



The Camden

Private Tenant

The Voice of Private Tenants in Camden

Spring 2010 Issue 6



This Time It Matters

We believe that the forthcoming general election will be an important opportunity for the country's five million plus private tenants to have a good look at all of the political parties – to see what they are going to do to improve standards in the sector.

We also think the proposals for a national landlords' register (with the requirement for landlords to list all of the rental properties they own) and the regulation of letting agents is a good

start – but so much more needs to be done if the private rented sector (PRS) is to ever move from being a housing choice of last resort to one that is made for positive reasons. We are also aware that some representatives of the landlords are calling for self-regulation of the sector. But this didn't work for the banks – why would it ever work for the PRS?

In Camden, private tenants make up 25% of households in the borough

(2001 Census). Given that private renting households across London have increased by 40% since 2001, that figure will be even higher now. If we add in the number of housing association tenants and non-council leaseholders – then we are in the majority.

So, now is the time nationally and locally to ask a simple question – who will best represent our interests?

The Great Service Charge Rip-Off

Since the government put a cap on rent rises for social housing a few years ago, it would seem that some housing associations have tried to increase their income by inflating service charges. On one estate in Camden run by Community Housing Association (CHA) – part of One Housing Group – tenants have successfully challenged some of these charges.

In 2008, Hillview Estate tenants in King's Cross, were surprised to find their charges had increased by almost 100%. Services provided had not increased or improved, so, with the backing of their resident's association, a couple of tenants decided to investigate. After many phone calls and hours of writing persistent letters and emails, they uncovered a variety of anomalies in the service charge budget. To expose this, they copied in as many people of influence as possible including councillors, relevant council officers, CHA directors, the Housing Ombudsman and the Camden Federation of Private Tenants. The investigation is still ongoing, but with some very positive outcomes for Hillview residents.

They have, so far, forced agreements to refund for three major overcharges:

- 1) Tenants were being charged over £4,000 per year for an estate officer (employed by the landlord) to attend an estate tenants' surgery – so we were effectively paying twice for this "service".
- 2) For three years estate lighting was left on 24 hours a day. CHA tried to excuse this initially as for health and safety reasons, but was eventually forced to admit it was unnecessary.
- 3) An annual wage for a cleaner – even when they did not exist!



The refunds so far add up to approximately £76,550 ... and this is a conservative estimate. Tenants also believe they are owed further refunds for other overcharging.

If all this is in any way typical for the situation with other landlords, we suggest tenants may benefit from taking a very close look at their service charges.

Hillview Estate residents

Note: We've now received the new Rent Notice. It shows the service charge has been reduced by £3 a week, or £156 a year for tenants in each flat – and a total of £32,760 across the estate. This hasn't been explained so far, but we assume it's part of the agreed service charge refunds.

Crown Estate Plans To Sell Out Its Tenants

Robert Taylor from the Camden Federation of Private Tenants was among speakers heard by 300 tenants at a meeting organised by the residents association, to protest against secret plans to sell off most of the Crown Estate's properties near Regent's Park.

Tenants expressed anger that plans to sell hundreds of homes on the estate to private landlords had been well advanced for some time before they were consulted. No doubt they were impressed by the estate's location between the Nash terraces of Regent's Park and the West End, and the large open space currently in use as allotments. How soon will that be filled with



new-build properties if the land comes into private hands? And what chance that any new lets will be at affordable rents?

The Crown Estate is actually controlled by the Treasury. Income from it helps finance the Civil List – the money that keeps the Royal Family in the style they're accustomed to. Virtually all the affected homes are occupied by people on low incomes, ex-council tenants and key workers. It's believed that selling 1300 homes in Camden, Westminster, Lewisham and Hackney could raise as much as £250 million.

In the past, they had a policy of creating low cost housing for the public good. But, in recent years, the Crown Estate has been turning much of the Regent's Park site from social housing over to Assured Shorthold tenants on market rents (currently 31% of properties). The Crown Estate has admitted that it has recently left many homes empty pending any sale, presumably so that the new owners can dispose of them as they wish.

