

Council commentary

THE LEVY SNAG

by PHILLIP SOMMERICH and LIZ FORGAN

WITH a conspicuous absence of rejoicing, Camden Council last Wednesday approved the final terms of the controversial Tolmers Square development in Euston Road.

North Cross query

LABOUR'S win in the GLC elections produced little in the way of elation-filled predictions or political gauntlet flinging at the council meeting.

The most sanguine speech on the change in control came from Mrs Millie Miller, leader of the council, when, seconding the motion on 'somehow', she predicted the GLC's Housing Department would play a greater part in solving this problem.

Councillor Hartley Spence sought to defate the anti-motorway lobby's elation by asking whether the new GLC rulers had confirmed that planning applications in the path of proposed motorways should be treated as if the motorways would not be built.

Councillor Ivor Walker, Planning Committee chairman, said no such confirmation had been received yet, but "the council expects that a modification to the Greater London Development Plan will be submitted to the Minister, deleting the North Cross Route."

The agreement reached with Mr Joe Levy's Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, will bring Camden 8½ acres of subsidised housing land.

But the price it is paying—co-operation with compulsory purchase powers and planning permission for a huge office block on the site—is an unwelcome one for many Labour councillors.

The details of the agreement provide for Camden to get a share in the profits of the commercial development but, as Policy and Resources chairman Councillor Peter Best warned, the ratepayers are unlikely to benefit much from the deal.

Camden's share will be calculated as a percentage of the profits made on the first year's rental—after the developers have deducted all their costs plus a three per cent management charge and 10 per cent of the initial net income.

Camden then gets 20 per cent of the next two per cent and 30 per cent of anything more. Whatever percentage it gets in the first year it will go on getting for as long as the office

Deal puts Socialists in 'schizophrenic dilemma'

block stands. But the snag is that if, as is quite possible, profits in the first year are so low that the council gets nothing at all, it will continue to get nothing for ever.

Conservative Councillor Julian Tobin accused the Labour majority of being in a "schizophrenic dilemma" over the Tolmers Square agreement.

"Half of them don't want to go on with it; the other half want to go on but don't know why," he said.

And he criticised the terms of the profit-sharing agreement which, he said, should have been based on the true rental value of the office

block reckoned over seven years, instead of on the initial net income.

"Those of us with any experience know that every council except Camden when dealing with joint developments insists on true rental value as a basis of participation. It makes us wonder whether the negotiations are being carried through as vigorously as they might have been," he said.

The Tories wanted the scheme to go ahead, but Mr Tobin claimed that Labour's terms were worse than those the Tory council had reached two years ago.

Mr Best denied this categorically and added that he had asked for safeguards on

the way the first year's rent was calculated, to ensure that Camden got a fair deal.

But he admitted that the council did not like the scheme and was only accepting it because without the land subsidy, bringing costs down from over £200,000 an acre to £200,000, it would never get permission to build there.

"The financial return is a secondary consideration in this deal. The purpose is to get round Government cost ceilings," he said.

"We may get a small financial return or we may not. The question is: is the scheme worth doing for the people of Camden? It is, but not because of the financial argument. It is worth it for 8½ acres of housing land we could not otherwise get.

"By doing a deal which is against our principles we are making provision for 1,600 people to be housed here. I think we are doing the right thing."

HOMELESS—'No cause for gloom'

HOMELESSNESS, a problem usually able to strike emotive vibrations in Camden Council, only served to create a desultory debate at the conclusion of last week's council meeting.

The debate was on a motion proposed by Councillor Robert Humphreys, supporting recommendations made by the London Boroughs Association and calling for immediate action by the Government and GLC to act immediately to help the homeless.

But, as Alderman Martin Morton, leader of the opposition, pointed out, the LBA's recommendations amount to a list of what Camden was doing, would like to do or had for some time wanted the Government to do.

And Mr Humphreys himself quashed some radical passion by saying that however desperate the plight of homeless people, the situation was improving and gloom should be avoided.

Answers to an LBA questionnaire revealed that half the London boroughs had to defer redevelopment schemes because of the pressure they would create on the number of homeless people, while just under a third of authorities replying said the problem was aggravating their rent arrears problems.

About 20 councils had to use bed and breakfast accommodation for the homeless, costing £1,000 a year per family, but in Camden at least rehousing was having some effect on the list of homeless people.

But renegotiation of the agreement with the GLC was needed so it would rehouse a number of people equal to three-quarters of the number of homeless each borough had in the previous year, he said.

Mr Morton said one solution might be to displace people coming to London from the belief that London's streets were paved with gold and that one could find a place to squat in for summer and the prospect of homeless family accommodation in winter.

