

**WESTMINSTER HOUSING COMMISSION**  
**Visit to Lisson Green Estate: 16 February 2006**

Those present at Lisson Green meeting:

- Fiona McCreedy, Treasurer, Lisson Green Tenants and Residents Association
- Isaac Dsane, member, Lisson Green Tenants and Residents Association
- David Kaufman MBE, Lisson Green resident
- Marco Torquati, Church Street Neighbourhood Manager
- Barry Montgomerie, Lisson Green Estate Manager
- Nick Richards, Estate Director
- Sean McGrail, Lisson Green Estate Action

By invitation, I visited residents and staff living and working on the Lisson Green Estate in North Westminster. I drew 10 key conclusions as follows:

**A) Management of social housing**

**A1. The Arms-Length Management Organisation**

Properties previously managed by the Westminster City Council are now the responsibility of City West Homes. For 80% of the stock, this arms-length management organisation has passed on responsibility, under contract, to a number of housing associations and private companies.

There are clearly potential dangers for communications when responsibilities are divided between the local management body, and CityWest Homes, and the City Council itself: for example, the issues relating to the extensive in-fill development on the estate cannot be handled by the local management organisation; the letting of commercial premises on the estate – with controversy over shop

rents that are not affordable to previous shop-keepers or over leases to a potentially troublesome off-licence – is in the hands of the City Council not the ALMO nor the local managers; and funding decisions on support to residents and community activity and over use of communal premises – eg on the rates charged for the hall – cannot be taken by the local managers.

Some of these intrinsic communications difficulties are overcome where the Council alone is responsible for all the functions relating to the social housing; they are also overcome if the ownership of the estate has been transferred to another owner / manager which has full responsibility for all these matters.

The difficulties in Westminster are by no means insuperable and, with good communications and good will, residents need not suffer from fragmented decision-making. *But this version of the ALMO arrangements – with three tiers of control – is not the easiest model.*

#### A2. Local management

At the level of the local management organisation, one company, Dunlop Haywards, was contracted to manage a majority of the homes, but a minority were managed by another organisation, Paddington Churches Housing Association. This was not a good arrangement. The smaller player could not afford to have on-site management of their own and communication problems were compounded. A family evicted for anti-social behaviour by the larger managing body was subsequently re-housed by the smaller one which lacked knowledge of the situation. Differing policies in relation to rubbish collection led to confusion and conflict; and so on.

This problem has been eradicated by an arrangement for the major provider of housing management, Dunlop, to manage all the homes on the estate. *Residents explained how local management of the estate by one organisation has made for a much smoother and more cohesive arrangement.*

#### A3. On-site management

Lisson Green has an excellent, new housing management base which is very well used by the 1500 households on the estate. This is a one-stop shop for all housing and related matters; advice is available, repairs can be sorted; translators are on the premises; resident representatives can call in; and its physical attachment to the community centre keeps everything working together.

It is good to note that three of the Dunlop staff live on the estate and, therefore, experience its problems and the outcomes of its management, for themselves.

*On-site management is clearly a key component for high levels of resident satisfaction.*

There is a wider point inherent in this experience: there are 13 housing associations in this part of North Westminster, each with relatively modest housing stock. Of necessity, this means management at a distance – “absentee landlordism” – with tenants of different landlords presenting themselves at the local neighbourhood centre with their complaints and anxieties, in the absence of a local office. To have access to translators (particularly, in this area, for those speaking Bengali and Arabic) requires a management office with a relatively large catchment. *Some consolidation by different landlords would assist in providing a better quality of locally-organised housing management.*

#### A4. Resident involvement / community development

This estate benefits from high quality input from residents. But they, in turn, need backup and this is provided through the facilities of a *community development officer*, a bright modern meeting room, and the opportunity for engagement in the decision-making processes for the estate.

Although residents do not directly run the *community facilities*, the excellent hall for social activities has a Committee on which residents are fully represented. And volunteers play the central part in helping make social events – such as the current series based on different national foods which is drawing in a wider and wider circle of women to meet and eat – successful in building local capacity and good neighbourliness.

#### A5. Crime and anti-social behaviour

As in all inner-city areas, there are community safety issues for the estate and problems with criminal behaviour. And, unsurprisingly, the high concentration of teenagers who live in small and often overcrowded flats, and who have the natural desire to club together with their peers, can lead to behaviour sometimes getting troublesome for other families and older people.

