

L&Q failures correspondence between the Barking Reach Residents Association and L&Q

From: Lukman Ahmed

Sent: Wednesday, October 13, 2023 20:28 PM

To: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>

Cc: Matthew Carpen <MCarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sphillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Complaints & Feedback <complaints@lqgroup.org.uk>; Anne Hawkes <AHawkes@lqgroup.org.uk>; Sian Weller <sweller@lqgroup.org.uk>; editors@socialistparty.org.uk; shac.action@gmail.com
Subject: RE: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

Stage One Complaint Decision Complaint Ref: CAS-682283-S9G0H6

Hi Pete,

Thank you for your email on 2nd October, detailing concerns at the Barking Riverside development. I am writing to confirm my response regarding your complaint and to let you know what will happen next. I have addressed the multiple concerns raised below.

1. You raised concerns surrounding resourcing and funding for resident services on the estate. I'm pleased to update you that recruitment for Mark Kyle's vacant Neighbourhood Housing Lead (NHL) role was already underway when we received your letter. We have successfully recruited a talented new NHL who will be joining us shortly, returning the frontline staffing ratio to original levels.

You raise valid questions about staffing levels and make a reasonable point that more support may be required as Barking Riverside expands. We are closely monitoring workloads to ensure our NHLs can continue delivering first-class housing management services as the community grows. We intend to proactively evaluate whether further adjustments to staffing levels are needed over time based on demand. Plans are already in place for new posts to be released as this happens, and we are currently in the process of adding a third NHL role to Barking Riverside.

I'd also like to highlight that as well as the NHLs who are dedicated to L&Q, we also have specialist support teams in place centrally who assist our frontline officers in dealing with complex anti-social behaviour, supporting vulnerable residents, and working with victims of domestic abuse. In the case of large schemes like Barking Riverside, we also have Senior NHLs who work alongside the Neighbourhood Housing Lead to help them find solutions to any issues that arise. Our Housing Assistants complete the team, providing essential back-office support when the Neighbourhood Housing Lead is out and about, ensuring residents always have someone to speak to when they contact us.

Please be assured we share your desire to avoid frontline staff being overburdened. Delivering high service levels to residents is our top priority.

2. You raised dissatisfaction surrounding the service for residents calling with heating or other health and safety issues to the call centre, as well as complaint handling.

We sincerely apologise for this and know that at times residents will have experienced a longer call answer time than we would like when contacting the Customer Service Centre. Call queues do vary and inevitably higher than usual wait times do occur. Where this happens, please do use the call back option (which allows you to retain your place in the queue without needing to stay on hold) as well as reporting repairs using our online channels such as web and social media:

Website: www.lqgroup.org.uk/contact-us/webforms/report-a-repair.

Social media (X): @LQcontactus

Our Customer Service Advisors have access to previous repair history and will handle your call as an individual. If you could provide us with more detail about any specific issues that have occurred with our handling of resident enquiries we can look into this further for you.

We recognise that the way we deal with enquiries is sometimes limited by our systems. To tackle this we're making major, long-term investments in new housing management systems and technologies that will improve how we manage information and communicate with residents, and in particular vulnerable residents who may need different types of support. This will address the constraints you have mentioned when accessing updates between teams within L&Q. Putting the new housing management system in place is a long term and complex project, but we hope to begin introducing changes from summer 2024.

We have recently introduced a new complaints operating model. Our call centre will raise a complaint to the relevant team where it will be allocated to a dedicated complaint handler who will coordinate our response. Wherever possible, the handler will be in touch by the end of the next working day with their contact details.

Our complaints policy aligns to the Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code so we aim to agree a resolution within 10 working days or explain why if we need longer. Any repairs needed as part of the complaint resolution will be monitored through to completion and any barriers to resolving the issue will be escalated as needed. Our complaints governance ensures outstanding complaint numbers are also monitored. Although we often need to send a complaints decision before work is complete to comply with the timescales in The Housing Ombudsman's code, we do keep a complaint open to monitor the work.

