



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Monday 4th March, 2024**, Rooms 18.01 – 18.03, 18th Floor Meeting Rooms, Westminster City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, SW1E 6QP.

**Members Present:** Councillors Paul Fisher (Chair), Gillian Arrindell, Laila Cunningham, David Harvey, Max Sullivan, Hamza Taouzzale and Jacqui Wilkinson

**Also Present:** Councillor Liza Begum (Cabinet Member for Housing Services).  
Officers: Roger Clark (TA Strategic Lead), Heather Clarke (Director of Housing Needs), Francis Dwan (Policy & Scrutiny Advisor), Greg Roberts (Head of Supply), Kamran Tyler-Hussain (Head of Property Planning Asset Management) and Sarah Warman (Strategic Director for Housing and Commercial Partnerships).

#### 1 MEMBERSHIP

1.1 There were no changes to the Membership.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2.1 Councillor Paul Fisher declared that in respect of item 6, the Oxford Street Programme Quarterly Update, he is a resident in Fitzrovia, and he wished to raise an issue brought to him by a resident group representing the area.

#### 3 MINUTES

3.1 That the minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny meeting held on 12th December 2023 be agreed as a correct record of proceedings.

#### 3.2 RESOLVED

The Committee approved the minutes of the previous Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

#### 4 WORK PROGRAMME

4.1 The Committee acknowledged that this was the last meeting of the municipal year and that the first meeting of the next municipal year is on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup>

June 2024, before which there will be a work programming session for Members of the Committee.

## **5 TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION**

5.1 The Cabinet Member for Housing Services, Councillor Liza Begum, introduced the report on Temporary Accommodation (TA) providing context on the challenges of rising demand for placements and then outlined the largest drivers to this increase. The Cabinet Member introduced Heather Clarke, the Director of Housing Needs, who spoke to the policy framework and importance of a supply plan. The Cabinet Member, supported by senior specialist officers, then responded to questions on:

- Approach to TA: addressing the impossible challenge, Members asked how the approach undergone had been selected and how it helped those most in need.
- Pan-London approach: the consideration that had gone into a collective, pan-London approach to providing TA and why this was not being pursued. Members also asked if a greater emphasis should be placed on properties outside of Westminster, particularly for those with a limited connection to Westminster.
- Repurposing hotels: whether hotels were being acquired and could be repurposed for TA. Members went on to ask whether this was a novel approach or something that had been considered before.
- Recent transition in approach: clarity on the approach to acquisitions, how this differed from previous and the quantities of TA available compared to previous years.
- Council Homes Acquisition Funding (CHAP): how the Council could access CHAP funding, where this funding came from and what the Council was doing to best utilise it.
- Trade-off between speed and quality: Members expressed caution about the speed of the acquisition proposals and asked whether it risked compromising quality checks and standards.
- Forecasting: what consideration had been given to long-term rental market forecasts in the consideration to acquire capital and whether rental agreements with registered providers could be considered.
- Home Office: the Council's relations with the Home Office and work done on those granted asylum integrating into society. Members asked whether Westminster was receiving a disproportionate number compared to other local authorities due to its central location. Members also asked whether there was communication with the Home Office and what the portal was for

conversations on this matter and whether they involved, the Mayor of London, other local authorities as well as the Home Office especially considering the push to clear the backlog of legacy asylum applications.

- Time in TA: how long the typical TA placement lasts in Westminster and how long it should be. Members also asked whether there was an upper limit to the number of families in stage 2 TA.
- Acquisition focus: whether the focus for TA was on smaller units or two or three beds.
- Emergency TA: the quality of emergency TA provided to rough sleepers, the caution in ensuring this is adequate and the level of inspection these undergo.
- Tackling irresponsible providers: how the Council ensures providers do not allow their stock to deteriorate in terms of damp, mould and worse.
- Integrating asylum seekers: ways in which the Council could be more proactive in reaching out to those that have been granted asylum before they get notice of eviction from hotels which can be as little as seven days.
- Appropriate accommodation: the assurances of safety in TA particularly for victims of domestic abuse. Members also asked about ensuring women's safety, particularly when they are victim to domestic abuse and how applications to female-only accommodation are processed to ensure women do not get overlooked. Members sought clarity on whether there was a formal policy for women and victims of domestic abuse engaging in TA and asked that this be shared with them.
- Management responsibility: the report highlighted that 8% of TA properties were failing inspection, Members asked how confident the Council felt in management companies addressing concerns and acting on inspection outcomes.
- Considering factors in homelessness: whether socially housed tenants that had previously been forced out of rented accommodation were necessarily appropriate to be placed back into TA and the considerations for the safety of those they might be placed around and whether TA in Westminster is necessarily the most appropriate place for them.
- Profiting from TA: how much housing associations stand to gain from providing TA to the Council. Members also asked about incidents whereby someone could be kicked out by a social housing provider then end up in a TA property under the same management and how that could be a profitable choice for that provider to default to.
- Demographics: the demographic data of those presenting homeless for TA, this was asked specifically for age and gender and was sought as an action. Members also asked what the Council was doing to help young people and

