

LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE Response to the Report of the Cabinet Adviser on Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders (CS/2024/09)	
REPORT OF Cabinet Member for Better Homes	
FOR SUBMISSION TO Housing Scrutiny Committee Cabinet	DATE 7 October 2024 9 October 2024
SUMMARY OF REPORT This report sets out commentary and actions in response to Councillor Slater's Cabinet Advisor report on Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders. Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information No documents that require listing have been used in the preparation of this report. Contact Officer: Charlotte Akinola Cabinet Portfolio Lead, Corporate Services 5 Pancras Square, London N1C 4AG Tel: 020 7974 1750 Email: charlotte.akinola@camden.gov.uk	
RECOMMENDATIONS Housing Scrutiny Committee is recommended to consider the report and make any recommendations to the Cabinet Cabinet is recommended to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Note the 8 recommendations made by the Cabinet Adviser for Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders. ii. Note the response of the Housing Scrutiny Committee iii. Note the response below from the Cabinet Member for Better Homes and officers to the recommendations made iv. Agree the recommendations set out in section 3 of this report. 	

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'GS' with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Signed:
Glendine Shepherd Director of Housing

Date: 9 October 2024

1. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

- 1.1 The Leader of the Council established four Cabinet Adviser roles to provide evidence-based policy recommendations across a range of Council work and programmes aligned with We Make Camden. The Cabinet Advisers are appointed by the Leader alongside the wider Cabinet and Committee appointments made each year. The report appointing Cabinet Advisers for the 2023/24 municipal year can be found as a Single Member Decision by the Leader of the Council in June 2023.
- 1.2 Councillor James Slater was appointed as the Cabinet Adviser on Improving Services to Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders. The role of Cabinet Advisors is to bring their wide experience as community leaders and policymakers to examine the work of the Council, to speak with community groups and those impacted by our services, and to draw together insights and recommendations on how we can take our work forward.
- 1.3 Councillor Slater's report was taken to Housing Scrutiny on the 13 March 2024 and examined how Leaseholder Services operate in Camden, with a specific focus on how Camden leaseholders' views are heard, how communications are made accessible and how leaseholders are supported to live in decent, safe and warm homes.
- 1.4 There are key obligations and responsibilities specified in the lease when a leasehold property is purchased that differentiate the relationship from that of our direct tenants. These typically make the leaseholder responsible for the maintenance of the inside of the flat, contributing to the costs of maintaining and running the building, and not doing certain things without the landlord's consent, such as alterations or subletting.
- 1.5 The Council also has obligations that will be specified in the lease to our leaseholders, who form a large part of our communities, and it is only by working together and understanding each other that we will be able to meet these aims.
- 1.6 Councillor Slater also considered the ways that Camden Council can lobby for national reform to better protect leaseholders in Camden.
- 1.7 This report provides an initial response from Councillor Sagal Abdi-Wali, Cabinet Member for Better Homes, to the recommendations made by the Cabinet Adviser, as well as the comments provided by the Housing Scrutiny Committee. The Cabinet Adviser and Cabinet Member will continue to work closely together to progress work across these recommendations in the coming year.

2. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 One of the key challenges to emerge from the We Make Camden work on housing is to ensure that Camden has enough decent, safe, warm and family-friendly housing to support our communities. The Administration has also committed in its 2022 manifesto to supporting greater leaseholder involvement on our estates, improving customer service around the council (including the usability of the Camden website and Camden Account), as well as reviewing the workings of the housing divisions more generally.
- 2.2 Alongside Councillor Slater's research and recommendations, Leaseholder Services have also led a piece of work internally to improve the experience of leaseholders, including conducting research with leaseholders and staff to better understand the challenges they face, before designing and testing a range of improvements. This work focused largely on improving clarity, transparency and accessibility of the website, written communications and the Camden Account as well as improving collaborative working and information-sharing between teams.
- 2.3 The outcome of this work has meant that we have updated templates for key communications with leaseholders, revised website content which is easier to navigate and feedback on the Camden Account, a digital self-service portal where customers can access information, which we have used to develop ideas to further improve this.
- 2.4 This work takes place in the context of the Government committing in the 2024 King's Speech to publish draft legislation on leasehold and commonhold reform that will ensure greater rights, powers and protections for leaseholders. It is predicted that this reform will result in reduced income and increased complexity in Property Management for Local Authorities. It will be important for Camden, and other local authorities with significant leaseholder populations, to monitor how this reform will affect us.

3. CONSIDERATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Councillor Slater's Cabinet Adviser's report [contained in Appendix 1] sets out 8 recommendations to the Council, which are quoted below and organised in the order set out in the Adviser's report. This section of the report considers an initial response to each recommendation.
- 3.2 ***Recommendation 1: Establish a working group to better connect how Housing Repairs (specifically Major Repairs) and Leaseholder Services work with each other and communicate together to resolve queries from leaseholders.***
- 3.3 We agree with this and as such we hold monthly Better Homes Board meetings that provide a venue for Leaseholder Services and Capital Works teams to discuss works that are planned or that are being consulted on with

leaseholders. This allows joint understanding and responses to issues and observations received from leaseholders to ensure that these are addressed.

