

Submission to the Independent Commission on the Future of Council Housing in the London Borough of Southwark



With Carole Barrett outside Bridport House in Walworth

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Please tell me your views by writing to: Harriet Harman MP, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA or via email: harmanh@parliament.uk.

People can also submit evidence to the Commission by contacting: Council Housing Commission, c/o The Smith Institute, Somerset House, South Building, London, WC2R 1LR or via email: info@southwarkhousingcommission.com

Summary

Over the years I have been MP for Camberwell and Peckham, many people have asked for my help because they need repairs done or need to move home. Housing is rightly a priority for Southwark Council because it has responsibility for 39,000 council properties and 16,700 leaseholders. Keeping these homes up-to-date and in good condition is a big challenge made even more difficult by the coalition government's cuts.

Because of the difficulty of providing housing for everyone who needs it and keeping these properties up-to-date and in good repair, Southwark Council has set up an independent commission to advise them on the future of council housing in the borough.

To help the commission with their work I'm reporting to them the housing concerns that people tell me about.

- **Prompt and high quality repairs** – Many people complain about repairs not being done or about a poor standard of work. **The council needs to keep a close eye on contracts and contractors so repair work is completed to a good standard and homes are kept safe. Residents should be told about the progress of planned works and the council must not leave works so long that properties deteriorate creating a need for further repairs at additional cost.**
- **Building more council homes** – Every week people contact me desperate for a council home. Because Southwark is a central London borough private rents are very high. For many people a council home, with the rent at a quarter of a private rental flat, is the only way to rent a home of their own. It is very welcome that Southwark Council has promised to build 1,000 new council homes. They are sorely needed.
- **Building larger council homes** – Families don't want to be overcrowded and want to stay together but a shortage of affordable family homes in Southwark means many people are living in overcrowded homes. **As the council considers the redevelopment of estates it must address the need for affordable family homes and make sure replacement developments have more 3, 4 and 5 bedroom homes.**



Meeting with Michael Ward, Secretariat to Southwark's Independent Commission of the Future of Council Housing

- **Enduring demand for council homes** – If you are a council resident and you don't like what is happening on your estate, you can vote out your councillor at the next election. You can't do that if you are a tenant of a housing association or private landlord and people worry that losing that connection would make them powerless. Again and again residents have voted to reject plans which would transfer their estate from the council's control to housing associations. People want the council as a landlord.
- **Providing a good service to residents** - Anti-social behaviour and disputes between neighbours are common reasons people want to move. **Where possible the council needs to look at ways of quickly and effectively addressing issues before people become desperate to move.**
- **Clamping down on illegal subletting** – It is fraud to rent a council property by saying it is for yourself but then renting it out to make money. It is deeply unfair to people who face long waits for council homes to see those who already have them abuse their tenancies by letting them out at market rates. It is also unfair to subtenants who unknowingly rent properties and then find themselves with very few rights. **It is vital the council clamps down on illegal subletting.**
- **Keeping communities together** – Many young people who have grown up in the borough want to get a home of their own but want to stay near family and friends. With high private rents, unless they can get a council property they have to move to a new and unfamiliar area. **Allocations policies should take local connections into account, while people displaced from their homes (for example during major repairs) should always be re-housed in their local communities where possible.**
- **Involving leaseholders and treating leaseholders fairly** – When major works are carried out on estates, leaseholders receive bills for their share of the work. These bills are often very high, sometimes reaching tens of thousands of pounds. Many leaseholders feel they are overcharged for substandard work. **It is important to recognise leaseholders' interests and involve them in planning and commissioning major works as well as making sure jobs are completed to a good standard.**

