

Date: 28th August 2020
Email: meric.apak@camden.gov.uk

London Borough of Camden
Town Hall
Judd Street
LONDON
WC1H 9JE

www.camden.gov.uk

Dear resident,

Window designs on the Chalcots Estate

Following the recent meetings with your resident representatives and local councillors, I wanted to write directly to you to address the issue of window designs at your estate.

In these meetings we covered a range of topics about the windows and it is clear to me that these have included some deeply felt concerns on the part of some of your representatives.

I arrived at these marathon meetings with an open mind and was prepared to be convinced that we would see an alternative to the proposed window designs – however having listened to resident representatives and the Council's design and safety experts, it is now even clearer to me that the windows being proposed are the safest and best design for your estate.

While I don't expect universal agreement on the window design, I would like to share with you my own thoughts on what I have learned from these discussions. Attached is a report which sets out what we talked about with your representatives, the Council and the professional assessment and input of our industry leading technical experts.

I hope that this goes some way to explaining the Council's decision, and why as your Cabinet Member for Better Homes, I believe firmly that it is the right one.

I also acknowledge that the decision not to proceed with Wates and the delay which has caused was perhaps the last thing residents wanted to hear. However while this was very far from an easy decision for the Council to take, it was the right one. We need to be clear with any contractor on our requirements and be prepared to walk away if they are not delivering what we need for our residents – which is the highest standard of safety.

We will soon be moving ahead to planning and new procurement and I have been advised by officers that in the coming weeks you will receive more information about this.

As we move forward in this project I am determined that our teams look at the world through the eyes of our residents. I have therefore asked officers to ensure that every household be considered uniquely and individually when they come to work in your homes, to reduce disruption and inconvenience as much as it is practically possible.

Residents must know in advance, the process and sequence of all works in their home, what to expect at each stage, what the Council's responsibilities are, and what the Council expects of residents.

Safety is the priority in Camden

Here at Camden we are dedicated, with our communities by our side, to overhauling the safety of our estates and bringing them up to the highest standards.

Of course, any delays to any project are disappointing but the bottom line here is that the market has problems and is taking time to catch up with the demand for a new standard of safety across the country.

With all of that in mind we will accept nothing less than the highest standard of safety and if this cannot be delivered right now by contractors then we will insist that a new contractor must deliver this.

Once complete, I'm convinced that the wait will be worth it and in the meantime we are doing all we can to make sure that our residents are safe and supported through this process.

Looking forward, I want you to know that I am committed to working together with you as residents and to have discussions about the issues that are important to you. We will always be open and transparent and I look forward to the next stages of this important work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meric Apak', with a stylized, cursive script.

Cllr Meric Apak

Cabinet Member for Better Homes

The windows decision at the Chalcots Estate

Following representations made to the Council by your resident representatives and your local councillors, we met with your resident representatives to discuss the window designs for your homes and why the Council made this decision on the window choice. This report sets out what was discussed and the conclusions taken from these meetings by Cllr Meric Apak, the Cabinet Member for Better Homes.

Meetings with your resident representatives

The purpose of these meetings was for the Council's design team and technical experts Arup to explain in detail the rationale of the designs, and for your representatives to test this by asking questions and discussing it with the team directly.

Your representatives submitted a wide range of detailed questions. You can read all of these questions and the transcript of the two meetings at camden.gov.uk/chalcotsestate from next week.

The rationale of the designs

Officers and the Council's technical experts Arup explained that the Council had to meet regulatory requirements for this design, but also had a legal duty to design out any identified risks where practicable to do so. So any final design of course complied with the legal requirements but went further and was objectively the safest design it could be.

It was explained that having ensured the minimum legal requirements were met, the design team had then brought forward a series of design options, which were consulted on widely with residents, before the Council made a final decision. The final agreed design addressed all the identified risks and ensured that they had been designed out as far as it is practicable.

It is impossible to design out all risks for a window design. Windows carry some risks even at ground level but particularly in buildings with some height. The Council being guided by industry leading technical experts agreed a design which is the 'most safe' following their professional assessment and input. We also discussed and it was agreed and acknowledged that residents must also have a degree of responsibility for managing risks in their homes as well as the design being as safe as it can be.

Discussions with your representatives about safety

At the meetings, we discussed safety of the windows with your representatives. The five main areas of concern with regards to safety that your representatives raised were not in fact different than those that had been considered by the Council:

- 1.** Risk of falling of persons (or windows themselves – if left open in high winds with overridden restrictors)
- 2.** Risk of objects falling out (or being thrown out) of an open window
- 3.** Risk of flats overheating due to poor ventilation
- 4.** Risk of poorer insulation due to a larger glazed area.

