

Crown Residents Against Sell Off

OUR HOMES ARE NOT FOR SALE.... THEY'VE BEEN SOLD! WHAT NOW?

Let's admit it: we lost our battle to remain Crown Estate tenants. We fought hard to stop the sale, but the Crown Estate were determined to press ahead against unanimous opposition.

One year on, it has become clear that the "old" Crown Estate that we knew and respected has gone forever. They put profit before people and no longer care to be a good social landlord. They planned to sell our homes to the highest bidder, not caring about massive rent rises and putting people out of their homes.

The worst-case scenario was being bought by a private property developer for upwards of £300 million. The fact that Peabody purchased the estates at half price (£143 million) means much less pressure to raise rents and sell off units to pay back interest on bank loans.

WHAT DID WE GAIN?

The campaign to protect our homes and communities was hard fought. The thousands of letters and postcards that you wrote; the march to Buckingham Palace; and the 1,500 signature petition gained us support across the political spectrum and made a big difference. It won us:

- the principle that Cumberland Market, Lee Green, Millbank and Victoria Park estates should always be AFFORDABLE HOUSING;
- legal protections on security of tenure, succession and the way rents are set (Our legal adviser says that while is no guarantee, the system of covenants and addenda appears to be a satisfactory and effective means of protecting the rights of tenants, subject to a number of detailed concerns. The Crown has now refused to discuss the remaining concerns.)
- a rent cap for existing Assured Tenants and Assured Shorthold Tenants;
- a housing association landlord based in the tradition of philanthropy and fairness rather than profit and exploitation;
- a real sense of community across the four estates that shows that if we stick together, it is possible to change the plans of powerful people.

A NEW BEGINNING

The sale is a sad end to the Crown Estate's provision of affordable housing and the beginning of a new future with Peabody. It is up to us to make sure that our new landlord honours its commitments to the future. When the sale was announced, Stephen Howlett, Chief Executive of Peabody said: "This is good news for Crown Estate residents. We are absolutely committed to keeping these homes affordable." This could not be a clearer statement, but we are going to have to keep fighting to ensure that this commitment is honoured now and in the future.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

Even though we are told that the sale will be finalised by the end of February, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. For example:

- the legal status of the Regulated Tenants is still uncertain. Our legal adviser has written to the Crown Estate's solicitor to request funding for legal advice on how we can best be represented in the High Court action. If you have any questions about recent letters from the Crown Estate, please contact us;
- exactly how rents for Regulated Tenants will be kept affordable is not clear. (The 60% cap does not apply because a "Fair Rent" will continue to be set by the Rent Officer as it is now. Fair Rents may be set below market rent but Peabody have refused to agree to a 60% cap, so we can assume that rents may eventually rise above this level. On the plus side, Regulated Rent rises will still be restricted to "inflation + 5% over two years". We now need Peabody to set a rent policy that guarantees affordable rents for everyone.)
- there are confused messages about the status of the shops and the people who live above them;
- the right of first refusal is causing all kinds of concerns – who is eligible, how is going to work, will it have the effect of breaking up our communities?
- Peabody promised a consultation with the tenants. What form will this take? When will it happen? How much scope will we have to influence the outcome?

WHAT NEXT?

If, as we have been promised, the sale is "good news for residents", then Peabody must show itself to be a better landlord than the Crown. As residents, we must look the future, organise and engage with Peabody to make sure that our rents are genuinely affordable and the estates are properly managed.

Rents are still increasing and many people are finding it harder and harder to pay, especially as their jobs are under threat and pay frozen. Some people are moving off the estates because they find they cannot afford it any more. This has to be addressed urgently.

The issues of cleaning, repairs and refurbishment have been neglected by estate managers who have refused to attend general meetings of residents for the whole of the last year because of uncertainty about the sale.

One of Peabody's strengths is that they have good tenant engagement – we have to grasp this opportunity and really get involved.

We need our four estates to stand firm. Although we will become Peabody tenants, there will be some interests and concerns that affect us uniquely. The RA chairs meet with Peabody on 21 Feb and represented residents' concerns there. We are taking up their offer to have a place on their Tenants' Liaison Committee to represent residents from all four estates.

With a new landlord, we need a new focus. The crucial issues in the months and years ahead will be rent control, good estate management and tenant participation. After the sale it makes no sense for us still to be called Crown Residents Associations, so we need a new name. All suggestions welcome.

NEXT PUBLIC MEETINGS

Lee Green Monday 28th Feb 7pm (Leegate Community Centre);
Millbank Tuesday 8 March 6.30pm (St Saviours Church Hall);
Victoria Park Thursday 17 March;
Cumberland Market Meeting to be arranged - details to be published on notice boards in each block.