



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 **Thursday 20th July, 2023**, Rooms 18.01 & 18.03, 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), David Boothroyd (Cabinet Member for Finance and Council Reform) and Cara Sanquest (Cabinet Member for Resident Participation, Consultation Reform and Leisure). Officers: Stella Abani (Director of Economy and Skills), Gerald Almeroth (Executive Director of Finance Resources), Deirdra Armsby (Director Place Shaping and Town Planning), Haylea Asadi (Head of Business and Enterprise), Jake Bacchus (Director of Finance), Francis Dwan (Policy and Scrutiny Advisor), Debbie Jackson (Executive Director of Growth and Planning), Paula Norris (Customer Engagement Manager), Serena Simon (Director of Communities) and Pedro Wrobel (Executive Director of Innovation and Change).

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 14th June 2023.

3.2 RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14th June 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 referenced the Westminster Shared Property Fund, Ebury Bridge, electrically powered lorry bins impact on the capital budget and the Seymour project. The Cabinet Member then responded to questions on the following topics:

- Revenue collection, how revenue collection, particularly of council tax, could be improved further beyond the improvements to date.
- Unpaid penalty charge notices (PCNs), the impact of unpaid penalty charge notices particularly those from internationally imported vehicles on the Council's revenue.
- Ethical collection, the number of people who are issued the extended period for paying council tax and how this service can be assessed in terms of success.
- Digital transformation, identifying the Cabinet Member who will take responsibility for digital and whether this is changing. Whether efficiency savings would be made to pass onto frontline services and if disaggregation savings were going to be realised.
- Report-it focus, Members highlighted that the priorities for review within report-it (waste, highways and noise) were the same as the previously set priorities and questioned the benefit of repeating this exercise and highlighted the risk of falling into the same traps.
- Contact centre staffing, why the Westminster Employment Service is securing the funding for "5 Westminster Residents" on "placement" and not formally permanently recruiting and what the advantage of this might be.
- Report-it visuals, whether the planned work to optimise user-experience with report-it had already been mapped out. Members expressed caution with the intention to have this ready by the end of the year if the design was not already mapped out.
- Contact centre communication, understanding the emphasis on calls for contact centres when there are many other forms of communication, including some which can be viewed as more practical. Members also asked whether the use of artificial intelligence (AI) was being considered and in what capacity this might be.
- Public participation in Full Council meetings, Members asked for how the process worked for vetting of questions and whether this was going to be tweaked following the initial run at the last meeting.
- Audit process, Members highlighted the need to pushback on auditors to prevent unnecessary delays in publication of accounts.

- Adjusted capacity, whether the Council is prepared to deal with an increase in number of reported issues if the report-it tool leads to a big jump in the level of reporting or if more staff would need to be recruited. Members expressed interest in the volume of ‘transactions’ being reported or available to Members once the changes are made and it goes live.
- Communicating how issues will be actioned, Members suggested communication could be improved so that residents can get a better sense of how their issue will be actioned and what is required of them.
- Reporting illegal short-let stays, Members raised issues that residents have experienced when reporting potential short-term lettings breaches via report-it and asked what action could be taken.

4.2 Actions

1. Contact Centres, to clarify why the Westminster Employment Service is securing the funding for “5 Westminster Residents” on “placement” and not just formally permanently recruiting. Members asked if there was any particular reason for this.
2. The Cabinet Member to note issues when reporting potential short-term lettings breaches via the report-it app and the confusion around how this can be reported and what action can be taken.
3. Additional information on the use of chatbots and any other AI tools on waste collection and/or reporting issues to the Council.

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 the decision by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to deny planning permission to the flagship Marks and Spencer’s store on heritage grounds. The Cabinet Member also highlighted the launch of the Meanwhile Activations Programme and the Highstreet programme launch before responding to questions on the following topics:

- Economic development focus, whether enough emphasis was being put into tackling potential illegal, money-laundering and non-paying business rate ventures on high streets. The extent to which conversations were happening with the police and National Crime Agency and what more could possibly be done, was also asked.
- Oxford Street Programme, detail on the timeline and understanding why the publication of reports and consultations were not published in advance.

Members suggested that it might be worth extending the consultation beyond the summer months, to ensure it could be considered by the maximum number of residents. The Cabinet Member indicated that if the resident response level was poor by the planned end of the consultation period, then an extension might be considered.

