



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

MINUTES

WESTMINSTER SCRUTINY COMMISSION
22nd November 2021
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a hybrid meeting of the **Westminster Scrutiny Commission** held virtually on 22nd November 2021 at 6.30pm via Microsoft Teams and in Rooms 18.01-03, 18th floor, 64 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QP.

Members Present:

Councillors: Karen Scarborough (Chairman), Jim Glen, Iain Bott, Aicha Less, Gotz Mohindra and Tim Roca.

Also Present:

Councillor Rachael Robathan (Leader of the Council), Stuart Love (Chief Executive of the Council), Mark Chalmers (Operational Contest Manager), Amy Jones (Director of Environment), John Hetherington (Head of Resilience, London Fire Brigade), Artemis Kassi (Lead Scrutiny Advisor), Calvin McLean (Director of Public Protection and Licensing), Raj Mistry (Executive Director of Environment and City Management), Mo Rahman (Head of Strategy and Performance), Anna Raleigh (Director of Public Health), Hannah Small (Policy and Scrutiny Co-ordinator) and Nic Wells (Strategy Manager).

1. MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 Councillor Adam Hug and Councillor Nafsika Butler-Thalassis were unable to attend and sent their apologies.
- 1.2 Councillor Aicha Less and Councillor Tim Roca substituted for Councillor Adam Hug and Councillor Nafsika Butler-Thalassis respectively.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 The Chairman sought any personal or prejudicial interests in respect of the items to be discussed from members and officers, in addition to the standing declarations previously made. No declarations of interest were made.

3. MINUTES

- 3.1 The Committee was informed that the minutes from the previous Commission meeting held on 21st June 2021 would be circulated at a later date for approval.
- 3.2 **ACTION:** Artemis Kassi (Lead Scrutiny Advisor) to circulate the minutes of the meeting held on 21st June 2021.

4. VERBAL UPDATES FROM POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CHAIRS

- 4.1 The Committee heard verbal updates from the Policy and Scrutiny Chairs on their respective Policy and Scrutiny Committees.
- 4.2 The Chair for the Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee updated the Commission on the following topics:
- the Extraordinary Meeting of the Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee on 27th October 2021 on the Marble Arch Mound and the recommendations put forward by the Committee.
 - the Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee on 7th October on the School Inclusion health and safety in schools policy. It was noted that this had been referred to this Committee by the Audit and Performance Committee and the School Inclusion Pilot.
 - The next Business and Children's Policy and Scrutiny Committee that will be taking place on 29th November and will receive an update on the Oxford Street Regeneration Project and interim themes from a Scrutiny Task Group looking into the mental health needs of children and young people across Westminster.
- 4.3 The Chair of the Communities, Regeneration and Housing Policy and Scrutiny Committee updated the Commission on the following topics:
- Previous agenda items for the Communities, Regeneration and Housing Policy and Scrutiny Committees that have included; nuisance vehicles and local partners programme of work to tackle the issue, air quality in Westminster and the Council's air quality action plan, the capital works programme in relation to housing and a call-in on Church Street Sites A, B and C.
- 4.4 The Chair of the Adults and Public Health Policy and Scrutiny Committee updated the Commission on the following topics:
- The temporary closure of the inpatient units in the Gordon Hospital. The Committee has been focusing on working with CNWL to ensure these inpatient units re-open.

4.5 The Chair of the Finance, Smart City and City Management Policy and Scrutiny Committee updated the Commission on the following topics:

- The Extraordinary meeting of the Finance, Smart City and City Management Policy and Scrutiny Committee held on 30th September 2021 on the recent flash floods that took place in Westminster.
- The Committee also scrutinised the Council's procurement strategy, this involved receiving deep dive case studies on the Council's major procurement contracts.

5. UPDATE FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

5.1 The Committee received a written and short verbal update from Councillor Rachael Robathan (Leader of the Council) who provided an update on current and forthcoming priorities for the Leader.

5.2 The Committee discussed the following topics in detail:

- Afghan refugees living in Westminster, including their accommodation, support provided and financial reimbursements by central government.
- The good growth fund and the allocation of funding to areas such as Harrow Road.
- The continuation of Al-Fresco schemes and long-term funding settlements for temporary schemes.

5.3 The Committee were told that approximately 300 adults and 400 child Afghan Refugees were being accommodated in the Northern part of the City in hotels. It was noted that this was temporary measure until permanent homes were located for these refugees across London and the country. Members asked if the Council had considered using temporary accommodation to house the refugees. Officers explained that these refugees were on a different support pathway and could not use temporary accommodation.

5.4 The Committee discussed the need to manage expectations amongst the refugee community, as due to limited available housing, permanent homes would likely be sought in outer London boroughs and further afield.