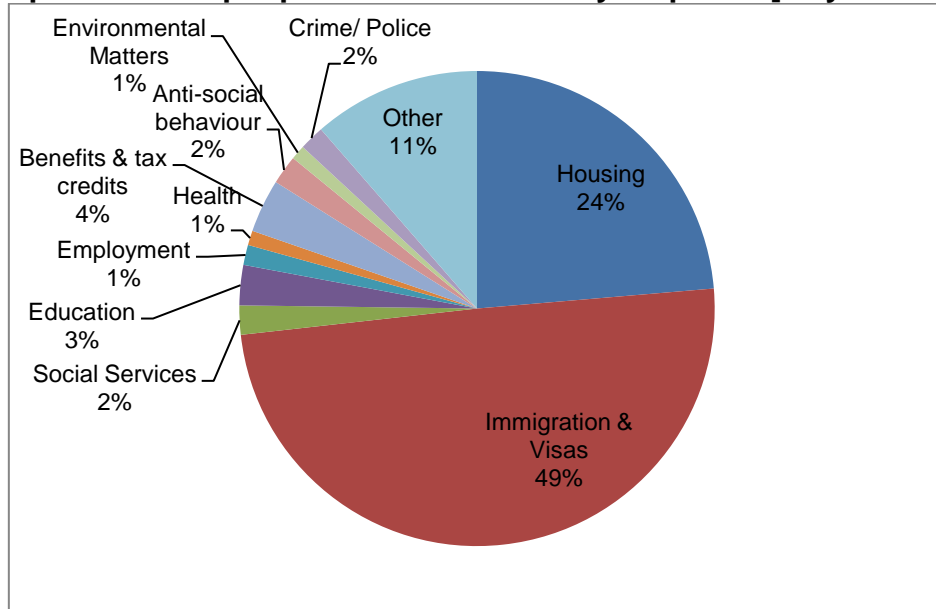
On the Poets Corner estate in Camberwell in 2010 with Cllr Kevin Ahern, Cllr Emmanuel Oyewole and chair of the local TRA, Theresa Adetona



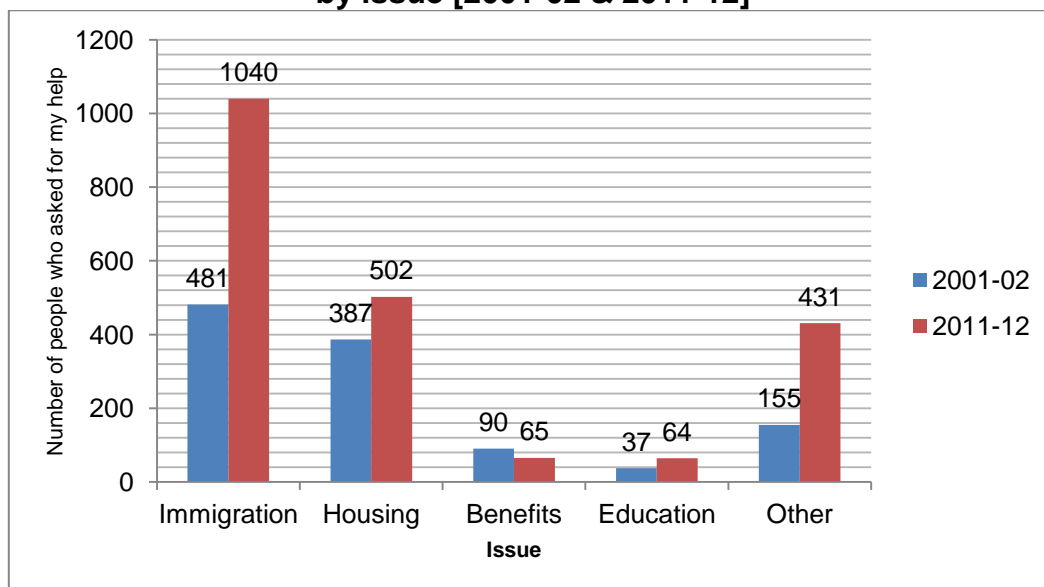
Helping people with housing problems

Almost one in four people who ask for my assistance do so because they need help with housing. And the number of people needing assistance with housing problems is increasing.

Graph 1: Issues people have asked for my help with [May 2011-12]



Graph 2: Number of people who asked for my help by issue [2001-02 & 2011-12]

