

THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CAMDEN	WARDS: All
REPORT TITLE: Housing Ombudsman Special Investigation into London Borough of (LB) Camden – update and action plan	
REPORT OF: Director of Property Management	
FOR SUBMISSION TO: Housing Scrutiny Committee	DATE: 25 February 2025
<p>SUMMARY OF REPORT</p> <p>This report details progress to date and future steps to be taken following the publication of the results of the Special Investigation by the Housing Ombudsman into LB Camden. It updates the committee on the progress of the resulting improvement plan being worked on in partnership with the Housing Ombudsman. It further places this into the wider context of both funding for social housing and wider financial pressures on the Housing Revenue Account.</p> <p>Local Government Act 1972 – Access to Information There were no documents used in the preparation of this report which require listing.</p> <p>Contact Officer: Elly Shepherd 5 Pancras Square, N1C 4AG Tel: 020 7974 5466 Email: Elly.shepherd@camden.gov.uk</p>	
<p>RECOMMENDATION:</p> <p>The Committee is asked to note the report.</p>	

Signed by:



Gavin Haynes
 Director of Property Management
 Date: 13 February 2025

1. Background to the Ombudsman Report

- 1.1 The Housing Ombudsman Service looks at complaints about registered providers of social housing and has the power to conduct special investigations where evidence exists that the provider in question may have wider issues than those related to one specific complaint. The Ombudsman conducts these special investigations as part of its wider role to encourage learning from complaints.
- 1.2 The special investigations produce reports providing:
- Insight to help all landlords to strengthen complaint handling;
 - Awareness of the fundamental issues causing complaints; and
 - Recommendations to support the prevention of future complaints.
- 1.3 Since the first of these special investigations and reports in 2020/21, the Ombudsman has now conducted fourteen investigations and publicly published the reports and recommendations. Ten of these have been for either London local authorities (Islington, Haringey, Hammersmith & Fulham, Lambeth twice, and Camden) or large London Housing Associations (this includes large providers such as L&Q, Clarion, Hyde and Southern). This is reflective of the fact that around half of Ombudsman complaints are made by residents living in London postcodes, despite only 1 in 6 homes in the Ombudsman's membership being in the capital. The Ombudsman's reports into issues facing London landlords have surfaced reasons for the comparative over-representation of London providers in complaints to the Ombudsman including quality issues with homes, increased ASB complaints and complexities in managing issues like decants where housing need is so high.
- 1.4 The Ombudsman made the decision to conduct an investigation at Camden after identifying that the London Borough of Camden had 10 findings of severe maladministration between 1 April 2023 and 16 October 2023 in cases involving repairs and/or complaint handling.
- 1.5 The Ombudsman conducted an initial analysis into the Council's handling of complaints involving repairs determined in this same period. This review found a notable increase in the maladministration rate from previous years and compared to the national average. The maladministration rate for repairs averaged 91% compared to 73% nationally, and 86% compared to 84% for complaint handling respectively. The special investigation by the Ombudsman commenced in November 2023 and has now concluded, with the report published in November 2024. The full report is available online at the Ombudsman's website¹.
- 1.6 During the investigation, the Ombudsman:
- Reviews previous cases;
 - Checks referrals arriving to the Ombudsman and cases open at the time of the investigation; and

¹<https://www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk/reports/special-investigation-reports/camden/>

- Asks the landlord for evidence (full list of what was provided is available in the report at the above link).
- 1.7 The special investigation looked at 52 cases at Camden. Twenty cases dated from 2021 or before, 27 cases were from 2022 and two cases were from 2023. It is therefore important to note that structurally, the report is a retrospective review.
- 1.8 In the report, the Ombudsman made 13 recommendations: 10 focused on complaint handling, 2 were related to disrepair concerning property conditions, and 1 addressed vulnerability. A summary of the recommendations and the Council's response is included as Appendix 1. The Council have been asked to create an action plan to address these points, of which a draft summary is provided below.

