

Councillor's casebook

This is a new feature by a member of one of the Greater London Borough Councils who will write from time to time in a personal vein of health and welfare aspects of a councillor's work.

My visitor was small, elderly and very diffident. 'I've come to see you about our housing,' he said with a Northern accent, taking off his cap nervously when I ushered him indoors.

I sat him down in an armchair by the fire to make him feel more comfortable and at ease, but he was still perched on the edge of the chair when I returned with pen and paper.

'The real trouble is the wife. She's in her seventies, and has osteoarthritis and suffers from blackouts, and our flat is up five flights of stairs. She's fallen down them several times, and she can only get down at all if I help her. There's no bathroom; we have to manage in a zinc bath, and the lavatory's on the ground-floor, and it's the only one in the whole building. We're not complaining about the landlord. He's been very good to us. But it's hopeless for my wife with all those stairs. We're on the approved housing list—but we've been on it for four years now. There's medical certificates in our file at the Town Hall from my wife's doctor to say it's vital to have a ground-floor flat, or a flat with a lift up to it. We only want somewhere small. But we do need *somewhere*. My wife's getting very depressed because she's more or less housebound; she goes out so rarely. Could you possibly come and meet her and see our place?'

I promised to be with him and his wife in half an hour, hastily finished dinner, and walked up the road to where they lived, and then rang their bell hard twice, as advised. There was a lengthy pause as the pensioner negotiated the five flights of stairs, then the door opened and he showed me the way to the two rooms he and his wife called home. By the time I arrived at the top of the large Victorian building I was feeling a little breathless myself, and my host, who told me he suffered from bad bouts of bronchitis, was obviously finding it tiring.

I knocked and opened the door of the living-room/cum kitchen, where his wife sat on the sofa, her stick beside her. She tried to struggle to her feet to shake hands, but I hastily stopped her from getting up, and took the chair she offered me. A kettle simmered permanently on the oil-stove, which gave out some heat, though not sufficient to make me feel I would take off my coat. It was obvious how cold the room must be in harsh winter days, and on the outside wall was creeping evidence of damp.

The wife was almost painfully pleased to be visited, and told me all about her family; a son who had lost a leg in the war, and so could never climb the stairs to see her, and a mother in her nineties, with whom she went to stay from time to time.

My hostess proved to be a bright and lively woman, yet virtually housebound, except for the occasional

outing to her mother, by the five flights of stairs to the ground-floor.

Her husband then showed me the bedroom in their flat; a vast, ice-cold, high-ceilinged room with another small oil-stove struggling to produce flickers of warmth against hopeless odds. The zinc bath was also produced for my inspection, and, as I departed, promising to do my best to get them rehoused in Council property, but of course giving no definite hopes, I was shown the lavatory at the end of the ground-floor passageway.

Next day, I wrote to the Housing Officer and gave him full details of the case. Two or three months later a ground-floor Council flat in one of our older buildings was offered to the couple. The wife was so excited and delighted she insisted on going with her husband on foot to see it, sheer will-power taking her the mile walk each way. I saw them once more in their old rooms, just before they left, and was given an open invitation to call in when they had settled down.

Now, they have been in their new home for over six months. I ran into them one day, the pensioner pushing his wife along in a wheel-chair to take the sun on the river tow-path, the water lapping high and cool on the banks. 'How are you both?' I asked. 'We get our ups and downs still with our health,' they said, 'but basically we're happy.' With so much anger, cynicism and distrust proclaimed in the world today, how pleasant to hear those words!

