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Westminster City Council – Planning Policy Update

Westminster City Council ('WCC') has published a "Regulation 18" notice for a Partial Review of its City Plan, setting out how the Plan is anticipated to change over the next two years. This, and a number of other recent announcements and changes in WCC, will affect planning decisions and development in the city.

Labour took control of WCC in May this year and in its manifesto pledged to put "the needs of residents before developers in the planning system", deliver more affordable housing and put the climate emergency at the centre of the Council's work. Five months on and we are beginning to see work on implementation of some of these pledges, through the Regulation 18 notice and other announcements. We set out further detail below.

PARTIAL CITY PLAN REVIEW – REGULATION 18 CONSULTATION

The Regulation 18 notice sets out the blueprint for how WCC intend to make changes to the adopted City Plan as part of its 'partial review'.

Comments are being sought on the scope of this notice and the potential contents of policies (as well as the Local Development Scheme and Integrated Impact Assessment: Scoping Paper) until **5pm on Friday 18 November 2022**. The scope of change set out in the notice very much aligns with the priorities which have been coming out of WCC since the new administration took over.

The proposed changes as part of the Partial Review are:

- **Changes to the current affordable housing policy** to redress the desired affordable housing split in favour of social housing (60% social housing; 40% intermediate)
- Potentially **requiring affordable housing from small sites** below the current policy threshold of sites over 0.5ha or providing 10+ units or proposing over 1,000 sqm residential floorspace. Labour's Manifesto suggested it would look closely at LB Islington's proposals to seek financial contributions from small sites.
- **Introduce a new policy prioritising retrofit and refurbishment of existing buildings over demolition** where relevant. Whilst there is an acknowledgement in the notice that "**sometimes demolition is the only route**", WCC want to have a "**more effective tool**" to assess the impact of demolition. Views are sought on what the policy should say.
- The **inclusion of Site Allocations** in the City Plan. WCC is welcoming the submission of new sites to be considered for allocation or new information provided on sites previously submitted as part of the previous call for sites undertaken in 2022.

There is no mention of introducing policy that would require affordable housing from commercial developments.

The next stage in the plan preparation is Regulation 19, where WCC will publish in full the draft amended policies and supporting text. This is anticipated in autumn 2023. It is at this stage where we will see how WCC intends to bring forward these policy changes in practice.

WCC has said that the changes would be adopted in summer 2025, with a wider review of the City Plan starting in autumn 2025.

FAIRER WESTMINSTER

WCC also recently launched its 'Fairer Westminster' Strategy, which will replace the Council's previous 'City for All' Vision and Strategy.

The new Strategy builds on previous manifesto pledges and does not set out any specifics in respect of planning policy and development. However, it reiterates the Council's commitment to meeting its targets to become a net zero Council by 2030 and net zero city by 2040, with **"efficient buildings" "at the forefront of our climate action"**.

This reflects the emerging anticipated policy changes set out in the Regulation 18 notice, as well as reflecting the current approach for officers and Members for pending applications.

There is also reference to a more transparent, open Council which better engages with its residents, as well as reference to a consultation on a new Statement of Community Involvement setting out how communities will be involved in planning matters. As has been the case for the last few months, we expect that the focus on meaningful resident engagement during the planning process will remain a priority both for officers and for Members.

OXFORD STREET

The Strategy also sets out an ambition for Oxford Street and the West End to be **"reimagined and revised"**, which presumably will be built upon in the long-anticipated Oxford Street vision which is yet to be published.

A **"new approach" to Oxford Street** has been unveiled by the City Council, focusing on public realm improvements to the street itself.

This will include **"permanent wider pavements, well positioned seating, additional and attractive greening as well as enhanced lighting alongside strategic interventions"** although no design detail has been released.

A new Advisory Board has been assembled, with an ambition to proceed **"at pace"** and construction planned to start in late 2023.

The proposals will not include pedestrianisation or changes to traffic flow along Oxford Street.

OTHER CHANGES

There are a number of other changes happening in WCC which are anticipated and which would affect planning and development in the borough, which are as follows:

- We expect a second round of consultation in winter 2022/2023 on the **Planning Obligations and Affordable Housing SPD**, with adoption scheduled in spring 2023. The previous SPD not only set out details in respect of affordable housing, it also included provisions for the encouragement of affordable workspace and increasing the £/tonne of carbon, amongst other matters;
- A new **Public Realm SPD** is due to be published for consultation in winter 2022/2023, with adoption scheduled in spring 2023;
- It has been announced that the adopted **Environment SPD** will be reviewed and updated, with consultation scheduled for autumn 2023, and adoption in winter 2023;
- A consultation on a new **Statement of Community Involvement** will be launched in autumn 2022, with adoption scheduled for spring 2023, which reflects the Council's focus on improving consultation for Council functions and planning applications;
- WCC's **Article 4 Direction** to remove permitted development rights for the conversion of Class E commercial floorspace to residential is now in force, albeit following intervention by the Secretary of State, covers a smaller area of the Central Activities Zone ('CAZ') than originally intended.

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