

Westminster Housing Commission

Chair, Lord Richard Best OBE

Briefing Paper for Commissioners For Meeting 2, 23rd November 2005

Westminster Housing Commission Consultation Strands Key issues and target groups

The Westminster Housing Commission has three cross-cutting consultation strands, to run alongside its formal meetings. This paper proposes an approach towards each of the strands, and suggests Commission Members who could lead on each.

Consultation strands

The three strands are employer needs, the consumer perspective and the sustainability strand. The purpose of each is outlined below:

Employer Needs – to understand whether local employers face recruitment or retention problems because of housing issues in Westminster, what that impact is and what solutions there might be.

The Consumer Perspective – to gain an understanding of housing consumers' views of the type of housing they want/need; what sort of housing products they would consider; and to act as a reality check against the Commission's recommendations.

Sustainability Strand – to test out ideas around housing density, design and environmental sustainability in relation to how people live in central urban areas like Westminster. If we are to tackle housing pressures by increasing densities, how can this be done in a sustainable way?

1. Employer Needs

Key employers would be engaged through three approaches, and results will be captured in a final report to the Commission.

- ⇒ Housing questions will be included in a business survey that the Council is about to commission.
- ⇒ A focus group will be held with a cross section of Westminster employers to explore issues that arise from the survey in more depth.
- ⇒ A report of the above consultation will be launched and discussed at a business breakfast – potentially hosted by a Housing Commission member

The key issues to explore are:

- ⇒ To what extent do employers in different sectors see the housing market as creating a problem for recruitment and retention of staff?
- ⇒ What do employers see as the solutions?

- ⇒ To what extent would employers be prepared to invest in 'intermediate market products'? Do they already fund housing related benefits for staff or provide accommodation?
- ⇒ What impact might the London housing market have on future location decision, the movement of certain jobs?
- ⇒ What are future trends in terms of business location / job location in London? Will there be more working at home? Are certain job types likely to move abroad / to other UK locations? What impact would this have on the Westminster housing market?

Possible Lead Commissioners

- ⇒ Sarah Jane Curtis
- ⇒ Kate Barker

Likely Timeframe

- ⇒ Business survey – November 2005
- ⇒ Focus group session – December/January
- ⇒ Business Breakfast – January/February 2006

2. Consumer Perspective

There will be a range of consultation and engagement activity connected to the Commission, and Appendix 1 sets out an emerging framework for this work. Young people, for example, will be targeted through a 'young persons' city survey' and focus groups that are already planned by the City Council.

However, many existing housing consultation channels are with residents who are already adequately housed - not necessarily those who we would expect to take up new housing opportunities that emerge as a result of the Commission.

The consumer perspective strand will aim to test emerging ideas and recommendations with those customers and residents who are most likely to be impacted by them.

Given the focus of the Commission on the intermediate market and the private rented sector (and the limited existing engagement channels here) the consumer perspective strand may need to target these households in particular.

More specifically, this strand may target the following groups:

- Those working or studying in the City of Westminster but currently living elsewhere (therefore possibly commuting long distances)
- Those already living in the City of Westminster but in overcrowded and bad housing
- Those who are in temporary accommodation after being assessed as statutorily homeless.

It might also target overcrowded households or speak to existing residents about their needs and views if housing densities in their neighbourhood were to be increased (linked to sustainability strand).

The consultation approach proposed is to establish a representative (and virtual) panel of say 100 households, and approach it (or sub-groups of it) to test ideas, issues and recommendations as and when they emerge.

We may approach the panel in the form of short telephone surveys, or perhaps occasional focus groups focussing on specific topics.

Perhaps an initial generic set of questions is asked of the whole panel. Perhaps the panel could be constructed from those who are interviewed through the City Survey and consent to be approached again (these people will have already answered a number of housing related questions).

The City Council, City West Homes and key RSLs are currently undertaking a piece of work, in partnership with residents, to consider how resident engagement can be improved across the board. This work is nearing conclusion and recommendations here might assist the development of the consumer perspective strand.