2. Steps taken since the Ombudsman Report

- 2.1 Camden Council and our housing services are clear that residents deserve high-quality, responsive, and compassionate services, and the Council is committed to improving these services. Whilst we face a challenging financial situation for our Housing Revenue Account (HRA), we have committed resources and capacity to ensuring that residents can access support and services effectively.
- 2.2 The Council recognises that complaints are an important source of insight in how our processes and policies are working – and we have invested in our own “lessons learned” capacity and committed time to reflecting on them as service leaders on what they mean for how we are working and could work differently in the future. Housing and Property senior leadership and the Central Complaints team have worked closely with the Ombudsman since the initiation of the report to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to learn from the cases under review where residents were let down.
- 2.3 As noted in the Ombudsman's report, the Council did not wait for the report and recommendations to be published to start implementing improvement. Internal Audit were invited to review the complaints process in housing and produced a report including the findings of which services were already working to implement when the Ombudsman report was published. Resourcing to handle complaints in the Housing and Property team and Central Complaints has been increased since the time covered by the report. A dedicated lessons learned lead role has also been created to ensure continuous improvement within the service.
- 2.4 We will maintain a focus on improvement and learning going forward, including regular communication with the Housing Ombudsman throughout 2025 to ensure that the promised actions are being implemented with regular updates to the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Our resident-led Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel will continue to support us with this work and provide regular feedback directly to Council senior leadership. The reports and meetings of this panel are available on our website: [Housing Customer Experience Oversight Panel - Camden Council](#). The Cabinet Member for Better Homes is overseeing and leading this long-term work which will benefit

from the continued involvement of the Housing Scrutiny Committee.

- 2.5 Full Council also held an Extraordinary General Meeting considering the s49 report and the Council's response to it. From this discussion, the need for transparency and to include resident voices (for example via the panels listed above) in the improvement journey was clearly made. As was the imperative to continue to report back on progress of the report action plan, including via the Housing Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.6 In January 2025, officers met with the Housing Ombudsman to interrogate the Action Plan and incorporate their feedback to strengthen, accompanied by evidence of progress (incorporated into Appendix 1).
- 2.7 The feedback from the meeting was extremely positive and the Ombudsman is satisfied with both the plan and the progress against actions, stating in subsequent correspondence: *"Thank you again for providing such a comprehensive update on the improvements you have made and are making to your services. It is encouraging to see so many changes already in progress"*
- 2.8 Other than the fundamental shifts noted above in ensuring residents' feedback is central to complaints improvement; other key improvements are in process, tightening templates and timelines, providing officers working on cases within Housing and Property and in the central complaints team with good quality training, and allocating clear lessons learned actions. The service have also introduced a relational conversation with stage 1 complainants via an independent survey company. They will contact everyone who was sent a stage 1 reply to ensure that we answered and handled the complaint professionally and as expected. The learning we take from this is fed back and actioned by the Case Management Officer. Finally, resident members of the Oversight Panel are helping us redesign a new local remedies compensation policy.

3. Complaints

- 3.1 The reasons for complaints in this area are complex and multifactorial (as explored below in regards to repairs improvement). The actions above will take time to bear fruit and must be supported by delivery of the Housing Investment Strategy and the transformation programme, which will also include staff training.
- 3.2 This year, for complaints relating to Property Management (including repairs) - an increase from 1,150 to 1,676 which is 526 complaints (46%) compared to a 58% increase in 2022/23 so the rate increase has slowed – but still highlighting the pressures on the service. In terms of volumes, it is noted that the service handles over 300,000 customer contacts and completes roughly 125,000 repairs orders each year.
- 3.3 Property Management continues to see a rise in the upheld rate from 36% in 2021/22 increasing in 2022/23 to 43% and in 2023/24 to 62% (this also includes partly upheld cases). This means that in a high proportion of Stage 1 complaints, the service agreed that there had been a service failure that

needed to be put right. This can be seen as a positive trend with the service having both greater empathy with the customer and a greater understanding of what good service should look like, and a move away from the defensive complaints culture challenged by the Ombudsman in the report. Additionally, the response times are improving with consistently 85-90% of complaints responded to within the ten-day target, which is the highest recorded for the service.

