

# One Housing Statement on Crescent Road and Islington Park Street

*(Updated on 2 July 2015)*

One Housing has served a “notice to quit” on residents living in two connected properties on Crescent Road in Kingston and Islington Park Street to be able to carry out its responsibilities as a landlord and to ensure that the properties remain fit for purpose.

These homes have been occupied by a small group of people living collectively since the 1970s although few of the original occupants remain. Initially owned by Patchwork Housing Association, the buildings transferred to Community Housing in 2005 which later merged to become part of One Housing. Despite repeated attempts by Patchwork, Community and One Housing to put proper housing management arrangements in place, the occupants have refused to co-operate over many years. As a result, there are no adequate arrangements in place for managing these properties effectively and the current practice falls foul of many policies, procedures and legislation. **There are good management practices in place which the Residents have maintained for a decade in the absence of support from OHG. “Attempts” to put management arrangements in place involved offering residents insecure tenancies which, could have led to swift decants. Put simply, we did not and still do not trust OHG.**

We need to ensure that homes are allocated to those most in need as is standard practice with housing association properties. As a responsible landlord, and at a time when housing in London is in shortage, we need to ensure that social housing is allocated fairly. **Our allocations policies are clear and suitable for this mixed needs group home as it was originally set up. All residents meet the criteria when they join the community. Council tenants are not asked to move on after they have settled in to their home because they are no longer in housing need. We should not be asked to leave our home because the support of the community here has helped people to improve their circumstances.** Attempts have been made to establish who exactly is living in the properties; however, while we have received some limited information we do not have full details of the occupants and their personal circumstances. We understand that some occupants may be entitled to on-going housing support or may need extra help because of their age or vulnerability. We will take steps to assess the needs of occupants and, where appropriate provide suitable alternative accommodation. While our plans for the future of the buildings have yet to be finalised, we will take all necessary steps to ensure that they are used to support our over-riding aim of providing more affordable homes for people in London.

**OHG know exactly who is living in the properties and has copies of identity documents for all residents. OHG wishes to force us out of our home and will only talk about decanting. Though they talk of needing to regularise management of the property they will not engage with us about this despite our frequent requests and willingness to show them how well we are managing the home.**

**Frequently asked questions about Islington Park Street and Crescent Road**

## 1. What does 'decanting' mean?

Decanting is a standard term used extensively in housing organisations and it is not the same as eviction. Decanting is rehousing residents into either permanent alternative accommodation or a temporary relocation in some cases, for example to carry out major repairs or during major regeneration schemes.

## 2. Why are you making the residents of Islington Park Street and Crescent Road homeless?

We do not want to make anyone homeless and we will do everything that we can to rehouse those residents who can clearly demonstrate that they are eligible for social housing as assessed against standard criteria (for example those used by the local authority). **One Housing has in vague terms said they will look at the eligibility of residents to alternative accommodation based on current criteria of those on the local authority waiting list. This would probably mean only a handful of people being offered move-on accommodation, despite residents meeting the acceptance criteria set by Patchwork, the original landlord, when they moved in, some of them over twenty years ago.**

If any residents do not meet these criteria, while we have no formal responsibility for meeting their housing needs we are committed to supporting them in their search for an alternative home (for example through providing relevant information and advice). **Some residents have lived at the property over 35 years. How can One say they have no responsibility for meeting their housing needs? One Housing took over from Patchwork promising they would honour existing agreements.** We will not ignore our responsibilities to any residents who are in genuine, proven housing need. We are intending to move everyone out of these particular properties and residents who are genuinely entitled to social housing will be offered new homes. As with any decant, the needs of each person will need to be assessed as part of the process of determining and providing for their accommodation needs.

## 3. Is One Housing planning on selling Islington Park Street and Crescent Road to make a profit?

No, we have no specific plans yet for the properties. We need to assess them and make sound business decisions about the properties before we do anything else. Our options could include refurbishment, replacement with more modern social homes or, potentially, sale of the land and property. If we do opt to sell, we will reinvest any profits in social housing to help address the chronic shortage of affordable homes in London. We have a responsibility and legal duty to ensure that we use all our land and properties to deliver the maximum number of high quality affordable homes.

