

Camden Tenant

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Independent voice of Camden Council tenants

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No near-market council rents!

Tenants are concerned that Camden council could use new Government rent policies to set controversial near-market rents for new council housing.

Tenants at Maiden Lane and Gospel Oak fear that new powers could mean up to 80% market rents for new council housing. They have successfully insisted on new council rather than housing association homes for rent to replace homes demolished in estate regeneration schemes.

But changes in rent policy could allow the Council to charge misnamed 'Affordable Rents' for some of the new homes. Based on current market rents in Gospel Oak this could mean council rents of up to £364 a week for a two bed and £475 a week for a three-bed council home. This would provoke determined opposition.

Lead Councillor for Housing Julian Fulbrook is adamant that he does not support any such move. Councillor Fulbrook says: 'While there are no doubt all sorts of rumours about all sorts of speculative hypothetical possibilities, we intend to rent out new Council tenancies in the normal way by fixing a standard Council rent.'

Council rents already more than cover the costs of managing and maintaining our homes. So such high rents would break the princi-

ples of council housing as genuinely-affordable for mixed communities.

Rhys Makinson, Housing assistant director for finance, says Camden has no proposals for 'rents at levels that would be unaffordable for council tenants.'

He adds that Councils will from next April have limited new powers over rent levels: 'Councils do not have to use these new powers and rent setting decisions in Camden will continue to be made following consultation with Tenants.'

If new build is proposed on or near your estate, tenant reps need clear answers and commitments in writing:

What rents?

We need a guarantee that council homes built as part of estate regeneration will be genuinely-affordable, at the level of existing rents, so as not to price out any existing and new tenants.

And what tenancies?

Council secure tenancies are the only 'like for like' replacement for existing tenants. And we want the same for future tenants, to create stable, mixed communities.

Flexible (fixed term) tenancies are minimum five years, and you have no rights to rehousing after that.

Unused car bays transformed



Tenants at Flaxman Court get gardening – see page 2

Tenants reject fixed-term tenancies and big rent rises

Tenants are determined to keep council secure tenancies and lower rents, for ourselves and for all future tenants. This is the democratically-decided decision of the council's tenant-led District Management Committee (DMC) meetings in September:

"Kentish Town DMC does not support the concept of moving to rents based on 80% of local market rents.

The DMC is opposed to tenancies being for a fixed term or flexible tenancies.

Mutual exchanges or

tenancies being changed when tenants are being moved for structural works being carried out to the home should keep their existing tenancy terms and conditions and not be subject to a new tenancy agreement on new terms.

Social housing tenancies should be based on determined need and not the ability to pay the rent unaided by benefits."

■ Kentish Town DMC, 13 September 2011 minutes, item 21.

"Camden Town DMC totally regrets any changes to the current security of tenure,

adoption of flexible tenancies and any moves towards market rents." ■ Camden Town DMC, 14 September 2011, item 11.

"[Hampstead] DMC is completely opposed to the introduction of permissive powers relating to flexible tenancies and affordable rents as set out in the Localism Bill.

■ Hampstead DMC, 22 September 2011, item 11.

At Gospel Oak the lead Councillor for housing made the following commitment:

"Councillor Fulbrook reassured DMC members that

the Council would continue to provide its tenants with security of tenure and would continue to charge affordable rents."

■ Gospel Oak DMC, 15 September 2011, minutes item 11.

Council consultation on controversial changes to tenancies and housing rights has been delayed, following tenant opposition. Camden Council will wait until the new year to consult tenants on Landlord (Tenancy) powers including fixed term tenancies, family 'succession' rights,

access to council housing for the homeless, and an open waiting list.

There will be a later consultation on the Allocations scheme.

These changes follow tenant opposition to earlier consultation proposals, and to fixed term tenancies, up to 80% market rents, and cutting access to council housing.

See Camden Fed's statement: <http://camdenfed.org.uk/2011/11/reject-threats-to-tenancies-and-rents/>

Tenant scrutiny needs real power

Government changes to housing regulation mean less external monitoring. 'Self-financing' means Camden like other councils will stand alone financially. Together these changes mean less outside checks on our landlord. So how will Camden be monitored and kept up to scratch?

