

## **Fitzrovia West Area Forum**

### **Report of the Housing Topic Group which met on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014.**

Present: Nick Bailey, Sharon Banoff, Susan Blundell, Ian Milne, Sheree Prevat.

Apologies: Ben Weaver, Paul Membrey

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We reviewed Westminster's City Plan core strategy and had a wide-ranging discussion about housing in Fitzrovia.

NB explained that one of the functions of the Neighbourhood Forum is to prepare a neighbourhood plan but that we have to accept the WCC core strategy as given. We can, however, add additional detail which expands and elaborates on how these strategic policies should be interpreted at the neighbourhood level. Once the neighbourhood plan is approved, it becomes part of the statutory plan which Westminster planners apply when considering planning applications.

#### **WCC Strategic Policy No. 3**

*To maintain and enhance the quality of life, health and well-being of Westminster's residential communities; ensuring that Westminster's residents can benefit from growth and change, providing more employment and housing opportunities, safety and security, and better public transport and local services; to work with our partners to foster economic vitality and diversity, improved learning and skills, and improved life chances in areas of deprivation.*

#### **No. 4**

*To increase the supply of good quality housing across all parts of the city to meet Westminster's housing target, and to meet housing needs, including the provision of affordable housing and homes for those with special needs.*

- **How do we ensure a continuing supply of all sizes and tenures of housing?**

WCC had a target of 770 new homes per year as set out in the London Plan in 2011. This was increased by the Mayor to 1068 in 2014, but there are no target figures for particular areas like Fitzrovia. 590 new homes were built in Westminster in 2012-13 (Mayor's figure).

It was noted that recent developments such as Crossrail and the rapid increase in population anticipated in London in the next 15 years would lead to rising land values, property prices, and rents for housing and other uses, as well as an increasing demand for housing of all types. Rents in the social housing sector have risen rapidly in the past few years making 'affordable housing' increasingly unaffordable for many.

It was felt that where possible as wide a range of sizes, types and tenures of housing should be encouraged in order to promote the social mix and sense of community which are important characteristics of Fitzrovia. It was noted that the primary school in Foley Street and the Whitfield Street nursery were both fully subscribed and there were a significant number of families living in the area.

A wide variety of agencies should be encouraged to provide different types and sizes of housing: the private sector, housing associations and voluntary agencies such as the Fitzrovia Trust.

The provision of luxury housing (over £1.5m?) cannot be stopped but the amount created could be reduced by ensuring a mix of tenures and sizes on each site in line with WCC's policy of achieving at least 30% affordable housing.

There is evidence that WCC is allowing developers to make payments instead of providing affordable housing on site. WCC's affordable housing fund is large but very little of it is used to fund affordable housing development in the W1 area or West End ward.

There are currently no vacant sites in the area but opportunities for redevelopment occur from time to time.

- **How best to integrate different types of housing particularly where large sites come up for development?**

It was felt that WCC should put more emphasis on implementing its own plan policies particularly with regard negotiating at least 30% affordable housing where more than 10 units are provided, and requiring all affordable housing to be provided on the site. It was noted that, according to figures from the Mayor of London, WCC only negotiated an average of 16% affordable housing in the past 3 years, compared with 34% in Camden and a London average of 37% (Mayor's Annual Monitoring Report 10, 2012-13, 2014; p. 25).

As densities increase, the importance of architectural design of the highest quality cannot be over emphasised.

- **What are our views on the conversion of buildings such as offices to residential use?**

Conversion from offices to residential requires planning permission in our area because WCC has secured an exemption to the recent change in government policy which allows these changes without permission. In general, permission to change small office units to residential should not be permitted in order to protect (and provide opportunities for new) small businesses.

- **How can we ensure new housing meets the density, height and design standards of the surrounding area?**

New development should generally conform to the density and height of the surrounding area so that it does not dominate the skyline, dwarf surrounding historic buildings, and block light from adjoining occupiers. High standards of energy efficiency and reduction of greenhouse gases should be required. Provision for off-street parking in new developments should be reduced to an absolute minimum.

- **Should new housing developments include ground floor uses such as shops and cafes?**

It was felt that mixed uses should generally be encouraged on larger sites in order to retain the 'mixed use' character of the area but the different uses should be arranged vertically as

far as possible, rather than horizontally where noise, leaks etc can affect different uses and occupiers. Open space should be included wherever possible.

- **How can we make best use of outdoor space such as balconies, roofs and open spaces?**

Maximum use should be made of outdoor space such as balconies and roofs, particularly where new building is constructed or where buildings are being converted.

Wherever possible noise from air conditioning and from the street should be kept to a minimum, particularly at night-time.

- **Are there particular types of housing not currently being provided, for example provision for people with disabilities, special needs and the elderly?**

It was felt strongly that demographic changes were leading to an aging population and that more provision should be made for the elderly. There is currently one old persons' home at Fitzroy Court, Carburton Street, and more provision is needed. Residents of this home used to go to All Soul's Clubhouse every weekday for lunch; this has been reduced to one day a week because of cuts in funding.

#### **Recommendations:**

Increase the provision of new housing and conversions in terms of size, density, and affordability, particularly in order to meet local needs (permanent residents with Westminster connections);

Ensure adequate provision for special needs particularly those with disabilities and pensioners;

Ensure the highest quality of design and sound insulation particularly where densities are high;

Maximise sustainability and insulation while also making provision for outdoor space, balconies, small parks etc;

Encourage housing as part of mixed use development so long as the environmental standards are fully maintained.