

# Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee Report

<b>Date:</b>	<b>17 March 2020</b>
<b>Classification:</b>	<b>General Release</b>
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Call-in of: Westminster Homelessness Strategy 2019-2024</b>
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Reuben Segal, Head of Committee and Governance Services</b>
<b>Financial Summary:</b>	<b>The Cabinet Member report sets out the financial implications</b>
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## 1. Executive Summary

1.1 On 19 February 2020, the Cabinet Member for Housing Services made the following executive decisions in respect of the Westminster Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 24 report.

1. That the Cabinet Member for Housing Services agreed the Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 2024 as set out in Appendix B of the report.
2. That the Cabinet Member for Housing agreed the Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 2024 Action Plan in Appendix C of the report and noted it be updated regularly.
3. That the Cabinet Member for Housing Services delegated authority to the Director responsible for Housing to update the Action Plan in conjunction with the Cabinet Member responsible for Housing.

1.2 Three Members of the Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee have subsequently exercised their right that the decision be “called-in” for scrutiny by the Committee. Their reasons for call-in are:

- Where families are being placed (whether temporary accommodation (TA) or private rented sector [PRS] discharge). The Council’s band two placements only are designed to maintain connections for families with children in key

exam years or where someone is working in Westminster. Often even these are on the far side of London, with extremely optimistic assessments of travel time (regularly assuming the use of trains or tube are possible where as in financial reality often it is not). Overall there needs to be greater consideration of how to enable a broader range of homeless families to maintain their connections to Westminster, rather than the direction of travel of the policy which seems to be aimed at encouraging them to end those connections. Westminster should explore more closely what other boroughs are doing to help maintain connections and find new TA option (both in borough and nearer to Westminster- Westminster City Council has taken some steps towards the latter).

- How they are being discharged. We have long raised concerns about the way in which PRS discharge is being used to end Westminster's duty of care to these families. Other boroughs do seem less keen to completely discharge their duty even when the private sector is being used to house homeless families. There needs to be a clear pathway for people who have been longstanding Westminster residents to be able to return to permanent housing if they want it- we understand the potential length of wait as do the residents but the choice should be theirs.
- Why has number of duty acceptances been falling? At a committee last year we were given a reply that we would know more as we moved through 2019/20 about how the Homelessness Reduction Act was bedding in and we would have a clearer picture of what was happening. As we are now nearing the end of that period what is the current position for 2019/20 acceptances and can the council please explain why it is where it is. What is being done to ensure that all people who have the legal right to support are getting what they need?
- How can we improve the Personal Housing Plan process? From information provided by housing charities there is scope to learn from better practice in other authorities about the quality of the PHPs being provided. Councillors have also, through cases they are dealing with, noticed that there have often been delays in PHPs and other important information being provided to residents and therefore would like to explore further whether Housing Solutions has the capacity it needs to deal with the volume of applications.

## **2. Recommendations**

2.1 That the Committee reviews the decision outlined above and, in this instance, agrees one of the following options:

- (a) To endorse the decision made by the Cabinet Members.
- (b) To refer the matter back to the Cabinet Members for reconsideration.
- (c) If, in the opinion of the Chief Executive, the matter is contrary to the Budget and Policy framework, refer the matter to Full Council.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 On 19 February 2020, notice of this decision was published in accordance with the Council's Constitution.
- 3.2 On 26 February 2020, a valid call-in from Councillors Adam Hug, Guthrie McKie and Matt Noble, was received, triggering the requirement from the Committee to consider the call-in.
- 3.3 The options available to the Committees are:

**Option A:** Endorse the decision taken by the Cabinet Member.

**Option B:** Refer the decision back to the Cabinet Member. They should then reconsider the decision having regard to the views of the Policy and Scrutiny Committee within 10 working days, amending the decision or not, adopting a final decision.

**Option C:** If, in the opinion of the Chief Executive, the matter is contrary to the Budget and Policy framework, refer the matter to Full Council

- 3.4 Further information on the Westminster Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 24 report is included in Cabinet Member report and appendices. This is the full report considered by the Cabinet Member on 26 February 2020 and may assist with answering questions from the Committee.
- 3.5 A response from the Cabinet Member for Housing Services to the call-in is to follow.

### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 The financial implications are contained in the Cabinet Member report.

### **5. Legal Implications**

- 5.1 The legal implications are contained in the Cabinet Member report.

### **List of Appendices**

Appendix A – Response to Call-In of the Homelessness Strategy 2019-2024

Appendix B - Statement of Decision – Westminster Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 24

Appendix C - Cabinet Member Report, 19 February 2020, Westminster Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 24 report and appendices