Possible Lead Commissioners

- ⇒ Jeremy Swain
- ⇒ Prof. Chris Hamnett

Likely Timeframe

- ⇒ between February and May, as draft recommendations are developed
- ⇒ final report June 2006

3. Sustainability

If more housing is to be provided in Westminster, this will inevitably increase housing densities in an already congested part of London, where the vast majority of people live in flats with limited access to dedicated outside space. The housing experience of a young person growing up in Westminster is likely to be very different to that of someone from the outskirts of London.

Housing decisions have proved to be unsustainable in the past, for example many large local authority estates built in the 60s and 70s became associated with poor design and high levels of social disadvantage, which has required significant reinvestment through regeneration programmes in recent years or whole scale demolition. Even homes built in the 1990's have had to be demolished. How can we ensure that we learn from mistakes of the past?

Key questions this strand may wish to consider are -

- ⇒ If densities are to increase how can this be achieved in a way that is socially, economically, environmentally and architecturally sustainable?

- ⇒ How much extra housing capacity can be delivered in existing areas of social housing in Westminster, who should live there, what else can and should be provided, what are the likely direct (and real) up front and ongoing costs?
- ⇒ How can we provide housing that is suitable for families, with adequate recreation and play space for children and young people, schools, health facilities etc?
- ⇒ Social housing is now provided through planning gain – but this often means no community hall, no play space, no communal gardens as on a traditional estate – what are the costs / consequences and what are the benefits? What can we do to mitigate any costs?
- ⇒ What is the right economic mix? If mixed income communities are desirable, how best is this achieved?
- ⇒ How can we ensure that high quality design principles are used - enhancing the urban fabric and representing value for money?
- ⇒ How can we improve the design and environment of existing housing, particularly social housing?
- ⇒ What about the regional agenda? Would it be better to “export” Westminster residents to live in sustainable communities elsewhere? How can we make Westminster a more attractive and sustainable place to live while also contributing to solving wider problems of London as a whole?
- ⇒ How can community cohesion be achieved, between people of different faiths, races and cultures?

What are the messages on sustainability that need to go to the full range of key public agencies?

Sustainability is not just about the environmental impact of increased housing supply. All of the Commission’s recommendations will have an impact on the broader economic, social and environmental wellbeing agenda.

Part of the role of this strand will be to ensure that the Commission applies a sustainability test to each set of recommendations. The Commission will need to demonstrate that it has considered the broader and unintended costs and consequences of recommendations, and that these have been balanced with the specific benefits of implementing a proposed way forward.

Possible Lead Commissioners

- ⇒ Sir Terry Farrell
- ⇒ Kelvin McDonald

Likely Timeframe

- ⇒ February to May, as recommendations are being developed.

Appendix 1

Target Group	How?	Strand	Timescale
Employers	Business Survey followed by focus groups	Employer needs	⇒ Business survey – Nov 2005 ⇒ Focus group session – Dec/Jan ⇒ Business Breakfast Jan/Feb 2006
Young people (14-18)	Young persons city survey followed by focus groups	Consumer	
Tenants/Housing Panel		Consumer / Sustainability	
Local residents	Invited to submit evidence	Consumer	November 2005
Faith Groups	Faith Forum, presentation, and invited to submit evidence	Consumer / Sustainability	✓
Members	Submissions / Meeting attendance Labour Group meeting on the 18 th November		November 2005
MPs	18 November meeting		November 2005
Partner Agencies	Invited to submit evidence		November 2005
RSLs	Evidence to be presented at the Housing Commission meeting		23 rd November 2005
Older people	Current work on older people which also included a series of focus groups	Consumer	✓
Key workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Needs Study 	Consumer	⇒ Draft Report –end of Feb

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermediate market research is being commissioned 		2006 ⇒ Dec 2005 / Jan 2006
Students	Research into location and type of student accommodation is being carried out.	Consumer	
TA accommodation residents	Focus Groups (Housing Options, Service Users Group)	Consumer / Sustainability	
Overcrowded households	Focus Groups	Consumer / Sustainability	

