

HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION - 9 MARCH 2020

Item 6 – The Council’s Relationship with Housing Associations in the Borough

Statement from Newington Ward Councillors in respect of Clarson House

We have been contacted on numerous occasions by residents of Clarson House in recent years. They have consistently reported widespread issues of poor management of their building by Wandle. These issues have included but not been limited to:- regular heating and hot water outages; severe leaks; antisocial behaviour including drug taking in stairwells; drug dealing in the vicinity of Clarson House; mice infestations; and a build-up of rubbish in the bin store rooms.

The problem is not so much that these issues occur. Rather the major frustration is Wandle’s inability or refusal to bring about lasting solutions to any of them. Residents report Wandle staff being difficult to get hold of and slow to act. There is anecdotal evidence of high staff turnover, which exacerbates the problem. Residents have appealed to ourselves as ward councillors, Neil Coyle MP, and taken to social media regularly on learning about the latest incident. Sometimes Wandle respond, and there is a short term fix. But there has never, to our knowledge, been a serious effort to ensure residents receive the services they are paying for via rents and service charge.

In our view, this amounts to Wandle delivering a far worse service to their residents than Southwark Council provides to its tenants and leaseholders. Members of the committee will know and recognise that when things go wrong in council-owned properties, there is a clear chain of accountability to put things right, and clear guidelines on when compensation is due. It is therefore relatively easy for elected members to intervene when needed and to escalate repairs and compensation claims.

The ongoing problems at Clarson House have raised a number of questions for us, which we hope committee members will be able to probe at the meeting on 9 March These include: 1) What specific powers do councillors, and Southwark Council more generally, have to force housing associations to provide the same level of service we deliver as a local authority? 2) Can the council conduct more robust assessments of resident satisfaction within housing association properties, to better understand the issues residents face? 3) At what point does a service provided by a housing association become so bad that Southwark decides they should no longer be a building partner in the borough?

We’re pleased that the committee will consider some of these issues, which no doubt are much more widespread than this specific case. We are also grateful that residents from Clarson House will be able to present their case in person and pose their own questions to Southwark Council.

Councillors James Coldwell, Eleanor Kerlake, Alice MacDonald
Newington Ward Councillors

Dated: 8 March 2020