

Camden's Housing Conference - 25 October 2007

Summary and feedback



1. Introduction

On 25 October London Borough of Camden held a successful half-day conference for all housing stakeholders, including residents from across housing tenures, housing associations, homelessness agencies, private developers, Members and staff.

The conference was designed to:

- Bring stakeholders together to discuss current and future housing challenges in the borough;
- Encourage delegates to debate the contribution that housing can make to 'people and communities' agendas; and
- Launch the Council's updated Housing Strategy 2005-10.

The conference was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (WC1).

2. Delegates

121 delegates attended from a wide range of organisations involved in housing in Camden:

Groups represented on the day	Number of delegates who attended
Camden Association of Street Properties	2
Camden Federation of Private Tenants	3
Camden Fed of Tenants & Residents Associations	2
Camden Homelessness Forum	4
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy	1
Councillors	6
District Management Committees	9
District Monitoring Panels	4
Leaseholders Forum	1
Council staff (non-LBC)	3
LBC ¹ staff – Camden Strategy Unit	5
LBC staff – Children, Schools & Families	6
LBC staff – Housing & Adult Social Care	32
LBC staff – Culture & Environment	1
London Housing Foundation	1
London School of Economics	2
Camden council tenants	2
Primary Care Trust	1
Private developers	3
Private landlords	4

¹ London Borough of Camden

Registered Social Landlords	16
RSL tenant representatives	2
Shelter	1
Sheltered Housing Forum	3
Supported housing providers	5
Tenants & Residents Associations	2
TOTAL	121

3. Context

People and communities issues

Housing policy and service delivery in Camden are now clearly connected to all the other big challenges we face – the wellbeing of children, health, community safety, sustainability, community cohesion and regeneration.

Housing contributes to a range of ‘well being’ agendas including:

- Promoting well being of children and young people – for example via provision of housing that provides space for good-quality play and study and joint working with children, schools and families colleagues to deliver Every Child Matters outcomes; and
- Pathways for all - working with all service users to engage them on housing options, education, training and employment opportunities and to promote a culture of shared responsibilities between service users and providers.

Accordingly, like Camden’s Housing Strategy, the conference was designed to give delegates an opportunity to debate ‘people and communities’ as well as ‘bricks and mortar’ issues.

Housing Strategy launch

The Council used the conference to launch its updated Housing Strategy 2005-10. The strategy was reviewed in 2007 following consultation with residents and other stakeholders. The review helped us sharpen our focus in six key areas:

- **Maximising the supply of affordable housing** - Doing all we can to work with partners to maximise the supply of the right kind of affordable homes is one important part of our strategy to help meet needs, as far as we can.
- **Making best use of council stock** - We know we can do more to achieve a better match between property size and household size, particularly by promoting home swaps between overcrowded tenants and under occupiers and converting properties by example knocking through.
- **Tackling overcrowding** – We have developed a set of innovative interventions to improve tenants’ quality of life; including offering practical interventions designed to help families make best use of space and helping parents with basic life skills to improve space, time and activity management. We are piloting our ideas in a Communities and Local Government (CLG) funded project.

- **Energy efficiency** - Housing in Camden accounts for 30% of total carbon emissions. We want to help tenants go green (for example by making recycling easier) and reduce the carbon footprint from new and existing housing.
- **Worklessness** – While the trend for the borough as a whole over recent years has been towards a reduction in numbers of people out of work, the reverse is true for social housing. We will use outreach work and timely opportunities and conversations to help people access local education, training and employment opportunities.
- **Decent Homes** - Approximately half of the Council's tenanted properties do not meet the Decent Homes standard. In the absence of the central government funding that Camden's tenants are entitled to the Decent Homes standard is unlikely to be met before 2030. In response, we are developing (in consultation with tenants) a new investment programme that will enable us to meet the Decent Homes standard by 2012.

The following is a brief summary of the conference:

4. Opening presentations

After opening welcomes from Councillor Keith Moffitt and Councillor Chris Naylor (Executive Member for Housing, Camden Council), three speakers gave opening presentations:

Andy Gale, Specialist Advisor, Communities and Local Government

Key points

- Government-led initiatives on tackling homelessness have been successful – for example the Government is on course to meet the target to halve the number of households in temporary accommodation to 50,500 by 2010
- Andy stressed the importance of the strategic housing role that local authorities have 'in creating vibrant mixed communities by ensuring that the right housing, of the highest quality, is in the right place and supported by necessary infrastructure and support'
- A key challenge and area for debate is how to balance competing housing needs. Everyone should be able to get help – not just the established priority need groups; for example we need to think about how we can help single people with no priority or tenants seeking advice about getting a job.

