Residents serve Right to Transfer Notice on Council

On Tuesday 11th August the residents of West Kensington and Gibbs Green took a further step towards taking control of our own future. A delegation of residents served a Right to Transfer Notice on our landlord, Hammersmith and Fulham. This gives the Council notice that we want to investigate transferring the estates to a housing association owned and controlled by us, the residents.

This is a significant step on the long road of trying to save the estates from demolition and to stop the developer, Capco’s plans to build thousands of new, mostly luxury homes. At the General Meeting on 17 March 2015, Members of West Ken Gibbs Green Community Homes (WKGGCH), the organisation set up and owned by residents, voted by 100 to 1 to serve the Right to Transfer notice.

Since last year, the Council has been in discussions with Capco. We have done our best to find out from the Council what proposals this might lead to, but we are told the discussions are secret. At one point we got the impression that part of the estates might be saved. We have made it clear that we don’t think any of the estates should be demolished and that to save some homes but not all would be divisive, as it would set resident against resident.

With the setting up of a Capco base on the estates, it is clear that the developer is looking to push ahead with its plan to move out residents so as to demolish the estates. Without any clear new options put forward by the Council, the Board of WKGGCH decided it was time to serve the Right to Transfer Notice on the Council.

We know the next months will not be easy. WKGGCH’s Board has legal advice from a leading barrister that our Right to Transfer Notice is valid. We hope that the Council will agree and that it will allow our application to proceed to the next stage.

The Council has 28 days to respond to the Right to Transfer Notice and if they refuse it, they must give us their reasons. If the Council does not respond or if it accepts the Notice, the Right to Transfer Feasibility Study process, which examines the financial viability of the options for the future of the estates in Council or community ownership, will begin.

Residents have told us that community ownership is the best option for the future of the estates. We have begun the legal process of developing community ownership for West Kensington and Gibbs Green Estates.
At our general meeting on 17 March, residents voted overwhelmingly to serve a Right to Transfer notice on the Council. In the largest meeting held so far, 131 residents packed into the Gibbs Green Hall. Only WKGGCH Members were allowed to vote on serving the Notice. The result was 100 in favour and 1 against.

Following our meeting, Councillors asked us to delay serving the notice. On 5 May our Tenants and Residents Associations’ Chairs met Council leader Stephen Cowan and other councillors to find out what progress was being made to save the estates.

The Councillors explained that they have been holding regular talks with Capco over the last year. Despite the land sale agreement with the developer, they still hope they might save some homes by offering Capco permission to build more properties in other parts of the neighbourhood. The Councillors said they were concerned about how Capco might react to our Right to Transfer notice.

Councillors Ben Coleman and Larry Culhane visited our committee meeting on 19 May and repeated their request not to serve the notice.

We have taken the Council’s request very seriously. However, no proposals or options for the estates have yet emerged and discussions with the developer are still secret. Capco still seems to want to demolish all the homes on the two estates.

The Councillors visited us again on 7 July. Still, they were unable to tell us anything about the proposals being discussed with Capco. We were very disappointed to be told that the Council intends to set up a consultative group that would involve the Council appointing residents who do not live on the estates to be involved in what happens to our homes.

Last year the Labour Party fought the Council elections on its manifesto commitments to protect existing council homes from demolition and give residents ownership of their estates. We still hope this will mean they support our proposal for community ownership.

We have given the councillors extra time to continue their negotiations with Capco. But our homes are still under threat of demolition, and we cannot see any sign that Capco has made concessions or its plans would avoid knocking down the estates.

In these circumstances we felt we had to serve the Right to Transfer notice on the Council. We received a strong message to do this from residents at our meeting in March, and we still believe that transfer to a community-owned organisation is the best way to save all the homes on our estates.
The people’s plan for our homes

As part of our transfer proposals, we will produce our own plans for regeneration of the estates. As we have explained over the past few years, our vision for the estates includes the provision of additional homes. There are quite a few places around the estates where this could be achieved in a sensitive way. And, we want to be able to rehouse residents who are overcrowded or need to move for other reasons.

We intend to engage a group of architects who are sympathetic to saving and improving council housing. They will examine the layout of the estates as they are now and draw up options for making improvements and identify sites where new homes could be built. There will be widespread consultation with residents and we will invite you to make your own suggestions and be involved in preparing a policy for prioritising who should be offered new homes.

Once we have reached agreement on what we would like to see for the future, these plans will become part of our own regeneration proposals. They will be separate from the stock condition survey that will need to be carried out to determine what repairs are required to bring the homes fully up to the standard they should be.

Annual General Meetings 22 September

Please note that the Annual General Meetings for the West Kensington and Gibbs Green Tenants & Residents Associations will be held on Tuesday 22 September at 6.30pm in the Gibbs Green Hall. They will be followed at 7pm by the WKGGCH Annual Meeting. Nominations to the Board will open in August.

Steering Group wrong again

The Steering Group sent out a letter in mid June claiming that the estates have been sold and that residents should talk to Capco otherwise the Council won’t get to hear our views. This is wrong. The Council has entered into an options agreement with Capco. The sale of the estates can only happen in phases once each phase has been completely emptied of residents. We have the clearest possible advice from a senior Barrister that, at this stage, the Council still owns our homes and the land they are on, and that the Council remains our landlord.

It is also wrong to say that we have to talk to the developer for the Council to hear our views. It is for the Council, not the developer, to carry out consultation with us on the future of our homes. The Council attended our General Meeting in March and they know very well that the majority of residents are against demolition.
Labour Lord visits estates

In May, Lord Adonis, who was a Minister in the last Labour Government and is now Chair of the think tank the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), visited the estates accompanied by IPPR’s Director, Nick Pearce. The visit included a tour of the estates with resident representatives and meeting residents in the home of one of our Board Members.

Nick Pearce then wrote an article which was published on the IPPR website. It emphasised their conclusions that residents should be fully consulted and balloted on redevelopment proposals, that schemes should add to the stock of social homes and not be at the expense of existing mixed communities, and that policymakers should explore the potential for community ownership to give tenants greater control. We think this is a very positive and sensible approach that should be applied across the many proposals in London for redeveloping council estates.

Improvements to Mund Street green space

On 1 August, Environmental charity Groundwork held a consultation event on an improvement plan for the green space bounded by Mund Street and North End Road in front of Churchward and Fairburn Houses. The £21,300 scheme was secured by the Tenants & Residents Associations and is intended to encourage wildlife and make the space more attractive.

The project will include removal of the fencing, refurbishment of the pathway and bench, and the installation of new park benches and litter bins. Wildlife will be encouraged through the creation of new habitat including logs, boulders, ‘insect hotels’, bird and bat boxes, and planting a wildflower meadow. Works are planned to start in January 2016 with an official launch next April.