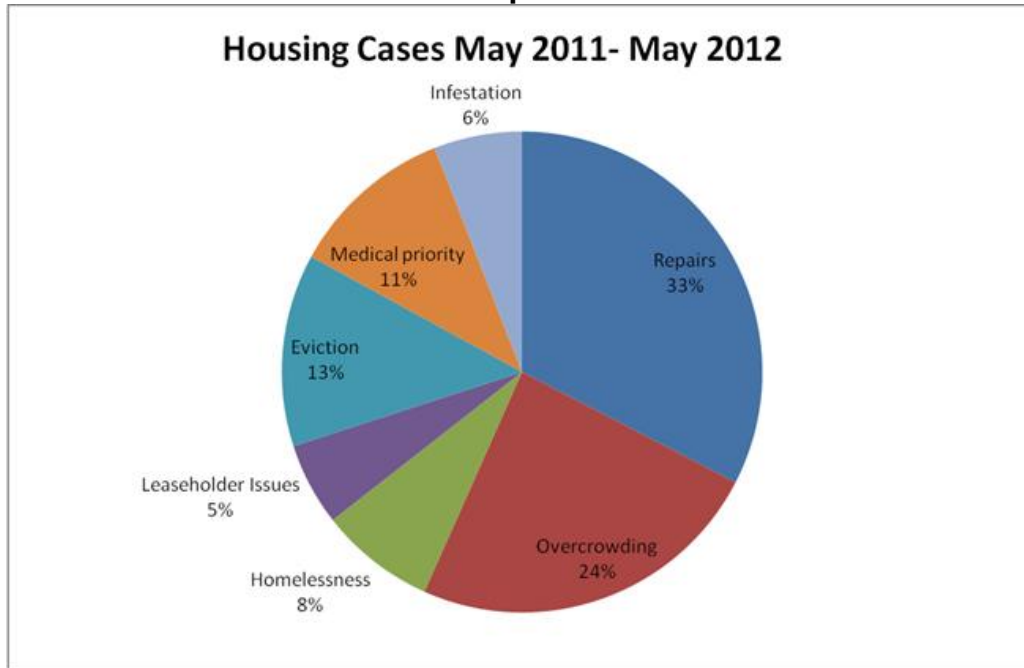


Source: casework enquiries data (total number of cases 2001-02: 1,150; 2011-12: 2,122)

Prompt and high quality repairs

Problems with repairs are the most frequently raised housing issue. One-third of people who ask for my help with housing issues have a problem related to repairs. Sub-standard work, delayed repairs, and a lack of preventative work leaves residents upset and creates a need for further repairs at additional cost.

Graph 3:



Keeping homes safe

One of the most important issues around repairs is ensuring homes are safe. Repair issues that compromise the safety of tenants are urgent and need to be rectified immediately.

Case study: A tenants and residents association (T&RA) contacted me recently when an independent fire safety inspection revealed potential issues with fire safety works in a tower block on the estate. Residents were understandably concerned about the report. I immediately contacted the council and fire brigade and asked for an urgent inspection of the block. The council and fire brigade contacted the T&RA to reassure residents and to make sure any minor issues were corrected without delay.

The council needs to ensure that people are safe in their homes. They must carry out works promptly and undertake regular inspections - reinforcing security where vandalism has resulted in compromise safety measures.



On the Sceaux Gardens Estate

Ensuring works are completed to a good standard

A lack of quality in repair works upsets residents who see this as money being wasted. This is particularly a problem with major works such as the 'Decent Homes' programme. I often see people at my surgeries who explain that those responsible for overseeing a contractor's work are not ensuring value-for-money.

Case study: Residents of a large estate near Bermondsey have raised grave concerns with me about the management and fulfilment of the Decent Homes work on their estate. The contractor left the site two years ago leaving unfinished work which left residents fearful for their safety. The site manager promised residents they would address their concerns but this did not happen. Unbelievably, Southwark Council was actually paying another company to manage the contractor's work but still residents were forced to try to sort out problems themselves. Residents feel public funds have been wasted in carrying out this work and by the contractors and company who were hired to oversee it.

Repair work and major contracts need to be closely monitored and enforced. Works should take place and be signed off as complete in consultation with local residents.



With Cllr Veronica Ward on the Champion Hill Estate

Working with tenants to solve repair problems

People often ask for my help because they have an ongoing repair problem which they feel is not being taken seriously. Often this happens with hard-to-solve repair problems where the cause is unknown.

Case study: Ms A lives on a large estate in Peckham with her newborn daughter. For the last three years she has been asking the council to fix the problem causing damp and mould building up in her home. Each time Ms A asked for the problem to be fixed a contractor is sent round to 'wash' the walls. The contractors have been telling the council the problem is caused by condensation, but Ms A disagrees. She is worried for the health of her daughter. She says: *"I really have done all I can."* During the last three years Ms A's walls have been washed and even re-surfaced and plastered – but each time the damp comes back. I have written to the council and asked them to work with Ms A to investigate the underlying causes of the damp and mould.



Meeting a resident on the Willowbrook Estate

With reoccurring repair problems people are often desperate for help after living in disrepair for many years. They are also frustrated, especially when the same 'fix' is repeated over and over again without solving the underlying problem. Many people tell me they want to move because of repair issues.

Both tenants and the council want repairs to be taken care of quickly because it helps prevent more serious problems and cuts down on long term costs of maintaining homes. So, the council must take people's concerns seriously and work with tenants to get to the bottom of hard-to-solve repair issues such as leaks.

