

Housing, Finance and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee

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Portfolio: Finance, Property and Regeneration
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Overview

I am pleased to take on the portfolio of Finance, Property and Regeneration. I will continue my predecessor's work to deliver sound financial decisions that facilitate ambitious programmes which improve the lives of our residents.

We have already delivered 641 affordable homes and we are on track to exceed our target of 1,850 homes by 2023. I will be making sure that that housing we deliver is green and helping Westminster Council be carbon neutral by 2030. I'll be working with residents, businesses and landowners to improve and future-proof our iconic Oxford Street.

Finance and Resources

1. Revenues (Council Tax and Business Rates)

- 1.1. Council Tax collection has continued to improve, and now aligns with the collection level of last year, which should in turn mean that end of year collection should hopefully mirror last year's highest ever collection figure of 96.7%.
- 1.2. The current business rates (NNDR) collection rate is only down 0.3% compared to the same point in time last year, despite a number of retailer insolvencies during the current year. It is anticipated that it should be possible to match last year's collection rate of 98.0% by year end.
- 1.3. The Council also collects Business Improvement District (BID) levies for the borough's 12 BIDs. Collection is progressing well with 9 of the 12 BIDs remaining, which is an improved collection on last year.

2. Discretionary Housing Payments

- 2.1. Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) are made in accordance with the Council's DHP policy and provide additional support to Housing Benefit and Universal Credit claimants. Due to central government reductions in the Council's DHP funding allocation in recent years, the Council has previously agreed to top-up the government's funding allocation from within its own resources. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property & Regeneration has agreed in principle to fund a top-up if required in 2020/21.
- 2.2. At the end of Quarter 3, it was forecast that a top-up may be required at year end of around £140,000. The benefits service will continue to review the forecast on a quarterly basis.

- 2.3. The Council is awaiting the Government's announcement on the Council's DHP funding allocation for 2020/21.

3. Budget

- 3.1. The Budget was approved by Council on March 4th, 2020.

4. Community Contribution

- 4.1. At the end of December 2019, we have collected £900,172 from 812 unique donors of Band H properties.

5. London Living Wage Adoption

- 5.1. The 'Real Living Wage' is now being applied to all new third-party contracts as contracts are retendered. A Steering Group continues to oversee the Council's progress and to further refine the contract renewal pipeline and establish the status of existing contractors.

6. Procurement Services

- 6.1. Following completion of formal consultation, mobilisation is progressing for the new service to 'go live' on the 6th April. A number of operational changes will also be implemented to improve governance and bringing added focus to contract management. The new service will include procurement activity previously undertaken by devolved teams in the adults and children commissioning services.

Regeneration and Development

7. Church Street

- 7.1. Our stakeholder engagement with the Church Street community is ongoing. On the 16th of February we held a Winter Wellness event for the community, where more than 200 residents attended and took part in activities ranging from Zumba, fencing, yoga, mindfulness and meditation and many more health and wellbeing activities.
- 7.2. Neighbourhood Keepers have just finished their applications for 2020 with some promising community led initiatives and we will be letting successful applicants know by end of March.
- 7.3. We have also collaborated with Spacehive to launch Thriving Communities & Create Church Street Funds for employment and creative based projects.

7.4. Luton Street

- 7.4.1. The site office accommodation block has been erected in Luton Street, works are ongoing to complete the loading platform which will receive site deliveries from the end of March.
- 7.4.2. Our new Carrick Yard hoarding has gone up around the area and we have introduced our new Carrick Yard newsletter.

8. Ebury Bridge

- 8.1. The renewal of Ebury Bridge continues to be a top priority for Westminster Council. It's our ambition to deliver a new national standard in estate renewal with the delivery of a vibrant, truly mixed tenure, new neighbourhood.

