



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

MINUTES

Community Services, Business and Planning Policy & Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a virtual meeting of the Community Services, Business and Planning Policy & Scrutiny Committee held on **Monday 8 June, 2020 at 6:30pm.**

Members Present: Councillors – Karen Scarborough (Chairman), Geoff Barraclough, Richard Elcho, Lyndsey Hall, Andrea Mann, Eoghain Murphy and Hamza Taouzzale.

Also Present: Councillor Matthew Green (Cabinet Member for Business & Planning) and Councillor Paul Swaddle (Cabinet Member for Community Services & Digital).

1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 There were no changes to Membership.
- 1.2 It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Eoghain Murphy be appointed as Deputy Chair for the meeting.
- 1.3 **RESOLVED:** That Councillor Eoghain Murphy be appointed Deputy Chair of this meeting of the Community Services, Business & Planning Policy & Scrutiny Committee.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 No declarations of interest on items on the agenda were made.

3 MINUTES

- 3.1 **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 April 2020 were approved as a correct record of proceedings.

4 CABINET MEMBER FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES & DIGITAL UPDATE

- 4.1 Councillor Paul Swaddle OBE (Cabinet Member for Community Services & Digital) provided a verbal update on current and forthcoming issues in his portfolio, and responded to questions from Members. Recent months had been a busy time for all teams within the City Council, and the Cabinet Member

thanked all of the staff within his portfolio for the work they had done, and for stepping up to support other departments during the Covid-19 crisis and in connection with the recovery response.

- 4.2 A single information hub had been established on the City Council's website in response to Covid-19, which had been constantly updated as the pandemic progressed. The website had seen a significant increase in traffic, with 1.2m unique visitors between March and June. The Committee noted that as part of the social media campaign, two Facebook Live sessions had been staged with the Leader of the Council, with the first attracting over 1500 visits. The viewing figures for the sessions had been 13 times the average for local authority events of this kind and had shown good engagement. The Westminster Connects Service had also been launched, and sought to attract volunteers and coordinate them with people who were shielding, in self-isolation, or were vulnerable and needed help. As the country entered the recovery stage, the City Council was providing additional information to connect businesses and residents.
- 4.3 Westminster Connects was currently supported by over 3,200 registered volunteers, of which 2797 had been deployed to deliver nearly 36,000 needs which had included shopping and befriending. The Committee highlighted the need for the service to continue once the pandemic had ended and noted that Connects would now migrate into voluntary sector responsibilities and service other residents' needs. Although it was hoped that there would not be a second wave of Covid-19, Connects would be in a position to be reinstated with an immediate response if needed.
- 4.4 The Committee commended Connects for their work and noted that the service was being mainly run by staff taken from within existing budgets. £15,000 had been made available to fund a shopping service, in which volunteers used pre-credited cards to buy shopping which service users paid for after it had been received. Although £7,000 had so far been repaid, it was not anticipated that all the money would be recovered. An update would be provided at the next meeting in September, when more data would be available.
- 4.5 The Committee also discussed eligibility for the Connects Service and noted that needs were self-identified by residents who needed support. Individual cases of need could also be assessed if applicants had not been considered eligible.
- 4.6 The Library Service had closed on 23 March in line with government guidelines, but had continued to offer virtual services, which included information, e-books, and sessions through social media. Since Libraries had reopened on 2 April 1200 customers had used internet and computer services, with social distancing being maintained through the provision of time-limited sessions. It was anticipated that libraries would re-open on 4 July, subject to government guidance.
- 4.7 The Committee also commended the work of the Active Westminster Physical Activity Leisure & Sport team (PALS) during the pandemic. All of Westminster's seven Leisure Centres had closed on 20 March, while Parks had remained open. Since the lockdown began, over 300,000 people had visited the

Paddington Recreation Ground: with 20,000 people visiting over the Bank Holiday. The recent warm weather had also created a demand on recently re-opened sports and court facilities; although some of the courts and gardens had to be shut when some of the visitors had failed to observe social distancing.

- 4.8 As many residents did not have access to open space, the Committee recognised the importance of keeping parks open until guidance on re-opening facilities was received. Committee Members also highlighted the importance of smaller parks within estates, and the Cabinet Member agreed to provide further information of future plans for Play Streets.
- 4.9 The City Council's business was being done differently in response to the Covid-19 lockdown. Staff had been working from home, and virtual Committee meetings had been held online and made available on the City Council's website. Public involvement and representations in Planning and Licensing Committees were also being maintained through the virtual meetings.
- 4.10 The Committee also discussed the role of the City Council in Westminster's foodbanks, together with their current location at three temporary sites. The Cabinet Member considered that their location at multi-use sites could serve communities better, and agreed to provide details of the support being provided by Westminster.
- 4.11 Other issues discussed included Ward Budgets; the Westminster City Lions online; progress in connectivity; and making cultural activities more accessible.
- 4.12 The Committee thanked Cllr Swaddle and the Council Officers within his portfolio for their work in establishing the Westminster Connects Service.

5. CABINET MEMBER FOR BUSINESS AND PLANNING UPDATE

- 5.1 Councillor Matthew Green (Cabinet Member for Business & Planning) provided a verbal update on current and forthcoming issues in his portfolio and responded to questions from Members.
- 5.2 The Planning Service had continued to function effectively online, with officers working remotely and virtual Planning Committees being streamed on the City Council's website with good viewing figures. Although site visits had been slowed down by the lack of access to properties, consideration was being given to how visits could be safely reactivated.
- 5.3 The City Plan had been submitted to the Secretary of State in November and was now in the examination phase which would include a public hearing. Although all public hearings had been postponed in response to the pandemic, it was hoped they would reconvene in October, which would enable the City Plan to be adopted by the end of the year or early 2021 at the latest.
- 5.4 Although a number of Place Shaping schemes had not moved forward due to staff mostly being redeployed to work on highways and support the response to Covid-19, Public Realm projects had continued to be delivered across Westminster with work being done responsibly.