Finishing repair work

The way repairs are currently dealt with isn't working for many residents in council homes in Camberwell and Peckham. People find it difficult to get repair work started and often ask for my help because they are having problems getting repairs completed. Frequently people tell me they have waited at home for work to be done only to see a 'sorry you were out card' come through their letterbox: *"a card was left but they didn't actually make any attempts to ring on the bell and quietly dropped the card."* This enrages tenants who believe the contractors are being paid for work they haven't yet carried out.

Case study: Ms B lives in a flat around Wyndham Road. She had an ongoing problem with damp and mould but there had been a number of delays to repairs being carried out. The council had raised several work orders with the contractor but the contractor had not followed these through. Ms B asked for my help when she had been waiting for 3 months for repairs. I wrote to the Director of Housing and to the Chief Executive of the contractor on Ms B's behalf. Extensive damp-proofing works are now underway.

It is also difficult when several different contractors work on one repair problem and fail to keep residents up-to-date with their progress. Residents tell me they want to know what is happening and when repair work will be finished. And when repairs go unremedied for several months, further problems can develop which require more difficult and expensive repairs.

There is an urgent need to ensure every effort is made to carry out necessary repairs and communicate progress and delays to residents. Work orders should not be closed, and contractors paid, until residents are satisfied repair problems have been fixed.



With Theresa Adetona by Landor House

Communicating with residents during major works

Residents often raise concerns when they feel their block is being overlooked while all their neighbours have had work done.

Case study: Ms C lives on an estate in Camberwell. She recently raised her concerns about a need for repair and redecoration works in her property, particularly in her kitchen and bathroom. She said that the state of the property does not at present meet the Decent Homes standard although other, similar blocks have been refurbished to meet that standard. I wrote to the Director of Housing on Ms C's behalf and the council have agreed to repair her kitchen in line with the Decent Homes kitchen upgrade plan.

There is a need for residents to be fully informed on the planned progress of upgrade work as soon as programmes begin on an estate and to be kept up-to-date throughout the works.



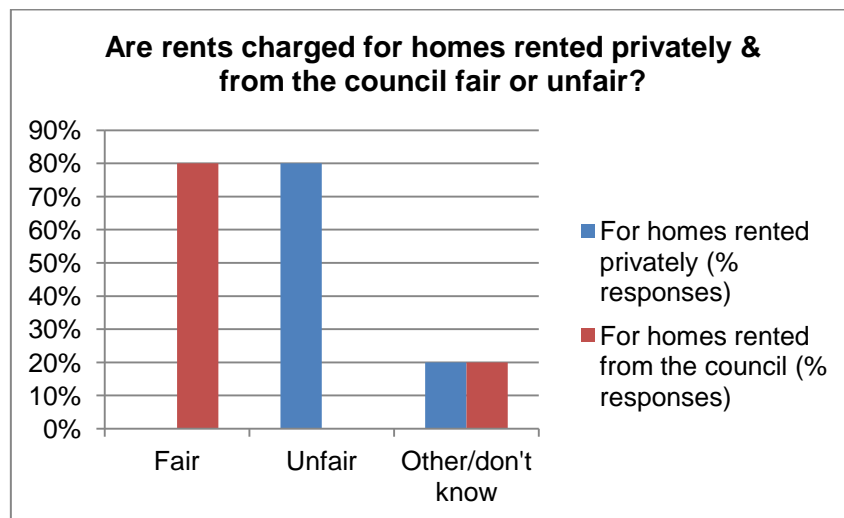
A kitchen in Camberwell where the tenants are waiting for Decent Homes work

Building more council homes

Many people tell me they want a council home because renting privately is not affordable.

For a two bedroom home in Southwark the average council rent is £362.50¹ per month. This is a quarter of the average private rent of £1,456.54².

In order to afford the average private rent for a two-bedroom home, a family would have to earn take home pay of more than £3,714 per month – approximately equal to a salary of £65,000 per year. This is not affordable for many families in the borough where the median income is £27,108.



My own survey, carried out at my advice surgery on 27th January, asked whether my constituents felt that private sector and council rents were in general fair. Almost every person surveyed felt that council rents were generally fair, while private rents were generally too high.



The shortage of affordable housing to rent, or even own, is becoming ever more critical and is driving demand for council homes. It is very welcome that Southwark Council have promised to build 1,000 new council homes. They are sorely needed.

