



City of Westminster

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting:	Thursday 25 July 2024
Classification:	General Release
Title:	Leader's Update
Report of:	Councillor Adam Hug, Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Leader of the Council
Wards Involved:	All
Policy Context:	Fairer Westminster
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1. Environment

- 1.1. The Council is continuing to work towards its target of being a net zero council by 2030 and a net zero city by 2040.
- 1.2. The Climate Leadership Group has met quarterly, with the last meeting on 17 April and the next on 7 August. The Cabinet and all Executive Directors are invited to each meeting to discuss the strategic approach with climate officers.
- 1.3. In Westminster there is a clear link between climate change and economic, health and racial inequality. Pimlico North, Pimlico South and Queen's Park have among the highest levels of deprivation in the borough, as well as the highest risk of flooding. The wards which have the greatest exposure to heat risk include Church Street, Queen's Park, Harrow Road and Pimlico North, where life expectancy is also 3.75 years lower for men and 1.5 lower for women than the Westminster average. Low-income households are also more likely to be exposed to higher levels of air pollution and have less access to green space.
- 1.4. A Climate Adaptation and Resilience plan will be published in late 2024 in order to mitigate the impact of extreme weather events. Earlier this year the Environment team also appointed a dedicated officer to focus on the climate resilience workstream. This is following the increase of adverse

weather, which seriously impacted Westminster in 2021 when flash floods affected approximately 230 properties, 60 roads, three community centres and a local primary school. The plan will seek to improve the capacity of the city to respond to impacts of climate change.

- 1.5. Officers have also produced an engagement action plan outlines engagement with residents, employers, and community organisations on the issue of climate change.
- 1.6. Following the declaration of an Ecological Emergency in Autumn 2023, a range of actions are being taken and £450k has been allocated from this year's budget. This includes a Green Infrastructure Audit which has just been completed and assessed the current condition of green spaces in the city. The No Mow May campaign was launched which encouraged gardeners to facilitate biodiversity throughout the month. A ban on use of the weedkiller Glyphosate has been imposed, further supporting nature. The Council has also become a partner of Wild West End, which is bringing together local authorities, businesses and conservation organisations to create a network of green spaces.
- 1.7. £750k has also been allocated from the budget to enhancing waste and cleaning resources as well as keeping streets clean.
- 1.8. Following the Citizens Climate Assembly last year and its final recommendations, a committee populated by former attendees has been formed to assess progress in fulfilling set targets. The Committee had its first meeting on 3 April and will meet again towards the end of the year.
- 1.9. The refresh of the Climate Action Plan will be published later this year.

2. Cost of Living

- 2.1. With approximately 8,800 households in receipt of universal credit and around 1 in 4 children in Westminster living in poverty, alleviating the cost of living is a priority for the Cabinet.

- 2.2. The total cost of living support package is now more than £23 million.

Household Support Fund

- 2.3. Continuing to assist residents throughout the cost of living crisis is a priority, and £11.1m of Westminster's own resources have been spent to extend the support of the Household Support Fund.
- 2.4. The Council was allocated a further £1.9m from the Household Support Fund for the period of April to September 2024.
- 2.5. Efforts have been made to target support to the vulnerable groups identified in the Cost of Living Strategy, namely families, older people, those with disabilities and single people, which was in line with guidance issued by the previous government in April.

2.6. Key areas funded include:

- £991,277 to provide free school meals in school holidays, benefitting 8,800 children
- £524,115 to support to those eligible for the Severe Disability Premium.
- £200,000 towards the Cost of Living Support Fund, with applications made through Citizens Advice Westminster and agency partners.

2.7. Further funding was also allocated to food charities, including North Paddington Foodbank and Abbey, Westbourne, HAFs and Emmanuel Pantries.

Free School Meals

- 2.8. An additional £1.6m has been committed to continue the free school meals programme for Key Stage 3 and nursery pupils until at least July 2025.
- 2.9. Alongside the Mayor of London's programme to provide meals for primary school children, it will ensure that all Westminster pupils between the ages of 3 and 14 receive a free nutritious lunch daily.
- 2.10. It is estimated that this will save the average family £550 per child.
- 2.11. This funding will continue to be provided as long as the Mayor of London provides free school meals for Key Stage 2.

3. Cabinet

North Paddington Programme

- 3.1. Since it was established in 2023, the first year of the North Paddington Programme (Year 1 2023-24) has sought to build momentum and impact in collaboration with North Paddington community stakeholders.
- 3.2. The next steps and indicative programme of works for the Years 2-4 of the Programme were approved at Cabinet on 15 July. The proposed works include improving trust and visibility around crime and safety for residents; shop fronts on Harrow Road; Maida Hill Market activation and capacity building for local organisations. A full list of the proposed projects can be found [here](#).