Despite its shortcomings as a landlord, tenants are very fearful of what follows if the Crown Estate is permitted to sell them out and have launched an effective campaign. It's likely that, if the sale goes ahead, it will either be to a housing association or another large private landlord, such as Grainger plc.

Landlords In Wonderland

In the spirit of fair-mindedness, the Camden Federation of Private Tenants attended the recent Landlord & Buy-to-Let Show at London Olympia, to hear what the current issues of concern are for landlords.

On perusing the seminar programme for the day, it was noted that out of the 21 sessions on offer – 12 were purely about making money. So much for all of the talk about the private rented sector addressing housing need and providing homes – as opposed to merely business opportunities.

Every imaginable way for making a quick buck was featured from “How To Avoid Property Tax” to “A License to Print Money Whilst Building a Solid Property Portfolio” and the modest “Mind Blowing Strategies to Build Your Portfolio Using Other People’s Money”. Lastly for the would-be property tycoon who never learns “Introducing the New Buy-to-Let”.



Once I had eaten my popcorn out of a box with a hilarious advert for “EVICTION SPECIALISTS” on it, I decided to go and see what illuminating insights the panel discussion on “industry” updates might throw up.

On the top table were Alan Ward (Residential Landlords Association), Kate Faulkner (Designs on Property) and Ian Potter (Association of Residential Letting Agents).

The main topics up for discussion were the government’s proposals for a national landlords register, a TripAdvisor style word-of-mouth website comparing landlords, and a new housing hotline to offer free help and advice for private tenants.

Alan Ward repeated the RLA’s view that the plans were “failed and unworkable” and that the private rented sector should be “self-regulating and not oppressed by government”. This leads one to question where he and his organisation have been during the banking crisis – which, if nothing else, highlighted the failure of self-regulation

and the need for a much more effective regulatory body for that industry.

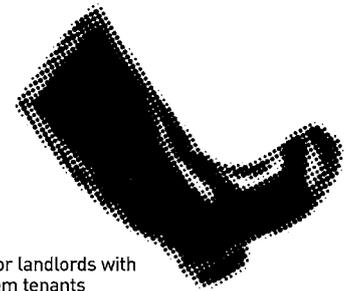
He then bizarrely went on to mention the “Three R’s – rogue landlords, Rachmanism, Rigsby”, claiming that “you can’t speak to councils without those 3 R words coming up”. Well, we speak to Camden Council on an almost daily basis on behalf of private tenants and have never heard Rachmanism or Rigsby once being mentioned by them.

On the power of landlords being able to influence politicians he said “This government needs to remember there are a million votes in landlords – we are a powerful force and they will ignore us at their peril in the next 6-8 weeks”.

It’s worth saying at this point that all of the professional associations put together only represent a tiny percentage (the Law Commission estimated it to be about 2%) of the UK’s landlords – so they’re not quite the organised and unified “force” he makes them out to be.

Next up was Kate Faulkner from Designs on Property. She apparently didn’t “get why landlords have to be registered and their privacy not protected – but we protect criminals’ (referring to the Jamie Bulger murder case) privacy”. This immediately struck me as a completely spurious attempt to try and link something as serious as the death of a child with asking landlords to provide their name and address (which tenants have the legal right to request) and the properties they own!

This was closely followed by the landlords’ mantra of there are “Probably more rogue tenants than rogue landlords”, but strangely she did not produce a single statistic to back up this bold assertion.



help for landlords with problem tenants

By this time, I had seriously begun to wonder whether something had been put in my tea, before she started to put the boot in to the new housing hotline by stating “We already have Shelter and Citizens Advice”, but failed to mention (or realise ?) that Citizens Advice does not operate a telephone advice service but instead provide an online Adviceguide in addition to their local bureaux.

The person chairing the session then piped in that he had recently been to a conference where a plea had been made “for more money for the NSPCC to run ChildLine” and asked, “Which is the priority – children being helped or tenants ?” Well, both actually in their own completely different ways.