Speaking with a local resident at an advice surgery

¹ Southwark Council Based on average weekly rent of £86.31 x 4.2

² Shelter. March 2012. *Homes for London* http://homesforlondon.org.uk/london_housing (data as of Nov 2011)

Building larger council homes

Many people in Camberwell and Peckham live in overcrowded conditions. This is a concern for many young families and a large number of my constituents come to see me at my advice surgery desperate to move.

As the council considers the redevelopment of estates it must address the need for affordable family homes and make sure replacement developments have more 3, 4 and 5 bedroom homes.

Other causes of overcrowding

When people are not eligible for social housing, the council's housing department are not able to help. But many people ask for my help with housing after their visa has run out or their basis of entry to the UK is being questioned.

Many asylum seekers cannot work and are not entitled to benefits. Once the initial time in asylum seekers accommodation has finished, some people find themselves homeless. They will often stay with friends on sofas for many months.

This contributes to overcrowding in private rental and in council properties, not because there are too many people listed on the tenancy but because tenants will take in families with nowhere else to go.

Case study: Ms D is from Tanzania. Ten years ago she moved to the UK with her young son. She asked for my help with her immigration application which had been under consideration at the UK Border Agency since 2007. Ms D and her son were then living with a friend and her husband and two children in their two bedroom home. When Ms D's friend sold the property and could not accommodate Ms D and her son in their new home, Ms D moved to stay with another friend. In the last year Ms D and her son have stayed in the living room of three friends. Ms D is concerned that her son, now an A-Level student, will have to move out of the area and change schools.



*Speaking with a resident at my advice surgery.
I hold regular surgeries
at Walworth Methodist Church 'Clubland'*

Enduring demand for council homes

If you are a council resident and you don't like what is happening on your estate, you can vote out your councillor at the next election. You can't do that if you are a tenant of a housing association or private landlord and people worry that losing that connection would make them powerless.

Again and again residents have voted to reject plans which would transfer their estate from the council's control to housing associations. People want the council as a landlord.

*With Kate Hoey MP and tenants representatives
Mike Tuppen and Henry Quennell
discussing issues on estates
formerly owned by the Church Commission,
which were sold in 2006*



Because there are so many people who want a council house and not enough homes, even people in very difficult situations often wait years before getting a council home.

Homelessness

Many families who have been made homeless come to my surgery or write to me about the length of time they have been waiting for a council home.

Case study: Mr E and his family came to my advice surgery because they were homeless. The family were evicted when their landlord decided to sell the property that they were renting privately. They had tried to find a new home in advance of the eviction date, but could not find anything they could afford. I wrote to the council and Mr E and his family have now been placed in temporary accommodation. Their application to the council for a council home is now being processed but it is likely they will be in temporary accommodation for over a year.

Medical problems

Waiting for years before being getting a suitable council home is very difficult for people with medical problems who are struggling with day-to-day living in their homes.

Case study: Mr F has developed knee problems which make it difficult for him to climb stairs. In his current flat he has to climb 27 steps just to reach his front door. And because his flat is on two levels he also has to climb up and down stairs each time he needs to use his kitchen or bathroom. Mr F recently fell due to difficulty climbing the stairs and had to be admitted to Accident & Emergency. The council have taken account of Mr F's mobility problems and he is registered for re-housing in band 3, but it is likely to be more than two years until Mr F can be re-housed. He is concerned that it will be very difficult to manage in his current flat until then. I have

written to Southwark Council on behalf of Mr F. Southwark Council has said he will have to wait two years to be re-housed as there are other people that the council deem to have multiple problems and therefore a higher priority for re-housing.

Because of the high demand for council housing, people in very difficult situations, often feel their plight is being overlooked.

Priority bands and the bidding system

Because there are so many people who want a council house and not enough homes, many people's expectations of moving into a council home are unlikely to be met.

There are currently hundreds of people waiting for a home who are in the lowest priority band on Southwark Council's housing list. In Southwark's own words people in this band are unlikely to ever get a council home.



Meeting a resident about repair issues in Southampton Way

"Applicants registered in Band 4 are advised to consider other options as it is very unlikely they will ever secure a successful bid for a home." – Southwark Council

This is because people in the lowest band have been assessed as having no priority for housing. But being on the list creates a hope, if not an expectation, for people that one day they will be allocated a council home.

Residents need clear explanations about how the waiting list for housing and bidding system works. The system where people can choose housing they would like to live in from the list of homes the council has available ranks every bidder according to their priority need and the time they have spent on the waiting list. The system does not take into account when bids were placed and people sometimes feel they are being treated unfairly when those in higher bands are allocated properties, but have put in a bid later in the week.