Alan Benson, Head of Housing and Homelessness, Greater London Authority

Key points

- The Mayor thinks that London *can* build its way out of the housing crisis – as long as London is viewed as a whole rather than a set of individual boroughs working in isolation.
- Choice and mobility for those living in social housing should continue to be promoted.

- The GLA Act has devolved certain powers to the Mayor's office, largely planning, housing and other strategies.
- The Mayor's new planning powers mean that the GLA can make positive decisions on strategic applications if local authorities are not delivering the homes London needs.
- All local housing policy must be in line with the Mayor's housing strategy.
- The mayor has no responsibility for Decent Homes.
- The themes of the Mayor's housing strategy are: increased supply; increased quality and changing lives, with the target of 50,000 new homes (29,000 of these to be socially rented). Of these new homes, 42% of social rented will comprise of 3 or more bedrooms.
- New homes for existing social tenants will be provided in growth areas outside of London (1,000 per year).
- The quality of new homes will be related to climate change, and the strategy focuses on the "greening" of existing homes. New properties will be built to the "lifetime homes" standard.
- Estate Regeneration will be carried out on a borough-by-borough basis, with the borough council recommending properties.
- The Mayor's strategy will encourage choice and mobility in social lettings through a pan-London CBL scheme.

Jenny Edwards, Chief Executive, Homeless Link

Key points

- Jenny focused on two questions: 'What makes a home?' and 'What makes a community?'
- She argued that soft furnishings/bricks and mortar are not enough – a 'home' must make you feel safe, it must help you maintain social networks (friends and family) and help your connections and relationships get stronger. People must also be able to exercise choice over where they live.
- A community is not made by shops alone. It should feel like a positive place, with opportunities for work and training, and for individuals to achieve their full potential. Children should not be seen as part of the problem. Volunteering opportunities can help people feel included. We need to find 'community anchors' – organisations or people that can foster good relations and bring people together.
- Successful communities are those that help all the most vulnerable people.

5. Discussion forums

Delegates attended discussion forums (workshops) to reflect on the challenges posed by the speakers in their opening presentations. Each group were asked to agree three bullet points and two questions to pose to the conference panel members (see section 6 below). The bullet points captured the main responses of the group to what the speakers said and the challenges ahead.

Group 1 (Chaired by Philip Colligan, Deputy Director of Housing, Renewals)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- The fact that councils don't currently have the power to build new homes makes it difficult to meet needs.
- Stakeholders need to acknowledge the contribution that RSL tenants make to promoting the welfare and housing conditions in the sector and there does not need to be an antagonistic relationship between tenants and their landlords
- There is sometimes a tension between the praise that central government gives Camden for its housing achievements (for example in the opening presentations from Alan Benson and Andy Gale) and what tenants think (for example many of the Council's homes do not meet the Decent Homes standard and there has been no direct investment from the Government).

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. Is enough attention given to private tenants and is this group represented at consultations?
2. How can we ensure the same rights for housing association tenants (for example in relation to security of tenure and tenant participation) that council tenants enjoy?

Group 2 (Chaired by Brian Matthews, Lead Officer for Supporting People)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- Housing supply increase is to be welcomed however it is only part of the solution and must be linked with allocations, worklessness and regeneration;
- Those charged with the responsibility of 'building communities' should seriously consider improving the links between older and young people;
- Cannot see how the new build programme from the Mayor's office will work considering the current dynamic between the GLA and some of the local authorities in London.

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. What plans does Camden have to increase housing supply within the borough, particularly with regard to empty homes and brownfield sites?
2. Does the panel believe that there are barriers to move across borough boundaries with too much emphasis placed by local authorities on 'local connections'?

Group 3 (Chaired by Karen Swift, Head of Strategy & Commissioning Unit)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- New housing supply in Camden is welcomed but there also needs to be the infrastructure to support the new units of accommodation.
- There needs to be a better balance within the Allocations Scheme in terms of providing local flexibility.
- Supporting individuals in their own home is important but also in relation to the need for through put, i.e. there needs to be new housing stock in Camden.

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. Where will the new affordable housing be built in Camden?
2. If the Government is going to get RSLs to build the new supply what guarantees can Karen Wilson give on RSL rights and their voice as tenants?

Group 4 (Chaired by David Padfield, Assistant Director, Housing Management)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- Lack of settled communities and the problems this causes – how can Camden build communities?
- We must be careful not to build at very high densities.
- How can we turn houses into homes?

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. What is the attitude to increasing housing density in Camden?
2. What is the strategy to help people move out of Camden if they want?

Group 5 (Chaired by Ed Wallace, Camden Strategy Unit)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- New housing developments must be accompanied by the right kind of community infrastructure (for example schools and GP surgeries).
- We should consider extending a 'pathways' approach to secure social housing tenants to support them to move on in life.
- We need to debate what social housing stands for (for example who it is for and how long people should live in it) and we should also challenge the lack of mobility among tenants.

