

Camden New Journal

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UK WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR



COP THAT!

The climate **emergency** can feel overwhelming and sometimes even terrifying.

But the packed rooms at our **LDNCOP** conference and inspiring speakers gave us reasons for **HOPE**.

Reports: p10-15



ALL PHOTOS: ALICE HORSLEY

Now Housing Ombudsman launches investigation into Camden

MOULD PROBE

by FRANKIE LISTER-FELL

CAMDEN Council is facing a “special investigation” by the national housing watchdog into its handling of damp and mould complaints.

The Housing Ombudsman said it wants to know why the Town Hall has high maladministration rates.

Every week the *New Journal* receives multiple calls from people living in mouldy homes and who have been fighting to get the problem resolved, but often facing months-long waits for fixes.

Petra Dando, chair of the tenant representative group Camden Association of Street Properties, said: “Camden needs to be honest about the scale of the problem, especially as it affects Camden residents.

“If some councillors think some of the

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What's the pub quiz record?
— See page 3

Pupils pay tribute to coach Aston

— See page 5



Taking that final call from Eddie

— See page 8

They didn't just beat Chelsea ...

— See page 31



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Housing association tenants take protest to bosses' front door

by ALICE DEVOY

ANGRY tenants protested outside a housing association's headquarters in King's Cross this week, after living with severe damp, mould and leaks in their homes for years.

On Tuesday (December 12), members of the London Renters Union (LRU) demonstrated outside of Notting Hill Genesis's offices. The association's CEO came down to address the crowd. And the protest ended with repair works for one tenant scheduled immediately, and a follow-up meeting with affected tenants penned in for early January.

Notting Hill Genesis generates a turnover of £728 million, including



a £106million surplus. It was founded in the 1960s to address the growing problem of slum housing in London and now houses 2 in 100 tenants in London. Around 50 per cent of these tenants are dissatisfied with the service provided. In August, the Housing Ombudsman found severe maladministration in

the association's management of a property with unsafe windows.

Tenants said they had developed health conditions after moving into mould-infested properties managed by Notting Hill.

Alva Gotby, organiser at the LRU, said: "No one should be forced to become sick because of their housing. But

Notting Hill Genesis seems more interested in its bottom line than the wellbeing of its tenants. Notting Hill Genesis would do well to remember it was founded to tackle slum housing, not create more of it."

Notting Hill Genesis is now headed by former Foxtons CEO Patrick Franco. Mr Franco told the *New Journal*: "The service that many of our residents have been getting has been really unacceptable. And it's mainly come down to responsive repairs, a lack of investment in homes, inadequate investment in homes over time, and then particularly for shared owners and lease holders, service charges."

Mr Franco thinks the issue is cultural. He added: "People and culture need to improve. Many of our residents are sort of customers, but they don't necessarily get to vote with their feet, because we're not like, you know, a consumer brand."

"If you don't deliver a great service people leave. Unfortunately, with housing associations, many

people are sort of forced to stay with a housing provider.

"So, we need to change culture here, where we treat all of our residents like customers from any other consumer business. As if they could leave, and there was a consequence to leaving."

The approach of housing associations more widely was discussed at the London COP climate conference in Camden Town on Saturday, where it was suggested by both audience members and panellists that some housing associations had become more like large-scale developers.

Housing campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa told one of the debates: "The culture of some of these organisations is absolutely rotten. The attitudes within these organisations from top down: it's all about generating profit. And we all know what happens when you prioritise profit over people's health and safety."

He was talking generally rather than specifically about one particular housing association.

See LDNCOP 10-14

It's going

■ From page 1

issues are caused by lack of government funding, then they need to be honest and shout out about the current challenges instead of hiding behind wordy officer reports which seem a million miles away from what's happening to some residents on the ground."

She added: "We seem to be spending literally thousands of pounds on consultants but without pushing up standards."

Lorna Jane Russell, Highgate's new Green councillor, said she was "very concerned but not entirely surprised" by the findings of the Ombudsman.

