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Report of: Councillor Heather Acton

Portfolio: Cabinet Member for Communities, PPL and Regeneration

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1. City for All Vision and Strategy (2021 – 2022) – Communities, PPL and Regeneration Priorities

1.1 Cleaner and Greener

1.1.1 Revised Code of Construction Practice

Our revised Code of Construction Practice has been through governance and is being put in place. The Code of Construction Practice is in place to minimise and mitigate the impacts of construction and development across the borough. The revised Code has strengthened the requirements placed on developments and provides a tool for the council to help manage the environmental impacts of construction across Westminster

1.2 Vibrant Communities

1.2.1 Develop a New Private Rented Sector (PRS) Strategy

Our Private Rented Sector Strategy is in operation. Post implementation achievements include the creation of a strategy group with representation from advice agencies and partners across Westminster, £100k awarded from DLUC for energy efficiency enforcement and £150k from the Carbon Offset Fund to provide landlords with grants to improve properties, and an increase in accredited landlords.

1.2.2 Refreshing our Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Strategy

Progress is being made on a refreshed Anti-Social Behaviour strategy with a number of key areas for improvement across the Council identified. Several practitioner workshops have already been held including internal and external sessions for partners and victims. More workshops are planned over the next two months and a consultation plan has been completed so that the new strategy will be distributed as widely as possible. The strategy will be evidence-based, and all partners are sharing their data to ensure accuracy.

1.3 Smart City

1.3.1 Adopt a Digital Approach to Enforcement, Inspections and Licensing

Mobile working for street entertainment and fixed penalty notices is already in operation, with further enforcement actions to be digitalised in the coming year. A new platform for Markets and Street Trading licensing was put in place at the end of December. This offers a platform for Markets and Street Trading businesses to be digital by choice and manage their licence and pitches through the platform. If successful, the same platform will be rolled out to LA03 licensing in the spring of 2022.

A strategy to transform all services in Enforcement, Inspections and Licensing is being developed and will be brought to the relevant Cabinet Members shortly. Our teams will then work together to support our communities to be digital by choice and to support our officers to provide efficient services.

2. Major Decisions

- 300 Harrow Road Full Business Case
- Ebury Phase 2 Professional Appointments

- Infill Programme Appointment of a Main Contractor
- Lisson Arches Full Business Case
- Luxborough Street Development
- Private Lettings Enforcement Policy
- Parsons North Transfer of Units
- Nuisance Vehicles Public Space Protection Order
- Rehousing Policy for Residents of Huguenot House
- Revised Code of Construction Practice
- Rough Sleeping Services Contract
- Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

3. Areas of Focus

3.1 Outbreak Management

Case rates per 100,000 in Westminster were increasing significantly due to the impact of the Omicron variant. A vaccination drive has been taking place across the borough in existing sites which has been expanded in capacity both in size and times with slight variation for each site operating 10 – 12 hours per day. There is significant capacity within the offer presently to vaccinate more residents. The vaccine bus is also still implementing over 130 vaccines per deployment.

3.2 City Inspectors

In late November, we welcomed a new intake of 11 City Inspectors who have had initial 'Induction Training' provided by a Central Team Manager and the Senior Practitioner for City Inspectors. One further new colleague started in late December. The initial cohort has now joined their teams and have commenced street-based enforcement, including supporting the Council's Greener City vision with waste enforcement duties.

3.3 Updates on Operation JADE

Our multi-agency partnership enforcement initiative, Operation Jade, was last carried out again in late November 2021. The aim of this particular operation was to focus on the sweets and souvenir shops on Oxford Street. After months of planning and consultation with numerous internal and external partners, the operation yielded considerable levels of enforcement. Actions from the operation include: The seizure of over 11,000 goods by Trading Standards Officers including unsafe toys, counterfeit clothing and nicotine products incorrectly labelled as they had high nicotine content; three notices being served by Health and Safety officers for unsafe electrical goods and standards of safety within premises; and food officers seizing 4000 food items as the business could not provide the paperwork to show the origin of the items as is required under the regulations.

3.4 Pedi-Cab Operations

A joint partnership approach is being taken with colleagues at the MET to tackle the issues of pedicabs in the City. Operations have taken place on 19th & 20th November and 11th December and 17th December 2021. The areas covered were Leicester Square, Covent Garden, Soho, China Town, and Oxford Street. Over the course of the operations officers witnessed 25 riders playing amplified music past 9pm at a level likely to be an annoyance and case papers are to be submitted for prosecution under the Control of Pollution Act 1974. 24 written warnings were also issued to pedicab riders for various antisocial behaviours under the Antisocial Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014. Work is also underway to look at a communications strategy that will highlight the issues with pedicabs to anyone who might consider using them.