Current regulator the Tenant Services Authority is being abolished. Regulation of tenant standards will transfer to a Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) committee by April next year.

Day to day regulation will be based on tenant scrutiny or co-regulation. It will be key to ensuring services are maintained and tenants treated fairly.

The new HCA regulator will continue to set national standards. The HCA will only intervene in exceptional circumstances, if failure to meet standards are or threaten to do serious harm to tenants.

Complaints to the Ombudsman will have to go via an MP, councillor or tenant panel (a new

Director of Housing says JMG is 'a council meeting where residents are invited'

concession will allow complaints directly from tenants in some circumstances).

To make tenant scrutiny work we need a tenant-led structure, with tenants having real power to hold Camden to account, to set the agenda of service review, and to initiate and carry through change where it is needed.

How will this work in Camden?

We have democratically-constituted and tenant-led District Management Committees (DMCs). These are (sometimes) consulted on housing policy and strategy, but do not monitor housing management in detail.

A Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) was set up to carry out ten-

ant-led scrutiny of how Camden council housing is run. But it is chaired by Council officers, and Assistant Director David Padfield has rejected calls for a tenant co-chair. He describes the JMG as a 'council meeting where residents are invited.' (Joint Monitoring Group review 2010/11 4/membership p9 included in DMC minutes June 2011)

William Edgill from Holborn, says JMG is not tenant-led scrutiny - because it's not chaired by a tenant, and Camden refuse to have a tenant chair. Which is appalling.

Organisations which should be represented are not, and the Group has never co-opted members as it has powers to.

Tenant reps are frustrated at the lack of response to their proposals, and are blocked from tackling important issues. JMG members have been trying to talk to officers monitoring estate cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts for over a year, to no effect.

William Edgill says: 'We come up with very good ideas and ask relevant questions - but nothing happens.'

'For genuine tenant scrutiny it would be helpful if there was a tenant chair; if information came back to us quicker than the current eight weeks, with the same again to get answers to any questions we ask about it. It's painful to ask and answer questions. It becomes a farce.'

'I want residents directly involved' to improve estate services

Justin Hunt is Camden's new interim Head of Estate Services. He and Angela Spooner, now head of tenancy services, replace the previous Heads of Housing East and West.

He is responsible for all estate services, including caretaking, Veolia (cleaning) and Fountain (grounds maintenance). This new role, managing estate services managers and monitoring the work of contractor, is part of a re-organisation.

Justin Hunt has worked in housing for 20 years. He says Camden has a good caretaking service: 'it compares well with other boroughs.'

But he adds, 'It's not my opinion that counts. Residents are the ones who live there and know what's best for their estate and their block.'

Caretaking is an in-house Camden council service. Contractors do the cleaning and gardening in estate communal areas.

Tenants opposed this split, and Hunt's role is a response to criticisms. 'The point of my role is to improve managing the relationship with Veolia and Fountains. I'm Housing's representative to discuss how contracts are working.'

The Council has reviewed Caretaking services, as a result of a tenant and caretaker campaign against cuts and privatisation. The Review and proposals on the future of caretaking and estate services will be presented to tenants at District Management Committee (DMC) meetings in December, with a consultation on how the service is run.

Tenants will be invited to join a



Justin Hunt

'We are looking to improve it, not make a radical change.'

Tenant reps want to know how we can feed into monitoring contractors' services.

Hunt says talking to your caretaker or phoning Contact Camden (020 7974 4444) is the first step, with questions and concerns about cleaning and gardening. Caretakers can liaise with enforcement officers. 'If you provide caretakers and the on-site supervisors with feedback about communal areas, we will respond,' he says.

If the problem continues, the next step is a complaint to the Estate Services Manager through the Camden Complaints process.

There is no direct route for tenant reps to feed in to monitoring services. Hunt says his objective is 'to make sure we are delivering an excellent service,' and that will

include 'responding openly to requests to be involved in monitoring of the service.'

Charlie Hedges, Alexandra and Ainsworth TRA, comments

'Camden did not consult us about this latest re-organisation of housing management. Legally they have to consult on such change, so it's not a good start.'