- Westminster Investment Service, Members asked which businesses had benefitted from the scheme and whether this number of businesses represented a success to the scheme.
- Oxford Street Programme funding, whether the £10 million project referenced in the update was enough to cover the entire area. Members also asked whether the target aim of 50% private sector funding had yet been secured.
- 363 Oxford Street, Members asked what the latest developments were where the flagship HMV store used to feature at 363 Oxford Street.
- Soho monitoring surveys, Members asked when the planned surveys looking at noise, traffic and air quality in Soho were going to be undertaken.
- Highstreet decline, what has been identified as something that highstreets might need to perform better in and what areas might be in need of additional and enhanced branding. Members also asked what the timelines were for consultation with other highstreets such as Edgware road and what the next steps would be.
- Raze sustainable bag pilot, Members asked for the source of the statistic claiming that use of the advertising on the bags was “up to 11 times more effective at diverting web traffic than online other advertising methods”. Additionally, what, if any, other research was available to corroborate this.
- Smart Cities Programme, Members asked what work was going on in addition to the air quality work. Members requested that more detail be provided in subsequent Cabinet Member updates.

5.2 Actions

1. Members asked for more information on what the Council might be able to do to try to tackle suspected money laundering operations and business rate non-payers on major high streets.
2. Westminster Investment Service, to identify the other business that has benefitted from the scheme.
3. Members asked when the Soho monitoring surveys on noise, traffic and air quality were going to take place.
4. On the Raze sustainable bag pilot, Members asked for the source of the statistic claiming that use of the advertising on the bags was “up to 11 times

more effective at diverting web traffic than online other advertising methods". And if available, what other sources could corroborate this.

5. The future Cabinet Member report to include more information on the Smart Cities programme.

6 ADOPTION OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

6.1 The Cabinet Member for Resident Participation, Consultation Reform and Leisure, Councillor Cara Sanquest introduced the report, explaining the process and how it linked to wider Council strategies. Serena Simon, Director of Communities, elaborated on the work done on the initial phases and reiterated that the hope was for Members to help shape the next phases through steers and suggestions. The Cabinet Member, supported by specialist officers, then took questions on the following themes:

- Timing and detail of the paper, Members expressed disappointment at the level of depth and openness of the paper and suggested it might be more appropriate to return to Policy and Scrutiny at a later date once this information and specifics could be provided and there might be options being considered available for review.
- Managing and administrative costs, Members asked for more detail on the costs that are set to arise as a result of administering the various forms necessary to facilitate participatory budgeting (PB). Further to this, Members asked what the costs were likely to be from any citizen assembly efforts in terms of recruitment, participation and officer time.
- Register of active residents, Members asked what the register of active residents was and what someone might have to do, to be included on it.
- Promotion, Members questioned whether the Communities Priority Programme could be better advertised and if not, whether more resource was required. The channels used by the Council were also questioned.
- Assistance offering, having identified that some individuals might struggle to get involved in PB efforts, Members asked what assistance might be made available to encourage the maximum amount of people can get involved without barriers in their way.
- Scope of phase three, clarity on the scope of the potential project and then understanding how this decision had been reached and why some areas had been chosen over others.
- Profile of beneficiaries, how the profile of the 77 beneficiaries from the first two phases of PB differs from the typical profile of beneficiaries from equivalent grant funding.
- Evaluation report, why the evaluation report that was due in July 2023, had not been provided to the Committee.

- Scale of funds on offer, Members asked how serious the Council was about this as a form of budgeting given the scale is very small compared to the overall total spend of the Council and whether there were plans to expand this in the future.

6.2 Actions

1. Administering costs, Members asked how much additional funding would be required to administer the £600,000 allocated grant budget and where this was coming from. Including, but not limited to, the costs for the managing of the grants and the costs of running community forums and residents participation in decisions.
2. To provide a copy of the evaluation report of the first round that is due "July 2023".

7 WORK PROGRAMME REPORT

7.1 The work programme was discussed, and Members agreed to the planned agenda published in the Work Programme. Namely a look at the business case of the Oxford Street Programme. Should the consultation have closed, as planned, Members asked whether initial results could be referenced in the papers that are provided to the Committee.

7.2 Members expressed an interest in the recommendations arising from the Future of Westminster Commission, however felt it did not merit a substantive look by itself.

7.3 Actions

1. To keep Participatory Budgeting in mind when agreeing future meeting agendas, as Members felt there could be a more productive conversation to be had when specific details were available to the Committee.

The Meeting ended at 21.00.

CHAIR: _____

DATE _____