4. Planned action with regard to the Repairs Service

- 4.1 Decisions taken by the previous government have resulted in £168m of lost rental income since 2016. Nationally, the 2016-20 social rent cut alone reduced council landlords' rent revenue by £2.4 billion over four years, amounting to an estimated £40 billion by 2042. Further rent caps have reduced revenue by a further £900m. London boroughs are facing a specific gap of £700m over the next four years. Pressures are so acute that boroughs are budgeting for £170m of cuts to spending on supervision, management, maintenance and repairs over the next four years to balance their HRA accounts, focusing only on the most urgent repairs and delaying much-needed improvements.
- 4.2 In Camden, these sector wide issues are compounded by the unique profile of the stock:
- Average home is 74 years old
 - 188 High Rise Buildings (25% Homes)
 - 10% Homes in Listed Buildings
 - 19% Street Properties
 - 33% Built pre-1945
 - 20% with single glazed windows
 - 35% with Energy Performance Certificates below C – meaning homes are inefficient and hard to heat
- 4.3 However, while the context is extremely challenging, landlords must deliver appropriate and fit for purpose services including repairs. A major factor in improvement will be the Housing Investment Strategy which was approved in January 2025, as this sets out how we will manage our homes and provide appropriate investment within the challenging financial context.
- 4.4 We also have to improve the day-to-day service in repairs. Improvements to the repairs service over and above the recommendations identified above by the Ombudsman are identified as an essential part of the Council's improvement journey on housing and is underway. The vision of this work is that:

*Tenants will experience a **reliable, simple, and relational** repairs journey from reporting and tracking to resolution. When on the job, trades will be equipped with all the **necessary skills -and information** about the home and the tenant's needs -to complete work **efficiently** and **cost-effectively**.*

*Repairs carried out will be of **high quality**, with both in-house team and contractor partners **maintaining our service standards** and providing a **seamless experience** for residents. And where repairs or maintenance is*

*outside our remit, we will work closely with the communities, empowering them to **take action** in their homes and estates.*

4.5 It is important to acknowledge that over the last 6 months, repairs colleagues have been making improvements, of which the impact has not necessarily been felt by residents. This includes:

- Introduction of **new IT systems** in the repairs service to improve reporting and appointment booking process
- **Recruited to front-line trade staff posts**, introducing new specialist roles to focus on key areas such as fire safety and lessons learnt manager
- **Reduced sub-contractor dependency** to 13% of current position (this was as high as 40%+ post-pandemic)
- **Closer scrutiny of Legal Disrepair cases.** The Lesson Learnt Lead has been working closely with the Legal Disrepair Team since August 2024 and reviewing each letter of claim which we have received. We have also appointed a new Disrepair Programme Manager to oversee all cases and lead the response on complex issues
- **Monthly complaints outcome reporting**, following up with the relevant repairs team to investigate what can be done to reduce issues
- Internal processes are being reviewed, including reviewing the **Disrepair Policy and Procedure** to be implemented, alongside the new Disrepair Programme Manager and **pro-active communications** encouraging residents to contact us about any unreported issues or potential disrepair
- **A Human Resources lead** has been working with repairs managers to improve workforce productivity
- The service has now implemented a "**60 Second round up**" where operatives ask residents if there are any other works needed. This was something that used to be part of the process and residents raised that they found it helpful so it has now been reinstated – an example of the shift towards a more proactive service responsive to residents' feedback.

4.6 These actions should start to impact on residents over the next year. Further improvements to the service are prioritised as part of the Housing Transformation Programme following an initial discovery phase of work which will shortly report back to the Housing Transformation Board. The service is also pledging to be much more transparent about performance, regularly publishing the latest information at [Housing repairs performance data - Camden Council](#).

5. Legal Comments of the Borough Solicitor

5.1 The Borough Solicitor has been consulted and has no comments to add.

6. Finance Comments of the Executive Director Corporate Services

6.1 The Executive Director Corporate Services has been consulted and his comments have been incorporated into the report.

7. Environmental Implications

7.1 There are no environmental implications.

REPORT ENDS