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. How will Capital Moves work in practice and what are the funding implications of this?
2. How can the planning system ensure that community facilities such as open spaces, GPs, schools and infrastructures are provided alongside new housing?

Group 6 (Chaired by Catherine Illingworth, Interim Assistant Director of Renewals)

The three bullet points agreed by the group were:

- How do we address worklessness in our housing? We should carry out more joined up working with RSLs.
- Mayor's strategy is positive on new build and mobility – where can we build in Camden? Is there any land? At what point do we say 'no more building in Camden'?
- We need to promote more sense of community.

The two questions posed by the group to the panel were:

1. How will the money be raised to meet the decent homes deficit in Camden?
2. How will we ensure that the LAA priorities are the right ones and how will these be funded?

6. Panel discussion

The panel was chaired by Councillor Chris Naylor and was made up of:

- Jenny Edwards, Chief Executive, Homeless Link
- Peter Wright, Camden leaseholder, Chair of Holborn District Management Committee
- Heather Schroeder, Director of Children, Schools and Families Directorate, London Borough of Camden
- Karen Wilson, Chief Executive, Origin Housing Group, Local Strategic Partnership representative

The panel answered the questions posed by the six discussion forums:

Answers to groups 1-3

Karen - "RSLs should be viewed as a solution rather than a problem and that it is important to work jointly. There are differences between council and RSL tenures, but it's important to understand the real - not the perceived - differences between tenures. RSLs are engaged in conversations to try to communicate what the real differences are. We are also talking to residents to help them become more aware of the valuable services that RSLs provide in the borough. RSLs want people to have the right information to make changes, whilst providing a level playing field and common standards. RSLs are not democratically elected, but this doesn't necessarily make them worse. Tenants are on the boards of organisations and RSLs are regulated by the Housing Corporation."

Jenny – "There is a long way to go in every sector to ensure empowerment; some models work better than others. If people want to be treated as consumers, they sometimes have to be told "no, that isn't the solution."

Chris – "A key way forward is to talk more directly about these issues, and to create room for a constructive dialogue."

Peter – “District Monitoring Committee Chairs are involved in tenant participation; they understand the issues. We want to involve RSL and other tenants, but what do we do with what is said? We must have mechanisms for ensuring that tenants’ views influence services.”

Jenny – “There is a conflict in allocating social housing, but we are constrained in how we allocate homes by housing law. Real life leads us across borough boundaries. In using local connection as a way of allocating homes we inadvertently put barriers in the way of solving problems.”

Heather – “It is extremely important for children to have a settled home – in Camden some schools have student mobility rates of 60%. The key objective should be to get families settled.”

Chris – “Unfortunately we can’t always identify sites easily and we are under constantly pressure to deliver new homes. In this situation we need to think creatively about how to increase supply – for example by building taller and working on smaller brown field sites.”

Karen – “Land supply in Camden is a real issue; we just don’t have the sites available. Kings Cross and Euston will be on rebuilding existing things, and will not be completed for 10 years. There is more housing choice across London to free people up to move.”

Heather – “We are working better and more joined up – for example at Kings Cross there will be new health centres and schools.”

Answers to groups 4-6

Karen – “The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) brings together different perspectives in the borough from providers of services. Priorities are set based on research and the LSP looks across broad priorities.”

Heather – “The Local Area Agreement does have a budget but it’s critical that we get the priorities and targets right to deliver the priorities. Partners will share the priorities.”

Peter – “Higher densities do work in some places – would they work in Camden? Do we have the infrastructure to work with this? These are important questions for Camden and there are also important related issues of community cohesion to consider. All things are feasible, but we have to think very carefully about what the consequences of higher densities could be.”

Karen – “There will be a proportion of vacancies for cross borough bidding via Capital Moves, but it is true that there is resistance from a number of local authorities.”

Chris – “The Council does have a strategy for meeting the Decent Homes funding deficit. It involves selling off a small fraction of vacant properties. Selling homes will raise £110 m over five years.”

7. Feedback

Ten feedback forms were received from delegates. The responses are summarised below:

Speakers

- Generally rated `good' or `fair'.
- Presentations gave good background to recent work in housing.
- But time should have been given to allow delegates to ask questions.

Discussion forums

- Forums could have been themed to allow a wider range of discussions.
- As a way of ensuring that proposals and ideas are properly thought through, the discussion forums could have been based on consideration of specific problems and examples of good practice.

Conference format

- Generally rated `good' or `fair'.

Venue, facilities and refreshments

- Generally rated good.

8. Further information and contact details

If you would like to discuss any of the issues arising from this report or you would like to receive copies of Camden's Housing Strategy, please contact:

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Camden's Housing Strategy is also on our website:

<http://www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/housing/housing-policy-and-strategies/>