**Thus One Housing does not rule out in any way that the property might be sold off.**

## 4. What are your plans for Islington Park Street and Crescent Road?

We do not have any definite plans for the properties at this point – our priority is simply to effectively manage them in line with our many responsibilities as a landlord. For example, we have only had limited access over many years to carry out the routine repairs and maintenance that we need to do and can do within a fully occupied property. However we now estimate that the properties could need as much as £1m in remedial work to bring them up to modern safety standards and work this extensive cannot be done while people are living in the properties.

One Housing has always been allowed access to the property to carry out maintenance work. However, despite repeated requests by residents, they have done only the most basic and emergency repairs for several years. While the properties are not in need of major repairs, any decline in the fabric of the properties is due to One Housing's deliberate neglect. A person supporting One Housing recently Tweeted about the difficulty of getting access to the properties while a contractor was being shown around by a resident at IPS!

We currently have no control over who lives there which is an unacceptable breach of our obligations as a registered provider of social housing. We need full access and knowledge of the properties to enable us to make any decisions about what to do with them in future.

We have offered to talk to One Housing about our allocations and Management of the properties but they have refused to talk to us.

##### **5. Have you met with the people who live at Islington Park Street and Crescent Road?**

We have written to the residents and have asked to meet with them individually to discuss their situation, needs and requirements. We have asked people for ID as part of this so that we can verify that people are who they say they are and do indeed live at the properties and that this is their only and principle home. It's quite normal for a social landlord to see ID as part of the process of allocating homes to people. We've also been in regular telephone and email contact with people who say they are nominated spokespeople although as yet we do not have any documents to verify their claims to speak on behalf of the two groups. For all these reasons we do not feel that group discussion is an appropriate forum for talking about people's personal housing needs. These discussions will involve details of issues such as personal circumstances, health and preferences and are clearly best handled privately and with due respect for confidentiality. Since OHG acquired our home in 2005, the only times they have attempted to find out who is living in the property is when they have issued Notices to Quit (NTQ), first in 2009 and now in 2015. We believe this is a clear breach of their regulatory obligations. Since they walked away from mediation in 2010, they have not enquired once about who lives in our home, until serving the NTQ in April this year. Since they requested information about who lives in our home we have provided copies of identity documents for all residents.

They are claiming that spokespeople do not have a mandate to speak for the community. This is as misleading as it is contradictory. One Housing offered to speak to us individually; we said we wanted dialogue as a community. They later asked for a single person to contact for ease of communication with the group. We nominated people as requested. For One Housing to now say

that nominated persons are unsuitable and they want to deal with individuals only is merely a means to hinder communication on the pretext of confidentiality. We are a community and we wish to engage in dialogue with OHG collectively. This does not preclude individuals discussing their particular needs privately, if desired. However, we will resist divide and rule tactics being used against us.

Our project manager recently spoke to several residents at Crescent Road. While he was visiting the property to address complaints of overgrown trees causing damage to neighbouring properties he was invited to discuss residents' understandable concerns about the decant process. Several individual residents have also been directly in touch with us to talk about their situation and to start to explore other options at their request.

## **6. Is One Housing against communal living?**

No - in fact, many of the social care homes we run have an element of communal living through shared facilities. In the case of Islington Park Street and Crescent Road we first need to understand who is living in these properties, which people meet the normal criteria for social housing and what support, if any, they need. If there are enough people in the group homes who qualify for social housing who wish to continue living communally, we are open to looking for another, more suitable property for them to share, but subject to affordability and putting in place formal tenancy agreements as with all our other socially rented homes. **Again, One Housing wishes to impose current eligibility criteria on existing tenants, not candidates for tenancy. This retrospective review of circumstances is not imposed on council tenants, nor should it be on us. If OHG are not intending to sell the property, we can see no reason why residents should be forced into another property, when this one has served the community well for nearly four decades.**