On this estate, the position has been made substantially better by a series of measures:

- evictions have targeted those whose behaviour has been quite unacceptable to their neighbours and this has sent out strong signals;
- support for the youth club and a range of diversionary activities through the summer holidays have given young people something more positive to do;
- CCTV is used in a highly sophisticated way with high definition video being retained on hard disks for 31 days so that all incidents can be recorded and perpetrators of drug dealing or other crime can be more easily identified.
- the remodelling of the estate has (as advised by Alice Coleman) included the removal of walkways that, on different storeys, used to create “streets in the sky” connecting each block to another:

these provided means of escape and dispersal in all directions for those involved in nefarious activity.

It is possible that the building works over the last decade on the estate – with the presence of numbers of building workers and overnight security from the construction companies to ensure no loss of plant or materials – has helped to provide an informal layer of security. This will conclude shortly; but by then, the problems inherited from the past seem likely to be largely solved.

## **B) Densification**

### **B1. Use of spare land**

This estate has seen substantial additional development on pieces of land previously allocated as open space (and as the result of some demolition). Overall – when demolitions are deducted from new additions – numbers have not risen substantially; but fuller use has been made of the available land.

*Valuable as this remodelling exercise has been, it is not immediately apparent that any additional housing could be added. Certainly the toddlers' playgrounds, the kick-about areas for older children and other play spaces – which were well used when I visited – could not sensibly be developed. Going higher, on top of existing blocks, would seem likely to create a density of family living which few would find acceptable.*

### **B2. Car-parking**

To enlarge a number of ground floor properties (and sometimes to create new homes on the ground floor) a number of garages have been sacrificed. Although this is an unpopular move amongst the residents affected, the creation of some larger homes seems a price worth paying to relieve acute overcrowding. In so far as the new homes may be under-occupied – because of continuation of their earlier tenancy – incentives will be needed to encourage moves that enable growing families to take the larger accommodation.

### **B3. Impact of construction**

The nine phases of remodelling are due to conclude in about one year's time. This will mark over ten years for residents who have lived through the noise, the construction traffic, the mud in winter and dust in summer. *There is a limit to how much development it is fair to*

*impose upon any one community.* Certainly residents now look forward to the end of this decade of building works, with a sense of impending relief.

### **C) Leaseholders**

Those who have exercised the Right-to-Buy and continue to live on the estate are significant contributors to resident involvement. They have added pressure for upgrading of buildings and management standards. Their influence has been important.

However, an unknown but significant proportion of lessors have let their properties to a transient population of tenants who are not included in the consultative or management processes. This is not helpful in generating the sense of community which, for the majority, is a reality.

A second problem arising from lettings of properties purchased under the Right-to-Buy (and often repurchased by “Buy-to-Let” landlords) relates to flats used for Temporary Accommodation. These are usually managed by housing associations and although the level of (net) rent is very satisfactory for the landlord, the arrangement introduces a multiplicity of absentee landlords. It also means disputes over who is responsible between the managing housing association and the owner of the lease (who, in turn, may sometimes blame the City Council or the management organisation for the estate). These arrangements seem fraught with difficulty, not least for the tenants who have a limited time on the estate – even if they integrate well and get used to local schools – because they must be moved to “permanent” housing within a maximum of two years.

The problems of Temporary Accommodation are dealt with separately in the Commission’s report.

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The Lisson Green estate has been the subject of high levels of expenditure on the construction side (some £65m over a ten year period). It has benefited from significant and successful efforts to raise management standards by the local housing company with its 12 staff working (and sometimes living) on the estate; and these changes have been accomplished with considerable input from residents who have also endorsed the progress made by the local housing organisation. This adds up to a success story which has one more chapter to go in the completion of the remodelling exercise and consolidation of the management

arrangements. Those involved deserve congratulations for persistence and commitment in sustaining the necessary effort.

This case-study, however, throws up some wider questions relating to management of social housing in Westminster; to “densification” of estates like this; and the difficulties from private lettings of properties sold under the Right-to-Buy. All of these are important matters for the Commission to highlight.

Richard Best  
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