This was then closely followed by “...If tenants get funded advice, why not landlords ?” Well, if 98% of landlords dipped into their pockets and joined one of the professional bodies – they could get as much as they wanted !

Even Ian Potter, who normally talks a lot of sense about the need to educate both landlords and tenants and the general lack of enforcement by environmental health departments, joined in. He felt there was “No merit whatsoever” in the feedback website idea and that there was only “vitriolic crap” put on existing websites “about landlords and letting agents with absolutely no true substance”. Once again, how does he know this to be the case. Has he checked them all out ?

At this stage in the proceedings a comment from Alice in Wonderland sprung to mind “Oh, dear ! What nonsense I’m talking !” It was sadly time for me to return to reality and leave the Kensington Olympia.



Where To Go For Housing Advice In Camden

Camden Council Private Sector Housing Advice

Town Hall Extension, Argyle Street, WC1H 8NJ

Tel: 020 7974 5801

Email: housingneeds@camden.gov.uk

Mon, Tues, Thurs, Friday 9.30am – 3.00pm

Wednesday 9.30am – 12.00pm

(Somali speakers only)

Appointments 4.00pm – 7.00pm

(private tenants)

Outreach drop in and appointments:

Kilburn CAB, 200 Kilburn High Road, NW6

Monday 1.00pm – 4.00pm

Hampstead District Housing Office,

156 West End Lane, NW6

Tuesday 1.00pm – 4.00pm

Camden Community Law Centre

2 Prince of Wales Road, NW5 3LG

Tel: 020 7284 6510 for up-to-date information

Mary Ward Legal Centre

26-27 Boswell Street, WC1N 3JZ

Tel: 020 7831 7079 for housing advice availability

Fitzrovia Neighbourhood Association

39 Tottenham Street, W1T 4RX

Tel: 020 7580 4576

Tuesday (10.00am–1.30pm, open door advice service)

The College of Law – Legal Advice Centre

14 Store Street, WC1E 7DE

Tel: 01483 216528 to make an appointment

BPP Law School – Legal Advice Clinic

68–70 Red Lion Street, WC1R 4NY

Tel: 020 7430 5668 to make an appointment

Shelter London Housing Advice Line

Tel: 020 7014 1540 (telephone advice only)

Monday – Friday (10.00am–1.00pm)

Camden StreetSafe Project

Are you concerned about street activity in Camden?

StreetSafe gives local residents and businesses the opportunity to report concerns about street activity in Camden. This includes rough sleeping, begging, street drinking, drug related activity and sex working.

All the reports which we receive are investigated by our outreach Safer Streets Team who can offer those involved support, treatment and support to find accommodation if appropriate. They also work with the police and the wardens and if the activity is causing a nuisance then enforcement will be considered.

Our teams cover the whole of Camden so reports from the community are invaluable in providing us with local knowledge and enabling us to target our resources most effectively.

You can help by telling us about street activity in your area so we can investigate and update you about the outcomes. (Please note that whilst we will respond as quickly as possible we are not an emergency service. If the situation is an emergency please contact the police or the ambulance services.)

Community Auditors – send us brief updates about street activity in your area and we will send you regular detailed reports about our work.

Contact us on: 020 7833 7970 or StreetSafe@cri.org.uk



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Housing Advice For Leaseholders

Leasehold Advisory Service

Provides free legal advice to leaseholders, landlords, professional advisers, managers and others on the law affecting residential leasehold and commonhold.

Monday-Friday
(9.30am-5.00pm)

Tel: 020 7374 5380

Email: info@lease-advice.org

Website:
www.lease-advice.org.uk

Private Sector Housing Advice Team

(see box on the left for their details).

Are You A Local Business?

Need To Reach More Potential Customers In These Difficult Times?

Then Why Not Advertise In This Newsletter ?