intervene early to prevent the risk of homelessness and whether supported accommodation existed specifically for young people.

- Allocations policy review: how, if at all, the allocations policy review that the Council had recently undertaken might impact TA and the demand for it.
- TA that fails inspection: whether TA that fails inspection and is therefore in need of urgent or immediate attention is used to house people. Members then asked what the rate of restitution was for properties that fall into this condition.
- Addressing average: given a large concentration (69.6%) of TA property listed at Grade C or below, what works was being done to drive up standards and what timeline was in place for this.
- Wrap-around support: clarity on the support offered, particularly to families, in TA and what assurances there were that this was adequate.
- Exclusions from TA: whether there were parameters that might exclude someone from accessing TA, such as becoming intentionally homeless.
- Acquisition affordability: how the acquisition programme ensured fair pricing and the relationship between the Council and estate agents and what agreements, if any, were in place to ensure fair pricing and avoid the risk of the Council being exploited.
- Westminster Council's capacity: how many people are employed by Westminster Council to manage TA and the job vacancy rate. Members also asked about agencies that work with and provide resource to the Council and whether they were responsible partners.
- Female-only TA: the level of female-only accommodation provided by the Council and whether there were any plans to increase this. Members also asked how many women this served and what proportion were there specifically due to domestic abuse, if this data is readily available. Members were also concerned about the number of women who might be accessing TA who have been victims of domestic abuse and are then placed in mixed accommodation. After hearing about work that is being done to address these issues, Members asked for more information and to review policies in place relating to supporting victims of domestic abuse who go into TA.

## 5.2 Actions

1. To provide more information on hotel acquisitions for temporary accommodation and how they might be repurposed.
2. To provide detail on work done and policies in place for supporting women presenting homeless, particularly following incidence of domestic abuse, to minimise the risk of them being placed in a potentially threatening new environment.

3. Within what might be readily available, Members requested data on the number of women who present homeless identifying the cause to have been domestic abuse and of these what proportion are then placed into female only temporary accommodation.
4. To provide a breakdown of key demographics for those presenting as homeless, particularly age and gender.
5. To provide information on the response to properties identified as Grade D and Grade E and how quickly these situations are remedied.
6. To provide additional information on the wrap-around support provided to families in TA and how the Council ensures this is adequate.

### 5.3 Recommendations

1. The Committee recommended that the Council works to try to improve standards across the TA stock, given the large proportion (69.6%) of those inspected in the last three quarters of the year were assessed as Grade C or below.
2. The Committee recommended that the Council improve lines of communication with the Home Office, to improve the social and physical integration of those granted asylum into society.

## 6 OXFORD STREET PROGRAMME QUARTERLY UPDATE

6.1 The Committee discussed the latest quarterly update on progress made regarding the Oxford Street Programme. The Committee drew attention to a resident group concern about traffic surveys in Fitzrovia post implementation of traffic capacity enhancements and whether the Council would commit to them. Members discussed the importance of the Programme being scrutinised in the most effective way. Members requested that the next update includes information on how the Programme intends to manage issues relating to crime in the area and improving the retail offering.

### 6.2 Actions

1. The Chair to update the Committee on the intentions around traffic surveys in Fitzrovia post implementation, following a resident group's query highlighting no planned expenditure in the update the Committee was provided.
2. To consider the best ways to ensure the OSP is sufficiently scrutinised.
3. For the next quarterly update to outline how, if at all, the Programme intends to deal with issues of crime and improving the retail offering on Oxford Street.

The Meeting ended at 20.03.

**CHAIR:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_