

This is a rotating political column, penned by the three leaders of the main political parties in Lambeth. In this edition, Cllr John Whelan, Conservative Group Leader, Lambeth Council...



As councillors we don't have in-trays any more because inboxes on our desktop computers or mobile devices have replaced them.

My first big headache this past week was dealing with a mini epidemic of squatting. Incredible as it seems some owners of private property occupied by squatters—one in my ward is valued at over £1 million—take no action to evict them sometimes for years. In the meantime the cost to the taxpayer quickly escalates because of the need to curb anti-social behaviour by the illegal occupants.

During the 2002-2006 Conservative-Lib Dem coalition administration we established an empty homes unit that specialised in tracing owners of vacant property and succeeded in bringing more than 150 properties back to life. Sadly, this initiative was terminated by the incoming Labour regime after 2006. It remains the case that scant consideration is given to what neighbours have to endure when a home in their road is illegally occupied. Next on my list for the week was anti social behaviour by customers of a wine bar in West Norwood who annoy nearby residents by massing on the pavement after closing time, urinating in the street, banging car doors, and turning up stereos to maximum volume. And then almost stranger than fiction was an episode of what can only be called "hate crime." More prosaically it involves a dispute between two coffee vendors. Fortunately, my week included a meeting of my local neighbourhood policing panel where I met our new woman police sergeant whose no nonsense approach was certainly not Dixon of Dock Green but will probably be twice as effective.

It's always good to finish a week with a success—in this case it involves the much maligned Lambeth parking service. A local pastor called me to ask if anything could be done to suspend parking restrictions around her church for a funeral on May 2 so I promised to investigate. The parking service is now talking to the pastor about which streets can be used by the mourners without fear of a penalty. I'll report back to you next time if the ceasefire on issuing parking tickets is observed for the funeral.

No place to call home?

EVEN ON a soggy day, finding yourself in one of Stockwell's lushest gardens is an unadulterated delight - especially when you're watching four flighty fox cubs tumbling over each other among towering, multi-coloured tulips, writes Martha de Lacey...

THEY SCAMPER away and Miritza Tschopp scoops up Oliver, a gargantuan chocolate brown cat who arrived on Lansdowne Way as a foster but never left. It's no surprise: if you found yourself in the house Miritza has poured sweat, blood, tears and money into over three decades, you'd etch your name on a pew, too.

But Oliver could soon be without a home, and Miritza forced from the one where she raised her three children - and owing over £55,000 to Lambeth Council.

Miritza's two-bedroom listed semi is one of Lambeth's 170 remaining 'shortlife' properties, council-owned buildings which were, in the 1970s and 80s, deemed not of a lettable standard or worth refurbishment. They were to be demolished, the plots sold to private developers.

Residents on the council's burgeoning housing waiting list formed co-operatives such as Flying Buttress, Clapham North Housing Co-Operative, Short Stock and Miritza's own High Priority Housing. They were granted license to move into these 1,200 ramshackle properties, thus keeping them in the council's affordable housing pool and free of squatters. Faced with nowhere alternative to live and no guarantee they would move quickly up the housing list, tenants paid rent to the co-operative and maintained the homes with no financial assistance from the council.

"When I arrived it was a mess," says single mum Miritza, flicking through photographs of the original 'kitchen', a mound of rubble with a garden hose for a tap. "There was no glass in any windows, only sheets of black plastic, no central heating and an outside bath shared by other members of the co-op."

Miritza - who's been on Lambeth's official housing waiting list since 1979 - installed central



Miritza Tschopp with Oliver the cat

heating, glass windows, a fitted kitchen and cultivated a stunning garden. Most shortlifers did the same. But now, despite over 17,000 households being on their housing waiting list (not including transfers), Lambeth is recalling these properties, aiming to sell the buildings to private developers and raise some £32 million for improving schools, neighbourhoods and housing stock, and has served eviction notices on their inhabitants, many of whom are families with young children. Remaining shortlife tenants have formed a "super co-op", the Lambeth United Housing Co-operative, to fight these orders.

"It's terrifying," Miritza says, showing me the letter in which the council's lawyers insist they issued 'notice to quit' in 2009 and now want penalties of £55,000 for occupying the property since then. "I'm a youth worker - where am I going to get that kind of money? It's all I can think about. I don't sleep."

"Lambeth wants to be seen as the 'co-operative' council but that's a joke. They should be using us as examples of how co-operatives can really work, not demonising us as 'doped-out old hippies'."

"It boils down to them having an alternative vision for this area, one with houses entirely occupied by private, affluent tenants, and those who need affordable housing forced onto big estates. We think it is social cleansing, just like what's

going on in Newham."

Lambeth Council Divisional Director for Housing, Rachel Sharpe, said: "Occupants living in shortlife housing always knew these arrangements were short-term but we understand that those who have put down roots within the local community do not wish to move."

"Lambeth Council is one of the last remaining local authorities to even have shortlife housing and since its introduction we have seen the number of properties reduce from 1,200 to 170. Occupants were never given tenancy rights and were only ever required to pay very low amounts in rent and in some cases have not paid any."

"For the past few years we have worked hard to find occupants alternative accommodation. This includes bidding for alternative properties as high priority cases and being given the opportunity to buy their properties outright."

The problem, says Susan Patterson, a shortlife resident on Larkhall Lane, is the word 'shortlife'. Even in 1997 a letter from Lambeth's then chair of housing indicated tenants wouldn't be forced to leave.

"We weren't here a week! The council allowed me to live here with my children for 25 years," she said. "Why weren't these properties recalled earlier? Why are central government and the council suddenly deciding the houses are worth money and can be sold?"

"The council won't legally admit they allowed these friendly societies to exist and yet they allowed us to maintain these properties. Now they just want money but aren't going to compensate us or reward us for doing up these houses and won't let us pay them rent. It's atrocious."

Kate Hoey, Labour MP for Vauxhall, is vocal in her support of the shortlifer plight, deeming it "disgraceful" to sell the few remaining council-owned homes in the area. With reference to council negotiations with Notting Hill Housing Trust who will buy the properties and put 80 percent on the open market, leaving 20 percent as affordable houses, she told parliament: "I simply do not understand how a housing association can get away with spending a lot of money buying up properties from a local authority that has tenants who need housing and then planning to sell off 80 percent of them."

"They are not trading organisations. I thought that the point of a housing association was to provide housing. I find Notting Hill Housing's attitude very strange. If it is doing this as a favour to Lambeth, I do not think that it is much of a favour to the people living in the properties."

A council spokesman said: "We are selling off properties that are uneconomic to refurbish and part of the money generated will into the Single Capital Programme, of which in part, will be used to allocated to housing."

"All legitimate former shortlife occupants have been granted a relatively high priority on Choice Based Lettings and if they engage in this process then they will not become homeless. If people fail to engage in the process then they will be made a 'direct offer' of housing. If this offer is rejected then the Council will no longer have a duty to house them, in which case homelessness may result."

Back in Stockwell, house-proud Miritza looks onto her garden and wonders if it's all been worth it. "My family has been an integral part of the community for three decades, organising events and neighbourhood initiatives - but I would have left earlier when the children were little if I'd known it was going to end up like this. But not now. Now it's too late."