3. You raised previous issues surrounding heating and hot water across the development.

In recognition of previous failures and issues, our gas team have requested for a winter check to be carried out, which is a measure we have put in place when there are ongoing or historic issues. It allows our contractors to investigate and implement changes after further investigation.

We are extremely sorry for the historic issues at the site surrounding heating and hot water and know the great inconvenience this can cause.

We have put the following measures in place:

- Ensuring our contractors have the correct level of expertise and specialism to service and maintain Viessman boilers and identify issues without unnecessary delays (K&T have since appointed an engineer that specialises in Viessman boilers).
- Ensuring our contractors hold parts for Viessman boilers so repairs can take place on the first call out.
- Carrying out winter checks for residents that have previously reported issues to ensure heating and hot water problems are identified and dealt with as quickly as possible.

We however hope that the above actions give reassurance that such issues will be addressed more quickly and with less involvement needed from residents to ensure they are seen through to completion.

If you would like to discuss this response, or do not agree with any of the points made please let me know. I will need to understand what you feel has not been addressed and how you would like to see it resolved. If I can't help any further, you can ask to escalate your complaint to the next stage of our formal complaints process within six months. You will find more information about our complaints process here: <https://www.lqgroup.org.uk/contact-us/complaints>

You can also speak to the Housing Ombudsman Service to discuss your complaint at any time. I've added their contact details below.

Email - info@housing-ombudsman.org.uk
Website - www.housing-ombudsman.org.uk
Tel: 0300 111 3000
Housing Ombudsman Service
PO Box 152
Liverpool L33 7WQ

Please let me know if you have any questions that I can help with.

Yours sincerely
Lukman Ahmed
PRS & Commercial Director
LAhmed@lqgroup.org.uk

From: Lukman Ahmed

Sent: Wednesday, October 4, 2023 11:20 AM

To: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>

Cc: Matthew Carpen <MCarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sPhillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Complaints & Feedback <complaints@lqgroup.org.uk>; Anne Hawkes <AHawkes@lqgroup.org.uk>; Sian Weller <sweller@lqgroup.org.uk>; editors@socialistparty.org.uk; shac.action@gmail.com
Subject: RE: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

Hi Pete,

Thank you for your response and I will review the content of the emails and will aim to provide a full response by Friday 13th October 2023.

In the meantime, please do let me know if I can assist further and do hesitate to contact me.

Regards

Luke

From: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>

Sent: Wednesday, October 4, 2023 9:01 AM

To: Lukman Ahmed <LAhmed@lqgroup.org.uk>

Cc: Matthew Carpen <mcarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sPhillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Complaints & Feedback

<complaints@lqgroup.org.uk>; Anne Hawkes <AHawkes@lqgroup.org.uk>; Sian Weller

<sweller@lqgroup.org.uk>; editors@socialistparty.org.uk; shac.action@gmail.com

Subject: Re: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

Dear Luke,

I am grateful for your response.

In order for you to gain a full understanding of our case, we would like you in the first instance to read and respond to the contents of the email we sent you yesterday. We believe it will enable you to fully understand the issue.

We addressed to L&Q several proposals in the opening section of the email. I'd be very grateful if you could examine them in particular and give a response.

The email was very carefully considered by residents. In my view, the view of residents on the estate and our committee members, it fully explains the situation. I realise it is long, but it is broken up into sections for ease of reference. We feel it is worthy of consideration.

However, there is one omission in our email that we would like to draw your attention to. The Ombudsman's report states the following:

“Between January and 26 June 2023, we issued 103 determinations, including 24 cases where we found severe maladministration on at least one of the issues raised by the resident – an unusually high proportion.

“With a severe maladministration rate of 13.4%, the landlord [London & Quadrant] has severe maladministration found against it at more than double the national rate of 6.0%.

“The cases spanned 30 local authority areas. We ordered or recommended the landlord [London & Quadrant] to pay £141,860 in compensation – 13% of all compensation ordered in that six months on only 6% of all determinations made at a rate of £1,351 per case.

“The most similar sized landlord to London & Quadrant had only £13,044 ordered in compensation on the 27 cases determined in the same time period – a rate of £483 per case.

