

Barbican Residents Consultation Committee AGM, 2023

Subject: Chair's Report

Author: Sandra Jenner, Chair RCC

RESIDENT ISSUES

There are many matters that are concerning residents and their representatives just now which can be summarised as:

- Ever increasing service charges and lack of accountability by those who actually spend our money - in many respects not even plausible explanations or justifications for how our money is spent;
- An estate which is fifty years old where plans need to be made with value for money at the forefront of minds to maintain it as a place to live comfortably and as the foremost example of Brutalist architecture that it is.

The key issues on which the RCC and its Working Parties are focussing are highlighted below. House Groups continue to work hard on issues that affect their buildings.

Service Charges

We all had quite a shock last September when we received the service charge final account for 21/22 together with sizeable surcharge bills. Subsequently, House Groups, the Service Charge Working Party and the RCC have been working hard to get to the bottom of the issues. The main contributors to the considerable overspend against estimates were Energy and Repairs.

We have been pressing for information on the expected outturn for the current year, 22/23, and level of surcharges to be expected. It is clear that there will be a significant overspend,

particularly for those blocks where a number of top floor, exposed windows have been replaced. Increases in energy costs will also contribute to the overspend.

There will be another meeting in mid-March where we will be reviewing the outturn for all expenditure, for this year, the consequent impact on surcharges and the budget for next year, 23/24.

Energy

Usage

We had all expected significant increases in the charge for electricity for all the reasons which had been rehearsed in the media, mainly arising out of difficulties to do with supply because of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. However, the charges we received were not in line with expectations (an increase of the order of 30%) but way over that in some cases and, perversely, significantly under in others!

Investigations revealed that the City Energy and Sustainability Group which procures our electricity and recharges us for usage had, because of deficiencies of its 3rd party suppliers, lost control of our usage and thus charges. This had been going on since April 2021 ie the whole of the last service charge year and still continues.

I am sorry to say that despite assurances from Graeme Low, who leads the City Energy Group, that considerable effort has been and continues to be made to reconcile usage the situation has yet to be resolved.

We have been told that there are still problems with the reconciliation of 21/22 usage but that 22/23, ie this year's, usage has been identified for all except 5 meters. We have been assured that any overpayments will be reimbursed.

Cost

What we have been assured is a positive move to reducing our electricity costs has been somewhat overshadowed by the above but supply from a solar farm came on stream on 1st January and we are told that this will reduce the unit cost we would have been paying. However, given market conditions our bills will still be significantly higher than previous years. We are awaiting the reworked figures on unit costs.

Repairs

Repair costs are escalating year after year and we are not satisfied that we get value for money. The prime example is window replacement.

We were told in June last year that as several of the exposed windows on the roofs of the terrace blocks were letting in water and required replacement a programme approach needed to be taken to gain economies of scale. This programme has still not been established, some eight months after the need was recognised, and meanwhile windows have been replaced on a piecemeal basis with unit costs of variously c£20k, £50k and c£70k.

The Service Charge Working Party is actively working on these and other matters and is pressing for information and action. They will also continue to be agenda items of the RCC until we have satisfactory resolution.

Contract for 3rd Party Services for Repairs

The current contract with Metwin expires in 2024 and the procurement for the new contract will be undertaken this year. We have asked for a report on this at the next RCC and have indicated that we expect to be involved in the procurement process from draft of Heads of Terms to selection of the

preferred bidder. (This approach was adopted successfully in the procurement of Altair as consultants to the BEO Review)

Service Levels

Set against the ever-increasing service charges there is also substantial unease from residents about the quality of work including: cleaning, quality of decorations and repairs.

Stock Condition Survey

This was undertaken by Savills and commissioned by the City. The report was produced in November 2021. A presentation of the findings was made by Savills to the RCC and members of the Asset Maintenance Working Party in November 2022. A recording of this has subsequently been made available online for residents.

This high level survey identified work required on the fabric and mechanical and engineering infrastructure of the estate over a 30 year period.

We understand that officers are preparing proposals and we have asked for a report at the next RCC.

Arup Fire Safety Reports

These reports have proposed a number of measures to the City to improve fire safety the main ones being:

- 1) Replacement of all entrance doors across the estate. This has been accepted as a Landlord cost. While we understand that a survey has been undertaken and established that there are many different doors across the estate we have no information on the timetable for other phases of the work, removal of asbestos from the cupboards adjacent to the entrance doors and any

safeguarding of residents' properties while it is undertaken.

- 2) Sprinklers in towers and corridor terrace blocks. Residents remain to be convinced that these are necessary. Moreover, they are not satisfied that the examples of the sprinklers they have been shown and the fitting thereof would be suitable or acceptable for Barbican flats.
- 3) Shut down the communal air extraction system for all buildings across the estate in favour of the installation of recirculating fans in each property. We have no further information on this proposal at present.

BEO Review Project

As a result of our concern over increasing service charges and our view that improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of the BEO were possible and highly desirable our suggestion of a review by external consultants was accepted.

We were involved in the drafting of the Heads of Terms and the procurement of Altair, the consultants, and I have a place on the Project Board with Paul Murtagh, Rosalind Ugwu and the lead consultant, Julie Leo.

The Heads of Terms, which were circulated to RCC members, are wide-ranging and include the consideration of whether we get value for money for our service charges and whether there is proper accountability for spending as well as looking at the efficiency and effectiveness of the set-up of the BEO itself.

The factfinding phase was completed before Christmas and at the time of writing the Summary Interim Report is due to be circulated to RCC members by 15th February.

Work continues on the proposals for improvements which should be complete at the end of the month and the final report will be produced shortly thereafter.

IMPROVEMENTS IN RCC EFFECTIVENESS – work in progress

I contacted RCC members in November with suggestions that Jim and I had, to improve:

- How the Chair and Deputy Chairs work together - we agreed to work as a team, present ideas as one, share the work and that one of us will be on each Working Party.
- Effectiveness and communication:
 - Chairs (or an agreed nominee) of Working Parties should meet to share information on issues, approaches, forthcoming work_etc and should generally be aware and raise an alert with each other, as necessary, where their work may have a knock-on effect on another Working Party.

The first meeting was held just before Christmas where we agreed how we should operate. (Action points were circulated) Meetings will be held midway between RCC meetings so the next will be around mid April.

- House Groups share information/meet/take up issues where they have the same/similar types of property which will exhibit the same issues and should require similar levels of service and incur similar costs. This would avoid duplication of effort and ensure that relevant information is shared.

It would be useful to have feedback on where this approach has been taken up and its success or otherwise.

- We have a common, accessible record of the membership of our House Groups and Working Parties.

We have managed to get the Who's Who on the RCC page on the BA website up to date with names and contact details of RCC members.

We now also have an up-to-date list of Working Parties and their membership. **Can Chairs of Working Parties please provide their group contact details or members' email addresses, providing they are happy to share them, to Helen Hudson so that they can be published with the other Who's Who information?**

BRC Briefing

We have also introduced a regular meeting of myself and the Deputy Chairs after the RCC and before the BRC to brief the resident elected members on discussions and advise on how we would hope they might represent the key issues at the BRC. The first such meeting was held in December and we all thought it useful. The next is in March.