



City buzz: side street mansion flats, like these in Meard Street, Soho, are perfect for late-working West End staff (right) who are willing to share



A new scheme will help the West End's vital young workforce find flats to share at affordable rents, says **David Spittles**

WestEnders – young single and willing to share

ACTORS, theatre technicians, market traders, hotel staff and charity workers are the very lifeblood of London's West End – yet they are also among its lowest paid. Their incomes are too low to be able to buy a home or pay market rental rates, and recent changes in housing benefits have made renting tougher still.

But now Westminster council hopes to throw a lifeline with the launch of Fair Share, a new scheme to provide affordable rented housing in W1 for people who make a vital contribution to the capital's economy.

The homes are designed specifically for two to four sharers, with rents up to a third cheaper than those in the private sector.

Since last month, single people aged under 35 can no longer receive housing benefit (based on one-bedroom self-

contained accommodation). Jonathan Glanz, Westminster's cabinet member for housing, says the Fair Share scheme addresses their needs.

"With these housing benefit changes and increased living and transport costs, councils have had to find ways to accommodate those people on a London living wage in order to keep local economies thriving." Fair Share properties are let on an "assured short-term" basis, which gives security of tenure only for the period of the contract, usually a year. But tenancies can be renewed. The income bracket for applicants has been set at £17,264 to £30,000.

Properties are coming on stream through the council's housing partners, including Soho Housing Association, Pimlico-based Dolphin Square Foundation and Barratt.

Soho Housing Association has a portfolio of 800 properties, including

mansion block flats on Charing Cross Road, and is undertaking small-scale developments where homes will be let on flexible tenancies. Coming soon are five assured short-term flats at **Hanway Place**, tucked away off Tottenham Court Road. To qualify, applicants must earn about £26,000 a year and have lived or worked in the area for at least four years. Singles get priority, says Joe Chambers, chief executive.

"Our remit is to provide housing to people linked to West End industries, not to those in dire housing need or with social problems. There are haters and spoilers who say this policy diminishes family housing in Soho, but you have to ask whether the West End is a good place to bring up kids. Personally I think not."

A more commercial approach has given the association greater asset management control, he adds. Shared ownership is discouraged because the

West End is a transient housing market, but it is promoted by other associations.

More people work in the borough of Westminster than any other in London. If you are one of these employees, particularly a key worker, and trying to get on the property ladder it makes sense to register with the council for an affordable home – there are more available, even in posh postcodes, than you might believe. Visit homeownership.westminster.co.uk or call 0845 437 9701. The council has links with housing charities and associations as well as private developers, and nominates people for homes at new housing schemes.

Westminster's boundaries extend far beyond the famous parliamentary quarter and the West End heartland. The borough covers Pimlico and Paddington, takes in Maida Vale and St John's Wood as well as Fitzrovia and

Marylebone. The Grand Union Canal runs through it and there are several high-profile regeneration projects where new affordable homes are part of the mix.

One Housing Group has two schemes under construction. A redevelopment of **Marylebone magistrates' court** bordering the Portman Estate conservation area is bringing 60 affordable new homes for rent and shared ownership plus a children's play area. Completion is due in October this year. **St Luke's Yard**, five minutes walk from Westminster Tube station, has eight homes. Call 0300 123 9966 or visit onenewhome.co.uk

Other housing associations operating in Westminster borough include Origin and Octavia.

■ For more information on Fair Share properties, visit westminster.gov.uk, or sohoha.org.uk



Benchmark: by October, One Housing Group will have turned former Marylebone magistrates' court into 60 new apartments for rent and shared ownership



Easy reach: St Luke's Yard, near Westminster Tube, has eight new homes. Through One Housing Group (0300 123 9966)



Keep it local: 32 affordable flats for local workers are being built by Pocket in Fermoy Road, W9. Visit pocketliving.com