



City of Westminster **Westminster Scrutiny Commission**

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Title: Leader's Update
Report of: Cllr Rachael Robathan
Cabinet Member Portfolio: Leader of the Council

1. Afghan refugee resettlement

- 1.1 As of 10 November 2021, there are 675 Afghan refugees housed in hotels in Westminster following the emergency evacuations from Afghanistan in August and September. This group is comprised of 305 adults and 370 children and the direct support for them whilst they are in bridging hotels is provided by central Government. The group will eventually be rehomed through either the Afghanistan Relocations Assistance Policy (ARAP), or the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS).
- 1.2 The council plays two distinct supporting roles: a) supporting Afghan refugees while they are living in the bridging hotel in Westminster e.g., with access to local services and b) supporting families who will be permanently relocated to Westminster.
- 1.3 The most significant risk for the Council is that refugees in bridging hotels in the city present as homeless to secure another route to permanent accommodation. This would place significant pressure on the council's housing system and is likely to result in a sub-optimal outcome for the individuals involved as the ARAP and ACRS schemes offer a more direct route to permanent accommodation than the council's housing waiting list. Officers are working with the Government and the local voluntary and charity sector to manage this.
- 1.4 The Home Office has not been able to confirm how long refugees will remain at the bridging hotels, but for the purposes of local support planning, officers are working on the basis of a 9 month offer of support within hotels. A multi-agency plan outlining the local support offer over the next 9 months is being developed.
- 1.5 We are continuing to make representations to the Government, including alongside Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and Camden Council, to work quickly to resettle refugees in safe locations far more suitable for families than an inner London hotel. We have also requested that Government look

carefully at all options which could avoid further refugees being placed in hotels in Westminster to manage the pressures being placed on council services. Government have confirmed that no additional refugees will be placed in Westminster hotels and work is ongoing to define to offer to move refugees into permanent accommodations.

2. Climate Emergency

- 2.1 The council's Climate Action Plan was launched on 3 November with almost 70 actions designed to tackle climate change and improve air quality across the borough.
- 2.2 Testing of 15 charging points for commercial vehicle use has been undertaken and will be expanded in 2022, with a wider scale pilot scheme involving an initial 20 extra EV points for vans. More will follow as part of a transport strategy designed to service the rapidly growing market for fast food, groceries, and online shopping delivery vans.
- 2.3 Over 1,000 electric vehicle charging points have been installed with a further 500 points scheduled in for early 2022. We will also look to work with Government and the Mayor of London to find incentives and grant funding to help independent traders to make the switch to electric vehicles.
- 2.4 Other measures included in the Climate Action Plan include: a new Low Carbon fund to help residents, small businesses and community groups make energy savings, a climate education programme for schools, food waste collection across the borough and a sustainable city charter, being developed alongside leading landowners and developers, to help businesses cut emissions.
- 2.5 We have worked closely with residents on a campaign to urge Government to require the removal of diesel locomotives used at Marylebone Station and a firm deadline for the adoption of hybrid technology across all rolling stock, as soon as is practicably possible. The council joined with Birmingham City Council and Oxfordshire County Council in co-signing a letter to the Minister of State for Transport requesting action as part of the upcoming franchise contract renewal, and an air quality action day was held at Marylebone Station in October to highlight awareness. This saw the installation of a new air quality monitor at Boston Place, the early readings from which confirm that both PM2.5 particulates and Nitrogen Dioxide levels outside Marylebone Station are significantly above the World Health Organisation recommended limits. The data is available here <https://www.breathelondon.org/>.

3. Budget and Spending Review implications

- 3.1 The freezing of the business rates multiplier in 2022-23 is positive for the vast majority of Westminster businesses with more of a benefit than any other Local

Authority given the size of the business rate take in the city. Officers are working to quantify the direct impact on Westminster.

- 3.2 The 50% business rates relief for the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors will benefit all Westminster businesses, with only around 10% of the largest businesses being caught by the £110k rates cap.

4. Al fresco dining

- 4.1 The temporary al fresco scheme, in place from April to 30 September, helped nearly 900 businesses, bars and restaurants to open to outdoor diners by implementing al fresco dining. 60 streets benefited from either pavement widening, temporary closure of roads and parking bays to allow tables and chairs to be set-up for outdoor restaurant seating in the street and saving many businesses from closure by creating more than 17,000 additional covers.
- 4.2 Following a month-long consultation in September, the council received feedback from residents and businesses in Covent Garden, St John's Wood, Warwick Way, Denbigh Street and Churton Street in Pimlico, Elizabeth and Eccleston Streets in Belgravia and North Audley Street in Mayfair.
- 4.3 All schemes received overwhelmingly positive responses, ranging from 83% to 96%, from residents and businesses who agreed they would like the current al fresco measures to continue until a permanent solution has been subject to a full consultation.
- 4.4 Over the winter months, businesses can submit a request for additional furniture such as heaters and gazebos. This is assessed on a case-by-case basis to ensure safety.

5. Engagement and consultation

- 5.1 The council will shortly commence a review of how it undertakes consultation and engagement to ensure a more consistent standard is applied across all council activity.
- 5.2 This will also be an opportunity to ensure it is easy for communities to engage with the council, for example, by clearly displaying consultation information on the council's website, planning consultation activity across the council, including on timings, to get more meaningful feedback.