3.5 Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Service Update

A service level agreement (SLA) has been drafted for the Social Landlord ASB Teams and PP&L ASB Team to ensure that the resolution of ASB cases in social settings is standardised across all tenures. The SLA is being reviewed by Westminster Housing before going to all Social Landlords in the borough for consultation through the Housing Association Chief Execs group (HACE) and will continue to be refined through our ASB working group formed to support the ASB strategy development.

3.6 Nuisance Vehicle PSPO Update

The PSPO decision is now live and will run from 31st December 2021 – 31st December 2024. A cross borough meeting with RBKC took place on Friday 14th January to discuss Exhibition Road and the collective issues both LAs share, with a view to discussing joint Police responses, and possible environmental / highways changes where appropriate. A car meet took place on 18th December and 26th December on Exhibition Road. VRMs were identified both via the Councils Acoustic cameras, and through social media, and retrospective action taken in the form of 33 Community Protection Warnings and 16 Section 59 warning letters being sent to those who were seen causing nuisance while driving. It is hoped that this continued action, albeit retrospectively, will continue to have an impact on the number of these events taking place in Westminster.

3.7 Busking and Street Entertainment

There has been an increase in issues from licensed buskers particularly concerning the noise volumes of performance, overextension of the pitch area, and buskers not displaying their licences. All licence holders will be written to in due course highlighting recent issues and advising them that we expect all performers to be compliant with the conditions of their licence and to follow the code of conduct.

City Inspectors will now focus on ensuring a highly visible presence consistently in the Leicester Square and Covent Garden areas, where there are known to be issues. Conversations will be held with Street Performers and, where there are breaches of licence conditions, they will be warned formally.

3.8 Homelessness and Rough-sleeping Update

David Harvey and I meet regularly with our main partners in the Homelessness Partnership and we have a very good working relationship. One of their comments is that the outreach teams would like more police presence in the areas where criminals target the homeless and vulnerable (for example for drug dealing). I have asked the police to take action in the hot spots which have been identified. The team also organised a workshop with our partners to begin co-production of a three year plan to apply for funding from DLHUC, which was very productive. The plan has to be submitted by the 25th February.

In November 2021, the annual national street count for rough sleepers in Westminster was 187, which is one of the lowest annual figures for many years. The next street count is later in January.

The team has also met with West London CCG and local NHS partners to consider how we can expand our already well-resourced vaccination programme across supported housing, hotels and for those who remain on the street. Westminster continues to develop and innovate our approach to supporting rough sleepers to access the vaccine programme. We are working in partnership across our Health department and our providers to ensure access to this programme is available.

This includes twice weekly vaccination in our partners day centres (Connections Saint Martins and the Passage) and across our most at-risk supported Housing Services and Fast Pass which is the promotion of community hub sites and the creation of a 'fast pass' that allows rough sleepers to access the vaccination quickly without the necessity to queue and GP Practices providing readily available access. We have also developed a training programme for front line staff to help their conversations about health, with a particular focus on the vaccine for rough sleepers who are resistant to taking up the offer of vaccination.

3.9 Food Safety in the City

The team has benefitted from grant funding to implement 'Natasha's Law', a new law which sees enhanced allergen labelling in food premises selling pre-packed food for direct sale. The team is planning and implementing a range of initiatives in order to raise awareness of the new law with the businesses it affects.

Over 4000 CBD products were detained and removed to storage from 'Covent Garden Tech Shop', Oxford St for non-compliance with the Novel Food Regulations, by officers as part of Operation Jade. No food business operator has come forward to prove the items have been subject to the FSA approval process and therefore a food EHO has now seized the items using section 9 seizure powers under the Food Safety Act 1990 ahead of the 21-day cut off and a Food Condemnation Warning is to be served on the entities relating to the operator.

3.10 Improving Air Quality in Westminster

We have recently written to the CAA regarding Heathrow's Airspace Change proposal developments and flight paths over Westminster. The Council believes that every effort should be made to respond to the ongoing climate emergency by working together to reduce emissions across the capital. Evidence shows that aviation leads to air pollution, significant carbon emissions, and noise pollution, affecting individuals' health, productivity, and the quality of air they have to breathe.