We need to find an effective way of monitoring caretakers and other contractors.

At the moment it's just not working. It's uneven - between different estates.

For example, Fountains are supposed to have a full time gardener on our estate, but there never has been. The grounds outside my back window have not been touched for 18 months.'

Growing spaces out of tarmac

Flaxman Court tenants have created new allotments just south of Euston Road.

They now have 30 raised beds for allotments, where formerly there were five unused car parking bays. The TRA won council funding from Holborn DMC, and support from estate manager Dilip Shah and Groundwork.

The beds were allocated first come first serve, with all 100 flats invited to bid. William Edgill, chair of the TRA, says 'We asked people who were interested to come and talk about it. People turned up, who don't usually come to meetings.'

'We were oversubscribed, so the plan is to go back for more space to create extra beds. We did this to get people involved, get to know each other, and take responsibility for keeping the block nice.'

'It's gone really well - I was surprised the amount of interest. People didn't mind doing the work, and it's nice to see people out in the summer evenings watering and weeding.'

'Already people are taking a greater pride in the flower beds and grounds. It gets people doing things together.'



Oakshott tenants help restore garden

Oakeshott Court estate tenants stepped in to restore an award-winning flower bed. The estate flower display was looked after with great care by a pensioner couple and had won a Camden in Bloom award.

When it was vandalised in

October, fellow tenants in Polygon Road, Somers Town, went into action. With help from neighbours, friends, a local councillor and Camden Garden Centre, the garden area has been restored.

Jim Widdowson, chairman of the tenants' association, said: 'It

was an awful thing to happen to that couple when they make such an effort to make the garden nice for everyone on the estate - it must have been heartbreaking for them.'

The TRA want security gates which they hope will reduce such vandalism.



Local residents in Lismore Circus community woods, with a young oak planted last year by Michael Palin

An urban taste of woodland delight

The Lismore Circus Community Woods group was formed in 2000. Suza Johnston of Lambie St TRA reports:

'We have turned a patch of rubble and waste strewn ground into a community woods/garden.'

The woods were planted with native British wild trees and plants, including hazel, wild cherry, oak, silver birch, field maple, and an abundance of wild climbing ('dog') roses. The 'floor' is covered by drifts of snowdrop and spring flowering bulbs; later in the summer it is dappled with wild violets and other flowers.

We have an abundance of 'good bugs' in the summer including butterflies and ladybirds (which gobble up the bad bugs). Robins and blackbirds follow our footsteps as we work.

Volunteers meet regularly - usually every Sunday afternoon - for 'work parties.' A refuge of

shady calm in all seasons, all enjoy this small 'urban hedgerow' tucked within a densely residential and urban area in Gospel Oak.

Neighbouring Ludham and Waxham TRA is also involved, and has donated money. Secretary of the TRA Jeanette Easterbrook says 'The little woodland area is very tiny, but lovely.'

'There is a little pathway and a bench. In the spring it's absolutely delightful with masses of bulbs coming up.'

'One little boy from our blocks goes every Sunday to help. We're not going to lose it: if there was any threat we'd be chaining ourselves to the trees.'

Last month a good sized group of adults and children helped plant donated spring bulbs to ensure a great springtime treat for the whole community. To find out more email email@lccwoods.org

Right to Buy changes will hit rents and funding

New proposals to encourage selling off more council homes to existing tenants, have been announced by the Prime Minister. These would increase Right to Buy (RTB) discount, so tenants pay less.

Details are not yet clear, but Camden's extremely high private rents mean this is likely to mean yet more existing council housing being turned into expensive private renting.

Senior housing advisors told *Camden Tenant* there are two main questions:

Replacement homes

The Prime Minister promised 180,000 new replacement homes on "low rent" for families on waiting lists. Now officials seem to have redefined this to mean new so-called 'Affordable Rent' homes with up to 80% market rents and generally fixed-term tenancies. This would mean replacement homes at very high rents, with tenancies as short as five years.

Possible approach

We should seek to hold PM to his word. Replacement should be like for like. That includes rent levels.

To deliver a same number replacement without high rents would require major capital funding.