She said: "For too long residents living in council homes across the borough have struggled with inadequate housing conditions, and it's clear that this has been compounded by Camden's failure to carry out necessary repairs effectively and in a timely manner."

Town Hall faces probe by regulator into how it deals with rising cases of toxic rot in homes

She added: "Going forwards, it's imperative that Camden acts as the responsible landlord we all want it to be. This will require it to put more investment into its housing stock, not just into improving its repairs system, but in getting it 'right first time' and ensuring that all of its homes are fit for purpose."

The leader of the opposition, Liberal Democrat councillor Tom Simon, said he was also

GULLIVER Bond aid at the Royal Free p17

Disabled struggle to be heard

CAMDEN'S housing team needs a "complete culture change", disabled residents have told officers, writes Frankie Lister-Fell.

At a Disability Oversight Panel last Tuesday evening, residents told of the impossible-to-navigate allocations system. Many shared their struggles to find a home which suits their accessibility needs.

One woman had been waiting seven years to get a bath installed for her disabled daughter. Another couldn't walk down the stairs in her block without

help from someone else. Her block doesn't have a lift.

Most people agreed the council needs to communicate better with residents.

"There needs to be a complete culture change within the department, both housing and non-housing," Kentish Town resident Ciaran Farrell said.

"There also needs to be a proper, integrated approach between housing and social services. When I talk to social services they say housing has nothing to do with us. I cannot make any

progress because housing requires certain things from social services and social services require things from housing. I cannot move forward. I don't know what else to do."

Labour cabinet councillor Anna Wright said: "100 per cent agree with you. That needs to happen. At the moment we don't have enough joined up work between housing, social care, mental health and community safety. It amazes me how difficult it is within a local authority structure to progress really

good, joined-up working."

Gospel Oak resident Mick Farrant said: "In most cases you need to apply online and if you're visually impaired or not very technically savvy or you haven't got access to the internet you're doomed from the start. That's one of the most important things not just for housing but in the way the council makes people apply for anything."

Deaf and visually impaired residents told officers they wanted them to meet in person rather than being contacted via text or email.

Mr Farrell, who suffers from severe chronic fatigue, said: "A lot of the time I end up crawling around the floor, because I can't use my wheelchair as it won't fit in my flat. It's a total mess."

Gerry Crowley, head of allocations and lettings, said: "We're currently looking at the housing allocation policy here in Camden, which was last updated in 2018 when there was a very minor update. It was substantially updated in 2016 so a long time has passed."

"We see that going forward policies relating to disabled residents should be co-designed with disabled residents."

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to be mouldy this Christmas!



Housing chief Meric Apak has blamed under-investment from central government, but Labour has not yet pledged a spending hike on council housing if it takes power next year



not shocked by the news, adding: "Camden Labour has a really poor track record on housing repairs, with systemic issues going back years. They have talked a lot in the last couple of years about how they have revamped the service and set up a special damp and mould team, but it is no

surprise that the Ombudsman has launched this investigation."

Labour has repeatedly blamed a lack of spending by the Conservative government, although there have been no pledges from Sir Keir Starmer so far that he will provide funding if the

party wins power at the next general election, expected next year.

Camden's housing chief, Councillor Meric Apak, said: "We are absolutely determined to deliver on this despite the mounting financial challenge that we face. After years of underfunding from government, councils

'People can't afford to fix homes bought in the 70s'

HOME OWNERS are living in "absolute squalor" because they can't afford to fix disrepair, it was warned at the London COP conference on Saturday. Simon Green, who works for the engineering firm GEM and serves as chair of the London Rebuilding Society, told the room that people are also living in "poverty and destitution" in "private housing".

He warned: "In large buildings people bought in the 70s, one of their partners has probably died, and they're living on state benefits and can't maintain their properties, and live in absolute squalor."

Mr Green said: "I've been around to people's houses and trees are going through, there's been no

with large housing stocks like ours have been stretched to the limit and



Simon Green from GEM

heating and no hot water, people have had hoarding issues and mental health issues."

GEM has been working with Camden, Islington and Westminster councils to advise them on improving the energy efficiency of their housing stock, Mr Green said.

