



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

# MINUTES

## Westminster Scrutiny Commission

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Westminster Scrutiny Commission** held on **Wednesday 3rd May, 2023**, Hybrid, MS Teams and Rooms 18.01-03, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

**Members Present:** Councillors Melvyn Caplan, Paul Fisher, Patricia McAllister (Chair), Angela Piddock, Rachael Robathan, Karen Scarborough and Jason Williams.

**Also Present:** Councillor Adam Hug (Leader of the Council), Stuart Love (Chief Executive), Lee Witham (Director of People Services) and Clare O'Keefe (Lead Policy and Scrutiny Advisor).

#### 1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 There were no changes to the membership.
- 1.2 The Chair apologised for the unavoidable delay to the meeting which was originally scheduled for 28 March 2023.

#### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

#### 3 MINUTES

- 3.1 The Committee approved the minutes of its meeting on 26 January 2023.

#### 3.2 RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2023 be signed by the Chair as a correct record of proceedings.

#### 4 POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE UPDATES

- 4.1 The Commission received a verbal update from the Chair of the Children and Adults, Public Health and Voluntary Sector (CAPHVS) Policy and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Piddock. The Commission was updated on the following:

- Councillor Piddock was unfortunately unwell for the meeting on 18 April. She however did watch the meeting online and wanted to record her thanks for Councillor Scarborough's robust scrutiny of the Central and North West London NHS regarding access to mental health services in Westminster for adults.
- It was noted that the closure of the Gordon Hospital is an ongoing issue with a wide-reaching impact.
- It was understood that the report on the Council's response to Covid-19 was not ready for the meeting on 18 April for a number of reasons but would be brought to the next meeting of the Committee in June.

4.2 The Commission received a verbal update from Councillor Fisher for the Finance, Planning and Economic Development (FPED) Policy and Scrutiny Committee. The Commission was updated on the following:

- The meeting of the Committee on 9 March was noted as interesting because it was used for the publication of the independent review into the Oxford Street District Programme and Members heard from Mike Cook, who conducted the review.
- Councillor Fisher highlighted the importance of challenging the reasons behind some of the less successful elements of the Programme, particularly around procurement and decision-making.
- The meeting also covered a report on the impact of Covid-19 on Council finances.
- Overall, Councillor Fisher noted, there were great questions asked by Members of both the Opposition and Majority Parties.

4.3 The Commission received a verbal update from the Chair of the Communities, City Management and Air Quality (CCMAQ) Policy and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Williams. The Commission was updated on the following:

- The meeting held on 25 April was noted as a productive meeting which first discussed the busking consultation and involving ward Councillors in that consultation.
- Members also examined measures to discourage engine idling, dockless bikes and discussions with various companies who provide dockless bikes.
- In addition, the next steps on school streets, including the successful trials and future rollout and the Waste Action Squad pilot scheme and their work across the City was discussed.

4.4 The Commission received a verbal update from the Chair of the Climate Action, Housing and Regeneration (CAHR) Policy and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor McAllister. The Commission was updated on the following:

- The Committee held an extraordinary Call-In meeting which reviewed the Cabinet Member Decision on 'Ebury Estate Renewal: Delivery Strategy and Viability Position', and, in particular, homes for intermediate rent and segregation of tenures.
- Recent meetings of the Committee have focused on temporary accommodation meeting the needs of homeless households, points in

housing procedures, rough sleeping and Councillors being encouraged to attend street counts.

- Further, the meetings have discussed Green Bonds, Green Doctors, service charges for leaseholders, repairs (including damp and mould), as well as security and anti-social behaviour.

## **5 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL UPDATE**

5.1 The Commission received an update from the Leader of the Council on forthcoming and current issues. The Leader responded to questions on the following topics:

- Reform of business rates; whether the ongoing discussions with central government are productive and responsive to the City Council's needs.
- Candy stores enforcement; how far the Council can go with closing these down and tackling the systemic issue beyond disruption tactics so positive economic growth can take place.
- Candy stores across Westminster; whether candy stores across Westminster are being targeted, not just those on or around Oxford Street, and if there are adequate resources for enforcement action to happen across the City.
- Property ownership; the focus of the Campaign Against Dirty Money on company ownership structures in pockets of the City is welcomed and joint working should be encouraged against those who buy property with illicit funds. Working with MPs will shine a light on these issues.
- Rent Support Fund comparisons; how this scheme compares to other London boroughs and if other local authorities also use this targeted funding for those who fall outside of eligibility of main government benefits.
- Rent Support Fund; the funds which have been allocated to the scheme, whether the scheme will be topped up with additional funds and where the funds are coming from to allow the scheme to operate.
- Support for secondary schools' free school meals; clarity was requested on the mechanisms to provide support to secondary schools for free school meals as efficiently as possible.
- Long-term empty residential properties scheme; the powers and resources available to the Council and those in the remit of other bodies, the language used around foreign investors and their rights as property owners, the scale and costings of the scheme and what it aims to achieve.
- Memorial to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; the process for setting out appropriate places to memorialise HM and how the process ought to be a whole-borough exercise with resident engagement and cross-party discussions.
- Fairer Westminster Delivery Plan; the information which is to be communicated to residents and the Audit and Performance Committee.
- Communication with ward Councillors; ensuring that ward Councillors are routinely informed of schemes and consultations, for example, when appropriate, rather than at the last hour or not at all.
- Administration of funds; in whose remit it is to administer packages of support, such as the Rent Support Fund and other hardship funds.