This system needs to be clearly explained to people so people know they will be ranked based on their priority band and length of time on the housing waiting list.



Speaking with a Southwark Council cleaner near Gibson Road

Providing a good service to residents

In the past Southwark's busy housing offices sometimes struggled to respond efficiently. People would contact me with concerns about the speed of the service as they experienced delayed responses to basic enquiries and were often left hanging around for considerable amounts of time when visiting the housing office.

I hardly ever hear these complaints today because Southwark Council is responding much more quickly. They usually respond to my enquiries within two to three weeks.

The relationship between housing officers and tenants can be a crucial factor in determining the quality of service people believe they are receiving. But tenants often say they have problems getting in touch with their housing officer. As a result they think their housing officer is not taking their problems seriously. My team and I also have difficulties reaching housing officers sometimes.

One housing officer is often responsible for a large number of homes and gets asked for help sorting out a wide range of problems including rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, repairs, disputes with neighbours, issues with waste collection and more.

More housing officers, particularly ones with specialist experience in areas where there are lots of problems with repairs or regeneration, could help improve tenants' confidence that they will be helped, improve communication and cut down on complaints.



With tenants and Cllr Barrie Hargrove of the Bells Garden Estate in Peckham

Anti-social behaviour

Residents often complain when blocks on estates do not have secure entry door systems and non-residents use stairways and walkways to take drugs, urinate, defecate and allow dogs to roam freely. This situation is unacceptable for residents. It is also unacceptable for the council's cleaners to deal with.

Case study: In 2010 I visited an estate in Camberwell where there were incidents where dogs had attacked residents causing such serious injuries that people had to seek hospital treatment. The residents I spoke to were so fearful they did not allow their children to go outside. I wrote to the council and asked for the four blocks affected to have security gates installed as a matter of priority.

When faced with these safety concerns and anti-social behaviour many families apply for re-housing.

Southwark Council should show tenants the work being done to tackle anti-social behaviour so residents always feel services to deal with such concerns are efficient and readily available.

Neighbours in dispute

Noise complaints are a common problem and when unresolved can lead to disputes between neighbours. This is especially a problem where noise doesn't disperse evenly through a block of flats.

Case study: Ms G contacted me because she was having problems with noisy neighbours. She lives alone with her young baby in a block of flats and she explained that her neighbour two floors above plays loud music every day. The music cannot be heard, but the heavy bass can be felt in her home. Ms G said that this was very difficult to deal with and she no longer felt happy being in her home in case the music started. I wrote to Southwark Council about this issue and they explained that they had a record of Ms G contacting the noise team nine times in the last six months. However when officers had visited the noise had not been heard. I contacted the council who explained that the problem, if witnessed by officers, would be taken seriously. I asked the council to arrange for officers to contact Ms G and discuss the issue so a visit could be scheduled for a suitable time so they could witness the problem.

With disputes between neighbours the council needs a range of options for residents, including mediation. It is important that people can sit down and resolve their problems and these solutions happen quickly, before problems get out of hand and people get to the point where they are so unhappy they want to move.



With Cllr Richard Livingstone and community safety wardens

Clamping down on illegal subletting

It is frustrating for people waiting for a council home to see those that have one abuse it. While a council property may cost £80 per week to rent, on the private market it could go for £220 per week.

Case study: Mr H lived with his five year old daughter on an estate in Camberwell in a flat which was sublet from a council tenant. However Mr H said that he was not aware he was subletting until a notice to quit was served, as he believed he was renting directly from the property's owner. He was then threatened with homelessness and, although he was already registered on the housing list in band 3, he was advised that it could still take years before he could expect to be re-housed. I contacted the council and Mr H was referred to the Homelessness Department for an appointment to discuss his options.

People come to my advice surgery when they have been evicted after sub-letting from a council tenant. It is unfair that these properties are sublet and it's unfair to the thousands of people waiting for a home.

It is fraud for council tenants to move and sublet their council homes. The council needs to know what is happening with its housing stock. Housing officers need to take responsibility for every home. They need to knock on every door and know the family that is rightfully living there.



Peckham Area Housing Forum

Tenants need more information on subletting issues. It would be particularly helpful for prospective tenants if there were a way to check if someone is illegally subletting.

Keeping communities together

Young people, many who have lived in Southwark all their lives, sometimes ask for my help because they cannot find an affordable place to live near family and friends.

Due to the lack of affordable housing, many young people in Camberwell and Peckham are forced to continue their childhoods by living at home long after they would have liked to set up their own homes.

