



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 **Wednesday 31st July, 2024**, 18.01 – 18.03, 18th Floor Meeting Rooms, Westminster City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, SW1E 6QP.

Members Present: Councillors Paul Fisher (Chair), Gillian Arrindell, Melvyn Caplan, Laila Cunningham, Iman Less, Hamza Taouzzale and Jacqui Wilkinson.

Also Present: Councillors Liza Begum (Cabinet Member for Housing Services) and Geoff Barraclough (Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development).
Officers: Jasmine Blyth (Policy Officer), Andrew Carter (Head of Housing Solutions Service), Heather Clarke (Director of Housing Needs), Francis Dwan (Policy and Scrutiny Advisor), Gill Matthews (Head of Homelessness Prevention), Manisha Patel (Director of Oxford Street), Sarah Warman (Strategic Director for Housing and Commercial Partnerships), Mark Wiltshire (Director of Public Protection and Licensing).
External Guest Witness: Dr Bert Provan (Senior Policy Fellow at the London School of Economics).

1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 The Committee noted that Councillor Max Sullivan sent apologies and Councillor Iman Less was present as substitute.
- 1.2 The Committee noted that Councillor David Harvey sent apologies and Councillor Melvyn Caplan was present as substitute.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

- 3.1 That the minutes of the Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny meeting held on 4th March 2024 be agreed as a correct record of proceedings.

RESOLVED

- 3.2 The Committee approved the minutes of the previous Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny meeting held on 4th March 2024.

4 WORK PROGRAMME

- 4.1 The Committee discussed the Work Programme and considered the items scheduled for the next Committee meeting on Monday 30th of September.

5 HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING STRATEGY

- 5.1 The Committee invited expert witness, Dr Bert Provan (Senior Policy Fellow at the London School of Economics), to give his assessment of the report and the strategy outlined by the Council. Dr Provan outlined his background, before commenting on what he described to be an excellent and well-written strategy that was well evidenced. Dr Provan spoke of the importance of being considerate to current and potential future issues. Dr Provan then ran through areas to consider. These included the need for excellent data, being conscious of new, emerging challenges, iterative engagement, considering feedback from external partners and experts as well as the importance of being staff being empathetic which stems from workload management and recruitment.

- 5.2 Dr Provan then answered questions on the following:

- Staff retention: how Westminster can better retain staff.
- Assessment of strategy: the degree to which the strategy, as outlined, is sufficient in addressing the acute and complex challenges faced in Westminster.
- Statutory framework: the potential limitations of a strategy given the rigidity of national legislation and the accompanying statutory framework. Members questioned whether Dr Provan felt lobbying for change was worthwhile.

- 5.3 The Cabinet Member for Housing Services, Councillor Liza Begum, supported by senior officers, introduced the report on the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, providing context on the challenges and drawing attention to the wrap-around support and accessibility of the approach. The Cabinet Member then outlined the strategy's aims and clarified the link to other services and other housing policies such as allocations. The Committee then heard further detail including partnership work and examples of good practice, before the Cabinet Member, supported by senior officers, took questions on the following:

- Identifying responsibility: Clarity on Westminster's legal duties with regards to international and transient rough sleepers. Members also asked why the Home Officer concentrates resource in densely populated, urban areas like Westminster and what financial support it provides for those that are not issued the right to remain and do not have a place to live.

- Street counts: understanding the variation between annual counts and street counts. Members also asked how these numbers are verified and how to account for all, especially the most vulnerable.
- Monthly Partnership and Operations Board: understanding who sits on this board and what the purpose is.
- Understanding capacity: whether Westminster has the capacity to sleep everyone who might be in need of a bed on any given evening.
- Vulnerable groups: understanding how vulnerable groups had been identified and the discrimination that they face. Members asked whether the service are alert to issues with modern slavery and human trafficking with regards to people who are at risk of homelessness.
- Partnership work: the degree of overlap working with internal and external partners, including public health and the importance of empathy and responsiveness in managing these relationships.
- Evidence base: the importance of understanding the scale of the issue.
- Child homeless: the concern over the significant proportion of under eighteens who are at risk of, or are, homeless.
- Severe weather strategy and protocol: understanding how this is initiated, whether it applies to hot temperatures and whether it had been in place on the day of the Committee.
- Outcomes: understanding how vulnerable people who should be eligible for assistance, can use the service and still be forced into a situation where they sleep rough.
- Neighbourhood co-ordinators: how the Council ensures that they do not come across in a hostile manner. It was suggested that in future Committee meetings, the Committee could consider inviting potential partners and housing providers.
- Private rented sector referrals: the support available for those who are referred to the private rented sector but might still need financial support.
- Empty and void properties: how many empty or void properties there are in Westminster and how the Council can work to get them back into use. Members asked how many Council-owned properties were void and this was actioned for a response.
- Supported tenancy cycle: how residents are supported when it comes to the end of their social or supported tenancy and whether this leads to cyclical issues.

- Identifying empty properties: whether Members can put forward potential empty properties across the City.
- Joined up approach: the importance of joining up with other housing strategies such as housing allocations and supply.
- Managing expectations: how the strategy must make clear that it will not be able, necessarily, to help everyone as real choices will be borne out of tough decisions and whether the strategy risked overpromising on some potential deliverables such as the hidden homeless.
- Staff morale: how the Council manages and rotates staff so as to keep them energised and positive.
- Trade-offs: understanding the challenges between allocating stock for temporary and permanent accommodation.
- Veterans: consideration of referencing veterans of the armed service within the potentially vulnerable groups referenced in the equalities impact.
- Ward data: understanding why previous ward boundaries and names were included in the evidence base and whether this could be updated.
- Geographic focus: understanding and asking for acknowledgement that deprivation exists also in the areas typically considered more affluent.
- Eligibility: clarifying what conditions might make a family eligible or ineligible for social housing based on maximum earnings for example. Members were also interested in how discretionary housing payments (DHP) were sufficient in preventing homelessness.
- Job seeking: understanding the link between seeking work and homelessness and how the Council can help particularly with this cohort.
- Prioritisation: whether time spent living in Westminster was a factor in prioritisation for Housing services amongst other considerations.

