



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

MINUTES

Finance, Planning and Economic Development Policy and Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance, Planning and Economic Development Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Thursday 4th May, 2023**, Rooms 18.01 & 18.03, 18th Floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

Members Present: Councillors Paul Fisher (Chair), Sara Hassan, Patrick Lilley, Ralu Oteh-Osoka, Ian Rowley, Cara Sanquest and Paul Swaddle

Also Present: Councillor Geoff Barraclough (Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development) and Councillor David Boothroyd (Cabinet Member for Finance and Council Reform). Officers: Stella Abani (Director of Economy and Skills), Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director of Finance Resources), Deirdra Armsby (Director Place Shaping and Town Planning), Brandon Avery (Policy Officer - Planning), Francis Dwan (Policy and Scrutiny Advisor), Rebecca Gordon (Digital Lead), Aruj Haider (Chief Digital Innovation Officer), Martin Hinckley (Director of Revenues and Benefits) and Sarah Little (Policy Officer - Planning). External: Nick Bailey (Fitzrovia West Neighbourhood Forum) and Simon Birkett (Knightsbridge Neighbourhood Forum).

1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 The Committee noted that Councillor Concia Albert sent her apologies for the meeting.
- 1.2 The Committee noted that Councillor Cara Sanquest stood in as substitute for Councillor Concia Albert.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

- 3.1 The Committee approved the minutes of its meeting held on 9th March 2023.

3.2 RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9th March 2023 be agreed as a correct record of proceedings.

4 PORTFOLIO UPDATE - CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE AND COUNCIL REFORM

4.1 The Committee received an update from Councillor David Boothroyd, Cabinet Member for Finance and Council Reform, on priorities for the portfolio and updates that have arisen since the last meeting. The Cabinet Member referenced the successful launch of the Responsible Procurement Strategy and the sign-off of arrangements for the latest round of the Household Support Fund. The Cabinet Member then responded to questions on the following topics:

- Information sought: Members outlined a list of topics not covered in the Cabinet Member update which were requested for future Committees. The list of topics included analysis of population estimate surveys, Pimlico District Heating Undertaking (P.D.H.U), implications of insourcing, corporate property portfolio. Following this, Members also requested information on IT disaggregation, Council reform and updates on the Report It review.
- Ethical recovery process: the status of the £200,000 set aside for ethical recovery process and whether that would sufficiently cover the expected shortcomings. Members also asked whether there were considerations to totally write-off long term overdue payments for debts owed.
- Westminster green investors: whether any applicants for the Westminster green investors scheme had been rejected.
- Contact centres: whether there were areas for improvement or inadequately performing aspects of contact centres.
- Green bonds: whether there were set to be more green bonds offered going forward beyond the £1 million worth that was initially offered. Members asked what had driven the success and take-up of this initiative.
- Macroeconomic outlook: Members asked what the rate of inflation was and the ongoing impact this was going to have on the Council's costs such as those on building material.
- Cost-of-living board: Members asked who sat on the cost-of-living board mentioned in the report.
- Identifying those in need: Members asked how households in need could be identified and mapped out across the City. In addition to this, whether enough was done to identify child hunger in Westminster and how the Council could get a clearer sense of this to ensure it is prevented wherever possible.

4.2 Actions

1. Cost-of-living board, a specific breakdown of the people who sit on the board.

2. The Cabinet Member, through future Cabinet Member Update(s) to provide additional information on population survey statistics, P.D.H.U, implications of insourcing, corporate property portfolio, IT disaggregation, Council reform and Report It review.