Case study: Ms I is in her mid-20s. She works as an administrator in the public sector and lives in Peckham with her mother, step-father and brother. Ms I has been registered on the housing list in band 4 for five years. She has been told by the council that as a band 4 applicant she is unlikely to ever be allocated a council home. Ms I asked for my help because she cannot afford to rent privately so she is faced with a choice of either moving away from her friends and family in London or continuing to live with her parents for a long time to come. I contacted the council who told me Ms I is unlikely to make a successful bid for housing through the council. I have provided some further information about specialist housing advice services which may be able to advise Ms I on possible affordable housing options.

The alternative for young people who cannot get a council property or afford high private rents is to leave the area and move to outer London. But this forces young people away from their families and breaks up the community.



With estate staff, Terry Matthews (Treasurer of the tenants' organisation) and Cllr Barrie Hargrove on the Willowbrook Estate in Peckham

Case study: Ms J and Ms K came to one of my advice surgeries together. Until they lost their homes in a fire, they had been neighbours on an estate in Peckham for more than 30 years. After the fire Ms J moved in with her 26 year old granddaughter, who was expecting a baby and Ms K was offered temporary accommodation from the council. The council is rebuilding homes destroyed in the fire and Ms J and Ms K hoped to move back to their estate where they are still part of the community. Ms J and Ms K asked for my help because they were told the refurbished properties would not be classified as refurbishments and as a result they would not be able to move back to their flats once the work was completed. I

wrote to the council and asked them to make sure former tenants including Ms J and Ms K were able to return to the homes when the work has been completed.



*With Cllr Dora Dixon-Fyle, Cllr Emmanuel Oyewole
and Wyndham and Comber residents*

“I think council tenants should be required to attend at least one tenants and residents meeting per year. It should be a responsibility and part of the tenancy agreement. It would help people know what was going on in the community” – T&RA representative

I strongly feel it is important to look at local connections, especially where residents have been displaced from their homes.

Involving leaseholders

In addition to 39,000 council homes, Southwark also manages 16,700 private leasehold properties. Any council housing strategy has to take leaseholders into account.

Leaseholders often ask for my help because they are concerned about the quality of works the council has approved. When major works are done poorly, it enrages leaseholders, who are often paying thousands of pounds for a share of the work.

Case study: Ms L has been living on an estate in Peckham for 18 years. Her block was built in the 1930s and has only had major renovations carried out on two occasions since then – once in 1996 and then again in 2008-2010. Ms L, a leaseholder, wrote to me because she and other leaseholders were unhappy with the standard of works. One of several issues that upset the leaseholders was that floor tiles in the halls were dug up and replaced with concrete rather than new tiles. Each leaseholder was required to pay out £24,000 for the works and they believe the works were carried out to a shoddy standard which does not justify their expense. I wrote to the council and asked for contract specifications, a full breakdown of the cost of the major works and information on the officer who signed off the job as completed. I also asked for remedial work to be undertaken.



A leaseholder points out poor quality work completed by a council contractor

Leaseholders, like tenants, care about their homes and the environment where they live, and are often vocal about poor quality work. This attitude should be supported, because if people like their homes and care about their environment they will be more likely to look after it. Where possible, leaseholders should be involved in evaluating works and confirming jobs have been completed before work is signed off.

They often get their own quotes for major works which don't match up to the council's estimates. When the work goes ahead and is substandard leaseholders are furious.

In 2005 I received many complaints from leaseholders who suddenly faced much larger bills than in previous years. I was contacted by residents of the Friary Estate who felt the estate had gone downhill with blocked drains, broken railings, rubbish

everywhere and a general feeling of disrepair. Residents told me they were happy on the estate 10 years ago but they felt the council didn't care anymore.

Leaseholders are particularly angered by large service charge costs when they feel long-term neglect accounts for higher service charges.

It is important that leaseholders get fair value for the services provided by the council. Accounting systems must ensure fair charging of and invoicing for leaseholders.

Large bills for service can sometimes put significant strains onto households and may make it difficult to keep a property.

Case study: Ms M is a leaseholder on an estate in Peckham. She received a major works service charge invoice of almost £10,000 from Southwark Council last year, mostly for works carried out on communal areas. She says she cannot afford the charges and she is concerned that the council may have chosen a more expensive contractor than necessary, based on three independent estimates for the cost of double glazing works. I wrote to the council and have provided Ms M with details of the Leaseholder Valuation Tribunal should she wish to take this matter further.