The Council's design team were able to demonstrate that each of these risks had already been identified and designed out as far as it is practicable in the new window designs. However we would like to address each in turn:

1. Risk of falling of persons (or windows themselves – if left open in high winds with overridden restrictors)

It was noted that the current windows are often opened beyond the restrictors. This, and the reach for the handles in some cases, increases the risk of residents leaning out. When opened beyond the restrictors the current windows are also prone to wind damage and this has happened on a number of occasions with windows twisting off their hinges. This is why safety cables have been fitted to all of your current windows.

There was a lot of discussion in the meetings on how far the window opened and the decision to lower the window sill. The new windows will be operated by a key and will generally open to either 10 or 30 degrees. If much more ventilation is needed, a restrictor can be removed by a second key and the window opened to 90 degrees. This will be in the control of residents and the windows do not need to be opened to a wider opening unless a decision is made by residents to do this.

The new windows will open inwards, removing the risk of people leaning out to close them, it will also make it quicker and safer for the windows to be repaired. The current windows have to be repaired by abseilers.

Reducing the sill height creates a 1100mm barrier which is the regulatory guarding height for balconies; this greatly reduces the risk of accidental falls. Some representatives raised concerns about the risk of bunk beds against windows. The design team demonstrated that the risk was actually potentially higher with the current window arrangement and the risk could be designed out with the new windows.

2. Risk of objects falling out (or being thrown out) of an open window

In reality, short of having no windows, nothing will prevent residents from throwing objects out of windows. Indeed we heard the current windows carry this risk, so we have no option but to rely on education and enforcement action to try and deal with this. The new windows reduce the risk of objects being thrown out when windows are in their usual 'tilt' function or the restricted 'turn function'.

3. Risk of flats overheating due to poor ventilation

The team confirmed that while your current windows complied with regulatory requirements at the time of installation, they would not comply now with the current regulations relating to ventilation and overheating. This is an important factor for many residents living in homes in the Chalcots that are overheating.

Having been advised that the current windows carry these risks, this does concern me greatly as does the fact that they cause overheating to many residents because they do not offer sufficient ventilation.

4. Risk of poorer insulation due to a larger glazed area

The Council's designers explained at the meeting that their analysis of heating and cooling with the new cladding, curtain wall and improved glazing had been taken into account. This showed that the new facade and windows will provide better insulation than the previous system and that the new windows will have improved glass that better protect residents from heat gain. This was all set out in their report which has been shared with residents.

Discussions with your representatives about design

We also talked about the design of the windows. Some resident representatives told us that the new design was unacceptable to many residents because of the wide-ranging disruption and inconvenience it would cause. This is what your resident representatives told us:

1. The current position of the radiator under windows are ideal for room layouts. Having to reposition radiators would take up precious wall space elsewhere, which overcrowded families needed for furniture.
2. Lowering sills and repositioning radiators is too disruptive, resulting in reduced furniture space, particularly in many overcrowded households.
3. Lowering the window sill would create a problem for those who suffer fear of heights.
4. Allowing the windows to open inwards would interfere with installation of blinds and curtains.

Officers acknowledged that these were concerns that would have to be addressed when works began and the process of working with each household to establish their individual needs and requirements would continue. The final positioning and type of radiators as well as how works will be carried out will be discussed with residents and finalised once a new contractor has been appointed. The concern regarding a larger window and a fear of heights was also raised and the option to obscure the lower panel under the windows was offered to residents.

“

Cllr Apak's conclusion and position on the situation

“Having listened to resident representatives and the Council's design and safety experts, it is now even clearer to me that the proposed windows not only meet the regulatory building and safety requirements but go beyond them in designing out as far as it is practicable any of the identified risks. In addition they meet the requirement for increased ventilation which is becoming an increasing problem because of the impact of climate change and the greater risk for residents of high rise blocks of overheating.

With the new design we will eliminate the risk of the windows falling out, and also reduce the risk of objects being thrown out when windows are in their usual 'tilt' function or the restricted 'turn function'.

We will also increase ventilation by increasing window openings, and reduce the risk of leaning out of these larger openings by having a low window sill and putting in place the same safe guarding height of 1100mm that is used for balconies.

We will install restrictors which can only be overridden under specific conditions and only by using a key or a tool. None of the proposed alternatives in these meetings, such as a narrower window sill at the current height, came close to dealing with the risk of larger openings in the same way.

I am therefore convinced that the advice I have before me on the latest windows design (a design which has been agreed by the Council) is the right advice and the agreed design is the one which deals with the identified risks as best as possible. It is the safest and best design for this estate.

I hope that my letter and this short report has helped you to understand why the Council has made the decision it has on the design of the windows for your homes.”

Cllr Meric Apak

Cabinet Member for Better Homes

28 August 2020