

Statement for Full Council regarding the Carpenters

Occupation

29 September 2014

Colleagues,

I thought I would set out the position of the Council regarding two separate but linked issues:

- Former residents of the Focus E15 Mother and Baby Unit
- Regeneration of the Carpenters Estate

I can then, if Members think it still appropriate, turn to the specific questions which have been submitted for tonight's meeting.

It is clear to me that the issue of the moving on of residents from the Foyer - specifically in relation to the family groups who had their Supporting People funding removed - was initially handled badly - both by East Thames Housing as their landlord and by Newham Council

who accepted overall responsibility for almost every one of the family groups.

I am frustrated and disappointed that both organisations initially failed to put a tailored process in place for each family to sit down with them, explain the issues and provide them with support as they considered their options for the future. I believe both East Thames Housing and Newham Council should apologise to the former residents of the mother and baby unit for that collective failure and I make that apology this evening.

Colleagues, we all know that Newham Council is facing the deepest cuts of any local authority in the country, we have the largest cut per household in England. We are under attack from this Tory government. And that means we have to make difficult decisions.

The reasons to move the families on, however, were in my view sound, and remain so. The Foyer accommodation for mothers and children was intended as short term accommodation with appropriate levels of support, based on individual need.

When East Thames undertook individual assessments and judged the families ready to move on to independent living, with additional support where required, the Council did the right thing in supporting those moves.

The Group of former residents that formed should have been a body that East Thames and the Council could engage with around any group-wide issues.

Instead, the group took a confrontational approach from the start. I can, in these particular circumstances, understand why they were frustrated and why a more constructive approach was not taken.

I am disappointed that the Group has deliberately misled residents, the media and others on the facts of the situation. Once the Council and East Thames recognised our collective mistakes in working with these affected families - and once Councillors and I became aware of the detail - our approach and processes improved markedly.

Every family from the original Group who wanted to stay in London was assisted to find independent accommodation in London, with the vast majority in Newham. The Council paid the deposits for that housing.

The Focus E15 Mothers are not the only families in the borough to face these issues. We have been working hard over the past year to help many other families who are in very similar situations ensuring they have access to suitable and affordable accommodation.

This is in the context of a housing waiting list in Newham standing at more than 16,000.

As far as I am aware, no one from the Mother and Baby unit resident at that time was issued with an Eviction Notice.

The Group's decision to organise noisy demonstrations outside full meetings of Newham Council – including tonight – is fair. Official meetings of the Council's decision making bodies are legitimate targets for protest.

The Group's earlier decision to disrupt three coffee mornings where Councillors, Council staff and I were engaging with residents individually was, in my view, inappropriate and unacceptable.

I sat down at the end of the Stratford coffee morning with two of the main members of the Group in an attempt to listen to them about their experience, explain the context of London's housing crisis and hold a discussion.

On at least three occasions, the Group turned up at these coffee mornings with the clear intention of disrupting them to make a staged protest, to the detriment of other residents.

These actions happened after the Council had – organisationally and financially – supported them in finding new accommodation. I have told members of the Group that if they want to continue a meaningful conversation regarding their individual issues I would be happy to meet them at my regular surgeries.

The Group has undertaken a number of other direct actions, often with the support of hardened political activists.

Their decision to force the closure of our Housing Options office at Bridge House - our main centre for dealing with homeless residents and others in very vulnerable positions - by occupying the front office was despicable and inexcusable.

What amounted to a promotional stunt for the Group when the vast majority of those affected had already been rehoused from the Foyer – in London and with both organisational and financial support from the Council - meant the cancellation of urgent case conferences and appointments for people in genuinely distressing situations and urgent need.

And colleagues, not one family from the E15 Foyer has been made homeless – and no one in the illegal occupation of the Carpenters Estate is homeless. How do we know that? Because that is what the group itself has said on notices it posted outside the block.

The notice says:

“Nobody will be, or intends to be living in the property. The property will be permanently occupied on a rota, with people being replaced at least every twelve hours. Everyone involved in the protest has secure housing elsewhere, and that is where they live.”

It could not be plainer - everyone there has been housed. While at the same time, more than 14,000 residents remain on our Council Housing waiting list.

Due to historic failures of housing policy, going back even further than Thatcher’s Right to Buy con, and barbaric welfare cuts on the most vulnerable from this Tory government we are in a housing crisis.

I am proud of our record, through Local Space we have provided 1450 homes to homeless families. With private rented sector licensing, we are the only council in the country licensing all private sector landlords in an effort to drive up the standards in this sector.

We know that the benefit cap is driving thousands of people out of London. Through Workplace, the council's employment service, more than 22,000 people have found work – 4,500 last year alone.

If you're working the benefit cap does not apply. Workplace, the council's job brokerage service, is the largest job offer in the country and as result of its work the number of people who would have had to move out of London can stay.

Red Door Ventures is set to build thousands of homes, many of which will be genuinely affordable to residents on low pay and we will continue to invest so in a few years half will be subsidised.

With the 1450 Local Space properties, thousands of people into work through Workplace, licensing the private rented sector and our Red Door Ventures, Newham Council has done and is doing more to fight the scourge of homelessness than any council in the country.

The hardened political activists who have hijacked their campaign should concentrate on the evils of the Tory Government's vicious benefit changes rather than attacking the Labour council doing the most to support its residents.

But more than that, it is absolutely clear to me that we have to deliver on a major redevelopment of the Carpenters Estate to provide vital jobs, housing and community space for local people.

We have worked hard to unlock the potential of the Carpenters Estate for all our residents. The UCL proposal – which ultimately failed for financial reasons not because of any protest – could have done that. And now the search for a development partner continues.

As we wait to shake off the effects of the global banking crisis – and the Tories' failed austerity plan – we should be putting the available low rise properties on the Carpenters Estate to good use to house vulnerable people. We achieved it in Canning Town. And we've done it with the

small number of properties we are responsible for on the Carpenters Estate

Officers of the Council hit a legal obstacle when instead of engaging with us properly, the Tenant Management Organisation sent lawyers letters to prevent this.

I have therefore asked officers to give the TMO one last chance – work with us to open up that housing or we will see you in court.

So colleagues, we should be realistic

- The former residents of the Foyer deserve an apology from both East Thames and Newham Council for how they were treated at first and I give that apology on behalf of the council.
- We need to elect Labour at local and national government as the only way to deliver a humane welfare system and get house building back on track
- But the campaigners must also realise that deliberately misleading people about what we are doing – or what we have done for them – will not stand.