## **7. Have you met with councillors who are supporting Islington Park Street and Crescent Road?**

We wrote to key councillors in both boroughs before serving the notices and have received a number of letters which we've responded to directly. We've also made it clear in our correspondence and through social media to those councillors who have expressed an interest that we would like to meet although we don't think it's appropriate to meet councillors together with groups of residents as one or two have suggested for the reasons given above. We're concerned that some councillors are being very vocal in supporting the residents without knowing the complete picture. **Some councillors having been informed by One Housing of their reasons then chose to meet with residents under threat of losing their homes in order to get a fuller picture. These Councillors have shown a commendable application of fairness in their attempts to fully understand the situation. Tellingly, after consideration of the facts, all 48 councillors in Islington approved an emergency motion calling a halt to the eviction and demanding OHG engage in dialogue with the community.**

## **8. Why has One Housing's Board refused to talk to the residents or meet with them?**

We have been engaging with the residents from the start. The Board has appointed Peter Blake as Project Manager specifically to resolve the situation and he is in regular contact with the residents – in some cases on a daily basis. Peter is currently trying to arrange individual meetings with the residents, to identify exactly who lives in the properties, and what are their needs are. We need to establish everyone's circumstances so we can rehouse them appropriately and we remain convinced that this is not an unreasonable request.

From the beginning One Housing has refused repeated requests to meet with us to discuss coming to an agreement about managing the properties. They have consistently refused to talk about anything except "decanting". We do not believe they are looking for a solution which would satisfy residents, and enable them to meet housing regulations. They have insisted that they will only engage in dialogue on the basis of "arranging as smooth and efficient a decant process as is possible." We believe it would not be difficult to achieve a practical management solution, if One Housing would engage in open dialogue with us.

## **9. Did One Housing walk away from mediation several years ago and if so, why?**

We previously paid for mediation and unfortunately our efforts to solve the issue were unsuccessful. While a small number of residents agreed to participate, residents were unwilling (as they still are) to provide the full range of standard information and documents that we need as a social landlord in order to assess and provide for their housing needs in an appropriate way. Despite our best efforts we were unable to overcome this major obstacle and so we reluctantly decided to end the mediation process. Emails from this period between ourselves and the mediator record our concerns: "as we discussed at the session, we were relying on this information [residents' details] in order to take the mediation forward and to be able to make an informed proposal to the groups." The mediator wrote to both group homes in October 2010 saying "You will appreciate One Housing Group does need this information".

A large number of residents participated in mediation; there were so many of us that a break-out room had to be provided as we couldn't fit into the negotiating room. OHG were again given details of all residents in the property. For unknown reasons, OHG walked away from the process. OHG's narrative about the mediation process is deliberately misleading.

## **10. Why won't One Housing stop the eviction process and go back to mediation?**

Having tried for many years to sort out the many issues with these properties without success we feel we have reached a point of no return. It has become very apparent to us that the residents either do not want to engage in a meaningful, constructive way or are consciously refusing to provide basic information that we need in order to meet our responsibilities as a landlord. We feel that continuing to turn a blind eye means that we would be negligent in our duty to allocate these homes to people who have gone through due process to be allocated social housing.

The residents have always been willing to talk about management of the properties as part of an

ongoing project. One Housing issued Notices to Quit **before** asking for or entering into mediation last time and have **without warning** issued Notices to Quit to the residents this time without attempting to talk beforehand to the residents.

In this instance, as before, despite their assertions to the contrary, One Housing have not asked for information about personal circumstances or housing need. The only information they want is details of when residents moved into the community. This is clearly not to assess housing need, but to risk assess a court case and attempt to ascertain how many residents will have strong residency rights due to the length of their occupation. This is data requested solely to facilitate the eviction process.