“We ordered 42 apologies to residents for failures in the landlord’s services. We also ordered reimbursement of costs and repairs to be carried out to remedy the impact on residents. In total, we made 493 orders and recommendations.”

What our email did not make clear, and the Guardian article did not bring out, was that London and Quadrant stands head and shoulders above all others in terms of maladministration. In money terms, judging by the compensation ordered, compared to the most similar sized landlord, L&Q is slightly more than ten times worse.

We would like you to address the question of resources for our estate in the first instance. But in the more general case, we would like to know how L&Q is responding to this situation.

Many thanks.
Pete Mason
Chair
Barking Reach Residents Association

From: Lukman Ahmed, <LAhmed@lqgroup.org.uk>
Sent: Tuesday, October 3, 2023 10:19 AM
To: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>
Cc: Matthew Carpen <MCarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sphillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Complaints & Feedback <complaints@lqgroup.org.uk>; Anne Hawkes <AHawkes@lqgroup.org.uk>; Sian Weller <sweller@lqgroup.org.uk>; editors@socialistparty.org.uk; shac.action@gmail.com
Subject: RE: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

Good Morning Pete,

I am really sorry to hear of the issues being experienced by residents and would like to assure you that the team and I are looking into the issues urgently and would really welcome a conversation to understand the issues fully.

Can you please provide the best number to contact you on and I look forward to speaking to you.

Regards
Luke

From: Fiona Fletcher - Smith <FFletcher-Smith@lqgroup.org.uk>
Sent: Tuesday, October 3, 2023 8:26 AM
To: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>
Cc: Matthew Carpen <mcarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sphillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Martin.Hilditch@insidehousing.co.uk; shac.action@gmail.com; haveyoursay@bbc.co.uk; politics@theguardian.com; money@theguardian.com; Lukman Ahmed <LAhmed@lqgroup.org.uk>; Complaints & Feedback <complaints@lqgroup.org.uk>; Anne Hawkes <AHawkes@lqgroup.org.uk>
Subject: RE: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

Good morning, thank you for your email.

I have asked that Lukman Ahmed (copied), who is our Commercial Director, looks at the issues you raise and resolves matters. Your complaint will also be formally logged by our Complaints Team.

Regards.

From: Barking Riverside <barkingriversideresidents@gmail.com>

Sent: Monday, October 2, 2023 1:23 PM

To: Fiona Fletcher - Smith <FFletcher-Smith@lqgroup.org.uk>

Cc: Matthew Carpen <mcarpen@barkingriverside.london>; Sarah Phillips <sphillips@barkingriverside.london>; Emma Walker <EWalker@lqgroup.org.uk>; Gintare Miciulyte <GMiciulyte@lqgroup.org.uk>; Martin.Hilditch@insidehousing.co.uk; shac.action@gmail.com; haveyoursay@bbc.co.uk; politics@theguardian.com; money@theguardian.com

Subject: Barking Riverside and the Ombudsman's complaint against L&Q

To Fiona Fletcher-Smith, group chief executive of L&Q

Cc Matt Carpen, managing director, Barking Riverside Ltd

Cc Sarah Phillips, Emma Walker, Gintare

Cc Inside Housing, Guardian, BBC, SHAC

From the Barking Reach Residents Association

Barking Riverside and the Housing Ombudsman's complaint against London and Quadrant

Dear Fiona,

We write with respect to the Guardian article, England's big social housing landlords ignoring official complaint warnings, (Guardian, 19th September, 2023).

I present to you our proposals arising from a discussion of that report by our residents.

I then outline the background to this appalling state of affairs, our own cases, and some detail on them, which in the general case may be familiar to you.

You'll be aware that L&Q has a 51% share in Barking Riverside Ltd, the freeholder of the 10,700 homes development on Barking Riverside in East London and builds and maintains many properties on the estate.

Our monthly residents meeting convened the day after the Guardian report as reported below. But allow me to cut straight to the bottom line, arising from our meeting:-

Our proposals to L&Q for Barking Riverside

Our September 20th Residents Association meeting agreed that L&Q should at the very least double the funding of resident services to this estate, so that issues can be dealt with properly. This was agreed unanimously.

