

THE ATTACK on Camden housing by Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray in the Observer on Sunday reached a new low in misunderstanding, misrepresentation, false comparisons and half-truths, Camden Council's leader, Councillor Roy Shaw, said in a statement on Wednesday.

He went on: We therefore wish to re-state our position.

Bad housing is still one of the most important single sources of human unhappiness. In Camden, the 1971 census showed that many families still lack elementary amenities: 18.3 per cent of all households lacked exclusive use of a hot water tap; 32.4 per cent lacked exclusive use of fixed bath; 10.4 per cent had no bath at all; 28.3 per cent lacked exclusive use of an inside wc.

Since 1971 a great deal has been done to remedy this situation, but much remains to be done. Booker and Gray suggest that because other boroughs have worse problems, ours does not exist. For them, in the "leafy lanes of Hampstead" it may not, and indeed we would have more respect for their views if they shared some concern for those in housing need.

Camden's determination to solve the problem has produced one of the most vigorous and adventurous housing programmes in the country.

- To date Camden has built 5,341 new units of housing.
- The forecast completions for now until 1980 total 5,447 units.
- Additionally, we have bought some 4,924 units of existing housing in the last 2½ years alone.
- In 1957, 1,745 newly converted units will be completed from the acquired property.
- In the ten years of Camden's existence 12,733 families have been rehoused by the borough and an additional 5,873 families nominated to the GLC and other housing organisations.

Inevitably in a programme of this nature difficulties will occur, but they should be seen in the context of the overall programme.

Inflation has had an exaggerating effect on housing finance generally throughout the country. In addition, Camden has exceptional factors which together produce above-average costs:

- Very high land costs;
- All housing development has to take place within the confines of the borough—we have no low-cost outer London land at our disposal;
- Camden residents have the fifth lowest median household income of all London boroughs;
- Camden has the political determination to pursue a vigorous housing policy;

Camden replies

No single factor is unique to Camden, but the combination is.

The borough's population has fallen, but many of those in lower and middle income groups who have left were not volunteers. We are trying as hard as we can to make sure that local people who wish to stay have a home to live in at a rent they can afford.

Camden's motivation has been and will remain the plight of the many thousands of families in the borough who are still living in bad housing conditions. We are proud of our achievements—though not complacent—and totally reject the ill-considered and prejudiced attacks on our housing programme.

'It branches off into science-fiction'

Attached to Mr Shaw's statement was an appendix dealing with specific criticisms made by Booker and Gray. Among its points were the following:

CAMDEN'S ANNUAL HOUSING DEBT. The graph at the beginning of the (Observer) article is meaningless. It accurately portrays Camden's rate-borne deficit for the first five years, but then branches off into science-fiction. The correct deficit figure for 1975 is estimated at £6 million and not £24 million as shown in the graph. This error is repeated in the text, where it is claimed that "the deficit will be nearly 24 times as large—a staggering £23.9 millions." We have no idea where they have obtained this figure, but it is clear that they are comparing two separate elements.

FIFTY-ONE PER CENT GROWTH IN LOCAL AUTHORITY SPENDING IN 1975. This statement, made in the introduction, is thoroughly misleading. Growth in revenue expenditure in real terms by local authorities will be about six per cent nationally in 1975. In real terms housing capital expenditure in 1975/6 will be 86 per cent of the level in 1974/5; ie, a reduction of 14 per cent.

GREAT ORMOND STREET. It is the council's policy to retain existing residential communities and retain important listed buildings. After many years of effort to do this in the part of Holborn owned by

Rugby School, the council bought about half the estate from the governors in May 1975.

This consisted of fine listed buildings of national significance in Great Ormond Street and very ordinary Victorian terraces in two adjoining streets. Camden made it a condition of the sale that the governors used the proceeds to rehabilitate their part of the estate and continue to provide homes for local people.

The council for its part has already started rehabilitation work on one Victorian terrace to provide 31 decent homes for 123 local people. Work should start on the other terrace to provide another 37 homes for 114 people early in 1976. The whole estate cost only £327,500, and the new homes in the Victorian terraces will therefore be much cheaper than a new development.

YMCA DEVELOPMENT. Camden Council, which did not initiate the YMCA development in Tottenham Court Road, had relatively little to do with deciding that it should be completed. Our financial commitment (£2,125,000) is relatively small in relation to the cost of the scheme (£15,320,000), is well secured and at a commercial rate of interest.

The main risk takers in this case are the DoE, which took the view that even if the rents in the finished development were going to be high—and they were fully aware of the likely rent levels from the outset—they were better than having a useless uncompleted shell of a building. We agree, but the decision and the risk are theirs, not ours.

HOUSING SCHEME IN KENTISH TOWN/HARMOOD STREET. The council's redevelopment scheme for this area is supported by practically all the local people in Kentish Town. It has been demonstrated to the DoE that it can be constructed within Government housing yardstick limitations, and would have been well under way by now if we had been allowed to get on with it. The cost of the delay to this scheme, most of it the direct result of journalistic pressure, has already run into thousands of pounds.

TOLMERS SQUARE. Camden Council is berated for purchasing recently the whole of Stock Conversion's land in this area for £4 million. Two years ago Messrs Booker and Gray promoted a scheme which involved buying out Stock Conversion's land for more than £10 million.

RENT ARREARS. While we certainly have a rent arrears problem of a very special size it has not been helpful to mention that the major cause was a computer strike last year, which meant for 12 months we had no rent accounts. During that period our rent arrears as a ratio to the total charge increased 300 per cent.

HOUSING PROGRAMME COSTS. It is all too true that our "building schemes cost as much as five times the national average." All our housing development has to be built within yardstick restraints which apply nationally.

FITZJOHNS AVENUE. It is true that we paid a high price for the site we own in Fitzjohn's Avenue. Messrs Booker and Gray were prepared to pay more for the residential land at Tolmers (£680,000 per acre) at the time we made our purchase.

All council purchases are by law independently vetted by the district valuer, so we are not masters in relation to the price we pay for property. Regrettably, the council is responsible for some of the delays in developing this site.

CAMPDEN COURT. This tenement block, about a hundred years old, has shared lava with each staircase. It cannot be rehabilitated to modern standard homes at anything approaching a reasonable cost.

'Delays have hit the badly housed'

FITZROY ROAD. The case for redevelopment against rehabilitation is rather more finely balanced in this scheme although every time the issue has been investigated by the council as a result of public pressure we have come down in favour of rehabilitation because rehabilitation would provide a substantially lower standard accommodation with a longer life, and more maintenance problems with a saving in capital costs. The delays have put many badly housed people being provided with decent homes and costs have escalated.

HIGHGATE ROAD. Here the issue was whether to retain a few old and attractive but unlisted buildings in a tatty mixed housing/shops/industrial area with derelict industrial property behind.

The demolition of almost all the front buildings was necessary in order to take advantage of additional land available behind and to provide homes of 108 people further back from Tottenham Court Road.

ALEXANDRA ROAD. The cost of this scheme which was started in March 1973, has risen from then until now from £6,200,000 to £9,100,000. During this time the index of building costs has risen 63.52 per cent from 146.1 to 240.1.