- Out-of-borough residents; ensuring that those residents who live out-of-borough are receiving the correct and proper support from hardship funds, including recognising the burden on children who travel from out-of-borough into Westminster to attend school and the schools who are struggling with the administration of this.
- Leaseholders; there are increasing amounts of leaseholders seeking help but often do not qualify for the current hardship funds available to others who are also struggling but in different situations. Also mentioned was Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and whether the Council has had conversations with them about Section 21 and raising the local housing allowance.

5.2 The Commission congratulated the Leader of the Council on the launch of the Campaign Against Dirty Money and the progress made since the launch, especially considering the impact this has in the City.

5.3 The Commission also noted the overwhelming support which has been fed back to ward Councillors about the Cost-of-Living support funds, including the free school meals initiative. The Commission expressed pride in being part of a borough that has achieved making people's lives easier in difficult times.

#### 5.4 **ACTIONS:**

1. That the Commission will receive a briefing from the Bi-Borough Director of Education on the mechanisms to provide support for secondary schools.
2. That the Commission be provided with information relating to the Rent Support Fund, including: the amount of funds allocated, if additional funds will top the scheme up and where the funds are coming from.
3. That the Commission will receive information regarding reporting on the Fairer Westminster Delivery Plan, including what will be presented to the Audit and Performance Committee.

## 6 **WORKFORCE UPDATE**

6.1 The Commission received an overview of the Workforce Update report from Lee Witham (Director of People Services) with input from Stuart Love (Chief Executive). Lee Witham, along with Stuart Love, responded to questions on the following topics:

- Grievance statistics; the absence of these in the report and the data being scrutinised at the Audit and Performance Committee on 23 February during the Ethical Standards item.
- Staff locations and London Weighting; the numbers of staff living out of borough, the focus on recruiting Westminster residents to work at the Council, the reasons for paying staff London Weighting if they live outside of London and mainly work from home.
- Reducing temporary and agency staff; the efforts that have been made to reduce temporary and agency staff on the Council workforce and the results of this effort.

- Respect and Dignity (inappropriate behaviour at work, bullying and harassment); the satisfaction rates with how their cases have been dealt with for those who have reported this.
- Leadership; the impact that Councillors and Senior Officers have on setting the tone of the Council, especially in terms of conduct and zero tolerance of inappropriate behaviour.
- Presence in communities; the importance of Officers being out and about in the community and engaging with residents and stakeholders, including the value of adequate resourcing to be able to do this.
- Community Thursdays; the positive changes that have been made with this scheme and the difficulties that can arise when dealing with lessees and communal repairs as opposed to Council tenants.
- Grievance procedures; the time it takes to deal with grievances is often lengthy and, especially given the growth in complaints about inappropriate behaviour at work, these should be dealt with properly but at a quicker pace than current practice.
- Grievance support; the assistance in place to help both parties who are going through grievance procedures.
- Staff demographics; the percentage of those working in the care sector who are women, and the positive increase in the numbers of people from the Global Majority on the Council workforce and what the contributing factors towards this are.
- Survey benchmarks; the local government benchmark used by People Insight and how it is formulated, what it consists of, the other local authorities used, and whether the benchmark is valuable and credible considering that less local authorities are carrying out staff surveys.
- Confidence in a good service; whether a free text field can be added to the next staff survey to clarify what survey-takers are thinking of when they refer to the 'If I was a member of the public contacting the Council, I would be confident of a good service' statement as current results are not easy to reconcile with public perception noted in the City Survey.
- Collaboration; the importance of having regular sessions with staff to improve processes and teams working in mental or physical silos.
- Career progression and development; the value in providing opportunities for career progression, investment in apprentices and development, keeping on top of career trends and thinking about future trends in workplaces. In addition, the importance of reviewing the approach to the current Seasonal Conversations which helps inform personal development.
- Data; the usefulness of data looking at length of service, turnover and sickness.
- Local Government Association data and staff pay levels across London boroughs.
- The positive number of disabled percentages in the Council workforce.

6.2 The Commission commended Lee Witham for a detailed and well-presented report. It was noted that there has been a plethora of good work that has been undertaken to improve the workforce and it was stressed that it is great to hear improvements are still being made.

### 6.3 ACTIONS:

1. That the Commission will receive grievance statistics in the next Workforce Update report as well as data regarding length of service, turnover and sickness.
2. That the Commission will be provided with current numbers of temporary and agency staff on the Council workforce.
3. That the Staff Engagement scores broken down by length of service of staff will be shared with the Commission.
4. That the Head of People Services will consider adding to the Staff Survey, for those who have reported inappropriate behaviour at work, bullying and harassment, a satisfaction rating on how their grievance has been dealt with.
5. That the Head of People Services will consider adding to the Staff Survey a free text option for those who are responding to the statement 'If I was a member of the public contacting the Council, I would be confident of a good service'.
6. That the Head of People Services will provide a list of local authorities who make up the local government benchmark used by People Insight.

## 7 WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

7.1 The Commission reviewed the work programme for the 2023-24 municipal year and discussed the following:

- That the Future of Westminster Commission item, which will look at the recommendations taken by the Executive, scheduled for June will instead be examined by the relevant Policy and Scrutiny Committees first.
- The Scrutiny Improvement Updates will be written updates throughout the year unless there is something that the Commission needs to approve or discuss.
- That the Commission will be kept informed of all developments concerning the work programme.

The meeting ended at 21:04.

**CHAIR:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_