

## Delivery of Camden's housing repairs and the role of direct labour

Climate Emergency Camden deputation to Housing Scrutiny Committee  
5<sup>th</sup> November 2024

In July 2020 Camden Council’s cabinet agreed to increase the 'in-house delivery' of repairs to Council homes, with an approximate value of £100m over five years. ‘In-house delivery’ includes work carried out by contractors managed directly by the Council, and work carried out by a labour force employed directly by the Council; the implication of the report was that the latter would make up a significant proportion. This proposal was enabled by the Council’s £8m investment in the Holmes Road Depot, where the repairs stores are based and training takes place.

We have been trying to understand what proportion of work carried out to repair, maintain and improve the borough’s housing stock is carried out by workers directly employed by Camden and have made a couple of FOIs to this end (summarised below). Our understanding is that between 2021 to 2024 the total value of construction work carried out (excluding work to Chalcots Estate) was £140m. Can officers please confirm whether the sum paid to directly employed workers over the same period is the £29.5m figure, and how the £1.9m allocated to the ‘in house team’ relates to this.

**Total value of capital works carried out to Camden's housing stock, including the Better Homes programme and Repairs and Maintenance**  
Summary of FOI requests October 2024

	Total capital cost	"Directly delivered"			"In-house team"
		Labour	Materials	Supply chain support	
	FOI 8440	FOI 8627			FOI 8440
2021-22	29,400,000	9,980,748	2,166,957	6,430,893	574,400
2021-22	45,000,000	9,352,686	2,147,190	8,035,315	1,009,403
2021-22	65,600,000	10,185,665	2,405,233	9,423,287	341,829
	<b>140,000,000</b>	<b>29,519,099</b>	<b>6,719,380</b>	<b>23,889,495</b>	<b>1,925,632</b>
		21.1%			1.4%

If correct, the direct labour component of the whole is around 20%. What consideration is being given to increasing this moving forward? There are many areas of work carried out by contractors could be done in-house, eg. window replacement and roofing.

Directly-employed labour is good for many reasons: from an environmental perspective it reduces dependence on contractors who may have to travel a long way to Camden, thereby reducing carbon emissions; from an economic point of view it keeps Camden’s money in the borough, investing in local people and increasing resilience; from

residents' point of view it has the potential to deliver a better service, as a workforce with knowledge of existing homes and residents should be more efficient and caring. For workers it provides secure and steady employment, with good employment and working conditions, and a training infrastructure to facilitate qualifying new recruits in construction trades and upskilling the existing workforce, including for low energy construction, in collaboration with local Further Education Colleges.

By bringing more work in-house the council has the potential to significantly reduce the cost and get more urgently needed work done. It may even allow for Camden to carry out 'planned preventative maintenance', which was omitted from its scope several years ago as a cost cutting measure. A well-maintained housing stock is critical for residents' health and well-being. It is also necessary to enable retrofit works to be carried out- it is not possible to retrofit damp, leaking and mouldy properties.

Camden has always had a DLO (Direct Labour Organisation), which in previous years was capable of building whole estates. The Camden Sustainability Task Force, set up 2006-10 by environmentally committed councillors, saw development of direct labour as an important part of tackling the climate emergency. However there appears to have been no monitoring of progress since that time.

We need to plan for future risks from an unstable climate and economy as the impacts of climate change become more severe. Bringing housing repair work in-house will enable the Council to look after buildings and people better when times get tough, as the workforce will be founded in secure jobs within the borough, delivering services directly to Camden. A well-managed, resilient workforce can be the basis of Camden's adaptation to the effects of climate change. In fact, the Council has a statutory duty to engage in precisely this type of capacity building, as laid out in the Civil Contingencies Act- preparedness with respect to emergencies is a legal obligation.

Camden Council needs to develop a strategy for increasing the capacity and capability of its direct labour force to carry out the construction work required for making the borough's housing fit for the future. In recent months we have heard from the head of repairs service how difficult it is to recruit people but not much in the way of a concerted strategy for how to deal with the issue in a proactive way. We would suggest that the following is considered:

- reconsider the council's approach to in-house delivery generally
- improve pay for the directly employed workforce
- increase the quantity and quality of training to provide necessary construction skills needed, including retrofitting
- train in-house staff to take on and manage the technical challenges and risks
- work with other north London boroughs to improve training facilities

Skills training is critical. At present a few apprenticeships are provided at the Holmes Road depot and the Euston Constructions Skills Centre provides starter courses, but no reliable route into apprenticeships. By Camden's own admission, these provisions are not providing the workforce required and a more targeted approach appears to be needed, matched to the needs of Housing Repairs and other services. We would request more clarity about what steps are being taken to address this.

Climate Emergency Camden oppose the proposed demolition of the depot at Holmes Road, as the demolition of any well-functioning building is not justifiable in relation to carbon budgets (we need to be reducing all unnecessary carbon emissions). However, if it does go ahead the replacement depot is an opportunity to increase the capacity for training apprentices in retrofitting and other related climate emergency work, and potentially providing a skilled pool of local authority workers who can do the same in neighbouring boroughs.

We therefore ask that the Housing Scrutiny Committee requests that metrics for Direct Labour are routinely reported as a 'performance indicator' so that a picture can be built up of how this is changing over time. As well as the value of the construction work carried out by direct labour, reporting should include a summary of the number of jobs provided, with a breakdown of what construction trades specialisms are being provided. Any shortage of specific trades required should also be identified, and measures for addressing this set out.

**Climate Emergency Camden**