



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 **Tuesday 26th September, 2023**, Rooms 18.06 & 18.08, 18th Floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

Members Present: Councillors Md Shamsed Chowdhury, Paul Fisher (Chair), Sara Hassan, Patrick Lilley, Alan Mendoza, Ian Rowley and Paul Swaddle

Also Present: Councillors: Geoff Barraclough (Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development) and 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), Francis Dwan (Policy and Scrutiny Advisor), Debbie Jackson (Executive Director of Regeneration, Economy and Planning) and Oliver Partridge (Chief Technology Officer).

1 MEMBERSHIP

1.1 There were no changes to the Membership.

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 20th July 2023.

3.2 RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20th July 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 clarified his anticipated involvement in the policy and scrutiny process going forward, given the impending changes. The Cabinet Member also drew attention to recent developments in his portfolio, since publication of the report which included an update on concerns around the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) switch off in 2025. The Cabinet Member then responded to questions on the following topics:

- Scrutiny changes: what the policy and scrutiny changes would mean and whether the Cabinet Member would have a role to play. Members also asked for clarity as to whether the topics and themes that would come up would be in the name of Cabinet Members.
- Hardship fund: when the remaining 50% of the hardship fund was scheduled to be distributed and whether that was on track.
- Data Protection: with future integration of 'Microsoft 365 CoPilot', how would it be implemented in the council and what might the implications be for Council operations and Councillors.
- IT disaggregation: what, outside of obvious cost levels, were the issues that were present with the previous bi-borough arrangement for IT services.
- Revenue collection: what is the monetary value of the 3% improvement in the rate of Council tax collection.
- Laptop refresh: what the plan for existing laptops was, given the plans to upgrade Council staff IT equipment.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI): whether the Council had an official position on the use of AI and if so, what that was. Members expressed concern that a lack of formal written policy could risk security breaches and urged that officers should be preparing one.
- Cost of Living (CoL) support: Members asked how the £3.9 million put aside for CoL support was being advertised, including to those digitally excluded and sought data on the number of households that have been in receipt of support since May 2023 and over the last twelve months. Members also asked whether this would likely be rolled out in future years (as likely necessary) and whether there was a plan in place to budget for it.
- Council tax: whether the Council is collecting data on demographics and locations of non-payees, which could be useful for the Council in understanding the cause of the issue.
- Property investment panel: Members suggested that officers consider the implication of the recruitment of independent panel members with specific backgrounds, such as urban regeneration, and what this might mean for the future of the programme and the conclusions made.

- Emanuel House: the implications of the freehold not being sold and what precedent that might set for future similar endeavours. Members asked for detail on the nominal fee requested and why this had been chosen.
- Reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC): Members expressed relief that Westminster schools were not significantly affected by the presence of RAAC, with very few needing to be closed or rebuilt. The Committee asked about the potential wider impact and whether there were likely to be any other potential consequences to the Council.

4.2 Actions

1. Members asked for more detail on how CoL support is being advertised. Members also wished to know, since May 2023 (or in the last 12 months), how many households/families have been in receipt of support.

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 drew attention to progress on discussions about co-financing place-shaping schemes as well as the North Paddington Programme, particularly the 'digital dash' competition for young people. The Cabinet Member then responded to questions on the following topics:

- Retrofit task group: how the retrofit task group will operate and whether the £300,000 grant that has been received would cover all costs. Members did query whether this denoted an ideological and potentially oversimplified position in terms of blanket bans on demolition. Clarity was sought as to whether decisions would be made on a case-by-case basis.
- Creative Enterprise Zones (CEZ): to consider whether the allocated budget for the CEZ was sufficient given the ambition being shown. Members also asked what the long-term ambitions were for the programme and when a five-year plan might be clear.
- Digital dash: Members asked how the 'digital dash' competition had been advertised and how the young people who had benefitted from the scheme had been identified.
- Place shaping: how place-shaping on highstreets was developing and how businesses can get more involved in the process of public realm improvements.
- Westminster Employment Service: what service was being provided to justify the relatively high cost per head with the Westminster Employment Service.

- North Paddington programme: given theories linking tolerance to prosperous economic activity, it was asked whether there was a risk of gentrification or the formation of 'ghettos' in North Paddington. How this would be prevented and what success might look like for the area post the work planned.
- Communication cross-department: Members alerted officers to an incident at a Ratings Advisory Panel meeting whereby a gallery was expressing that it was experiencing hardship, it seemed that they could be eligible and benefit from other Council schemes such as the Meanwhile Activations Programme, but they had not been aware of this initiative; it was suggested that communication across departments be improved.

5.2 Actions

1. To outline how businesses can get involved with place-shaping and high street improvement efforts.
2. Following discussions at a Ratings Advisory Panel meeting, officers were asked to communicate cross-department and consider, for example, whether the galleries that are experiencing hardship could be eligible for the Meanwhile Activations Programme.

6 WORK PROGRAMME REPORT

- 6.1 The work programme was briefly discussed, acknowledging the confirmation of the change to the structure of the Committee going forward.

The meeting ended at 20.09.

CHAIR: _____

DATE _____