

# **GOLDEN LANE ESTATE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION**

16<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear Committee Members,

As you are not proposing to undertake a formal consultation into the City's handling of the Covid 19 crisis I thought that, as Co-chair of the Golden Lane Estate Residents' Association, I would let you have my organisations's views on the response. I would be grateful if this can be taken as constructive criticism as this emergency has been unprecedented for the last fifty years and the community as a whole needs to discuss what can be done to prepare for a similar emergency, how the ongoing situation can be handled and how peoples' lives can be improved in the future.

My first concern is the state of emergency planning in the City. I assume that there was once a plan in place given the stock of emergency beds under Great Arthur House but we have seen, not just with the pandemic, but also with the gas leak in Basterfield House, the electrical fire in Crescent House some years ago and the recent lengthy electrical outage in Hatfield House that the ability to react to an emergency is lacking.

One of the main priorities of local government must be to make sure that its residents are safe and well during an emergency and if they are not, or are in danger, to take steps to protect them. It seems to many residents that the City acted quickly (and rightly) to protect its staff by making them work from home but did not take similar steps to make sure that residents and especially the vulnerable were also safe and well. I have heard that some residents got a phone call during lockdown asking if they were well but that there was no ongoing follow-up. This should have been possible as staff, working from home, will have had a reduced workload as they will not have been handling resident matters face-to-face. Local residents working together set up an emergency food bank supplying food to the vulnerable, those in financial difficulties and people who were having to self-isolate. This has been a community initiative and we are grateful for the Corporation allowing it to be established and which has engendered much community spirit and identified needs which the Corporation were obviously unaware of. However local authority input could have been invaluable not just to identify the vulnerable on the Estate but to help with sourcing and distribution. I realise that staff were working from home but the City has a duty of care to the volunteers and residents as well and one should not be traded off against the other.

Communication with residents was limited and largely relied on Facebook which many people may not have access to. The Estate also has a significant elderly population who may not use computers and a recent survey found that 10% of the estate's residents do not have access to broadband especially as the City's cloud service does not operate over many of the blocks. To communicate effectively with residents in the past, GLERA has found it necessary to leaflet the Estate rather than rely on electronic means and I would have hoped that the Estate Office would have realised this too.

The support and information given to City residents generally could have been improved. Below is the Covid page for residents from the Islington website.

<https://www.islington.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/coronavirus-covid-19/support-for-residents>

A Google search does not bring up an equivalent page for the City and if there is the equivalent financial support as that in Islington available then it has not been easy to locate.

Hackney appears to be planning for the future post-Covid and the aims of its action plan would be worth considering for the City:

<https://hackney.gov.uk/rebuilding-a-better-hackney>

While the Estate staff were working from home the level of cleaning on the Estate has not been maintained and it should be noted that even in normal times this does not meet the standards set out in the Service Level Agreement. Ideally cleaning would have been concentrated on disinfecting areas regularly touched by people but there is no evidence that this is happening. Cleaning of doors and lift operation panels should be happening anyway under the SLA but if this ever happens it does only occasionally.

Most of these problems with the operation of the Estate are a result of there being no management on site and there has therefore been no oversight of what has been happening. It should be noted that, although this is an unusual situation, the Service Level Agreement makes no allowances for emergencies and therefore standards should be maintained. The SLA also says that the cost to residents is dependant on the level of service provided and clearly a reduced service should result in reduced costs. That residents have been paying for the level of service set out in the SLA which, to my knowledge over the past 18 years, has never been achieved would suggest that the City has been over charging for some time.

The SLA also says that the City will:

- provide clear, timely and accurate information in relation to amounts of time spent on activities charged to the Service Charge Account
- provide residents with the information reasonably required to assess the value for money in respect of all costs, whether direct service costs or indirect costs, which are included in the service charge
- provide residents with performance monitoring data as set out in the Service Level Agreement, i.e. checklists

I cannot recall this data having ever been provided but would say that this is essential during the current situation to show how productive staff have been whilst working from home.

I would have been useful for the elderly and vulnerable on the Estate that some of the community facilities such as the Sir Ralph Perring Centre could have been reopened after the end of lockdown. Facilities in Islington, such as the community centre at St Luke's which was opened on 6<sup>th</sup> July., were reopened. If pubs could be open I do not see why a handful of elderly ladies could not use a room to play bingo once a week. The Sir Ralph Perring Centre provides a social centre for the elderly who will have been especially isolated during lockdown and there are sufficient responsible residents to act as key holders while the sports centre is closed.

There has been a failure to provide emergency access and access for residents with disabilities to be picked up and dropped off while the Estate Office was closed and vehicle access to the Estate was not possible during these times.

The work on site at the City of London Primary Academy Islington site continued except for a two-week break. It should be noted that works at the Denizon opposite Bowater House stopped for far longer and this was a commercial developer without a duty of care to residents. Work on COLPAI continued during the heatwave meaning that residents in Hatfield House and Basterfield House could not open their windows because of the noise and initially dust. I, personally, live on the ground floor of Hatfield House two flats away from the site and measured from my balcony there were intermittent levels of noise that are categorised as being dangerous to hearing and noise for prolonged periods as breaking World Health Organisation guidelines. Complaints to the COLPAI team were either ignored or dismissed in a cursory manner and we were fed spurious excuses why work must continue. There was a reluctance to appreciate that, while there might have been a financial imperative to finish the building on time, the City, as a client, also should take account of the mental and physical health of its residents. Leaseholders have in their lease a right to the quiet enjoyment of their property and as the City had control over this cause of annoyance it was defaulting on the leases.

Thank you for asking for residents' views on the City's response. Clearly if the City is to take on board criticisms some mechanism is needed to develop a plan to deal better with future emergencies and I would suggest that a resident/officer/common councillor working group should be established to develop this.

Yours faithfully,

Tim Godsmark  
Co-chair Golden Lane Estate Residents' Association