Oxford Street

- 3.3. The Stage 2 design for Oxford Street is complete and the finalisation of design is required in advance of pre-mobilisation and construction.
- 3.4. The next phase for the Oxford Street project is the development of a Stage 3 (detailed) design, which was approved by Cabinet on 15 July.

- 3.5. The Council has chosen to progress to Stage 3 design while the final financial arrangements with the New West End Company and their members are put in place. This is expected to be completed over the coming months.

Insourcing of Housing Solutions Services (HSS)

- 3.6. Providing Housing Services that are responsive and empathetic is central to delivering on Fairer Westminster commitments.
- 3.7. HSS has been provided externally for over 20 years with the service currently commissioned to Places for People and delivered by their subsidiary company Residential Management Group (RMG). The current contract was awarded in 2017, prior to the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which introduced the duty to prevent homelessness and the duty to relieve homelessness. These legislative changes have had a significant impact on demand for the service, which has had to adapt from the original service model.
- 3.8. The Council made a commitment to review HSS which acts as a gateway for those seeking support and advice. In doing so identifying opportunities to strengthen front line delivery and address increasing operational pressures faced by HSS during an unprecedented housing situation. This work also delivers on one of the recommendations of the Future of Westminster Commission to identify any parts of the service that could be delivered directly in-house.
- 3.9. By insourcing key elements of the service, as approved by Cabinet on 15 July, the Council will gain greater control and influence of the service and ensure it is better connected into wider services. This will include being better placed to understand and respond earlier to demand, including the temporary accommodation that is used and the financial risk that increasing demand for temporary accommodation brings.

4. Priorities for new Government

- 4.1. The Council has a number of lobbying issues that it will continue to make representations on to Ministers in the new Government. At the time of writing no announcements had yet been made on the areas detailed below.

Short-term Lets and Empty Homes

- 4.2. Whilst tourism is important to Westminster, excessive numbers of short-term lets hollow out active communities and places pressure on genuine residents who want to live in the city. There are a particularly high proportion of short term lets in West End, St James's, Hyde Park and Lancaster Gate wards.
- 4.3. Housing and licencing officers frequently receives complaints regarding the inappropriate use of short-term lets resulting in ASB.

- 4.4. This previous Government was committed to the introduction of the property register which would allow officers to take action against the properties that are effectively being used as permanent short-term lets. They had also proposed to make existing short-term lets exempt from the need for planning permission which the Council was opposed to.
- 4.5. On 15 July, the Leader joined officers on a 'Day of Action' to identify potential empty homes and short-term lets in breach of the 90-night restriction, as well as raising the profile of this issue.

E-Bikes

- 4.6. Careless use of e-bikes and scooters creates a daily barrier to residents and visitors, particularly those with disabilities and accessibility needs, and are particularly lucrative for their operators who do not contribute to public infrastructure.
- 4.7. Westminster has established a network of around 300 parking bays through negotiations with e-bike operators to help manage the situation. Officers are using the tools currently available to encourage responsible parking, however there is a high legal bar for intervention with officers only able to remove e-bikes in instances where there is an imminent risk to life.
- 4.8. The Council will continue to advocate for regulation around hire, operation, and parking as well as additional enforcement measures.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

- 4.9. Westminster has the highest rates of rough sleepers in the country, and whilst the Council is eager to implement a person-centred approach, this is undeliverable within the current framework.
- 4.10. This restricts the ability of officers to provide the wrap-around support that people need to ensure that they do not enter another period of homelessness.
- 4.11. Whilst supportive of the removal of the Vagrancy Act, a broader review of the system is needed.

Temporary Accommodation

- 4.12. The spiralling costs of Temporary Accommodation (TA) pose an existential risk to Local Authority finances across the country.
- 4.13. Initially TA was meant to be cost-neutral, and Westminster ran under budget every year until 2019. However, in 2023/24 gross spend on TA was £96m, which netted back to £37.8m after receipt of rents and DWP payments and grants.
- 4.14. Private rents in Westminster are increasingly expensive and the LHA rate is not reflective of the reality of rental prices in the borough.

- 4.15. The Council will shortly acquire Hopkinson House in Vincent Square with the intention to convert the building for use as temporary accommodation. It will deliver a minimum of 33 extra in-borough units and prevent the potential permanent loss of this longstanding social housing asset.