**11. Is it true that you bought these properties for £1 and are now looking to ‘cash in’ from soaring property prices?**

No. We took over ownership of these properties in 2006 at the specific request of the Housing Corporation (the then government regulator) because Patchwork was collapsing as a result of incompetent management and failing to carry out its duties as a housing provider effectively. One Housing initially supported Patchwork financially before their eventual liquidation when it became clear that the organisation could no longer continue as an independent body. We took ownership of a number of Patchwork properties (including those on Islington Park Street and at Crescent Road) at that point through a transfer of engagements (which involved a nominal £1 payment as is typical in situations like this) with a request from the Housing Corporation to safeguard the properties and ensure that they were being used appropriately. This clearly includes proper allocation procedures to people in need.

In the first year of ownership alone, One Housing spent £900,000 on basic health and safety work on these properties to help create housing specifically for very vulnerable people. Since then, One Housing has invested a further £20m pounds in improving the former Patchwork properties. As well as other socially-beneficial uses, they now account for London’s largest single resource dedicated to housing young homeless people.

One Housing was, and is, responsible not only for the good upkeep of the properties it inherited from Patchwork, but also for the tenants it inherited from them. OHG recently stated in a radio interview with BBC Radio for London that our home alone could be worth up to £12 million. It would be interesting to know how many central London properties that OHG have acquired, from Patchwork and through other mergers, have been sold off, and for how much.

**12. Residents care for and support each other – it’s not fair or appropriate to remove this support system from the more vulnerable residents. Some can’t cope on their own...how can you remove them from their safe environment?**

We are aware that some of the residents are vulnerable and have specific needs. We are currently trying to assess everyone’s support needs so as to provide the best solution for all but this is challenging in the face of repeated refusal to provide basic information.

While the residents paint a picture of a happy, problem-free, supportive environment, we have had to intervene as a responsible landlord on several occasions where this system of mutual support has failed – sometimes even at the request of the residents themselves.

One Housing was asked by the residents at IPS to provide adaptations to support a vulnerable resident with mobility needs. They refused. The local council provided the necessary adaptations where One Housing failed in its duty to care for its tenant.

One Housing are clearly not interested in meeting our support needs. We have not had a visit from a Housing Officer in years, despite inviting them to talk to us and to find out about our homes.

### **13. The residents have been paying rent for years – how can you do this to them?**

In this case there is no proper tenancy agreement in place – only a licence to occupy, and while we do accept a monthly payment for charges, we don't know how much individual residents are contributing because there are no published accounts or financial procedures. Based on what we receive, the average weekly contribution from each resident is around £61 in Crescent Road and £68 in Islington Park Street. This is well below the normal rate of social housing charges for the areas and in no way covers the running costs of the properties. The essence of the problem is that we have been trying to standardise the situation and put it on a proper legal footing for years without success.

Historically, Patchwork (our previous landlord) referred to us as tenants, both in our rent statements and in other correspondence. Members of the community even sat as tenant representatives on Patchwork's management board for over a decade. As recently as 2011, OHG invited residents to attend their tenant participation day, which we did.

The community was set-up as a permanent group home, and it was Patchwork's intention to give residents a tenancy for life. A significant number of our residents have been here for several decades. Some of us were here before the 1988 Housing Act came into force; these residents may even be "secure tenants".

In spite of all of this, OHG are trying to claim that we are only licensees. They are stating this because they want to evict the community from the property. We invite OHG to produce a written document proving their assertion.

All residents contribute the same amount of rent. Historically, our rent was always set in accordance with government guidance for social landlords. This changed in 2010 when OHG served the community with the first notice to quit. From this time onward, OHG have chosen not to subject us to any rent rises.

### **14. Why are you doing this now?**

We have been in communication with Islington Park Street and Crescent Road residents for years to try and get access to the properties to ensure that they are safe, meet our housing standards, to find out who lives there and to put formal tenancy and allocation agreements in place. Despite repeated attempts to sort things out we have failed, largely due to the unwillingness of the residents to co-operate or comply with the normal rules applying to all social housing residents. We feel we can no longer continue to turn a blind eye to this unacceptable situation when we have a responsibility to house people patiently waiting their turn on their social housing waiting lists. Because housing need in London is at crisis levels we must ensure that we allocate all our homes fairly and get the very best out of all our resources.

