



# City of Westminster **Westminster Scrutiny Commission**

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<b>Classification:</b>	General Release
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Chief Executive's Update</b>
<b>Report of:</b>	Stuart Love, Chief Executive
<b>Cabinet Member Portfolio</b>	Leader of the Council
<b>Policy Context:</b>	City for All

## **1. Executive Summary**

This report provides Westminster's Scrutiny Commission an update on the following:

- COVID-19 and the Council's Response
- Staff Survey Results

## **2. Key Areas for Commission's Consideration**

2.1. The Commission is asked to note the report.

## **3. COVID-19 and the Council's Response**

- 3.1. Westminster City Council has adapted its services and way of working at pace to respond to COVID-19. Within a short space of time we have seen majority of our workforce demonstrate resilience and high levels of dedication, either in performing critical front-line services or working from home to support our communities.
- 3.2. COVID-19 has resulted in numerous challenges for Westminster. As an organisation, responding to COVID-19 had required changes to the way that we work internally and with our partners.

### *Adult Social Care*

- 3.3. Supporting our care homes and care home providers through the pandemic has been a key focus. To minimise exposure to COVID-19, Westminster asked the care homes to cocoon from 9 March, which was 12 days before cocooning was became national guidance.

- 3.4. We continue to make sure all staff working in care homes are fully supported in tackling the impact of COVID-19. This includes ensuring all care homes have adequate testing and PPE provisions, supporting care home providers to implement government guidance, and providing mental health and wellbeing support for residents and staff.
- 3.5. To support with infection control in care homes, we funded testing for all Care Home residents and staff in July, when testing was difficult to access through the national portal.
- 3.6. Westminster Council has also supported care homes with the purchase and supply of iPads to enable video calling, so that care home residents can maintain relationships with friends and family throughout cocooning.

### *Schools*

- 3.7. Supporting our schools through the various government COVID-19 restrictions has been a key priority. The outbreak control process is working well and all schools have a process in place to support children continuing to learn remotely should they need to self-isolate.
- 3.8. We have established a regular meeting with head teachers to share latest issues and address concerns.
- 3.9. The various lockdown measures have meant an increased reliance on technology. To help keep children digitally connected, Westminster gave out 750 devices in total (laptops and notebooks) to vulnerable families and children in need.
- 3.10. We continue to work with schools to ensure children have access to devices should they need to access on-line learning platforms when self-isolating. We have established a project, 'digital futures', to continue to supply schools with devices. 750 devices are currently on order and they are expected to be delivered over the Christmas holiday period.

### *Westminster Connects*

- 3.11. When the Government announced its shielding scheme, local authorities were asked to ensure that those deemed as clinically vulnerable were supported in their self-isolation. To meet this need we created Westminster Connects which has been incredibly successful in enthusing and directing the efforts of volunteers in Westminster to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents.
- 3.12. With the help of volunteers, community groups and businesses, Westminster Connects has supported more than 6,000 residents, and continues to reach out and offer support to those who are vulnerable.

### *Rough Sleeping*

- 3.13. In April and May, Westminster had a record number of rough sleepers. We housed up to 266 rough sleepers in commercial accommodation (hotels and serviced apartments) and 400 in hostels and other council supported accommodation.
- 3.14. Finding a sustainable medium and long-term solution to avoid these individuals returning to the street and to return those with no Westminster connection to their home local authority continues to be a challenge.
- 3.15. As we head into the winter, the focus continues to be on supporting those who are sleeping rough on our streets into the appropriate pathways to have their needs met.

### *Engaging with Community*

- 3.16. At a time when government advice changed rapidly, we established new forums to engage with our key stakeholders. The aim of these forums is to give updates, discuss challenges and collaborate on solutions so that the Council can best support the city, its businesses and its residents.
- 3.17. Separate forums have been established with Great Estate & Landowners, Business Improvement Districts, Amenity Societies, Cultural Institutions and Faith Leaders.

