waiting lists, it is vital that every effort is made to increase the supply of social and affordable housing. Councils must do everything in their power to retain and increase their stock of social homes.'

Last year Camden sold 58 council houses in addition to commercial properties and hostels, raising £35 million for council funds. Chris Naylor, lead councillor for homes and housing strategy confirmed that Camden council will be

'It's ridiculous that the council is selling off so many houses when my son's having to sleep on the floor'

looking to sell off up to 442 homes:

'Ideally, we would not sell off any properties at all next year, but we don't have a choice. In 2004 the government refused to give us the £283 million we needed to renovate the houses we have. Now we don't have the money, but we still have the government requirement to keep housing at a minimum standard. With so many homes needing so much work, there's a crying need to raise money to pay for repairs,' Naylor added.

Meric Apak, the chair of the Camden Federation of tenants and residents association, says: 'The

council blames the government, and the government blames the council and somewhere in the middle, it's the ordinary person who is suffering.'

Sally Unwin has been on the waiting list for eight months, since she was registered blind in March this year. She lives with her son, David 35, who sleeps in the front room of her one bedroom house so he can care for his mother.

'I've been trying for some time to get a two bedroom house. I keep phoning the council, but I've stopped now, because they just keep on telling me that I've been rejected.'

'Without my son here I can't even properly cook. I depend on him now,' she said.

'He's too tall to sleep on the sofa. There's a big thick blanket on the floor he sleeps on, then he gets up, changes and goes to work each day.'

Sally seems despondent. 'It's ridiculous that the council is selling off so many houses when my son's having to sleep on the floor.'

The worst affected victims of the sell-offs are in temporary accommodation. A spokesperson from St Mungos, a homeless charity who provide refuge to people on the housing register, try to make the festive season as easy as possible:

'We make it nice and lively. We do general entertainment, have a big meal, and invite everyone to celebrate together. Some people prefer not to take part so much though. Christmas is not the same if you can not be in your own home.'

In brief

Fire Safety

Tenants Associations and reps can demand to see the safety assessment file for your block, estate or street. This should include an assessment of any risks, measures in place to improve safety, and materials used in your homes.

Grants for older people

Age Concern Camden are awarding grants of £100 to groups in Camden that work with older people. The Club Grants Scheme gives smaller groups the chance to make a difference to the lives of older people. You must have 75% Camden members, members over 60 and an income of less than £30,000. The deadline is 14th December. Call Corinna Hyman 020 7837 3777.

Translations?

Would your organisation benefit from a free translation service? UCL Volunteers are offering a free service to Camden groups. Contact Dee Davis on 020 7679 4119 for more information.

Legal help

Would your organisation benefit from free (pro bono) legal advice? Law Works can put you in touch with a free lawyer through their Choices project. Alternatively, you can access advice by email through the Initial Electronic Advice project. Visit the website to find out how to take part, or contact Lorna Heselton Choices and ALLIES Project Officer, Tel: 020 7929 5601

Energy

For information on making your home more sustainable and ways to save energy call 0800 801738 info@smallstepsenergyvisits.org.uk or see www.camden.gov.uk/homeenergyvisits

Digital TV

All council homes in Camden should have a new digital TV system (an Integrated Reception System – IRS) when the analogue signal is turned off in 2012. 13 sheltered blocks have got the new service, and project manager Paula Botha says around 7,000 homes should have it by April 2010. But street properties are not included currently, and may never get the new service. Others including St Albans Villas are finding it very hard to find out when they will get IRS.

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Camden Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations
tel 0800 652 3140 (freephone) website: www.camdenfed.org

email: office@camdenfed.org 11-17 The Marr, Camden St, London NW1 0HE

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