ACTION:

- 5.4 To consider inviting potential partners and housing providers to relevant future Committee meetings.

INFORMATION REQUESTS:

- 5.5 To provide more detail on how the strategy will be considerate to the dangers of trafficking and modern slavery.
- 5.6 To provide the number of known void properties within the Council's housing and property stock.

- 5.7 To provide information on the data on interventions on contracts and commissioning and how this is monitored and managed.
- 5.8 To provide more information on the link between seeking work and homelessness as outlined in the Homelessness Review and whether this was a national issue or relevant to Westminster.
- 5.9 To provide information on the intermediate rent scheme route for those in employment and still experiencing difficulty in the affordability of housing.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 5.10 The Committee recommended that the Council considers further developing the evidence base and ensuring that the Council's alertness to the scale of relevant issues, through the dataset it possesses, is sufficient. Additionally, the final strategy should display data from current ward boundaries.
- 5.11 The Committee recommended that the Council considers improving the degree to which the strategy is joined up with other essential internal strategies and departments, notably the Council's Allocation Policy and work with void properties.
- 5.12 The Committee recommended that that the strategy manages expectations and is conscious of the inevitable limitations and trade-offs that will still exist. The Committee suggested that this was particularly salient with regards to the Council's ambition to work with the 'hidden homeless'.
- 5.13 The Committee recommended that the Council consider increasing the level of rotation for front-line staff to help keep them energised, positive and that they feel supported.
- 5.14 The Committee recommended that the strategy make clear that it is for everyone. The Committee also suggested that when making consideration for vulnerable groups, as outlined in the equalities impact, veterans of the armed forces should also be recognised among the other potentially vulnerable groups identified.
- 5.15 The Committee recommended that the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy makes clear that it is published with the aim to improve matters and can identify, from the outset, how this will be done.
- 5.16 The Committee recognised the partnership work that the Council undertakes but recommended that a culture of empathy and responsiveness is further communicated to stakeholders who will work with the Council to deliver the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

6 OXFORD STREET PROGRAMME QUARTERLY UPDATE

6.1 The Committee welcomed Councillor Geoff Barraclough (Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development) who outlined the importance and significance of the Oxford Street Programme. The Cabinet Member evidenced this with several statistics including the estimate that Oxford Street is worth 5% of London's economy on its own and that a 5% increase in sales on Oxford Street is worth a potential additional £65 million in VAT revenues. After running through key partnerships and financial arrangements, the Cabinet Member, supported by Manisha Patel (Director of Oxford Street), answered questions on the following:

- Third-party funding: understanding the risks associated with third-party funding splits and contributions. Members also asked at what point in time would the money be in a position where it was all there and guaranteed.
- Arrangements: what options were available should companies renege on their contribution commitments. Members also asked how these agreements were enforceable and whether there was a legal basis for the monies to be paid.
- Consultation timeline: why consultations were taking place in August, during the summer holiday, when many people might be away from home.
- Dependency: understanding how dependant the agreements with the New West End Company (NWECC) were on the largest businesses and contributors within. Members wanted to understand whether this was an agreement with NWECC or with the major businesses within NWECC.
- Transport signage: how clear it would be what impact public realm improvements might have on the spaces and routes available to road users. Members also pointed towards unclear signage that exists in nearby Hyde Park and whether this would be avoided.
- Oxford Circus crossing: what the impact of the scheme was set to be on the Oxford Circus diagonal-crossing.
- Railings: whether measures, such as railings, were to be considered in an effort to prevent hostile phone-snatching, as often done by motorbikes mounting the pavement.
- Pedi-cabs: what improvements might be made to prevent Pedi-cabs cluttering the pavement, particularly in prevalent areas such as outside Selfridges.
- Public goods: whether it was possible to stop businesses that are not paying business rates from benefitting from the enhancements planned.
- Council property: whether the Council owned any property on Oxford Street.

- Quiet area: the consideration to allocating quiet periods or areas to encourage people to attend who may find it difficult in crowded spaces. Members also asked about childcare facilities to enable more choice.
- Contributions: understanding why businesses would be willing to put money into public realm schemes such as this. Members also asked what the tangible benefits to Westminster residents would be.
- Utilities co-ordination: the danger of the pavements being dug up and cheaper materials used to plaster over. Members were also interested in how this could be better co-ordinated, for when works are necessary.
- Newsletter reach: how the newsletter produced will increase its reach beyond the numbers currently receiving it.
- Public conveniences: whether public conveniences would be added as part of the programme.
- Youth Council: whether engagement with the Youth Council had been done.
- Contractors: identifying the main contractors for the works and the assurances that they could fulfil the contract. Members asked what contingency plan existed if they were to go bankrupt.

ACTION:

- 6.2 To pick up with Highways Services about potential issues with the signage around Hyde Park pedestrian and cycle crossings.

INFORMATION REQUEST:

- 6.3 To provide the proposed impact on highways and parking from the schemes shared within the latest update.

The Meeting ended at 21.11.

CHAIR: _____

DATE _____