

Tour of housing in the West End 17 May 2006

Commissioners present

Lord Best
Natalie Elphicke
Jeremy Swain
Cllr Angela Harvey

Other people present

Russell Purvis Head of Operations, Soho Housing Association
Steve Moore, WCC, Head of Supply
Jake Mathias, WCC, Private Sector and Energy Manager
Karen Charnley, WCC Cabinet Support
Daniel McCarthy, WCC Head of Housing Strategy

Meeting with Soho Housing association, Sandringham flats

Russell Purves gave commissioners an overview of the key issues for Soho Housing association and its residents.

Russell pointed out the central role that the housing association plays in community life in the heart of the West End. It enjoys a strong relationship with its residents as a small community based housing association.

The association has a relatively high proportion of commercial stock which cross-subsidises affordable housing. It would otherwise be difficult to maintain the viability of a 700 unit housing association, especially in this locality. About 20% of turnover comes from commercial lets.

Soho manages a significant proportion of stock where it is the leaseholder not freeholder – 38%. Some of these leases are close to expiry and renegotiating leases can be a significant drain on investment resources.

However, finances are such that stock is up to the decent Homes standard and can be maintained at this standard within the foreseeable future.

Experience of choice based lettings has been positive. Soho as an area is not to everyone's liking and Choice means that tenants can positively choose to live here.

Soho wants to remain an independent RSL. To improve efficiencies it will attempt to piggy-back on the existing contracts of other organisations such as the Council in order to achieve competitive contractor rates.

The association also manages dispersed stock in the north of Westminster and adjacent neighbourhoods. While Soho is aware of the drive to 'rationalise'

management of such units, these represent around 5% of its total holding and many of these units provide much needed family sized accommodation available for tenant transfers.

Density issues were discussed. The association does not perceive any major inter-tenant problems as a result of high density living. The stock is characterised by courtyard developments, where the courtyards generally provide the only communal space. Courtyards are often self-managed and some are tended by residents on a voluntary basis. Tenants tend to devise local rules, such as no playing in the courtyard after 10pm.

There are some problems for families living in the area, principally the co-location of the sex industry with housing and community facilities - e.g. a 'clip joint' is located adjacent to one of the neighbourhood's primary schools.

Move-on accommodation for young growing families is a problem. Sixty families are on the transfer list.

The association has a 'sons and daughters' policy for adult children, but only about three units a year are allocated for this purpose.

Tour of Soho

Steve Moore and Jake Mathias led a tour of key sites in the surrounding neighbourhood.

Ham Yard – This site lies on the south-west corner of Soho, the gateway to Soho from Piccadilly. Ham Yard is mainly derelict, apart from one office building on the south side. It remains one of the largest undeveloped sites in the heart of the West End and has the potential to yield 250 or so residential units. However, ownership of the site changes hands regularly, and a couple of units remain under separate ownership.

Green's Court and Peter Street - Here flats previously used as brothels have been compulsory purchased by the City Council and returned to use as housing in partnership with an RSL.

Trenchard House, Broadwick Street - This is a former Metropolitan Police section house that has been vacant for over a decade. It is now owned by English Partnerships.

Jeremy Swain outlined his ideas to develop the site as keyworker accommodation for former rough sleepers, with an emphasis on supporting employment in the catering and hospitality sector. A significant amount of work is necessary to further progress this option.

Working closely with the local community, the City Council will consider proposals for the redevelopment of this site alongside plans for the adjacent Westminster Kingsway College site and for the Berwick Street area. These sites provide real potential to add to the level of housing in the neighbourhood.