3.11 Violence Against Women and Girls Update

The council continues to support the police and the Safer Business Network in promoting and supporting the initiative "Ask for Angela", where vulnerable women and girls can seek assistance from staff in licensed premises. The council has already signed up to the pan-London Women's Night Safety Charter. The Soho Angels were back on the streets in December 2021 providing support to both women and men who for a variety of reasons needed assistance and were vulnerable. Plans are now in place to expand the Angels model into other key locations in the West End. Our new bi-borough 5-year VAWG strategy was launched on the 13th of December 2021 in partnership with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and an Action Plan will be developed shortly.

3.12 Short Lets

I have written a joint letter with Camden Council to Nigel Huddleston MP Minister for Sport, Tourism, Heritage & Civil Society, requesting the inclusion of a Tourist Accommodation Registration Scheme (and specifically Short Term Lets (STL)) in the upcoming consultation on the Tourism Recovery Plan. We have asked that the consultation encompasses suggestions and concerns around STLs beyond those proposed in the Airbnb White Paper, considering the practical frontline enforcement issues our teams face. Short Lets remain an issue in Westminster, with 1432 live cases at the moment. In 2021 the Short Lets team served a total of 148 planning contravention notices and has a further 21 pending for December 2021 and 4 enforcement notices pending.

3.13 Updates on Afghan Evacuees in Westminster

We continue to provide Cross-Council support on behalf of the Home Office to over 600 evacuees at the bridging hotel in Westminster. This is a reduced figure, as 26 families and over 100 individuals have been resettled in permanent accommodation since the middle of October. All children remaining in the hotel have been allocated a school place and recent feedback from primary schools indicates that the vast majority are attending school.

The Council has submitted the first of its five agreed properties to the Home Office to match to a family and we are awaiting feedback from the resettlement team. Our first financial claim against the £28 per person per day that the council is eligible to claim for providing support is now due for payment.

3.14 Westminster Connects

We again would like to thank our wonderful team of volunteers and staff who continue to support our communities through Westminster Connects. Since the end of November volunteers have primarily been supporting three activities: vaccine rollout, supporting Afghan evacuees and delivering Christmas hampers to vulnerable residents. With the effort of over 50 volunteers, 700 hampers donated by the Sir Simon Milton

Foundations and South Westminster BID, were packed and delivered to more isolated residents supported by Adult Social Care or living in sheltered accommodation.

3.14 Communities in Westminster

In late 2021 a new Communities directorate was set up in the Innovation and Change Department, with Serena Simon appointed as its director. The function of this department is for officers to work closely with community leads and other stakeholders, mapping our current work across communities and developing a strategic plan for more co-production of our strategies.

3.16 Church Street Programme

The Financial Viability Assessment for the Church Street regeneration programme has been finalised in line with the requirements for the planning submission. Discussions on this with the GLA will follow. As a result of the consultation with the residents and community stakeholder groups, the plans for the new Library have been amended to provide a larger quantum of floorspace through the introduction of a mezzanine floor as highlighted in the planning application.

3.17 Church Street Triangle Project

Due to staffing constraints that have now been addressed, the start of works on the Church Street Triangle project has been delayed by approximately two months.

3.18 Ebury Programme

Phase 1 construction on the Ebury site is well underway, with the main site office installation completed, piling commencing this month, and tower crane installation due in late Spring 2022. Branding and the sales strategy proposals will be finalised shortly. The Ebury Phase 2A RIBA Stage 2 design is also now complete. RIBA Stage 3 will commence in November 2022. Initial consultation on Phase 2A is running in the Studio, and a second consultation will be held later in the year.

3.19 Westminster Builds

The Westminster Builds Programme continues to progress well, with the West End Gate transfer of units nearing completion and Jubilee Phase 2 completion of 19 intermediate units scheduled for late January 2022

3.20 Updates to the Infill Programme

A review of Willmott Dixons' construction bid for a package 3 garage sites (Circencester, Desborough and Lapworth Court) is nearing completion and the consultants will be issuing a Value for Money statement shortly. Consultants are likely to support Willmott Dixons' bid for this package. Progression of these schemes is dependent upon the completion of a wider viability review of schemes across the Infill Programme following updated bids from contractors.

Following the completion and letting of a package of former office and undercroft spaces late last year, good progress is being made on other Infill sites in Lanark Rd and Cochrane St, which will deliver much needed family sized social rented homes on completion.