- 5.5 In addition to the creation of Westminster Connects, a further positive of the pandemic had been the redefinition of the way the City Council worked with its partners and with businesses. Consultation with businesses on the support they needed to re-open had led to the first phase of the Movement Strategy, in which 5 miles of barriers and cones had been installed across Westminster to allow pavements to be extended so people could move about safely. Businesses were also playing an active role in discussions on how the City and its hospitality industries could re-open; and the City Council was lobbying the Government to enable local authorities to make temporary changes to licences, which would enable premises to have a greater number of tables and chairs outside.
- 5.6 As Westminster entered the recovery stage from Covid-19, measures were being taken to support businesses with additional information that would connect them with residents. The City Council had recognised that the recovery would be resident led, so had launched the Shop Local Campaign on its website which included an interactive map for residents showing which shops and business were open and trading. The Committee noted that over 250 businesses had registered with Shop Local, and Members were asked to urge their local businesses to provide details of their services.
- 5.7 The Westminster Business Unit had received over 2000 enquiries since the beginning of March, and the team had been given additional support by staff being redeployed from other areas such as the library service. Advice on queueing provided by the Business Unit in support of the re-opening strategy had been shared country wide as best practice; and work with the Public Protection and Licensing services to produce guidelines for the re-opening of non-essential businesses and hospitality services was ongoing. Non-essential retail units were also returning to Westminster's markets, with 60 properly socially distanced managed stalls trading again at Church Street.
- 5.8 Although the Government had introduced a scheme of Small Business Grants for businesses across the country, the City Council had been disappointed with the qualifying threshold of rateable value needing to be less than £51,000, which only represented a small percentage of businesses in Westminster. The Leader of the City Council had asked that the threshold be extended, but this had not been taken up. Westminster had been the first local authority to launch the Small Business Grants scheme which had a closing date for applications of 11 June, and it was hoped that grants would be awarded by 25 June. The Committee noted that although £4 million had been allocated to the City Council in discretionary funding for businesses that had not been eligible for the grants, this had been less than was hoped for.
- 5.9 The Committee discussed the City Council's Movement Strategy and highlighted the importance of balancing the needs of business with residents. Committee Members also highlighted that need of maintaining parking facilities for shoppers, and for consultation with residents and campaign groups to protect residential amenity.
- 5.10 The Committee noted the contribution made by the Westminster Employment Service in supporting rough sleepers and providing them with hotel and hostel

accommodation during the pandemic, and in supporting residents and BAME communities back into work.

- 5.11 The City Council had also continued to stage the pop-up Business School, with the latest sessions being adapted to the Covid-19 crisis. The sessions had been held fully online with the two-week course focusing on business resilience and adaptation. The Committee noted that demand had been high, with one of the programmes having been attended by 250 people.
- 5.12 The Committee commented on the reduced levels of pollution in Westminster during the lockdown and sought assurance that this would be a post-Covid opportunity rather than a temporary effect. Committee Members also highlighted the need for the City Council to work more closely with developers on the construction and use of buildings, in order to achieve the objective of a climate neutral Westminster by 2040. The Cabinet Member suggested that pollution could be further reduced, and air quality improved by coordinating trade and commercial waste vehicles.
- 5.13 The Committee commented on the importance of the cultural sector, which was a major source of income in Westminster, and highlighted the need to support associated businesses that would reopen at the same time as theatres.
- 5.14 Other issues discussed included government discussion on deregulating the planning system and the need to maintain the obligation for developers to provide affordable housing and encouraging retail businesses in Harrow Road and Church Street. The Committee also discussed the need for people to be retrained in response to a post-Covid shift in business; linking up businesses with the caring community; and removing racist and discriminatory comments made online in connection with planning applications.

6. 2019-20 WORK PROGRAMME

- 6.1 The Committee discussed its future Work Programme for the remainder of the 2020/21 municipal year, together with agenda items for its next meetings on 14 September 2020 and 1 February 2021.
- 6.2 The Committee noted that following the recent restructure of the City Council's Policy & Scrutiny Committees, the Oxford Street Project review now fell within the remit of the Housing, Finance & Regeneration Policy & Scrutiny Committee.
- 6.3 **RESOLVED that:**

- (1) The next meeting of the Committee on 14 September would focus on the City Plan and on Westminster's continued response to Covid-19. The Cabinet Member for Community Services & Digital would be invited to attend; with a written update being requested from the Cabinet Member for Business & Planning. Other items for the September meeting would be Westminster's Contact Centres; the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy including Westminster Connects; and Libraries and the response to the report of the Libraries Task Group at present and going forward;

- (2) The agenda for the following meeting on 1 February 2021 would include a further update on the City Plan and the ongoing viability of designated development sites, together with an update on the Westminster Employment Service. The Cabinet Member for Business & Planning would be invited to attend; with a written update being requested from the Cabinet Member for Community Services & Digital. Consideration would also be given to including a review of the Create Church Street project; the further development of the Westminster Connect service; and the impact of Covid-19 on the future of the Arts Industry in the West End, together with the businesses that relied on that industry; and
- (3) Members be invited to suggest other issues that could be considered for the Committee's future work programme

7. COVID19

- 7.1 The Committee wished to formally record its thanks to Cabinet Members, Council Officers and volunteers for their ongoing help and support for Westminster's residents and visitors; and in providing encouragement and support to aid the economic recovery of Westminster's businesses following Covid-19.

The Meeting ended at 8.42pm

CHAIRMAN: _____

DATE _____