



CITY OF WESTMINSTER

MINUTES

Communities, Regeneration and Housing Policy and Scrutiny Committee

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Minutes of a hybrid meeting of the **Communities, Regeneration and Housing Policy and Scrutiny Committee** held virtually on **Monday 6 July 2021 at 7.00 pm** via Microsoft Teams.

Members Present: Councillors Andrew Smith (Chairman), Barbara Arzymanow, Antonia Cox, Elizabeth Hitchcock, Matt Noble, Ian Rowley, and Hamza Taouzzale.

Also Present: Cllr David Harvey (Cabinet Member for Housing), Lewis Aaltonen (Policy and Scrutiny Co-ordinator), Simon Brooker (Chief Inspector for the Metropolitan Police Service), Tim Davis (Head of Environmental Health, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea), Debbie Jackson (Executive Director, Growth, Planning and Housing), Alex Juon (Team Manager in Public Protection and Licensing), Artemis Kassi (Lead Scrutiny Advisor/Statutory Officer), Calvin McLean (Director of Public Protection and Licensing), Raj Mistry (Executive Director of Environment and City) and Neil Wightman (Director of Housing).

1 MEMBERSHIP

- 1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Heather Acton, Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration and from Councillor Guthrie McKie.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

- 3.1 **RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2021 be approved and signed as a correct record of proceedings.

4 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

- 4.1 The Committee had received apologies for absence from the Cabinet Member for Communities and Regeneration, Cllr Heather Acton. The Committee was informed that they could submit questions in writing about the Cabinet

Member's portfolio in writing, and they would be taken forward for as action items.

5 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

- 5.1 Cllr David Harvey, Cabinet Member for Housing, provided a written update and responded to questions about the ongoing resident survey, which aimed to measure resident satisfaction with Council housing. The Committee queried the reliability of the responses to the survey. The Committee welcomed Councillor Harvey's reply, which explained that the sample size of the survey and the quality and diversity of responses was likely to have a low margin for error, and that on first inspection, the responses received were consistent with known issues. The Committee accepted that more robust interrogation of the results of the survey would follow.
- 5.2 The Committee was given an update about the Churchill Gardens Pilot, and the multi-agency panel. The Cabinet Member clarified that the multi-agency panel was a measure to collaborate with several fields and disciplines where objectives were shared.
- 5.3 The Committee discussed the Smart Homes initiative, and was informed that interim results from the trial period of the Smart Homes programme would be available in October or November for scrutiny by the committee. It was raised that residents generally needed to have an active internet connection so that they could benefit from these innovations. The Committee was pleased to hear that a voucher scheme was under consideration that would get residents connected at very favourable rates.
- 5.4 Regarding drones checking the status of repairs and home conditions, the Committee was advised that, whilst there may be a teething period where residents were sceptical of drones inspecting their property, this technology was expected to be very useful. The Committee heard that, when repairs were needed in high places, the birds-eye view they offered would be valuable.
- 5.5 The Committee discussed the issue of anti-social behaviour on Council Property, and the enforcement measures that the Council could take against persistent anti-social behaviour. The Committee heard that only one eviction had been necessary over the last year, and that there were approximately 30 Notice of Possession Orders (NPOs) active or being processed. The Committee further heard that these NPOs would allow the Council to indicate to residents that, were they to misbehave or act anti-socially, they would be evicted, and that courts would have the ability to pass that measure rapidly.
- 5.6 The Committee was advised that cases of anti-social behaviour could be sensitive and complex, and that the Council endeavoured to respond to each case with the requisite nuance. The Committee discussed how situations involving families where only one member behaved anti-socially complicated enforcement against anti-social behaviour.
- 5.7 The Committee noted that the Cabinet Member aimed to reshape the agreements signed with tenants to emphasise neighbourliness as a key component. The Cabinet Member explained that a pilot scheme investigating

two Council Estates would seek consensus on tenants' expectations of good behaviour and that this would enable the Council to respond more effectively to cases of poor behaviour in Council-owned properties.