5.5 The Committee discussed the financial implications of supporting these refugees and funding from central Government. The Committee were informed that the Leader of the Council will be meeting with the Home Office to discuss the permanent resettlement of these refugees.

5.6 The Leader of the Council put on record her thanks to the volunteers and officers at Westminster Connects, who have been supporting the refugee community since they have arrived. Information on what donations are needed for this group can be found on the fortnightly Westminster Connects newsletter.

- 5.7 Concerning the good growth fund, Members of the Committee asked the Leader how the Council is distributing its resources evenly across the City to ensure areas such as Harrow Road received investment.
- 5.8 Concerning the temporary AI-Fresco schemes across the City, the Committee discussed the financing necessary to make some of these schemes permanent. Officers informed the Committee that the some of the larger AI-Fresco schemes were in part privately financed and that they would be different solutions for different areas.

6. COVID19 AND VACCINATION UPDATE

- 6.1 The Committee received a written and short verbal update from Anna Raleigh (Director of Public Health) who provided an update on Covid19 cases, outbreaks and the rollout of vaccinations across Westminster.
- 6.2 The Committee discussed the following topics in detail:
- The location of PCR testing centres across the City and the intended consequence this has caused by closing much loved community centres.
 - The engagement and guidance the Public Health team and Department for Health and Social Care have with university campuses.
 - The reasons behind Westminster's low Covid19 infection rate and low vaccination rate.
 - Vaccine hesitancy and the Councils programme of work to try and combat this.
- 6.3 Concerning the location of PCR testing centres across the City, the Committee discussed the intended consequence this caused by closing much loved community centres such as centre in Church Street. Officers informed the Commission that there were challenges in identifying suitable locations for PCR testing and there was limited suitable buildings across the City.
- 6.4 Members of the Commission asked whether the Council's public health team advise universities across the City on Covid19 related guidance. Officers informed the Committee that whilst the public health team works with Schools they have limited engaged with universities.
- 6.5 The Commission discussed how Westminster had a low infection as well as low vaccination rate. Officers stated that Outer London boroughs tended to have higher infection rates than inner London boroughs. Regarding the low vaccination rates, Officers informed the Commission they suspect the overall population data for Westminster is inaccurate and therefore the vaccination rates appear lower than they are.

6.6 Officers informed the Commission that one of public health's priorities was to ensure over 40's received their booster vaccine. Members asked what type of engagement the team were having hard to reach communities, Officers informed the Commission that they are using a hyper localised approach known as 'making every contact count', this involved working with 'covid champions' and identifying community leaders to engage with.

6.7 **ACTIONS:** The Committee requested that:

- Officers explore temporary locations for PCR testing sites in community centres.

6.8 **RECOMMENDATIONS:** The Committee recommended that:

- The Council's public health team accompanies housing officers as they conduct tenancy checks across the City to encourage local residents to get their vaccines and booster vaccines.

7. CLIMATE EMERGENCY UPDATE

7.1 The Commission received a written and short verbal update from Amy Jones (Director of Environment) who provided an update on the Council's Climate Emergency Programme.

7.2 The Commission discussed the following topics in detail:

- The incineration of recycling waste and the Councils programme of work to encourage more recycling across the City.
- Accountability on climate pledges and the Councils pledge to plant 2000 trees
- Measuring the impact of climate reduction and carbon offset initiatives across the City.
- Communal heating in tower blocks and encouraging residents to use heating appropriately.
- Future iterations of planning policy and how the Council can ensure it is as environmentally friendly as possible.

7.3 Concerning recycling rates across the City, the Commission were informed that the Council are conducting several pilots to encourage residents and businesses to recycle. These include door knocking and better communication from the Council.

7.4 The Commission discussed the accountability of climate pledges with particular reference to the Council's pledge to plant 2000 trees. The Leader of the Council acknowledged that this was a challenging pledge and enlisted the help of ward councillors to suggest locations of where these trees can be planted.

- 7.5 The Commission discussed that the Climate Emergency Action Plan was a living a document and the Council were learning and testing new ideas to tackle climate change regularly. The Commission discussed the importance of measuring impact, it was acknowledged that this was challenging to do as a City as a whole as the majority of emissions come from buildings not in the Councils control.
- 7.6 It was noted that the Council are working in partnership with businesses and local landowners in particular to address emissions produced from listed buildings. The Commission were informed that the Council and local partners were about to launch the Sustainable City Charter.
- 7.7 Members of the Commission asked Officers about communal heating in residential blocks. Members informed Officers that the communal areas of the residential blocks often got very hot and discussed what environmental impact this was having. The Commission discussed the balance between ensuring residents, including vulnerable residents, had access to heating throughout the winter and the environmental impact heating residential blocks has.
- 7.8 Concerning future iterations of planning policy, the Commission were discussing what levers the council had at their disposal to reduce carbon emissions.
- 7.9 **RESOLVED:** that the Committee note the report.

