



Open letter to the CIP Scrutiny Committee regards the Climate Emergency 01.02.20

We are writing to provide material for consideration by the Committee that is reviewing the performance of Camden's Community Investment Programme, in order to highlight a major issue that has not yet been addressed, ie. the environmental cost of demolition of existing buildings in the light of the Climate Emergency.

As organisations across the globe grapple with how to mitigate runaway climate heating, it is becoming clear that the routine demolition of existing buildings is a significant contributor to CO2 emissions and that refurbishment and retrofitting need to be prioritised in order to reduce them. Structural engineers in Australia, for example, have confirmed that they will not work on estate regeneration projects unless retrofitting has been considered as the first priority. In the Netherlands there is a presumption in favour of refurbishment over new-build built into the planning system. In the UK the Green Building Council and the RIBA call for refurbishment to be urgently prioritised.

Whilst architects and engineers have become adept at designing and delivering buildings that are highly energy efficient operationally, there is still a tendency to look at an existing building and decide that the best thing to do is to knock it down and build something new. This is the case at LB Camden, not just in respect of housing estates, but also school buildings, eg. Parliament Hill School, where existing buildings were demolished without a proper study being carried out to look at their possible reuse.

What is ignored is that the existing building's embodied carbon will go to waste and that the new structure comes with its own very large carbon footprint. Recent research by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors found that just over half of the lifetime CO2 emissions from a typical new-build residential building is a result of the activities and materials involved in its construction. Furthermore, it can take 50 years to cancel out the 'embodied carbon' in new buildings with savings of CO2 emissions made through high operational performance, and we simply do not have that length of time to make this an acceptable justification for demolition.

Camden's CIP programme to date has generally proceeded on the assumption that most existing buildings will be demolished and rebuilt, as at Bacton, Abbey Road and

Agar Grove estates. Schemes for redeveloping Wendling estate in Gospel Oak and West Kentish Town estate are currently being developed by Camden, and it has been confirmed that the potential to refurbish and retrofit these estates has not been looked at as part of the initial feasibility studies. This needs to be urgently reconsidered.

LB Camden, having declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency, has a duty to fully and properly consider refurbishment of these estates. Both estates have been refurbished in the past, in the case of West Kentish Town estate 35 years ago; this now needs to be done again to a much higher standard. Both estates are structurally robust enough to be adapted and extended, and to provide good quality housing, without the need for residents to move out for a long period of time. The fact that people value the existing flats is evidenced by the high number that have been bought through right-to-buy and by subsequent resale.

At West Kentish Town estate, a retrofit programme would include insulating the roofs and increasing insulation to the external walls, extending the buildings by adding an additional storey to the blocks, providing balconies and lift access, reconfiguring and extending some flats to provide larger units, replacing gas boilers and installing solar voltaic panels. Larger family homes with gardens could be built on the available space on the estate, with the new-build elements helping to reconnect the estate to surrounding streets. The construction cost for refurbishing the existing buildings would be significantly lower than the current proposal to demolish and rebuild them, and would require fewer market flats for sale to be built to raise the capital. Most importantly the overall carbon emissions resulting would be drastically reduced, and existing trees could be retained as a valuable environmental resource that benefits the whole area.

Retrofit schemes for Wendling and West Kentish Town estate would be a challenge to design, however this is the sort of work that local authorities can and should be leading on. The complexities of retrofitting should not be underestimated and procuring contracts for this sort of work may be challenging at the outset. However Kentish Town and Wendling estates present an opportunity for the Council to get to grips with retrofitting, which it will need to do for all of its housing estates and council buildings in the near future in order to address the Climate and Ecological Emergency.

If it would be helpful for us to attend the Committee to discuss these issues, please let us know.

Yours sincerely

**Climate Emergency Camden
Built Environment Group**