

Deputation

Reflections on the Housing Ombudsman's Special Report

The Housing Ombudsman's Special Report makes for dire reading. As noted in the Agenda Report, there were 10 findings of severe maladministration between 1 April 2023 and 16 October 2023 in cases involving repairs and/or complaint handling. The Ombudsman identified 14 key issues.

Among the issues are failure to identify, accept or acknowledge complaints and delays in repairs, failure to keep residents updated and poor knowledge and information management. Complaints were treated as 'business as usual' and this has created a 'perception of a defensive complaints culture.' In one case study, it took the Council 605 working days to log and acknowledge the complaint and in another case around 4 months to restore a working hot water supply and the same to restore the heating system.

Problems in the housing service requiring a change in culture in the Housing Department and difficulties in changing that culture

Changing 'business as usual' means changing the culture in the housing department.

'The capabilities of an organisation...may have built up over time in ways unique to that organisation – the taken – for – granted way of doing things therefore...may also be difficult to change.' (Johnson G., Whittington, R., Scholes.K, *Exploring Strategy: Text and Cases*, Pearson, 9th Edition, 2011, P. 158)

Changing organisational culture, the basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, has a lot to do with leadership, but it also has to do with analysing where the changes need to occur.

Change is not simply as case of spending more money, though of course money is a big factor. The Repairs and fire Safety budget in the HRA is to go up from £68,790,000 to £70,855,000 – an increase of £2,065,000. Housing Management Services costs are projected to go up from £30,436,000 to £45,796,000, an increase of £15,361,000 a huge increase, ([Public Pack](#))[Agenda Document for Camden Town District Management Committee, 08/01/2025 18:30](#) but will we get any improvements even with these increases?

We may well introduce new systems and change the behaviour of our staff, especially through training, but how do we change the behaviour of our contractors?

Suggestions on how housing scrutiny can help to effect changes in the repairs service

Supposing for a moment that one of the key levers for change in the housing department is the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Camden's Constitution gives the HSC significant powers to help bring about change:

One of scrutiny's general roles is to make reports and/or recommendations to the Cabinet and/or full Council in connection with the discharge of any functions; (Article

its policy development and review function includes conducting research, community and other consultation in the analysis of policy issues; and it can also consider and implement mechanisms to encourage and enhance community participation in the development of policy options.

Scrutiny has the power to conduct enquiries and the power to require Council Members and officers to give account. As well as reviewing documentation, scrutiny may require any member of the Cabinet, the head of paid service and/or any senior officer...to explain decisions within their remit. [PART 43 Scrutiny Procedure Rules.pdf](#)

Therefore, Scrutiny has explicit and wide-ranging powers so that it can closely monitor the improvements to the repairs and complaints areas of the Council. For example, the ACGC reported in 5 December 24 minutes that:

‘Complaints Improvement Group created to develop a Complaint Handling Improvement Plan and to implement the plan - Staff Jon Rowley / Gillian Marston Spring 2025 - In Progress’.

Thus, one action could be to ask Jon Rowley/Gillian Marston to come to a scrutiny meeting to report on the activities of the Complaints Improvement Group.

Another could be to ask the head of Internal Audit to come to discuss the deep dive they are planning to look at Complaints in Housing Repairs. [Agenda for Audit and Corporate Governance Committee on Thursday, 5th December, 2024, 7.00 pm - Camden Council](#)

Action plan – 14 points

The HSC could focus on the Action Plan agreed by the Ombudsman. Action point 5 could be a weak area – tracking to completion of any actions promised in complaint responses. How consistent is the tracking? It would also be good to check out Action point (14) Update on approach to vulnerability. The Ombudsman found that the Council doesn't have mandatory training on vulnerabilities, reasonable adjustments and the Equality Act 2010.

Scrutiny could focus on a few issues identified by the Ombudsman at each meeting so that the issues are examined in stages.