8. CITY FOR ALL UPDATE

- 8.1 The Commission received a written and short verbal update from Mo Rahman (Head of Strategy and Performance) and Nic Wells (Strategy Manager) who provided an update on the Council's City for All Strategy.
- 8.2 The Commission discussed the following topics in detail:
- The consultation and communication to residents about the City for All Strategy and how this can be improved.
 - The research methodology and sample size used within the City Survey and whether this sample size was representative.
 - How to avoid replicating voices when engaging with community groups and how to reach beyond usual engagement partners.
 - The input of policy and scrutiny committees into the City for All Strategy.
 - How the thriving economy fourth pillar is bedding in and how its interacting with the cleaner and greener pillar.
- 8.3 Concerning the consultation with residents and communication to residents of the City for All priorities, the Commission discussed how the consultation could avoid replicating voices when engaging with community groups and how to reach beyond usual engagement partners. Officers informed the Commission that they had

received similar feedback from the Youth Council who stated that they should engage directly with youth clubs on the strategy.

- 8.4 The Commission discussed in detail the methodology and sample size behind the City Survey. Officers informed the Commission that there the sample size was 2500 and that this was statistically significant and representative of residents across Westminster.
- 8.5 Members of the Commission pressed Officers on the involvement of Policy and Scrutiny Committees in shaping the City for All priorities. Members asked if the Strategy to come to the Committees before it was formulated in order to have input. It was agreed that the Strategy would come before the Committees to be scrutinised once published.
- 8.6 The Commission discussed whether the phrase 'city' was recognised by all residents, especially those in the north of the Borough. Officers informed the Commission that the Councils messaging, specifically 'a city for all' was well known by residents.
- 8.7 Concerning the fourth pillar of the City for All Strategy, a thriving economy, the Commission discussed how it was bedding in and interacting with the other priorities, particularly the cleaner and greener priority. Senior Officers said the two priorities were working well with one another and in some areas, businesses were encouraging the Council to go hard and faster with their cleaner and greener commitments.
- 8.8 **ACTIONS:** The Commission recommended that:
 - Officers provide the questions within the City Survey to the Commission to help guide the scrutiny of the City for All Strategy
- 8.9 **RESOLVED:** that the Committee note the report.

9. ANNUAL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS REPORT

- 9.1 The Commission received a written report from Raj Mistry, Executive Director of Environment and City Management, and Mark Chalmers (Operational Contest Manager) on the Council's annual emergency preparedness report.
- 9.2 The Commission welcomed John Hetherington, Head of London Resilience at the London Fire brigade to the Commission as an expert witness. John praised the Council and its partners, stating that Westminster is thought of very highly by partners as a category 1 responder.

9.3 The Commission discussed the following topics in detail:

- If the Council can conduct incident management training with ward Councillors, as often Ward Councillors are the first to hear of emergency incidents.
- The need for urgent communication from the Council when an emergency takes place. The Commission were informed that urgent comms had been developed for major incidents and that residents would be directed to the Councils website.
- If the Council conducts scenario planning with Officers to test their response skills.

9.4 Concerning the flash floods that took place in Westminster in July 2021, the Commission asked for this issue to be scrutinised by the Westminster Commission and not just the Finance, Smart City and City Management Policy and Scrutiny Committee as the floods were in part regarding climate change.

9.5 Members asked Officers present whether Councillors could be trained in incident management, as often ward Councillors are first to respond to local issues.

9.6 The Commission discussed how Westminster's response to the flash floods compared with neighbouring Boroughs. It was noted that like for like comparisons were not possible due to the differing number of residents affected in each Borough.

9.7 Concerning the improvement of urgent communication to residents affected by emergency incidents, Officers updated the Commission that urgent communication had been drafted for major incidents such as flooding. This would enable residents to receive quicker communication from the Council on the Council's websites. Members enquired if direct communication to residents, via text or email would be appropriate if a manage incident had taken place in their ward.

9.8 The Commission were informed that the Officers undertake incident management training to test their responses and improve these if needed. This training is London wide, but the Council also undertakes internal training as well.

9.9 The Commission Members and Leader of the Council put on record their thanks to the London Fire Brigade for their quick response on the night of the July floods.

10. WORK PROGRAMME

10.1 Members discussed the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

11. END OF MEETING

11.1 The Chairman formally closed the meeting at 8.47pm.

CHAIRMAN _____

DATE _____