### *Economy and Business*

- 3.18. There were a number of financial support and relief schemes for businesses that were made available in response to COVID-19, which the Council facilitated. The Council was the first local authority in the country to utilise 100% of its initial Government funding allocation of grants for businesses. By mid-September, the Council paid out 5,570 grants totalling £98million, which were fully funded by Government.
- 3.19. A Discretionary Grant scheme was also devised to align with the Government's priority areas. This scheme offered 492 grants of £10,000 that were fully funded by Government. The Council received nearly 1,500 applications, and we have now paid out all of the 492 available grants to business across Westminster.
- 3.20. In April, the council offered an initial 3 month rent-free period to businesses in our commercially owned property who were effectively unable to trade and have no income as a result of COVID-19.
- 3.21. To help support our businesses through these uncertain times, we established our Movement Strategy. Our Movement Strategy focused on how to give greater flexibility to businesses to use their outdoor space for tables and chairs, in order

to meet the social distancing requirements and help keep their businesses running whilst also balancing the needs of residents.

### *Disproportionate Impact on BAME Community*

3.22. As it became evident that the pandemic was having a disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities, the Council in partnership with the BAME Staff Network lobbied Government to ensure that ethnicity data is recorded as part of death certification so that the true impact of COVID-19, and the disparities are recorded at a local and national level.

### *Working with Other Local Authorities and Agencies*

3.23. Throughout COVID-19, pan-London structures have been established to help ensure coordination across London local authorities and key stakeholders.

3.24. Westminster City Council has participated in a variety of these structures, to ensure that Westminster is represented at a pan-London level and is able to collaborate with key partners. This has taken the form of convening and chairing sub-regional meetings.

3.25. In preparation for the second wave of COVID-19, Westminster City Council has taken a leadership role to help coordinate across London. I chair the London Delivery Coordination Group, which was established on 12 October. This group focuses on identifying system-wide risks for London and coordinating partners to work in collaboration to mitigate these risks. The aim of this group is to ask the question of whether London is okay, and to escalate to the London Strategic Coordination Group where there may be risks identified that cannot be resolved.

3.26. From 24 September, Westminster City Council in conjunction with the London Borough of Camden has taken the lead on the Mortality Management Group for Wave 2 of COVID-19. This group is responsible for the management of temporary mortuary capacity on a London-wide level.

### *Organisational Changes*

3.27. There have been several changes in Westminster's executive leadership team.

3.28. Debbie Jackson joined Westminster Council in July as our new executive director of growth, planning and housing and Raj Mistry joined in September as our executive director of environment and city management.

3.29. As we turn our attention to the phase of recovery, innovation and transformation, there are opportunities to capitalise on the positive changes made in response to the crisis.

3.30. To help drive this change, a new role of executive director of innovation and change has been created and Pedro Wrobel has been recruited to this role, to begin in late November.

3.31. The focus of this role will be to redefine what the 'new normal' operating model is for the council. The role will also entail a strong external-facing element, working with key stakeholders to help shape the City for All agenda. There are no financial implications of this decision as the role will replace the deleted executive director policy, performance and communications role.

### *Staff Wellbeing*

3.32. Within a short space of time, majority of our workforce had to work from home. The wellbeing of our staff has been a priority. We established Loop Live sessions which are a weekly touchpoint for staff to hear updates and changes from the Executive Leadership Team first-hand.

3.33. Staff working from home were also given the option to have a work chair delivered to them, as well as a personal budget to ensure that they are equipped to perform their roles from home.

## **4. Our Voice Survey**

4.1. The change in the last two and a half years has been significant. Our staff engagement scores have increased by 12% (as highlighted in our most recent staff survey).

4.2. This is the second year running that we have seen record levels of staff engagement. Staff are telling us how much more positive the organisation feels. The number of staff saying Westminster is "a great place to work" has increased from 53% to 76% since 2017.

4.3. The 2020 staff survey results put Westminster comfortably in the top quartile of public sector organisations. In 2020, 17 questions have scored 5 or more points above the local government benchmark, compared to 9 questions in 2019.