3.4 ***Recommendation 2: Improve how contractors are held accountable for their work, ensuring that quality assurance takes place when necessary, and that leaseholders can have their say.***

3.5 We agree and the Council will continue to hold contractors to account using quality assurance measures which are in place and actively managing performance. Measures in place, and which have been reviewed as a result of the Cabinet Advisor's report, include:

- Checking of completed day to day repair orders by Leaseholder Services to determine whether they are rechargeable. Officers meet with Repairs and Mechanical & Engineering (M&E) teams to resolve queries ahead of passing these costs on to leaseholders. Leaseholders are also able to check repairs we intend to recharge online and raise queries before billing is finalised.
- As part of our tendering process, contractors are measured on quality and cost, and are required to demonstrate their approach. Measures are in place to check each stage of the procurement of a project as well as during and after works are completed, with any issues around quality addressed immediately. We will challenge and review whether we will continue to employ a contractor that falls short of delivering the quality we expect.

3.6 To ensure a quality service, a management system is in place for every project, with Project Managers being supported by a Clerk of Works. There are Technical Standards used on all projects and we use technical experts to witness the installation of products, where required, to ensure that warranty requirements are met.

3.7 We acknowledge that we need to improve the standard of our communications and following on from the Cabinet Advisor report, we are in the process of developing new templates for key communications related to the Major Works process. Once tested, these can be used as templates to improve other forms of communication and introduce standardised forms to refer queries to the relevant teams, to help them focus their responses on specific elements of queries and resolve them.

3.8 We want to be more proactive in advising residents of the status of projects and any delays that we may be experiencing, as well as giving them opportunities to identify any concerns with progress or the works being carried out.

3.9 ***Recommendation 3: Introduce a Correspondence Management System for Leaseholder Services to better communicate with leaseholders and track correspondence.***

- 3.10 A customer relationship management system to manage and track all leaseholder queries and correspondence is vital to improving the service. A full system review is underway as part of the Housing and Repairs Transformation programme and the system requirements will be considered as part of this. This is extensive work which will take some time, so in the shorter term our service review intends to introduce a revised structure with new roles that will assist with monitoring and managing enquiries, improving accountability and ownership of queries, cases and communication with individual leaseholders.
- 3.11 We will work with leaseholders to ensure our processes make sense and are easy, and our communications are easily understood.
- 3.12 ***Recommendation 4: Review how written communications from Leaseholder Services (particularly service charge bills and consultation documents) can be made more accessible and more transparent, always including an explanation of the process taking place.***
- 3.13 This is accepted and as a result, the service has taken steps to improve the cover letter that accompanied the 2024/25 estimated service charge, as well as the text in our quarterly payment reminder emails, making them clearer for leaseholders to understand.
- 3.14 We have reviewed the content included in statutory consultation notices to make them clearer and will be testing their effectiveness over the coming weeks.
- 3.15 We are also testing new versions of some of the key communications related to the Major Works process. If feedback from leaseholders is positive, we will use these new documents as a template to improve communications in other areas.
- 3.16 ***Recommendation 5: Evaluate the information on Camden's website for leaseholders and freeholders and promote this more consistently across different communications to leaseholders.***
- 3.17 Following this recommendation work has commenced to make the website easier to use with the relevant content informed web analytics and leaseholder experiences.
- 3.18 Around 75% of leaseholders are signed up to the Camden Account (a platform used by leaseholders to find information or to complete transactions). Work to improve the platform content is taking place, including better signposting to the website. We will continue to monitor the impact of these changes through web analytics.
- 3.19 ***Recommendation 6: Complete an annual audit of best practice from other boroughs to ensure that Camden's offer to leaseholders is the strongest it can be.***

- 3.20 This recommendation will be taken forward. We have joined benchmarking groups such as Housemark / National Leaseholder Group (NLG) / London Leaseholder Forum and we will benchmark various aspects of service provision and good practice.
- 3.21 ***Recommendation 7: Introduce an additional formal councillor role, in line with the responsibilities of a Deputy Cabinet Member, to work with the Cabinet Member for Better Homes to ensure leaseholders voices are thoroughly represented and heard across council departments.***
- 3.22 We agree, and have formally announced the role of Associate Cabinet Member for Leaseholders, to ensure Camden leaseholders' views are heard, communication is accessible and that they are being supported to live in decent, safe and warm homes.
- 3.23 ***Recommendation 8: Provide more information online about the roles and responsibilities of different teams within Camden and how to contact them to ensure that queries are directed to the right team, first time.***
- 3.24 We agree and are exploring better ways for leaseholders and tenants to contact the Council reducing the need to contact different services for to conduct routine business. This is a big change which requires systems and process mapping. In the meantime, we have reviewed our website content to make it clearer for leaseholders about the role of Leaseholder Services and other relevant teams along with details about how they can be contacted.
- 3.25 We are also reviewing signposting from the Camden Account to make it easier for leaseholders to navigate to the correct team, working with them to ensure our content is easy to locate and understand.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The 8 recommendations set out in section 3 will be met within existing teams and resources. Should any eligible additional costs be identified, this would be added to leaseholder charges as they are directly in support of leaseholders.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Legal comments have been incorporated

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no direct environmental implications in this report.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1:

[Cabinet Advisor Report on Improving Services to Camden Leaseholders and Advocating for Leaseholders](#)