5 PORTFOLIO UPDATE - CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

5.1 The Committee received an update from Councillor Geoff Barraclough, Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development, on priorities for the portfolio and updates that have arisen since the last meeting. The Cabinet Member also took the opportunity to introduce Stella Abani, the recently appointed Director of Economy and Skills, to the Committee. The Cabinet Member then responded to questions on the following topics:

- Weekend markets: Members asked for information on how the baseline was determined for conclusions regarding the business of Berwick Street Market on weekends compared to during the week.
- North Paddington programme: whether progress had been made on the North Paddington programme and whether it was on schedule.
- Employment and skill board: detail on how the employment and skills board will work.
- Ebury works: Members asked whether local residents would be considered for the planned maintenance and sustainability improvements planned at Ebury. It was suggested that this project could be an opportunity to train local people and provide opportunities through the Council.
- Greening Westminster and small grants: how the greening Westminster and small grants work constituted a 'Fairer Westminster' and whether planters constituted a part of this.
- Providing updates: the Cabinet Member was asked to provide analytical updates of how schemes develop within his reports, which the Chair noted he would look out for. Additionally, the Cabinet Member was asked to address the issue of planning Committees running over time.
- Micro-logistics: clarity that cargo bikes are involved in the micro-logistics followed by a request to consider creating an opportunity for resident feedback on the initiative, particularly for road users to report any concerns.
- Activation strategy: detail was requested for future updates on the specifics of the activation strategy plan and the budget apportioned.
- Residential broadband voucher scheme: whether the scheme was still being developed given residential constraints when the cabling is considered uneconomical still exists.

- Major planning applications: understanding the fall in major planning applications and enquiring as to why the four applications that came to the Major Planning Applications Committee were deemed major.

5.2 Actions

1. The Cabinet Member, through his next Cabinet Member Update, to provide additional information on the digital connection vouchers scheme for residents.
2. The Cabinet Member was asked to provide the methodology behind the baseline comparisons suggesting an increase in Berwick Street Market trade on Community Saturdays vs a 'normal trading day'.
3. The Cabinet Member agreed to look into options facilitate resident feedback and complaints that might arise as a result of the micro-logistics schemes being developed.
4. The Cabinet Member invited Member feedback on the updates provided and agreed to consider changes based on Member preferences.

6 NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

6.1 The report authors Sarah Little (Policy Officer – Planning) and Brandon Avery (Policy Officer – Planning) introduced the report, highlighting its covering of statutory requirements and identifying key aspects including engagement with neighbourhood forums. The external speakers were then invited to give comment. Simon Birkett of the Knightsbridge Neighbourhood Forum spoke to their journey to date, impact of Government grants, their ongoing spends in terms of neighbourhood community infrastructure levy (NCIL) funding and expressed concerns about the uncertainty on national planning policy looking forward. Nick Bailey of the Fitzrovia West Neighbourhood Forum spoke to their journey to date, difficulties faced, conservation areas in need of refresh, link to public realm supplementary planning documents (SPDs) before making suggestions on how the Council could better support the forums. Questions were then asked of both the external guests and the Cabinet Member regarding:

- Use of ward funding: whether ward funding could be used to improve and host dedicated websites for neighbourhood forums.
- NCIL funding spend: examples of the type of projects that neighbourhood forums have worked on and the degree to which the Council were involved.
- Need for consultants: whether the forums had required external consultants and how onerous the financial burden had been. It was then posited as to whether NCIL funding could be dedicated for consultant fees.
- Stumbling blocks: Members asked what challenges neighbourhood forums face once an initial plan has been made and prevents progress. The forums

were also asked what more they think the Council could offer to support them, in terms of meetings and check-ins.

- Management Plan: the level of engagement with the Council on the management plans that are formed. Members asked about the degree of consultation and engagement required.
- Understanding where the Council can help: Members asked officers to outline for the Committee the extent to which the Council could support neighbourhood forums in the ways that had been suggested, given some aspects may pass beyond what was possible within the statute. Ways of engaging and listening beyond writing plans.
- Level of engagement: Members asked for the turnout in the voting process for neighbourhood forums, specifically how many people participate in a typical vote.
- Neighbourhood planning statutory requirements: Understanding exactly what the statutory requirements are of the neighbourhood plan set-up.
- Policy review considerations: Whether the policy review is set to consider the burden of hiring consultants to advise on planning matters and whether this would be picked up within the City Plan.

6.2 In closing, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development spoke to the decision-making process, benefits of localism in this context, the offer of NCIL funding for consultants, how they could be more streamlines and the nature of neighbourhood forums and the assembly of their hierarchy. The Cabinet Member took away a note to consider conservation area audits and thanked guests for raising it.