Speaking with a resident on the Aylesbury

Redevelopment presents a unique problem to leaseholders, who find themselves trapped as many are unable to sell their properties, while many believe that the council is not willing to carry out basic repairs on these homes.

Case study: A group of leaseholders on an estate scheduled for redevelopment contacted me earlier this year. Two years ago the council offered to purchase their homes at market value and help them find new homes. They believe the council's valuation officer has undervalued their homes and as such they do not feel that anyone, including the council, is prepared to buy the homes for fair prices. They are worried that the re-housing options offered by the council, which consist mostly of part-ownership schemes, would leave them worse off financially than they are at present, since they would be saddled with maintenance costs as well as rent payments.

Appendix A

Thank you for completing this short survey – I am always interested to hear the views and concerns of my constituents.

This survey is anonymous, you do not need to tell me your name and address.

Many thanks,

Harriet Harman MP



1. Which statement best describes your housing situation?

Please tick [✓]

- [] I am an owner occupier
- [] I rent my home from a private landlord
- [] I am a council tenant
- [] I am a housing association tenant

2. How important is your rent in your monthly expenditure?

27th January 2012 – Advice Surgery Survey (page 2)

1. How many bedrooms does your property have?
2. How many people live in your household?
3. Are you in receipt of housing benefit? If so, how much do you receive per week?
4. How important is your rent in terms of your household budget?
5. Do you think that the amount of rent you pay is good value for the property you live in?
6. Do you worry about your household budget? If so, what is your biggest worry in terms of cost?
7. What are your biggest items of expenditure each month? (*E.g. travel costs, rent, food*).
8. In general, do you think rent prices in the private sector are at a fair rate?
9. In general, do you think rent for council properties are at a fair rate?

Appendix C³

Welcome to the Independent Commission on the Future of Council Housing in Southwark

Southwark Council is the largest social landlord in London and owns a third of all housing in the Borough - with some 39,000 council homes and 16,700 leasehold properties. Much of that housing stock was built in the post-war era and is in need of repair or will need replacing. Furthermore, the Borough faces growing demand for more affordable homes. The Council is optimistic about Southwark's future and is determined to enhance the things that make Southwark special – its immense diversity and vast depths of untapped potential. The provision of affordable, quality homes in places where people are proud to live is at the heart of its vision. However, the Council face challenging years ahead and will need to develop a long term council housing strategy that meets the aspirations of tenants and is both sustainable and financially viable.

The Council have now agreed a £326m five year housing investment programme, which is designed to ensure that all of the Council's homes are made warm, dry and safe. This is part of the Council's overall top ten promises agreed within a new Council Plan to deliver a fairer future for all.

Given cuts in government funding and levels of deprivation in Southwark the task of delivering improved housing is immense. One of the biggest challenges facing the Borough is providing a fairer place to live for tomorrow's council tenants. Against a backdrop of rising demand, less public money, major housing reforms and uncertainty in the housing market what can be done to improve the future financing, ownership and operation of the housing stock? What are the expectations of tenants, residents, funders, and other stakeholders? What might a new council housing investment strategy spanning up to thirty years look like, and what factors need to be considered to make it sustainable and affordable and in such a way that it breaks the current cycle of an escalating demand for resources to maintain the stock?

Predicting the future is problematic, and the Council is now seeking expert, independent advice to evaluate the evidence on what is possible in order to develop a robust business plan for the future that delivers quality council housing, is self-

³ <http://www.southwarkhousingcommission.co.uk/>

financing, and increases the supply of affordable homes for rent. An investigation of this kind could also prove useful to other local authorities facing similar challenges..

The Commission is composed of experts and chaired by the leading housing lawyer, Jan Luba QC. In undertaking its work the Commission will have open calls for evidence and information from key stakeholders, tenants, leaseholders, residents, and all those who are involved and interested in providing housing across the borough.

The Commission, which will meet and work from January 2012 to September 2012, will:

- Explore options for the future financing, ownership and operation of Southwark's housing stock beyond 2015/16 (when the current five year investment programme comes to an end);*
- Examine proposals and make recommendations for an investment strategy, for up to thirty years, that is sustainable, affordable and breaks the current cycle of an escalating demand for diminishing resources.*

Members of the LBS Commission on the Future of Council Housing

- Jan Luba QC
- Professor Christine Whitehead
- David Miles
- Peter Marsh
- Kate Henderson
- Michael Collins
- Ben Shimshom
- David Thomas
- Marianne Hood
- Gavin Smart
- Martin Wheatley

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