It's low cost, effective and goes out a wide variety of individuals and organisations across Camden



Contact Robert Taylor for more about our circulation and competitive advertising rates

Camden Federation of Private Tenants

The Voice of Private Tenants in Camden

Tenants - Know Your Rights

- **Read your tenancy agreement carefully, so you know your rights and responsibilities.**
- **Make sure your deposit is put into one of the three government approved schemes (this is a legal requirement).**
- **Make sure the landlord/letting agent gets your gas appliances checked on a yearly basis (this is a legal requirement).**
- **Always use e-mail or write letters so you have a written record of anything that is said or agreed between you and your landlord or agent.**
- **Get help, advice and support if you have a problem.**

Camden Council - Housing Options

020 7974 5801 (Out of hours emergencies 020 7974 4444)

Camden Council - Environmental Health Team (Private Sector)

020 7974 2090

Camden Federation of Private Tenants

11-17 The Marr

Camden Street

London

NW1 0HE

020 7383 0151

admin@cfpt.org.uk

www.cfpt.org.uk



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MEMBERSHIP FORM



CFPT Needs You



1 Name _____

Address _____

Phone no _____ Email _____

2 I/we wish to have annual membership of CFPT as an:

Individual member £10

Individual student member £5

Group member* £30

Name of group* _____

3 I am a: (please tick one)

Regulated Tenant

Assured Shorthold Tenant

Assured Tenant

Housing Association Tenant

Leaseholder

Other _____

4 I would like to make a donation of (optional) £ _____

Total amount paid £ _____

Signed _____

Date _____

CFPT is the voice of private tenants* in Camden

- We work with and support private tenants in Camden to organise and campaign for better protection, rights and services.
- We lobby the government, the council, and a variety of other bodies and organisations to get things changed and improved.
- We work closely with other local community groups, organisations and national charities such as Shelter.
- We also signpost people to advice agencies, and provide information, support and basic advice on a wide variety of tenancy-related issues.

*Our definition of private tenant also includes housing association tenants and non-council leaseholders.

If you are interested in getting involved with us you can:

- Become a member (see the left hand side of this page for details of how to join)
- Become a volunteer (visit our website for more about this)
- Join the Management Committee (call or email us about this)

CFPT est la voix des locataires dans le secteur privé de la municipalité de Camden.

Nous travaillons avec les locataires du secteur privé de la municipalité de Camden et nous les soutenons pour qu'ils s'organisent et mènent une campagne afin d'obtenir une meilleure protection, le respect de leurs droits et une prestation de services.

CFPT es la voz de los inquilinos del distrito de Camden.

Trabajamos con los inquilinos del distrito de Camden y les ayudamos a organizarse y a conseguir más protección, derechos y servicios.

CFPT é a expressão dos inquilinos privados em Camden.

Nós trabalhamos com os inquilinos privados em Camden e lhes damos apoio para organizar e fazer campanha por melhores direitos, serviços e proteção.

CFPT waa codka gaarka ah ee ijaartayaasha xaafada Camden.

Waxaan la shaqaynaa oo ka caawinaa ijaartayaasha Camden in ay is habeeyaan uuna ololeeyaan kobcinta amaanka, xaquuqdooda iyo adeega.

ক্যামডেনে বসবাসরত বেসরকারী ভাড়াটিয়াদের কণ্ঠস্বর হচ্ছে সিএফপিটি ।

আমরা ক্যামডেনে বসবাসরত বেসরকারী ভাড়াটিয়াদের সঙ্গে একত্রে কাজ করি। এবং তাদের আরো অধিকতর রক্ষনাবেক্ষন, অধিকারসমূহ এবং অন্যান্য সেবার জন্য সংগঠিত হতে এবং প্রচারাভিযান চালানতে সহায়তা করি ।

هي صوت المستأجرين الخاصين في كامدن. المستأجرين الخاصين في كامدن فيدرالية للقيام بتنظيم وإدارة حملة من أجل الحصول على حماية نحن نعمل مع المستأجرين الخاصين في كامدن ونقدمهم وحقوق وخدمات أفضل.

Camden Federation of Private Tenants is registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act as The Camden Federation for Private Tenants Limited
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The individual views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Camden Federation of Private Tenants.

Camden Federation of Private Tenants

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