This must be without additional charge to residents. In terms of heating and black mould etc., these are landlord responsibilities that must not be shirked.

Since the meeting we learned that Neighbourhood Housing Lead Mark Kyke has left and his workload has wrongly fallen on the remaining property managers, leaving committee members' queries unanswered while they come to terms with this workload, indicative of the dire situation L&Q have fallen into.

So to put numbers on it, an increase of the present two remaining front line staff to six front line staff members would represent a doubling of the original three Neighbourhood Housing Lead/Property Manager/Case Manager staff that residents and the association have been in regular contact with.

This might provide a proper service to residents.

This is not a question of the competence or dedication of individual property managers. It is not my intention that blame is to be pinned on individuals at the front line.

This email addresses a long term failure, a failure so precisely akin to so many corporate failures driven by the bottom line, that one might mistake London and Quadrant for a profit-driven big business.

This is a question of the misallocation of resources, depriving the front line staff with the necessary resources to operate.

Certain elementary procedures need to be in place:-

For every resident who calls with at least a heating or other health and safety issue to the call centre, they should:

1. Be given a named contact who is leading on resolving the complaint, a reference and a personalised phone and email address for contacting them.
2. For L&Q to properly monitor timescales for resolution of the issue and have staff able to step in where a case is dragging on too long.
3. For call centre staff to have access to the caller's previous contact history. They can check what the issue is but should not expect the caller to repeat the issue in detail when a call has already been made.
4. Repairs calls should remain open until the resident agrees that the issues have been resolved.
5. There should be a log or transfer of knowledge / data / between the property manager and L&Q helpdesk. Often, residents tell me, they have no idea what the other party is doing.

Our understanding is that under pressure from recent events described below L&Q have taken measures to improve.

But are the above four points now properly implemented, and will our estate receive the resources it requires?

Our meeting and media coverage of L&Q's "prolonged decline"

The meeting expressed outrage that L&Q not only poorly deals with complaints from residents on this estate, but that the government's own Housing Ombudsman is complaining that L&Q is ignoring the Ombudsman's complaints that it does not deal adequately with complaints! The Guardian report carried a picture of our estate.

Over the years, my discussions with previous L&Q staff members revealed decades-long concerns over cuts to staffing levels.

Michael Gove summons

Now, as you know, the housing secretary, Michael Gove, summoned you, as group chief executive of L&Q, to a meeting after the Ombudsman's report uncovered a "prolonged period of decline" in L&Q's repairs and complaint-handling. (Gove tells L&Q 'you have failed your residents' as chief executive summoned to meeting, Inside Housing, 27th July 2023). His letter says "You have failed your residents".

That London and Quadrant can find itself in the situation reported in the Guardian precisely demonstrate that systemic decline, whether disguised as "efficiencies" or not, in its investment in dealing with resident's housing issues, including that of heating failures and black mould. Failures by housing associations to deal with these latter two issues have led to widely publicised deaths in the UK, mentioned below, and are indicative of the fact that L&Q's failure is part of a trend of generalised decline in this provision.

Outline of cases of L&Q failures on the Barking Riverside estate

Cases resulting in legal action:

We reported at numerous special and general meetings about the various failures to address heating issues by L&Q, and we won a marvellous victory in getting L&Q to install bigger radiators in all flats across Phase Two of the estate, gathered around Fielders Crescent. We thank L&Q for this.

But we continued to report to meetings that residents of duplexes had exceptionally high ceilings, and this led to freezing conditions in winter. We had been reporting on this since 2019.

On 15 December 2021 we wrote to L&Q: "The Duplexes remain underspecified... survey results from a survey conducted by L&Q... demonstrate that the radiators are too small for the space to be heated."

Citing volumes of correspondence, we eventually reported to a meeting that residents were forced to start legal proceedings against L&Q.

It is only now, four years later, that we learn that duplex residents have had an L&Q subcontractor install new heating devices within their dwellings. I may, I assume, draw the conclusion that the legal action was successfully resolved.

