Finding future opportunity for housing in Westminster

Westminster Housing Commission

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Dear Deane (if I may),

Thank you so very much for looking after me on my visit to see the work of GREMO. I was very impressed to see for myself that very high standards are achieved and residents like yourself play such a key role. You are to be congratulated, as is Dee, on the quality of management apparent on this important estate.

I gained a much fuller understanding of the ways in which Tenant Management Organisations operate, and I came away with the following points from our discussion:

- the Tenant Management Organisation option currently represents a small part of the whole: about 12½% of the stock is managed by these bodies. But it is likely that this will be increased to 20% if – as seems quite possible – tenants on the estate currently managed by Paddington Churches HA vote for this status;

- GREMO is the largest TMO and a very good example of how the arrangements can work well. CityWest Homes maintain over-arching responsibility for the estate's management which they exercise by a constant monitoring of the TMO's work, with advice – virtually on a daily basis – on all the issues that can emerge for the Estate Director and for the Committee;

- the TMOs tend to attract lessees on to their Committees and in several smaller ones these represent the majority; however, to choose this option for an estate, the ballot only allows tenants to vote;

- another reason why this model is not more widely used, relates to the turnover on some estates and the difficulties in securing the long-term commitment of enough residents to take on the – not inconsiderable – workload. But for those who do accept these responsibilities, CityWest Homes provide a very good support service;

- incentives to achieve good value for money on the estate include the opportunity to spend savings achieved against the budget on amenities for the estate: the impressive community centre and garden for older people have been supported by this process;

- not all TMO's (previously housing co-operatives) have succeeded: where hard-working Committee members have moved away, or disputes have broken out between residents, the system has sometimes failed. This suggests that having CityWest Homes in the background, to pick up the pieces if need by, is an important ingredient – even though some TMO's would be likely to work well as completely independent housing organisations (eg following a transfer of ownership from the Council to the TMO). In other cases, particularly for smaller TMO's, some economies could be achieved by sharing management services with others in a more consolidated framework. Again, CityWest Homes may be well placed to assist in such arrangements.

I conclude that where there are residents willing and able to accept the duties that go with the partial-independence of a TMO, this form of management can be more rewarding than contracting to the private sector or housing associations. And as part of this process, having the back-up and the safety net of an ALMO like CityWest Homes, is an important element. If there was a full transfer of ownership from the local authority to a successor body to the ALMO, there would be a chance for extra resources to fund major improvements (such as new lifts). But the structure of having a "parent" body, with TMOs at the next level, could be preserved after a transfer.

I also discovered from you that there are some areas of tension which need more attention:

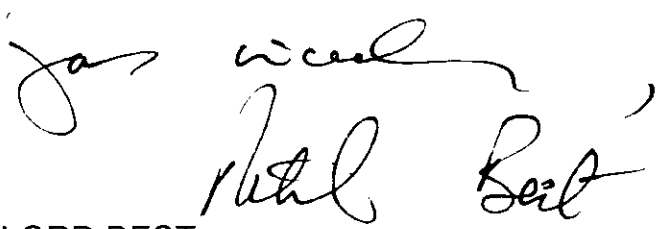
- the allocation of vacant homes to new tenants no longer engages the TMO in a meaningful way: under the choice-based lettings system, the TMO cannot play much of a role in choosing those coming to live on the estate. While this prevents existing residents barring people unfairly, it can set up hostilities. Sometimes those on the estate will know how unwise it would be for a particular home to be allocated to someone whom the City Council has determined should obtain it: you have told me about the person with a disability allocated to a home up three flights of stairs (who no doubt accepted this less-than-satisfactory solution in the hope – which was probably misguided – of a later transfer to the ground floor). Sometimes residents will be able to predict problems for, say, an older resident if a large and perhaps noisy

family moves in next door; etc. Greater sensitivity in liaison with the TMO may be better for all parties;

- worse, the arrangements for letting Temporary Accommodation to homeless families are not the subject of any direct communication with the TMO. Although these families are allocated the accommodation by the City Council, the landlord may be a private agent or a housing association but communications with these is negligible. None of the tenants coming in on a temporary basis have ever been part of the TMO even though they are invited to meetings, etc. The answer here could be that CityWest Homes takes on the management role for these properties and can then work closely with the TMO.

I really am most grateful to you and your colleagues for providing me with these insights. It was a really helpful visit.

With sincere thanks and very best wishes,



LORD BEST
Chair