

Leasehold Conference 2022
Residents Voice Session – Pauline Moran

My name is Pauline Moran and I have lived in the same property for 42 years and owned it for 33. This may be why I was asked to give a presentation because of my long history as a Westminster City Council (WCC) leaseholder.

I don't wish to turn this event into a complaint's fest, but there are a number of things which have cropped up over the years and never seem to change. So, this is a good opportunity to identify some of them with illustrations from past experience.

Bureaucracy keeps leaseholders corralled from social housing stock but many departments have never seemed to grasp the difference between council property and private property and many still carry a 'one size fits all' attitude.

Communications

It sometimes appears that decisions taken by one department are not actioned by another. This has a cost implication not only for lessees but for the public purse. For instance, the sale of the Freehold of the house next door to me was not recorded, it was purchased by the lessees 10-12 years ago. In the last major works scaffolding was erected outside and had to be removed so costs involved.

When looking through the Key Lessee Breakdown I noticed that next door was still on the list for Sewer Baiting so whether it was carried out is not known.

A few weeks ago I found a workmen on next doors' basement steps. when I challenged him he said he had been instructed by the council to look at the area. I told him it was private property, and he was in fact trespassing. I went off shopping and on return I noticed the electricity intake cupboard door which had been ajar had been closed so he had been downstairs even after I challenged him. Maybe he didn't believe me.

Another indication of faulty communication was that our property received permission to retain our existing high-quality locks but even so an Oakray? Person came to distribute new EVVA keys. More unnecessary visits at a cost. I reported this decision but a couple of weeks later a workman turned up at 8am to change the lock. Fortunately, my neighbour answered the door and sent him away. Another pointless visit due to poor record-keeping.

Decisions For Leasehold Properties

Most decisions are made behind a desk by those with no knowledge of individual properties whatsoever. Consequently, the mistaken premise is that 'one size fits all' - it does not, and much waste and cost is the result when inappropriate choices are made. And this ties in with records which are not kept up to date.

Major Works

Standards are unfailingly low and only ever borderline 'adequate' - this is no way to spend leaseholders' money. We now do not have the option of choosing a contractor, too many obstacles were placed in the way if the contractor was not on the approved list. I know that myself and a previous tenant made far better choices than those imposed on us.

Before works commence there is a so-called survey which consists of a pavement level survey with no inspection of the roof – this is only done when the scaffolding is in place – thus a true idea of costs cannot be assessed when the Section 20 is issued.

If this is for 'health and safety reasons' then one has to ask why a private sector surveyor would not hesitate to inspect the roof. And it used to be the case with the council surveyor. Believe it or not – before the last major works actually commenced it went through 5 different project teams each gainsaying the other and starting again from the top.

We, that is leaseholder and tenant together applied to refurbish our common area under the 'go it alone' initiative which seems now to have disappeared. And because of the contradictory decisions made by the project teams it was on again and off again. Eventually we did do the work ourselves and it has been admired by all who enter the house because we take a pride in it. And can you believe the contractor sent a bill for these works which he did not do!

Major works billing is shambolic. This is why I always ask for a Schedule of Works to keep a check on things. There were descriptions of works done to a portico which we do not have – a back roof extension which we do not have – removal of wiring which did not exist – replacement of door furniture – funny - I bought that from Beardmore's and paid for it! This is the result of inadequate pavement level surveys.

Cost is often the only criterion when choosing a contractor – this is wrong. The choice should be based on 'Best Value' alone. Buy cheap buy twice. So we fought long and hard for self-cleaning paint on the front elevation of our building which overlooks a set of traffic lights so that exhaust particulate coats everything. This paint is still in respectable condition 12 years later.

Contractors

Some contractors make me wonder how they ever won a tender. Next door before the freehold was purchased – the tenant was a surveyor. He saw what was happening. The workman on the top-level scaffolding was hacking off the stucco and the rubble and dust was falling down to the ground floor level where a workman was painting the front door! The rubbish was sticking to it! My neighbour ordered the pair of them off the site!

My own bedroom window had a sill replaced and the workman was painting with no primer and no undercoat, directly with gloss in the pouring rain! One contractor took off the bottom 2 rows of roof tiles on our roof without covering it with a tarpaulin then left for the weekend. Which turned out to be the wettest weekend so far that year. There was damage to my attic office, bedroom and living room from water penetration. Followed by a squabble over who was responsible for the insurance - WCC or contractor I never did get my carpets cleaned. Most of this you couldn't make up.

At pre-works meetings with residents and the contractor – we are often treated as a nuisance. Reassurances were given that everything would be different this time – a strict Clerk of Works would ensure standards were maintained. He came on site twice to my knowledge. There is a world of difference to what is promised and what is actually delivered.

Online Payments To Contractors

Payments sent out in line with agreed contracts are sent out automatically without checking if the works have been carried out as recently in our house when so-called emergency lighting inspections were paid for but not carried out and had to be refunded because I checked the attendance sheet in the basement. Automatic payments are a sure way for contractors to send an invoice and conceal non-attendance. We will see if the latest electronic device for contractors to check in to show attendance will work – but it does not prove that works were carried out.

Security

In large council blocks the entrance to the building is likely to be via a large communal entrance with a glassed or half-glassed door – thus whoever enters can be seen. Walkways giving access to individual flats are also visible to residents and post can be delivered direct or to cubby holes. This is not the case with a street property such as the one I occupy. There is a solid front door giving access to the hallway and the two flats within. Thus, whatever happens in the hallway cannot be seen from the street. I believe this to be a security risk – if the residents are absent any attempt to gain entrance to the flats would be hidden from sight. This is why I have doubts about the latest EVVA one key fits all initiative – should any one go missing then whoever has it will have access to multiple properties.

I did point out once that post and parcels could be taken by strangers from the hallway. At the time this was the suggestion – which ties in perfectly to my remarks about proper record keeping and knowledge of the property. I was told that a post cage would be fitted on the back of the front door. But the door is exactly the same width as the corridor. So it would no longer be possible to open the door!

The next bright suggestion was that a letterbox would be cut into my neighbour's flat door (not mine my post didn't matter) and a post cage fitted behind it. So the intention was for my neighbour to walk 12 feet to the front door, pick up his post, post it through his own letterbox, close the door, open the cage and take out his mail. The logic escapes me. Needless to say it didn't happen.

This may seem like a litany of complaint – but when things go wrong these examples show where the focus needs to be. But I hope some of this has kept you amused! It would not be fair to say that the treatment of lessees is sub-standard. Very definitely not.

When one can deal directly with individual officers and maintain a trail of contacts then results are forthcoming. In this regard I can certainly say I have had excellent service from Paul Halpin, Kimberlee Neal, John Millichope and Georgina Wingham over the years.

They are to be thanked and commended. If I have missed anyone out it was unintentional!

Thanks for listening!

Pauline Moran
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