- 5.8 The Committee suggested benchmarking, using analysis of other countries, which could be a valuable exercise for the Council. Singapore was named as a country that may provide good examples of enforcement against anti-social behaviour.
- 5.9 The Committee requested clarity around Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for leaseholder satisfaction and heard that satisfaction rates in Westminster had gone up by approximately 6% in the past year. The Committee heard that this placed Westminster's rates relatively highly when compared with other London boroughs. The Committee was told that hard work had been done in communicating with Leaseholders about major works in the past five years, though the dividends of these efforts would likely take time to realise in the data. The Committee heard that measures taken by the Cabinet Member and the relevant Council departments in this regard included hosting small-group workshops, which clarified to leaseholders the details of major works. It was noted that Leaseholders may not have had a good experience in the past, and so it was an ongoing process to rebuild trust with them.
- 5.10 The Committee requested more information about the status of Agilysis, the Council's repair call centre, and performance in the face of reduced staff capacity and ongoing high demand for services and repairs. The Committee heard that staffing of the main centre was facing a cut of nearly 30% of its capacity. The Committee discussed the advancements in the call system used by the centre in aiding performance. The Committee also heard that, in addition, the changes to the call centre would be graduated over the course of two or three years and that additional capacity could be provided in an urgent situation if needed, with some 15 additional staff able to be drafted in to increase capacity in a crisis or over the winter months.
- 5.11 The Committee requested and received reassurances that drones were legal to operate on Council property, provided that they were seen and managed by an operator. The Committee was also advised that, before drone repair inspections were implemented, the measures would be checked thoroughly with Legal Services and that this step ensured that no Council officer or department breached regulations on drones.
- 5.12 The Committee requested information about the employment of Westminster residents as apprentices and officers involved with this portfolio. The Committee welcomed the Cabinet Member's position, which was that, whilst the top priority was to employ the best candidates available, he had consulted senior officers about the number of attractive jobs on offer for residents. The Committee heard that the Cabinet Member aspired to hold job fairs for residents to seek employment with the Council in housing roles.
- 5.13 The Committee inquired about the reliability of data in recent housing surveys, and whether residents were included in the questioning process. The Committee welcomed the information that an online survey group had been set up to ensure resident input was accounted for in questioning.

6. REPORT ON NUISANCE CAUSED BY NOISY VEHICLES AND CAR MEETS

- 6.1 The Committee received a report from Calvin McLean, Director of Public Protection and Licensing and Alex Juon, Team Manager in Public Protection and Licensing at Westminster City Council, regarding noisy vehicles and car meets in the City. The Committee also welcomed Simon Brooker, Chief Inspector for the Metropolitan Police Service, and Tim Davies, Head of Environmental Health for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, who lent their expertise and experience to the presentation and discussion of the report.
- 6.2 The Committee was given an update about existing and new measures which the Council had at its disposal in order to tackle the issue of noisy vehicles and car meets. Officers presented Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) as a measure which empowered the Council to order people to cease drinking or surrender their alcohol.
- 6.3 The Committee was informed that RBKC had trialled the use of acoustic cameras, which aimed to detect high decibel levels in localised areas. The Committee further heard that this trial had seen some success in reducing numbers of car meets and vehicles causing nuisance in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.
- 6.4 The Committee was presented with details of the acoustic camera trial in RBKC by Tim Davies. The Committee heard how the trial had taken place over the three months before 25 December 2020 and how instances of car meets had fallen over this three-month period, although it was uncertain whether this could be attributed directly to acoustic cameras.
- 6.5 The Committee heard that many residents in RBKC took this matter extremely seriously, with RBKC receiving multiple letters and emails of complaint, and petitions formed to encourage RBKC to take more action against car meets.
- 6.6 The Committee was advised that, according to the data held by RBKC and the Metropolitan Police Service, the chief culprits in car meets and noisy vehicle disturbances were people who drove into London, such as (but not limited to) young men from Essex with customised cars. The Committee was further advised that, contrary to popular resident opinion, most Fixed Penalty Notices (PCNs) were not applied to owners of 'super-cars' during Ramadan, for example. The Committee welcomed the news that RBKC had seized one vehicle, following an incident witnessed by enforcing officers.
- 6.7 The Committee was further advised that co-operation between boroughs was essential in this matter, as there was likely to be displacement from one borough to neighbouring boroughs, depending on which Council cracked down on car meets more severely.
- 6.8 The Committee invited Chief Inspector Simon Brooker to give a verbal update from the perspective of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). The Committee was reassured that the MPS was supportive of the implementation of PSPOs, but was advised that the MPS wished to put in place as many tactical options

as possible. The ability to pursue remote prosecutions via evidence from acoustic cameras was also commended by Chief Inspector Brooker.