- 8.2. Pivotal to the delivery of the scheme is the important role the Community Futures Group play in shaping the project. The hard work of the group has brought the project to this point. They will continue to be key to the development through selection of contractors and monitoring of performance.
- 8.3. The project has reached a significant milestone with the successful rehousing of all phase 1 households. 106 secure tenant and leasehold households have moved from the estate with the majority indicating they want to return to a new home on the estate once built.
- 8.4. 'Ebury Edge' Meanwhile facility is scheduled to be completed by Spring 2020. The facility will provide space for new Westminster based start-up businesses, community groups and local residents.

9. Tollgate Gardens

- 9.1. Clarion Housing, who are developing the scheme, continue to report a completion date for the majority of units of 30th March 2020 completion. Two units (houses) have been flooded by a burst internal pipe, and their completion will be delayed until May 2020. Clarion have committed to ensuring that the scheme is delivered to a high-quality finish. The Council continue to monitor works against this expectation.
- 9.2. Improvement communal works to Tollgate House will be delivered as part of the scheme. Residents that are due to return to the new homes as part of the Council's Right of Return offer have had the opportunity to see a completed social rented show home. There has been a very positive response from residents on the standard that is being achieved.

10. Pimlico (Balmoral/Darwin)

- 10.1. The scheme will replace the existing Darwin House Community Supported Housing Scheme with new HAPPI standards flats let at social rents as well as providing flats for intermediate rent.
- 10.2. Public Consultation took place across three days, during which approximately 90 residents attended and 30 left comment cards. The sessions provided a mix of feedback, majority of concerns are over height and massing, residents are satisfied with the affordable housing presented.
- 10.3. The Council is now in the process of reviewing the daylight/sunlight and Right of Light data against the models. The stage 2 design report is under review and will be taken to a pre-application discussion with the planners, along with the feedback from public consultation.

11. The Infill Programme

- 11.1. There are currently 15 new homes being constructed on site, with a further 6 units ready to start on site in early June 2020.
- 11.2. The development team are working with procurement to develop a strategic procurement for the construction of 161 new units across the city. Recent procurement activities for the smaller infills have returned disappointing results, the intention is to offer the market 3 large packages of work, each of which will include a mixture of projects ranging from 2 units to 23 units. The intention of this strategic procurement is to attract a different sector of the market with a view to delivering better value and lower overall risk to delivery.

12. Jubilee

- 12.1. A resident drop-in session took place on Tuesday the 25th of February. This meeting was to inform residents about the next phase of works taking place over the coming months.
- 12.2. The demolition of the existing structures has now commenced. The developer is committed to delivering the completed units by Summer, 2022.

13. Oxford Street

- 13.1. We remain committed to improving Oxford Street and surrounding neighbourhoods and support the principles of the Place Strategy as well as the allocation of the £150 million already set aside to kick start public realm improvements.
- 13.2. But we are now ambitious to go further, particularly in relation to our environmental agenda as well as taking a Smart Cities approach
- 13.3. I am taking the lead on updating our current Oxford Street plans to reflect these fresh ambitions, with a commitment to reengage and continue to collaborate with residents, businesses and landowners to develop our plans further.

Human Relations

14. Staff Survey

- 14.1. Westminster City Council's overall Engagement Index for 2019 is 73%, excluding the housing team (previously City West Homes). This is an increase of 3% from last year (70%). In addition, this result is 4% above the 2019 local government benchmark. The council's engagement index including the housing team (formerly CWH) is 72%. The appendix details the full survey results for this year.
- 14.2. This result is a very positive indicator that people are engaged by our vision of City for All. The response to the question "I believe the work I do will help us deliver a City for All" has increased by 15% since 2017, and is now 79% positive.
- 14.3. Excellent progress is also being made in making Westminster a great place to work: the answer to this question is now 67% positive, an increase of 14% since 2017.
- 14.4. The response rate was 70% which has increased significantly compared to the last two years when it was 62%. This shows that staff are taking the time to fill in the survey as they continue to place more trust in the organisation.
- 14.5. We look forward to continuing to make Westminster the best place to work and live.