

## Westminster Housing Commission

### Notes of the meeting with Karen Buck MP and Cllr Paul Dimoldenberg - 17 November 2005

#### Present

- Lord Best
- Sir Terry Farrell
- Kelvin McDonald
- Jeremy Swain
- Karen Buck MP
- Cllr Paul Dimoldenberg
- Rosemary Westbrook, Director of Housing, Westminster City Council
- Daniel McCarthy, Head of Housing Strategy, Westminster City Council

Commissioners were first shown around a number of properties in which households are living in overcrowded conditions.

There followed a discussion about some key housing issues in Westminster.

#### Key Points of Discussion

##### Overcrowding and Homelessness

- The interaction of the shortage of supply and the focus on delivery of homelessness objectives has reduced opportunities for exiting social housing tenants to transfer. This has led to a rise in levels of severe overcrowding within social stock.
- A significant number of former council homes, sold under the Right to Buy, are now being let at considerable expense and used to house homeless households on a temporary basis - this has intensified levels of need in certain neighbourhoods. The funding currently being used for this housing could be used to purchase and bring units into the permanent social stock.

Note – The Council will circulate a map of temporary accommodation in Westminster.

##### Decent Homes

- The Decent Homes target has provided a clear focus to improve the quality of social housing. However, we may now be at the point of diminishing return. In particular, some RSLs have decided to dispose of social stock in parts of Westminster to fund decent homes works in other properties.

### **Delivery of social housing**

- While it will be difficult to deliver social housing in high volumes in certain very expensive parts of the City, social housing levels have grown in areas like Church Street, Harrow Road and Queen's Park and a broader mix of tenures is desirable in these neighbourhoods. Perhaps there are areas that fall within the middle range of Westminster's market where more social rented homes could be developed.
- There will always be 20% or so of the population that need to live in social rented housing.
- Could non-housing land currently in public sector ownership be developed as housing?

### **Homeownership and shifts in social stock**

- Although approaching 50% of the original council housing stock has been sold, this has largely been offset by growth with the RSL sector. However, the geography of social housing has changed, with a greater proportion of units sold under right to buy in more affluent areas like St John's Wood
- There is an emerging trend witnessed of poorer leaseholders who are unable to meet service charges and major works bills.

### **Population Mobility**

- Should we incentivise cross tenure mobility, for example would this reduce the incidence of people who sub-let social housing?
- Will units come through the regional housing route in the outer boroughs in the right numbers? Does this mirror natural population flows? Is East London the right place to be developing?
- Evidence that some people are interested in moving to coastal towns.
- Demography is changing. North Westminster is now primarily Arabic – only 15 or 20 years ago it was predominantly Caribbean.

### **Middle Income earners**

- Persuading people to bring up a family in central London will require quite a different approach
- Affordable open market homes now virtually gone
- Schools a big issue

### **Lord Best concluded**

- Westminster is one of, if not the, most expensive place in the World. However, there is actually a surprising amount of affordable housing here - council, RSL and leased from private sector and funded through housing benefit. Is the key challenge to use the existing stock better – such as 'knock throughs' to alleviate overcrowding and using funds equivalent to housing benefit to buy properties currently leased from the private sector?