- 6.9 The Committee heard that policing priorities focused on violence and major disturbances, especially currently within the context of easing COVID-19 restrictions. The Committee further heard that, despite this, there was a policing plan to tackle car meets and noisy vehicles in place that spanned until the end of August and for example, even the past weekend, several dispersal orders had been issued. The Committee welcomed the commitment of the MPS to dedicating resources to tackling car meets throughout the summer, with the caveat that this could not be committed to for the long term.
- 6.10 The Committee expressed that its own members had been inconvenienced by noisy vehicles and car meets, with Waterloo Place noted as a hotspot in Westminster. Member discussion focused on the highly attractive public realm that attracted car meets. The Committee queried whether persistent offenders could be banned from driving. However the Committee was satisfied that, whilst people causing disturbances with noisy vehicles could not be banned from driving in the area, PSPOs combined with other measures could limit their behaviour.
- 6.11 The Committee agreed that whilst noisy vehicles and car meets were a significant nuisance for residents, it was of utmost importance that serious violent crimes and robberies took precedence for policing.
- 6.12 The Committee requested more detail about the acoustic cameras and asked whether acoustic cameras were set manually, what decibel levels triggered them, and whether video was captured alongside audio. The Committee was advised by officers that a sound level of 80 decibels had been decided upon because it met the threshold required when a fixed penalty notice within a PSPO was issued and that therefore, nuisance vehicles could be penalised if they breached this limit. The Committee was further advised that acoustic cameras, when activated, captured a short video clip of the vehicle which caused the noise.
- 6.13 The Committee discussed hotspots in Westminster where further enforcement would be useful, such as, but not limited to, the Edgware Road. It was agreed that better communication with residents would be beneficial so that these problem areas could be identified.
- 6.14 The Committee observed that the collection of data should be prioritised so that Parliament could be lobbied with a firm case for improved primary legislation. The Committee was reassured by officers that this would be taken forward.
- 6.15 It was raised by the Committee that some vehicles involved in noise disturbances and parking violations were foreign vehicles, including from the Gulf states, and that preventing the importation of certain cars could be considered as one method to alleviate problems in central London. This matter was noted as difficult, as offending vehicles varied, and a traffic officer with keen knowledge of legislation was needed to enforce against such vehicles.

- 6.16 The Committee received an update on slowing and stopping measures such as additional speed bumps and 'stingers' and how they could be used to prevent misuse of vehicles. The Committee heard that temporary public realm works (such as temporary speed bumps) were under consideration but had financial and resource implications. The Committee further heard that acoustic cameras, in conjunction with PSPOs, would help to enforce in specific areas. However, the Committee was informed that severe measures such as stingers were rarely deployed by police and would not be useful, for example, in stopping ongoing car meets.
- 6.17 The Committee queried the cost-effectiveness of acoustic cameras Debate centred on the cost of the cameras, and the resource implications of staff required to review footage. The Committee was advised by officers that acoustic cameras would be a cost-effective measure for tackling this issue. The Committee thanked the report authors and the external witnesses for their contributions to the meeting and the productive discussions.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

- 7.1 The Committee received a report on its work programme from Artemis Kassi, Lead Scrutiny Advisor/Statutory Officer. The Committee was advised that it would be timely to discuss air quality at the next meeting of the Committee in October, ahead of COP26.
- 7.2 The Committee requested that post-COVID19 recovery, and the environmental implications of major works and construction in the City be raised as connected matters to discuss as part of the wider discussion around air quality.
- 7.3 The Committee received an update on the scrutiny function from Artemis Kassi, who indicated that, with increased resource, the Policy and Scrutiny Team would be able to provide a more detailed Work Programme to the Committee after the summer recess. The Committee welcomed Lewis Aaltonen, who joined the team as a Policy and Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

The meeting concluded at 21.05.

CHAIRMAN _____

DATE _____