But even this, coupled with another plea for the Conservative philosophy of selling council homes, failed to attract a Labour attack.

The motion, carried unanimously, supports such LBA suggestions as: more active acquisition of under-occupied houses and rehousing of their occupants; reduction of time council properties remain empty; compulsory purchase powers for homes which remain empty more than a year and penal rating on those empty for six months; security of tenure for furnished tenants and more Government money to cope with the problem.

HOMELESS—The breakdown

RENT rebates, squatters and accommodation for the homeless in general dominated question time at the council meeting.

In answer to a series of questions from Councillor Tim Skinner, Housing Committee chairman Councillor Arthur Soutter said 191 homeless families were in Camden's care—134 in Stage Two (temporary) accommodation, 20 in reception centres and 17 in bed and breakfast accommodation.

Only four of the families in Stage Two accommodation were homeless because of action by landlords. Squatters occupied 20 council houses and 81 had been given to Student Community Housing, which had housed some 600 family members among its 800 tenants.

Mr Soutter said there was local concern about 50 H.P. use of council homes and Mr Soutter said this was being looked into.

Councillor Frank Richard asked why no action was taken for nearly a month after Camden decided to seek a compulsory purchase order for 800 St. Vincent, West Hampstead, and Mr Soutter said that a full had called some delays, but the order should be ready for submission to the Minister next month.

In reply to Councillor Julian Tobin, Mr Soutter revealed that 2,000 applications for rent allowances had been

received, all but 801 from people receiving social security. Of the 801, 400 had been passed for payment, as had 13 of the other applications, while a total of 25 applications had been outstanding for three months—but were being processed now.

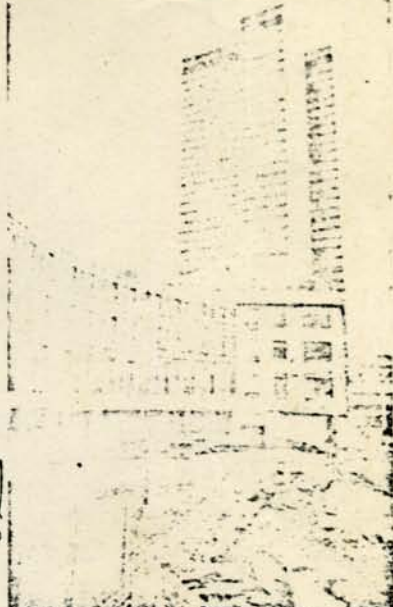
The largest allowance made to date was £11.04.

Camden knew of only 15 elderly people discharged from geriatric or psychiatric wards of hospitals in the past year, Councillor Miss Lontal Evans, Social Services Committee chairman, said in reply to a question from Alderman Mrs Leslie Campbell.

Lack of physical amenity in some of Camden's older homes and a shortage of places in supported housing inhibited the return to the community of such patients, rather than any lack of Social Services staff.

Chief officers were to consult with hospital authorities to enable more eligible people to return to the community, Miss Evans added.

The Water Bill, at present going through Parliament, had not been considered by the Finance and General Purposes Committee, its chairman, Councillor Roy Shaw, told Councillor Herbert Mather at a meeting. But the London Boroughs Association had proposed amendments to restrict the powers of local authorities to be filled by the legislation, Mr Shaw added.



A change of heart on CPOs

THE FLOW of compulsory purchase orders sought by Camden continued last week, although in two cases there were indications of a change in Labour's heart.

At 42-54 Camden Street, Camden Town, an application for an improvement grant and subsequent investigation into the security of tenure for 27 tenants had led the Housing Committee to propose compulsory purchase, but at the council meeting the decision was withdrawn.

A similar order for 258 and 270 Camden Road was withdrawn after the owners agreed to sell the freehold for £85,000 to the council.

But concern that properties were under-occupied, empty or likely to disappear from the stock of rented accommodation led the

council to approve CPOs for 41 Marsden Street, Kenning Town, 24 and 26 Albert Street and 17 Heales Street, Camden Town, and 37 Kingsgate Road, West Hampstead.

One humorous note came when Housing Committee Chairman Arthur Soutter explained that compulsory CPOs for Ilford Road, Kenning Town, had to be altered because in issuing the original order someone had read the map upside down.

CPOs for eight houses in Holmes Road, Kenning Town, were also withdrawn.

Now the council was told that Camden's bid to buy 13-15 Park Hill Road, Hampstead which have been empty for five years, would arise on at least another three months because the Environment Secretary had given the owner a last chance to make the houses habitable.

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