

The Lord Best OBE



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Rt Hon the Lord Whitty
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW

30 May 2006

Dear Harry,

Many thanks for arranging the meeting with the Churchill Gardens Lessees' Association on Thursday. I learned a lot from this and was very grateful to the representatives of the residents for explaining the position to me.

I came away with various thoughts and would be grateful if you could pass these on to those concerned.

- 1 It is clear that there is a high level of expertise amongst residents which needs to inform and enhance the management of the estate. Good advice and a commitment to improving life on the estate are qualities that those with management duties would be very unwise to ignore.
- 2 This "village" is likely to require continuous upgrading and maintenance, at higher levels than for other estates, because of its scale, age and form of construction. This will require continuous communication between residents and managers to keep on top of the problems.
- 3 Inevitably there will also be conflicting views relating to the different priorities of residents and between those from different parts of the estate. Channels of communication, therefore, need to be open and clear.
- 4 It is evident that the present arrangements are failing to achieve the necessary constructive relationships which are needed. The management structures are extremely complex, with the constant possibility of crossed wires and *buck passing*, in place of clarity

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and openness. Since I have witnessed excellent relationships on other estates, it is clear that considerably better arrangements are possible and feasible.

- 5 The key to ending the ongoing conflict between residents and managers, it is suggested, lies in responsibility being vested in one named individual: this person's task would be to:
 - a) ensure the consultation with residents is meaningful;
 - b) explain to all concerned exactly how the process will operate in relation to each decision;
 - c) act as the conduit between residents and the different managers, identifying and contacting those responsible within Westminster City Council, CityWest Homes, and the local provider (Pinnacle), whose job it is to implement agreed decisions.

I understand that CityWest Homes has recently introduced a system of Relationship Managers to cover all their estates. This person will act as the intermediary between residents and all other parties. Provided they obtain full co-operation from colleagues and can give definitive answers to points raised, this arrangement should go a long way to achieving the clear and open line of communication which seems so vital.

- 6 The contrast between the position at Churchill Gardens and at Grosvenor and Regency estate may offer insights. For the latter, there is a virtually daily discussion between the residents' representatives and the on-site management, and CityWest Homes, so matters can be resolved readily and in a spirit of co-operation. The Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) route would seem to offer greater opportunity for input by residents (although lessees are less prominent than tenants in that model). Perhaps there is also a lesson about the scale at which resident involvement is most effective: Churchill Gardens is very much larger, with its 1,700 homes and over 5,000 people. Since in a large village there will be different issues facing people in different parts of the estate, is there a case for having two or even three residents groups for such a large population? (A Parish Council might typically cover a much smaller population in a rural area yet has a full democratic status and fund-raising powers.)

One must ask, also, whether the three tier structure – Council, ALMO, and local provider – does not bring its own inherent

complexities and management costs (that must be reflected in service charges). If the value of an arms-length management organisation is accepted, how much advantage is gained from a further delegation of responsibility to managing agents? Is the extra work generated by the ALMO in having to set and monitor standards for the local providers, justified by the gains achieved by subcontracting responsibilities on a competitive basis?

- 7 As on all WCC estates, there is a problem of management of privately rented properties where a Right-to-Buy purchaser (or a landlord to whom they have sold) lets their property. This can involve more layers of management – and therefore potential for more confusion, delay, etc – with separate managing agents relating to these tenants, or with housing associations managing the properties under the Temporary Accommodation scheme for homeless families. In the latter case, a tenant can find a dizzying array of individuals and organisations with responsibilities for their home: the City Council will have responsibility for the nomination and welfare of the homeless family; the individual owner (their landlord) will have legal duties; service charges will go to CityWest for communal repairs and maintenance; the housing association will have management duties; there will be relationships with the provider body that looks after the adjacent apartments and organises contracts for common parts. If a tenant in one of these privately rented flats makes a complaint, or is the subject of a complaint, it is possible that five different agencies have to be involved!

More direct responsibility by CityWest Homes for letting to homeless families, rather than re-routing the process through a housing association, would seem likely to be a great deal more efficient. It should reduce the – currently extremely high – costs which must be reflected in rents/housing benefit payments (of £400 pw and more).

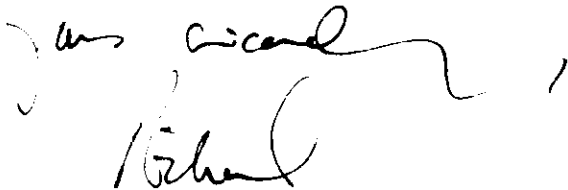
- 8 Meanwhile, residents would not be happy to see additional social housing built on developed land within the Estate. This is already an area of extremely high density (200 homes to the acre); adding more social housing would concentrate lower income households in one particular place; and development opportunities exist elsewhere (even though existing land ownership may make it an easy option for the Council to add to the population of existing estates). It is also the case that building works create disruption for neighbouring residents.

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This session was immensely helpful in drawing out these points and I hope that I can incorporate something constructive in the Commission's Report. I noted, when walking around the estate afterwards, that not all is doom and gloom: the standard of gardening/grounds maintenance (where, I think, the residents insisted on the contract going out to tender) was very high and, despite the 1961 vintage, the estate was looking good; and it is of course, in an extraordinarily good location. I do hope that, in the months and years ahead, the management of relationships will improve and residents can enjoy these facilities without the constant aggravations which have come from such a confusing, and sometimes ineffective, management system.

Do, please, pass on my sincere appreciation to your colleagues:

With best wishes,



James Niccard