One Housing repeatedly argues we are unwilling to talk with them. This is simply not true. We have communicated frequently on maintenance issues, and equally frequently chased up lack of timely responses from OHG on outstanding maintenance issues. We have complied with access requests for health and safety inspections and given access when asked for contractors to carry out works. At IPS we have never refused entry to the property to an OHG staff member or contractor. We have not resisted the normal rules for social housing residents. We have only resisted One Housing's attempts to evict us from our homes on spurious ground.

**15. This is a great example of how people can solve the housing crisis and make London a better, more human place to live. Why are you trying to destroy it? As a social housing provider shouldn't you be encouraging this kind of solution?**

As a social landlord we have a social and legal duty to make the best use of our land and properties to deliver the most social benefit possible. In the current housing climate we think the first priority is to increase the supply of comfortable, affordable homes. How people choose to live within our properties is not our concern, as long as they live within the law and meet their obligations as social housing tenants. We have no fundamental opposition to the idea of communal living – but we are clear that anyone living in our social-rented homes must meet the agreed criteria for social housing and follow the rules to ensure fair play.

One Housing have repeatedly claimed they do not know who is living in the properties, yet also repeatedly claim they know we are not entitled to be here. These are contradictory statements and once again wrongly assert that it is acceptable to evict **existing** tenants of many years standing based on housing criteria and personal circumstances that are now different to when they moved in.

**16. The residents clearly have an allocation process so how can you claim they don't have a proper selection process for housing people in need?**

The only legal and relevant allocation process in this situation is the one set by the local councils we are in formal partnership with. They decide who is eligible for social housing and refer potential residents to us from their waiting lists as homes become available. These communities have no legal right to determine who gets to live in the properties as they are designated social housing. Their allocation policies also don't comply with the many stringent requirements imposed by local councils.

Our allocations policy remains true to the founding principles of our community. We have maintained the policy in good faith, and to the best of our ability, in the absence of any support from One Housing. We have previously visited the Council to discuss taking nominations from the council list. Unfortunately because One Housing does not now recognise us as tenants the council were unable to nominate people to us. We have shown our allocations policy to housing professionals who assure us that it meets the requirements for group homes of this sort. It is important and reasonable in communal homes to have some say about who joins the community, as some residents are vulnerable, and not all people on the lists would want or be suitable for communal living. However feedback from visitors, councillors and housing professionals has always been positive about the importance of maintaining and increasing the number of group homes which provide a vital role in the wider community.

### **17. You say the situation breaks regulations – which ones and why?**

The allocation of social housing is governed by law. At local level there are nomination agreements between local authorities and housing associations. These vary but all broadly govern the allocation of extremely scarce social housing resources. The group homes in Islington and Kingston have their own allocation processes that do not comply with the housing needs criteria that form part of nomination agreements. There is no scrutiny or audit at all and we cannot tolerate any ‘queue jumping’ or housing people who would either be ineligible or low priority under normal circumstances.

We have always been willing to talk with One Housing despite their attempts to depict us as unaccountable. We are confident that our management of the properties and allocations policies, maintained without any support from One Housing, are sound. We would welcome the opportunity to develop a referral programme with OHG and/or Islington Council to ensure that individuals from vulnerable groups could have easier access to our vacancies. We would love to take suitable nominations from local councils.

Our group homes offer a supportive environment, safety and security for those who are homeless, jobless, sick or vulnerable, and a place from which people can take steps to improve their lives. It is a great shame that One Housing wishes to punish those who have done so - with eviction.

We offer truly affordable living combined with social support in a sustainable model which has offered a lifeline to many new residents and which provides a model for modern living that many more could benefit from.