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NEIL McINTOSH, chairman of Camden housing committee, answers criticisms of the Council's housing policy made in 'The Observer' by Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray.

Camden states its case

I HOPE I will be forgiven if I avoid a point-by-point rebuttal of the attacks made on Camden Council by Booker and Gray in the last two weeks. I do so because it seems clear that Camden is simply a scapegoat for a general attack on public sector housing expenditure.

Contrary to what Booker and Gray claim, capital expenditure on housing is by no means out of control. Indeed, for those of us most closely involved the worry is that, in real terms, spending is falling nationally.

It is very much in the interests of right-wing commentators on housing to diminish the extent of housing need. Booker and Gray go further. They pretend it does not exist in Camden or, by implication, in Inner London generally. It is difficult for a local councillor not to find such complacency gratuitously offensive coming as it does from well-housed residents of the 'leafy lanes of Hampstead.' There are, in fact, still far too many people living, like the residents of an estate Camden recently purchased in Kentish Town, at 300 persons to the acre with no basic amenities except a w.c. in the kitchen.

A major implication of Booker and Gray's approach is that public money should not be spent on providing housing in high land cost areas. It is true, of course, that even in Camden there are areas where land costs are not so astronomically high as in Bloomsbury or Hampstead. But in those areas



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Neil McIntosh: 'Why so much attention?'

view, March/April 1974) entitled 'The Social and Financial Costs of Urban Renewal.' Unfortunately Booker and Gray approached neither myself nor the Director before publishing their articles. As such their contributions are a good deal less useful than William Barne's 2½-year-old paper.

Mistakes were made in redevelopment, but often with keen support from local people as in the case of our St Silas North development. There was an attempt to change that scheme to rehabilitation but an immediate upsurge of quite unorchestrated protest put paid to the proposal.

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though still at high density. Whatever we do we must build new housing to take the excess people from such places.

During 1975 Camden will rehabilitate more housing per head of population than any other authority. We will be able to do this because we got onto rehabilitation before most other councils. Naturally this programme will be expensive and to Booker and Gray this makes us the worst authority in the country. We feel that in this one respect we are the best in the country and we are proud of the amount we have done. Although for some odd reason these facts do not prevent immense criticism of Camden by conservationists it really is very difficult to argue that we are knocking down too much sound housing. In the next five years we hope to build 1,000 new units

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A major implication of Booker and Gray's approach is that public money should not be spent on providing housing in high land cost areas. It is true, of course, that even in Camden there are areas where land costs are not so astronomically high as in Bloomsbury or Hampstead. But in those areas people are already desperately over-crowded living at six or seven times the density of that in Hampstead. Moreover, if we give up developments in Bloomsbury and Holborn the depopulation of the city centre will soon make central London resemble US cities at their worst.

Clearly, we in Camden and the rest of Inner London take very seriously any suggestion that our slice of the national cake is larger than our needs merit. But the figures Booker and Gray produce to demonstrate the case against us are totally false. The graph showing our HR Account deficit owed more to science fiction than housing finance. Our graph shows the true picture.

Nor have Camden's costs gone up unreasonably in comparison to other London boroughs. Della Nevitt of the LSE has passed to me some figures showing the increased costs in ratio to increased council stock in Camden and other central boroughs since their formation.

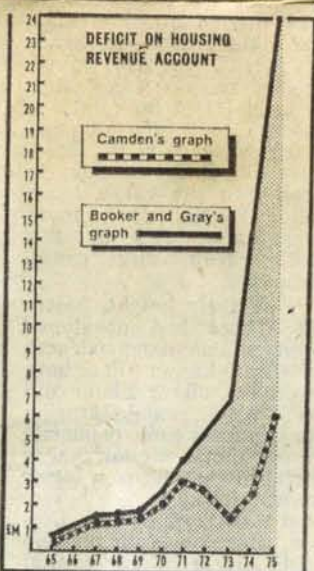
	% increase	Money Stock
Camden	5.9%	
Westminster	3.4%	
Kensington & Chelsea	17.9%	

I have never seen any investigation of the increased costs of Kensington and Chelsea. It is, of course, Conservative controlled. Booker and Gray's second article argued that Camden knocked down sound housing and that the financial and social cost of redevelopment had never been measured. Where on earth have they been? Literally my first meeting after election as a Councillor four years ago was with the researchers they quote so extensively. I arrived in the Council chamber filled with zeal, determined to prevent future redevelopment excesses. I was too late. Camden had already stopped large scale comprehensive redevelopment. Schemes like Harmood Street and Haverstock Hill were changed to allow for almost 50 per cent rehabilitation.

Shortly afterwards our Director of Housing published a paper (Housing Re-

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Booker and Gray showed the bold line above as 'Camden's annual housing debt.' Mr McIntosh here compares it with (dotted line) 'Camden's graph of deficit on Housing Revenue Account.'

new tenants were moved from newly acquired properties where they had been registered on the List and another 25 per cent were transferred from other council accommodation which is thereby released for Waiting List nominees. A similar analysis for Camden as a whole would show that the figure of 4,000 people rehoused since 1965 should be more than 25,000.

Clearly there is some population loss involved in redevelopment, but rehabilitation to reasonable standards involves just as much decanting and possibly an even greater loss of population.

Take, for example, the estate mentioned earlier in this article with a density of 300 to the acre. The housing is sound but environmentally dreadful. We can leave the people in those conditions, we can rehabilitate all the blocks giving a density of over 200 to the acre or we can knock down one block and create a decent environment

fore most other councils. Naturally this programme will be expensive and to Booker and Gray this makes us the worst authority in the country. We feel that in this one respect we are the best in the country and we are proud of the amount we have done. Although for some odd reason these facts do not prevent immense criticism of Camden by conservationists it really is very difficult to argue that we are knocking down too much sound housing. In the next five years we hope to build 1,000 new units per year and rehabilitate even more. The cost in terms of demolished housing will be about one third of the number we hope to improve this year alone.

It seems reasonable to ask why so much attention has been paid to Camden. Assuming for a moment that it is not simply indolence which stops B. & G. stepping out of NW3 we should perhaps examine their relations with this borough.

About two years ago Booker and Gray, under the guise of a property company called Claudius Properties, tried to persuade Camden to buy up the Tolmers Square area. We declined to follow their advice. Since then we have bought the area and in their first article they criticise us for paying £4 million or about £200,000 per acre of housing land. Their proposals involved paying £10 million for the whole site or over £600,000 per acre of housing land, easily the most ever paid by a local authority. The scheme would have been disastrous for Camden and fatal for its proposed backers.

Since we rejected the Tolmers Square plan Booker and Gray have conducted an unceasing attack on Camden at some cost to the ratepayers. They have even written entire articles on the Tolmers Square area without mentioning their role in the history of the area. Their methods have consisted of meaningless comparisons or half truths like the criticism of the 'house' we bought for £476,000 which was, in fact, a nurses' hostel of 40 rooms with 1.6 acres of land attached.

In summing up the articles of the last two weeks I can do little better than quote Stephen Marks in the *Municipal Journal* of 30 May 1965. In relation to earlier Booker/Gray efforts he said that examination of the housing subsidy system is long overdue 'but it is brought no nearer by Booker and Gray's one-sided sensationalism.'

It would be a tragedy for the disadvantaged people of London if such wholly unconstructive criticism was taken seriously.

* Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray will reply to Mr McIntosh next Sunday.