He said: "We've also found that if you can renovate people's homes, you can convert them and have carers living in there, on average people are able to stay in their own homes for another 10 years."

resources have been overwhelmed.

"However, we have not

shed away. Instead, we have set up new teams to tackle damp and mould and to make repairs.

"We welcome the opportunity to work with the ombudsman at this crucial time, as we establish higher standards across our services."

"The damp and mould cases that were raised by the ombudsman some time ago have now been resolved. However, there is more work to be done."

The investigation will also review Hackney Council and Hyde Group.

Richard Blakeway, the housing ombudsman, said: "We have concerns about how each landlord has handled these types of complaints and will investigate further."

"Safe and secure housing has never been more important and the learning from these reports will help strengthen the landlords approach to important areas and improve outcomes for residents."

It is the second time this year that Camden has faced questions over how

it manages its housing stock.

The government's Regulator for Social Housing handed an alert notice to the council in July after finding that thousands of fire safety jobs had not been completed.

A scathing report said a queue of overdue work was building up and that Camden must take swift action.

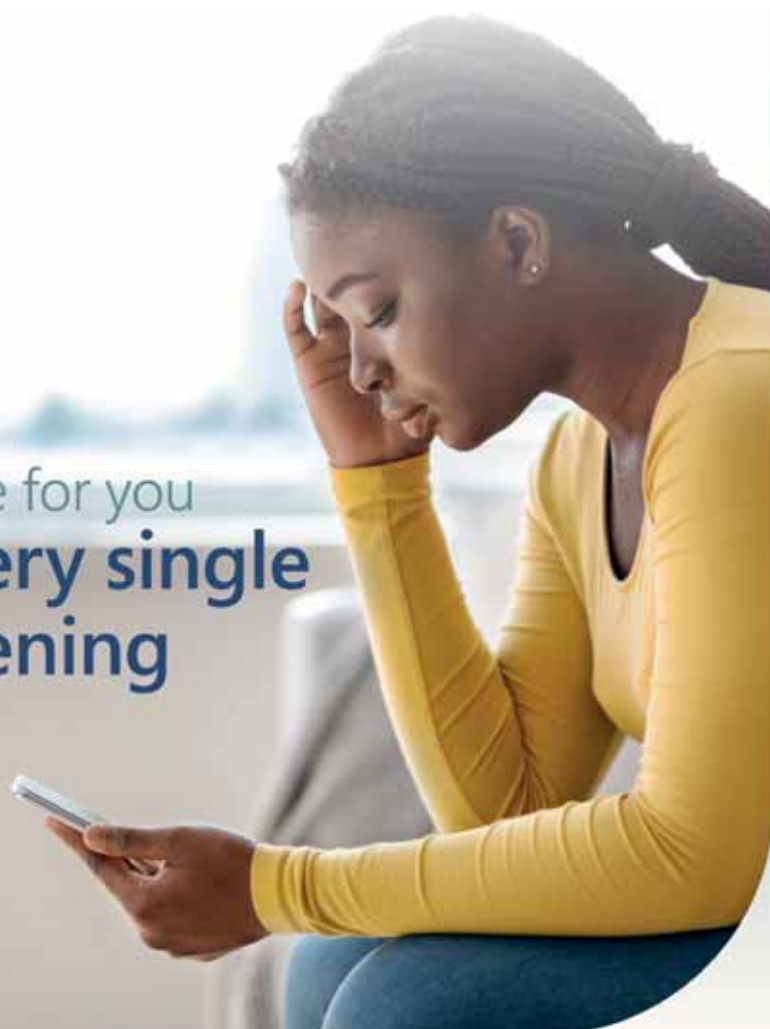
That investigation followed the death of a woman in a Hampstead block which had not been made safe in 2017. Work had been identified four years previously as needing doing and Camden was fined £500,000 for its failings.

A council service allows residents to flag up serious mould at www.camden.gov.uk/report-mould

It says cases are treated as a "priority".

Comment, page 20
Letters, page 22

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