

## **HOUSING COMMISSION**

### **Meeting notes from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2006 at the Abbey Community Centre.**

#### **Attendees**

The meeting was chaired by Lord Best, Chair of the Westminster Housing Commission, and attended by Jeremy Swain, Housing Commissioner and Chief Executive of ThamesReach.

A range of people attended including City Council and RSL tenants, lessees, people living in temporary accommodation or having experienced homelessness, keyworkers, agencies working with people experiencing housing difficulties, a representative from Westminster Action on Disability, and representatives from the Local Area Renewal Partnerships. Officers from the City Council were also present.

Appendix 1 provides a list of those who attended the meeting.

Lord Best introduced the session explaining that the Commissioners hoped to hear from a range of perspectives, including the impact of the shortage of affordable housing, but also asked contributors to include positive recommendations for how things could be improved, which would go back to the Commission.

Outlined below are the key issues raised.

#### **1. Loss of social housing and keyworker housing**

There was much concern about the loss of social housing, via a) the RTB, b) the sale of social housing which does not meet Decent Homes standards and c) the sale of old keyworker housing, e.g. section housing.

It was suggested that funding should be found to enable properties to be brought up to the Decent Homes standard and retained within the social housing sector.

#### **2. Temporary accommodation**

The issue of the length of time households spent in temporary accommodation was raised. There was a view that waiting times needed to be communicated clearly. The impact of a long period in high cost temporary accommodation and the effects in terms of disincentives to work, and the severe financial difficulties for working households were raised.

Despite having to spend long periods of time in temporary accommodation it is difficult for households to make accommodation properly their own.

#### **3. Allocations**

Access to social housing was perceived as unfair, particularly by existing tenants, with priority going to asylum seekers and refugees, while households who grew up in Westminster having to wait long periods of time.

It was explained that the City Council did not accommodate asylum seekers - this was the responsibility of the National Asylum Seekers Support Service.

The fact that this was such a widely held belief was considered to warrant attention as such inaccuracies could lead to intolerance and racial tension.

It was clarified that all households accepted onto the housing register must demonstrate a local connection, living in the City for 6 months out of the last 12, or 2 out of the last 5 years.

A suggested outcome was improved communication to residents about who was eligible for housing and who was housed.

### **Choice Based Lettings**

Although the introduction of choice based lettings was welcomed by agencies such as Paddington Law Centre, who had witnessed a decrease in dissatisfaction, with clients being able to choose the properties to bid for, other concerns were expressed.

The issue of accessibility was raised for those with a disability or those for whom English was not a first language. Although there are two computers at the Housing Options Service with staff on hand to assist, preferences were expressed about having access to a person rather than a system and the need for customer focussed help available over the telephone.

A recommended improvement was the way in which the Council communicated what support and help was available for people with access difficulties and the use of "expert users" in the community to train and assist people who were less confident about using the system.

### **Overcrowding**

A suggestion to avoid overcrowding in the future was to allocate accommodation to families to allow them to under occupy, allowing for future family growth.

The lack of consistency between social landlords on standards was considered unhelpful and could lead to frustration for households who were refused by an RSL despite being nominated by the City Council.

The recommendation was to agree common standards for the size of property and family size for all allocations irrespective of landlord.

### **Local Lettings**

Tenant Management Organisations experienced difficulties with choice based lettings, with very little autonomy to decide who was allocated the property. They were often in an advantageous position of knowing who the other residents are in the block and what their needs were (e.g. they could rehouse an underoccupying household to a smaller property within the block and offer a family home to a larger household).

Recommendation: To explore whether it would be possible to achieve more flexibility on a neighbourhood basis which complies with the statutory requirements for the allocations system.

#### **4. The need for more social housing**

The need for increased numbers of social housing units was strongly supported, as there was clearly insufficient amount to meet current demands.

The question was raised whether additional units could be secured by increasing density in some areas. There was not a clear view on this from attendees but this could warrant further exploration.

It was suggested that the City Council needed to target under occupying households more effectively, with an attractive relocation package to smaller properties.

There was a strong feeling that the City Council was not insisting on a high enough % requirement of social housing in new developments. There was also a suggestion that planning policy requires private developers to build larger units, which has consequences for the amount of social housing being delivered on each site.

Recommendation: Clearer communication on housing and planning requirements.

#### **Keyworkers**

Access to keyworker housing was seen as problematic, particularly for keyworkers who did not fall within the Government definition. Shared ownership schemes which allowed owner occupiers to staircase up were also considered to add to the depletion of the social / intermediate housing stock, and there was a view that some thought could be given to halting this process.

#### **5. Wider housing issues.**

There were a range of other issues which were raised as causing some difficulties. These are summarised below.

To overcome having buildings that are inaccessible to disabled people, it was recommended that a disabled person should sit on Planning Committee.

Lessees often faced high costs for major works and it was suggested that sinking funds should be set up to ease the burden on lessees who were unable to pay.

Delays in processing Housing Benefit, which could result in court action being taken against the household was expensive, and took its toll on the household despite the fault resting with the agency processing housing benefit applications.

Disabled people faced significant barriers: structural, attitudinal and accessing buildings and transport. It was agreed that a written submission detailing these would be welcome.

Better use should be made of community halls, widening access to all sectors of the local community.

## Appendix 1.

<b>First name</b>	<b>Surname</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Amin	Ali	Westminster Resident
Richard	Best	Chair, Housing Commission
John	Brett	Tenant
Gerry	Bolton	Chair of Housing Panel
Fabian	Sharp	Queens Park LARP
Noreen	O'Neill	Tenant
Christopher	Nicholas	Westminster PCT
Somru	Miah	Queens Park LARP
Cllr. Angela	Harvey	Member, WCC
Heather	Johnson	Paddington Law Centre
Carol	Haylon	Rep from South Westminster LARP
Jeremy	Swain	Housing Commission
Terry	Lane	Service User Group
Tariq	Moghal	Service User Group
Maryam	Zanousi	Westminster Action on Disability
Susie	Sinclair	Service User Group
Rebecca	Ireland	WCC
Vanda	Mahony	St. Mary's Hospital
Mary	Beak	St. Mary's Hospital
Mostafa	Ragab	Community Network
Toby	Gale	Westbourne LARP
Rosemary	Westbrook	WCC
Daniel	McCarthy	WCC
Gez	Kellaghan	WCC
Eileen	Crawford	Westminster Resident
Peter	Denton	Westminster Resident
Megan	Hill	WCC - Photographer