6.3 The external speakers were invited to comment. Simon Birkett spoke to the voting turnout, outlining that it should not be benchmarked against local government election turnout but in fact a would-be turnout on support for a city plan which would be more comparable. Simon encouraged the Council to consider support for an advisory role to help neighbourhood plans especially as they are starting out and performing monitoring reports. Nick Bailey spoke to neighbourhood plans needing to be better referenced in the City Plan to interlink at a strategic level, this would create much more harmony on streetscaping and some minor issues. Both guests thanked the work the Council does and the Committee for their time.

7 REPORT IT

7.1 The Chief Digital Innovation Officer, Aruj Haider introduced the report outlining that it has reviewed Report It in a more holistic way and identified four main areas across content, technology, data and organisational. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Council Reform, Councillor David Boothroyd, with the help of specialist officers then took questions on the following themes:

- Regular Updates: Members requested that the Committee receive regular updates on the progress of the review through the Cabinet Member updates.
- Strategic data collection: understanding how data will be collected, internally organised and strategically analysed. Particularly, in terms of demographics contributing feedback.
- Phone based app: understanding how a phone based app for Report It would look and feel different to the current website status. Later Members asked whether an app might form part of a wider Westminster City Council app with a wider berth of purposes.
- Bounce-back rate: After expressing concern that some residents have given up on Report It, Members heard that about 2000 reports are made each month and then asked how that figure compared to the number of people who visit the landing page and website, in an effort to try to work out the bounce-back rate of those who potentially give up on submitting a report.
- Cautious approach: Members recommended exercising caution on the relaunch, given there is only one chance to make an impression with any new offering.
- Existing capacity: whether Council services were sufficiently prepared should a new app generate a significant increase on demand for services.
- Addressing resident concerns: a recalibration of the system tool and website only addresses two of the eight most commonly reported concerns, there is a wider issue about the services being provided. A mobile app that works well but leads to the current outcomes, in terms of service, will still lead to a bad experience for users. Feedback was highlighted of significant importance.
- Working for ordinary residents: questioning whether an application was the most appropriate tool, particularly for a lot of residents who may just experience one particular concern at a certain point in time rather than routinely making reports. Questioning whether a mobile application was the most appropriate outlet for them.
- Care on the wording: Members highlighted some frustrations in the wording that is automatically issued such as “job closed” which can mean that it has been assigned and will be resolved within 28 days rather than meaning it is fixed, which could reasonably be misunderstood.
- Collaborative design: Members spoke both for and against the concept of collaborative design. For, in terms of engaging and receiving feedback from end users and involving residents in the process and against in terms of the risks of stifling innovation.
- Quick wins: Members asked what other ‘quick wins’ were in mind, following the improvements to the mapping tool and what the likely timelines would be for these.

- Communication improvements: Members suggested that the quality of information and level of communication sent out should be improved to detail exactly the process of what is set to happen.
- Structural changes: whether there were set to be significant officer restructuring to run alongside changes to the reporting system.
- Language: Ensuring that the system and particularly any plans for a chat box would be jargon-proofed in terms of issues like 'dockless bikes' which are more likely to be known by their specific brand (e.g Lime bike).
- Proactive action: Members were encouraged by comments regarding proactive approaches in the pipeline, however raised concern about issues whereby complainants of late-night noise, for example, would then be interrupted, at anti-social hours, by officers seeking to resolve or report back on the issue that has been managed.

7.2 Actions

1. The Committee heard that approximately 2000 reports are made each month, Members asked how much traffic the website attracts in total to gain an understanding as to the potential scale of people who wish to report something but may not due to the present system designs.
2. To consider changing the automatic wording of some of the reports such as "job closed" to improve communication and transparency for residents.

8 WORK PROGRAMME REPORT

8.1 The work programme was briefly discussed and Members offered to provide a list of alternative topics for consideration by the Committee going forward.

8.2 Actions

1. To receive Member suggestions and consider amendments to the variety, form and purpose of some of the substantive items currently listed in the draft work programme.

There was no other business and the meeting ended at 21.21.

CHAIR: _____ **DATE** _____