Receipts and debt

Government say Receipts, the money from sales, will be used to pay off housing debt. Currently councils keep 25% of such receipts - they will lose this. So if the rate of RTB sales rises, net income to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) will reduce over time.

This affects Camden when we go over to locally Self-financing HRA next April. The estimated level of debt Camden has to sustain needs to be adjusted for higher RTB sales. Total debt councils take on has increased, and Government are about to consult on how RTB receipts will be distributed.

Tenant history

a column by Bob Millar



A plaque and rose tree on Curnock Street estate in Camden Town, in memory of John Watts, former chair of the TRA. The garden on the Curnock

Street estate was John's project. He worked hard and tirelessly to achieve it. The result is a beautiful garden where all can sit and relax, and a play area.

In June 2007 the plaque was unveiled at a special garden party organised by the Tenants Association to show their appreciation.

Camden Fed news

Jim takes the chair

Camden Fed has a new chair, James Widdowson of Oakshott Court TRA in Somers Town.

Jim has lived on Oakshott Court, off Eversholt St for seven years. The Tenants Association has been going three years. 'I was part of setting it up, originally to deal with anti-social behaviour and then repairs. Our aim now is to get our estate painted,' he says.

The current concerns are with Lakehouse - with ongoing problems from leaking roofs and with central heating and hot water failing every two weeks.

He is studying at Birkbeck as a mature student. 'I am a community person - I've lived in Camden all my life,' he says.

Jim was elected as chair of the Fed Management Committee following the resignation of John Rolfe.

With major threats to council housing, and difficult funding negotiations going on with Cam-



Jim Widdowson



Helia Evans

den Council, the Committee hope Jim's experience, as Trustee and Governor at Kentish Town City Farm and in other local campaigns especially fighting cuts in Camden mental health services, will help in leading a stronger and united committee team.

Another new management committee member was elected at the Fed Annual Meeting in September.

Helia Evans, of Ossulston TRA in Somers Town, has been active in the tenant movement in Camden and London-wide, for many years, working with tenant groups of various tenures.

She is now involved in the CF-TRA Management Board, contributing to the work and decision making of Camden Fed, at what she says is a 'crucial time of funding cuts and introduction of the

Localism Bill, affecting all tenants.'

Another new member has been co-opted to strengthen the management committee.

Paula Schofield lives in Dorney Tower Block on the Chalcots Estate NW3.

She is secretary of Dorney Residents Association and was involved in the relaunch of the R.A. 'Our main aims at present are to encourage more residents to get involved and help us to organise activities that reflect the diversity of the Dorney residents.'

The Association want to improve the appearance and facilities of the grounds around the block, using council funding and charitable donations. 'We've learned already that active RAs fought for funding, and we aim to achieve the same,' Paula says.

Camden Fed News round-up

■ **Goldington TRA** has been back in action for a year. After frequent complaints, services have been transformed, with a new caretaker who is 'very good and popular.' All entrance doors will be improved or replaced, and the tenants hall will be improved with funds from the DMC. Problems with contractors leaving security gates open put children and others at risk. Things have improved after the TRA got the Council to monitor the gates.

■ The active Tenants Association (TA) at **Handel Mansions** near Kings Cross, has already made a big difference. In under a year the new TA has managed to get the hall and stairs painted, stopped smoking, spitting and other mess in the block, and is bidding to have the building re-tiled.

Tenants are happy to see things improving. Up to 12 attend meetings, out of 24 flats in the block. Once the basics are done, they have plans to improve the courtyard. 'The moral is, don't give up. If you are determined to get things done, you can,' says TA Chair Zoe Coleman.

■ And at **25 Gresse St** the new TRA feel that after years of dissatisfaction, they are making real progress to improve cleaning and caretaking.

■ **Amphill Square TRA** held a successful AGM and is tackling increased behaviour problems and drug use which they say is a direct result of faulty entry-phone systems and gates, and lights not working. The TRA is involved in consultation on redevelopment plans for the adjoining shops, medical centre and commercial area.

Regular children's and young people's sessions and sewing classes continue in the Tenants hall.

Best wishes for Christmas and the new year to all our readers from Camden Fed management committee and staff