On Phase One, L&Q were forced to pay out around £2000 for putting a woman and her children through four years of misery in Robert Lewis House with very poor heating, where after legal action via Citizens Advice, she forced L&Q to discover that there was no lagging on the heating pipes leading to and within her property, which contributed to the hospitalisation of her child through illness. She felt that the compensation was a mere pittance compared to the suffering the cold had put her through.

Heating failures misery cases:

In Argent House, last Christmas, 23rd December, we gathered the following information:- Flats 4, 25, 62 and 65 are all without heating in Argent House. Flat 4 has care of a 1 year old and 8 year old at weekends, flat 25 has a 2 year old child.

Flat 65 has been waiting for the issue to be fixed since the spring, flat 25 no heating or hot water since 14th October, flat 4 since July, and flat 62 since they moved in, in June.

Promises by L&Q's contractors to turn up failed and/or these issues were not resolved. Their Christmases were ruined.

Residents reported that during the year, contractors turn up, fail to fix the issue, and there the matter rests. Residents wait perpetually for a resolution.

On the 19th January 2023, one wrote:

“Dear L&Q Team,

“I am emailing from a place of disappointment and anger at the shabby way we are treated as residents of your property.

“We have endured 2 biting winters without heating as L&Q have sent at least 8 people to check our heating and none has been able to fix it since Dec 2021. This leaves me wondering if incompetent people are sent or if L&Q has just decided that their tenants can freeze to death and ignored the recommendations given to fix it.

“My family spent the entire Christmas and New year sick because we were stuck in a freezing house unable to recover this has happened 2 years in a row, same problem...

“Dear L&Q what will it take to get your attention to fix the heating, mold, rodent infiltration and theft on our property.

“We go to bed with our young children in a cold home, we sleep with our eyes open and ears tuned to our car alarm watching and praying we find our car the next morning in our parking lot.

“We do not get any form of attention, compensation in this financial downturn or even compassion...we neither owe rent, nor live in a cheap apartment, maybe a call out on every platform is what it will take.”

Detail on the systemic failures of L&Q

Death in Manchester

At our meeting, I repeated to our residents the case where, on November 18, 2022, an elderly woman, Mrs Pollitt, had called L&Q Group Housing in Greater Manchester, to report a concern about her boiler. The call was passed on to Liberty, a firm subcontracted by L&Q to provide gas services, but Liberty was unable to contact Mrs Pollitt and closed the call down. She died of hypothermia 13 days later. (Elderly woman died of hypothermia after call to housing association about faulty boiler was unanswered, Evening Standard, 27 July 2023).

Local examples of lack of follow up

It is not at all unusual to hear of residents waiting 30-60 minutes on hold from the call centre while waiting to call in a heating issue. There should be no wait time.

The lack of follow up by L&Q after contractors either fail to turn up or fail to fix a heating failure is one of the recurring themes of residents. At one point, many years ago, residents in Robert Lewis House summoned Margaret Hodge MP to intervene.

Just as bad, if a resident follows up by themselves to the call centre, and they make clear it is an ongoing case, residents have reported that the case is referred to the property manager, and as often as not, that's where it stays, unless they then press the property manager directly. Whereas if they simply re-report the heating fault without reference to any previous works, they get a visit from a contractor.

And finally, in either case, in residents' experience, it is as likely as not that another engineer makes the same investigation, equally fails to solve the problem, and leaves.

This then happens repeatedly. Just as the Ombudsman pointed out, systems are not in place to monitor this and property managers are overwhelmed with cases and rely on the contractors to pick up where they left off, and they often do not.

If there were elderly residents on our estate, would there have been some deaths, given the above?

It is this closing of cases that we continually come across. L&Q and their contractors must successfully follow up where there are heating and all other problems reported, until they are genuinely fixed, logging progress.

I fear from the 19th September Guardian report mentioned at the opening of this email, that L&Q still does not dedicate enough resources to resolving these issues, even when under pressure from the Housing Ombudsman.

We need specific information of fully resourced systemic changes including a huge increase in staffing.

Yours sincerely

Pete Mason

Chair

Barking Reach Residents Association