

Put paid to unfair treatment

Self service: Unhappy leaseholders don't have to put up with inflated property management prices - help is out there

BY JAYNE ATHERTON

Thousands of Londoners pay hefty service charges on their leasehold flats to property management companies - an industry that is largely unregulated.

The level of service they receive in return can vary enormously and leaseholders can be landed with large bills, with little idea of how the money is being spent.

The new coalition government is considering enacting delayed legislation that would reform and regulate the industry. Until that happens, though, leaseholders who have problems with their managing agents must fight for better treatment themselves.

Challenging property management companies and freeholders can be daunting, and most people will need professional advice.

Accountant John Leyden set up his own service at Carbon Accountancy in the City, examining the records of property management companies after being frustrated by the growing number and size of bills he had to pay on his own property in west London.

In a 13-year wrangle, he pored over invoices and other documents concerning the management of his block of flats and is now in negotiation for compensation over



A quick fix: Regulation of the industry would help stop unscrupulous property management practices

bad service or you find that bills are rising without good reason, then residents need to know that most leases will give them the right to see the accounts of their management company, which will tell them where their money is going.

'Managing agents on behalf of the freeholders are supposed to get competitive quotes from utility companies and take care of cleaning and redecorating of communal areas and shared

is a good place to start if you are not happy with the level of service. If 50 per cent of the leaseholders agree to self-manage the building, the freeholder is obliged to allow them to do so. Self-managing doesn't mean residents have to take on the

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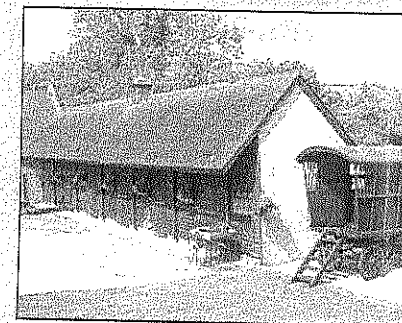
to the freeholder as well as the management company if it

hasn't worked, they could involve a solicitor to try to get a rebate. 'Approaching another management company which is keen for the business may be one way of getting some free guidance and advice.'

Leaseholders can get free help from the government-funded Leasehold Advisory Service if they feel their service charge is too high or unfair. The service also offers mediation to help settle disputes. If that doesn't work, residents can build a case to be heard at a Leasehold Valuation Tribunal, which has enforcement powers.

Leaseholder Bob Suvan set up

A rural idyll



Beauvoir Court, a tithe barn in Dorchester dating back to the 15th century, is to go under the hammer at an auction being held by Countrywide this month.

Listed as an ancient monument of Great Britain, the property has outbuildings including an imposing stable block and paddock, and the guide price is £675,000 to £700,000.

It will be among dozens of lots on offer at the auction on June 30 at BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1.

'I was sick of not being able to find out how my money was being spent,' he says. 'My frustration inspired me to set up the company so we could do things differently.'

BlocNet provides information via a residents' intranet service, including quarterly audited statements, updates on repairs, cleaning schedules and inspection reports. Residents can also post comments about services and report problems.

'I wanted to use a powerful unified customer computer communications system but I had to develop the system myself to fit the property