

Penny Creed

From: Penny Creed <vicechair@columbiatra.org.uk>
Sent: 14 June 2020 14:01
To: 'mayor@towerhamlets.gov.uk'
Cc: 'chair@columbiatra.org.uk'; Pamela Haluwa
Subject: Tower Hamlets Homes major works projects on Columbia Estates
Attachments: Response to 28 May meeting letter_20190716.pdf

Importance: High

Dear Mayor Biggs

We hope you are well. Further to our earlier exchange of emails about major works on Tower Hamlets Homes blocks we are writing to provide you with more detail on what has transpired.

Several Columbia TRA blocks have had major works projects launched in the last two years, they are: Tomlinson Close, Old Market Square and Georgina Gardens, Hackney Road, Pelter Street, Baroness Road and Sivill House. At the outset of these projects several issues arose that gave the CTRA Committee enough cause for concern for us to reach out to Tower Hamlets Homes leadership to ask for a meeting. This happened in May 2019, after which a letter to summarise our concerns was duly sent (attached) and acknowledged but despite this, management practices have not changed, and additional problems have arisen.

This is a list of some of the more concerning issues that we have faced:

- A major works contract was awarded to a contractor taken from the council approved list. It took a resident a five-minute Google search to ascertain that the contractor had less than £5,000 in the bank.
- Section 20 notices were sent out by the Leaseholder Services team to leaseholders, as it was later admitted by Tower Hamlet Homes "by mistake".
- Leaseholders have been issued with major works bills for works that are yet to start over a year later. No further communications about the delay, new start date or refunds have been forthcoming.
- Old Market Square comprises of three blocks, one of these blocks (21-35 OMS) was left out of the major works project through an "admin error" despite it having such bad concrete erosion that it was deemed necessary to erect precautionary scaffolding around the block well over two years ago. We understand the challenges of Covid-19 in recent months, but other projects have progressed during the pandemic. 21-35 OMS has seen two years of inaction. Meanwhile the scaffolding is still up and being paid for by Tower Hamlets Homes with no works start date in sight.
- Decisions on whether to replace windows were taken after projects were up and running, after Section 20s were issued, without adequate surveys causing extra delay costs to the projects.
- Despite the THH management team telling the CTRA committee that meetings should be monthly, in a ten-month project the Old Market Square steering group was only granted two meetings, despite repeated requests.
- Some leaseholders were needlessly asked to pay £1400 (outside of Section 20) for replacement fireproof front doors. Replacement doors chosen by THH have had serious quality and design issues.

- The Sivill House Steering Group has had to resort to using the media and even applying to have the building listed as a last resort to force THH to listen to their major concerns about the materials and finishes they were planning on using.
- Project managers have told steering groups that all projects have gone over budget by up to 50% due to the unanticipated poor state of the concrete. This is despite the project team having had scaffolding access to the concrete for surveying a full year before the projects started.

These, of course are just the headlines.

We believe an inquiry would find huge management and systemic issues across the major works teams. The projects have had inadequate pre-planning leading to poor procurement, inaccurate leaseholder estimates and changes in scope halfway through the project. We have clear evidence that departments do not communicate with each other. Communication with residents have been uninformative, non-existent and sometimes even contemptuous. We have experienced clumsy and overt attempts to sow division between tenants and leaseholders. The project team has met resident and leaseholder input or scrutiny with disdain, though they are of course expected to foot the bill.

Throughout all of this we have we have sought meetings, written complaints, we have engaged with our local councillors to discuss our concerns and resolve these issues. The process has been highly stressful for CTRA committee members and residents alike. Yet we have found Tower Hamlets Homes incapable of open dialogue. It is as though they are expecting litigation to follow and would hunker down and wait it out rather than try and remedy some of the problems they have created.

In addition to these ongoing projects, there have been other major works projects in the CTRA's area, Dunmore Point, Cuff Point, Strickland House and Gowan House. Each of these faced similar problems and an extreme level of stress reported by the residents involved. As a TRA we have tried to learn from these to better support our members. Not only is it disappointing to see many of the same issues recurring, when asked what THH had learnt from previous projects, residents were told that lessons learned were not properly tracked and analysed. This shocking admission does not befit the kind of contemporary organisation we are told THH aspires to be.

We believe it is time that London Borough of Tower Hamlets conducted a full and public inquiry, which fully engages with all affected residents, into these and other major works by Tower Hamlets Homes across the Borough so that lessons can be learned, and systems and process improved. An internal, private inquiry would do nothing to restore the confidence of residents which has been sadly squandered.

We feel that it has sadly now reached the point where the cost on the public purse, from the mismanagement of the building projects and from the exceedingly poor and counterproductive public engagement, must be set out clearly in writing and accounted for. **To that end, we are happy to meet you on site or via Zoom to discuss our experiences in more depth.** We are happy to share all correspondence regarding the major works with you. Anything you might need from us to help an inquiry we will be happy to provide.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Kevin McKenna (Chair), Penny Creed (Vice-Chair), Pam Haluwa (Committee Member)

On behalf of the Columbia Tenants and Residents Association Committee

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