



# City of Westminster **Westminster Scrutiny Commission**

**Date:** 20 April 2021  
**Classification:** General Release  
**Title:** **Leader's Update**  
**Report of:** Cllr Rachael Robathan  
**Cabinet Member Portfolio** Leader of the Council

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 As per the new agreed Cabinet Member report structure for Policy and Scrutiny meetings, this update provides key highlights on the Leader's portfolio, including the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have made no key decisions to update the committee on since my last report.

## **2. City for All**

2.1. The refreshed City for All strategy for 2021 was launched on 4 March 2021. As part of our Greener and Cleaner, Vibrant Communities and Smart City priorities, the refreshed strategy reaffirms the council's core offer of providing high-quality services for the most vulnerable, well-managed streets and sustainable outdoor spaces, and better technologies to improve the everyday lives of residents, as well as provision for Westminster's future and supporting the city to recover from the pandemic.

2.2. Central to the recovery is a new pillar in the strategy, Thriving Economy, which underlines the commitment to supporting the city to rebuild a dynamic post-pandemic economy which will enable businesses and communities to thrive.

## **3. COVID-19 infections, testing, and vaccinations**

3.1. As of 1 April 2021, the infection rate in Westminster was 26 per 100,000, which is half the English infection rate, and lower than London as a whole. The return of schools has not had an impact on the overall infection rate. Testing has plateaued but remains above the London average. The council continues to operate testing centres for symptomatic and asymptomatic testing across the borough.

3.2. The vaccination programme continues to be led by colleagues in the NHS with support from the council. Westminster has multiple vaccination centres: South Westminster, Marble Arch and Westminster Abbey with pop-up centres held at

London Central Mosque & Islamic Cultural Centre, as well as pharmacies across the borough. Through close working with the NHS and CCGs, we are working to improve the data sharing to ensure offers for a vaccine are extended to every individual in the eligible cohorts. This includes a weekly meeting with NHS leaders and local MPs to drive progress in improving vaccination rates.

#### **4. Virtual and hybrid meetings**

- 4.1. Emergency legislation allowing virtual council meetings, will not be extended from 6 May. This means meetings requiring a quorum of elected members will need to allow for physical attendance of these members, whilst other participants (including members of the public, officers and other members) can attend virtually. An application has been made by other parties to the Courts to declare that councils already have the powers needed to hold online meetings. The Local Government Association (LGA) will be providing support in these proceedings as the representative body for councils. The council will monitor the outcome of these proceedings while working with the LGA. Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, has stated he supports the legal challenge.
- 4.2. Since the enactment of the legislation, the council has been working on the basis that hybrid in-person/virtual meetings will be required going forward and have been testing technology solutions to do this.

#### **5. Budget and Tax Day implications for Westminster**

- 5.1. The business rates holiday for retail, hospitality and leisure has been extended from April to June 2021, with a 66% discount for the following nine months (to March 2022), capped at £2m per business that were required to be closed on 5 Jan 2021, or £105k per business for other eligible properties.
- 5.2. In Westminster, 5,000 businesses were eligible for business-related grants in 2020-21 and it is anticipated a similar number will benefit from a further £425 million in discretionary funding announced as part of a £5 billion 'restart' grant scheme. The discretionary funding will be administered by the council and fully funded by government via Section 31 grant.

#### **6. Al fresco dining scheme**

- 6.1. The al fresco dining scheme will be returning when restaurants, pubs and bars re-open to outdoor diners on 12 April and will remain throughout the summer months.
- 6.2. Since temporary measures were first introduced when lockdown restrictions eased in July last year, more than 560 premises have been issued with pavement licences and have been able to benefit from outdoor dining. The temporary measures from last year will support the same set of streets as before and will extend to the end of September.
- 6.3. Members and officers are considering the possibility of what a longer-term al fresco provision could look like. Consultations will be undertaken with communities as and when designs are created.

