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Report of: Councillor Heather Acton

Portfolio: Cabinet Member for Communities, PPL and Regeneration

Report Author and Contact Details: Alexandra Severino (adseverino@westminster.gov.uk)

1. City for All Vision and Strategy (2021 – 2022) – Communities, PPL and Regeneration Priorities

1.1 Cleaner and Greener

1.1.1 Air Quality Action Plan Update – Lisson Grove Pocket Parks

The Church Street Regeneration Programme was successful in securing the ‘Open Spaces Greener Places Fund’ to revitalise the Lisson Green Estate pocket parks, providing quality outdoor spaces in the Ward. The team has applied for additional funding to build on this work which we hope will fund extra seating, planting, wildlife habitat structures, raised planters, a small greenhouse, a new water system for the allotments to sustain water accessibility, and the creation of additional allotment spaces for residents.

1.2 Vibrant Communities

1.2.1 Develop a New Private Rented Sector (PRS) Strategy

The PRS Strategy is in place and operation. Recent achievements include setting up a Private Rented Strategy group involving external stakeholder and securing external funding for enforcing energy efficiency in the private rented sector.

1.2.2 Support for Westminster Businesses Post Lockdown

We continue to support our City since the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in July. The majority of the AI Fresco schemes that were implemented in July 2020 have now been removed. Some schemes have been retained where residents agreed they could continue. Over 400 pavement licences have been issued to businesses across the city to provide support for the winter months.

1.3 Smart City

1.3.1 Adopt a Digital Approach to Enforcement, Inspections and Licensing

City Inspectors are all now using the “Phablet” as a mobile working solution to process operations in relation to waste enforcement. The Phablet is being tested to process noise cases and should be in full use later this month.

We are in consultation with PPL Management and our Service Transformation Team with regards to our Dynamic Resource Scheduler (DRS). The aim of DRS is to become smarter with resourcing of front-line staff. It will also allow us to analyse hot spots and allow us to schedule regular inspections of premises which will be beneficial to our Food team especially due to the volume of visits required across the City.

2. Major Decisions

- Church Street Sites A,B & C The Public Realm and The Church Street Market - Planning Application Approach – Called-in 13/10/2021
- Disposal of Intermediate Rent Homes at West End Gate to Westminster Builds

- Luxborough Street Development, London, W1U
- Private Housing Letting Enforcement Policy

3. Areas of Focus

3.1 Autumn Nights in Westminster

In preparation for Halloween and 5th November 42 young people were identified for engagement and monitoring, of whom 3 were known to the integrated Gangs and Exploitation Unit (IGXU) and 3 to the Youth Offending Team (YOT). ASB Warning letters were sent to 26 young persons on 14th October and the IGXU and YOT worked with known clients in October.

Trading Standards updated that now only 2 retailers have licences to sell fireworks this year, Portland Express and Partytec. Colleagues in Housing Services have also put-up firework advice posters in our estates at the end of October.

3.2 Westminster's Strategic Community Safety Board

CS Mike Walsh, in consultation with us, has initiated this Strategic Community Safety Board in order to provide strategic governance, leadership and implantation of effective interventions to address medium to long term crime and ASB issues affecting our communities and we have been meeting regularly to discuss priority issues. Nine priorities were identified and working sub-groups have been set up for six of these (Eastern European street sleeping, begging and slavery, pedicabs, anti—social behaviour in Maida Hill, vulnerability in licensed premises, vulnerability of sex workers including in short term lets and the Bi borough Drugs Strategy).

3.3 Safer Westminster Partnership (SWP)

The most recent SWP meeting, currently chaired by Raj Mistry, a shared chairmanship with the MET Borough Commander, was held on 20th October, and a number of topics were covered. The Strategic Community Safety Board will report to the SWP, as do both the Serious Youth Violence Group and the Youth Crime Prevention Partnership. The latter two groups meet every two months and it was decided at the SWP meeting that the frequency of this meeting would increase from twice a year to quarterly.

3.4 Edgware Road Strategic Working Group

On 21 October 2021 the Edgware Road Strategic Working Group met a second time for a round-table discussion with several of our partners including the police, TfL, Church Commissioners, the Portman Estate and the Marble Arch BID. Several topics were discussed at the round-table including planning and licensing policy, curation of the public realm, development control and enforcement, commercial and residential premises, wider environmental/streetscape issues, crime and anti-social behaviour. We continue to work with our partners to monitor certain issues such as street begging, gatherings, littering, street sleeping including tents, persistent fly tipping and incorrect waste presentation.

3.5 Supporting Afghan Refugees in Westminster

Westminster Connects volunteers have been very supportive in supporting the local services organised by the Council to meet the needs of Afghan evacuee families. As at 12th October, 120 individual volunteers had provided 1686 hours 7 days a week, sorting and distributing donations, helping families find their way around the city, including children to schools and welcoming all the families. Volunteers have also been instrumental at supporting activities for adults and young people including the 'Children's Playroom, Women's Group, and 'Mentor a Mum Programme'. The Council has put in extensive resources into ensuring evacuees are receiving the highest standard of care, and have been liaising closely with the Home Office, Ministry of Defence and DLUHAC in order to smooth processes.

3.6 Community Events – Black History Month

A number of events were held during BHM. Hopefully all of you will have noticed the sculptures at the top of the elevators in City Hall - the exhibition is called "All the Works is Richer" These have been loaned to us by the artist - (artist name please) - which was organised, with a great deal of effort, by Giles Speid from PP&L, so our thanks to him, as well as to the artist. These sculptures have previously been on display at the House of Commons, and other places of note. Now they face another famous sculpture, the other side of Victoria Street, by an equally famous artist, who has just curated the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (artist name please)

Another event I attended was the screening of "Still we Rise", a very interesting and moving documentary of Windrush generation arrivals and settlers into Westminster. A number of our residents contributed to this documentary, and it was a pleasure to screen it at City Hall for our communities.

3.7 Westminster Connects

Volunteers continue to be a pillar of our community by providing vaccine support to the NHS at vaccine centres and the vaccine bus. Westminster Connects has recently renewed its web pages, including grant information for local community and voluntary groups and supports Council sessions to help voluntary & community sector (VCS) organisations access funding opportunities. Engagement is underway with the VCS in order to draft a new service specification to be able to publish an invitation to tender, to review those submitted and select and award contracts to begin in April 2022.

3.8 Rough-sleeping and Domestic Violence

The team continues to focus on known hotspots for rough sleeping, clearing abandoned tents and ensuring areas are cleansed post use. We continue to work with our Outreach colleagues and stakeholders to ensure those rough sleeping are supported into alternative accommodation and support services. Since the lifting of the national lockdown in July and during August and September there are notable higher numbers of rough sleepers and flow of people on the streets in Westminster as anticipated. There were increases in numbers of rough-sleepers during the September street count at 187, however, this is still remaining lower than numbers pre-COVID-19.

Our current figures illustrate that domestic abuse has remained the 3rd largest cause of homelessness since March 2020. Referrals to the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) have remained high throughout the pandemic and beyond despite lockdown restrictions easing over the summer. We continue to monitor this trend closely and work with our specialist services.

3.9 Busking and Street Entertainment Updates

The dedicated busking City Inspector Team responds to complaints, largely noise issues, as well as helping licensed entertainers comply with the licensing regime. The team is also engaging with the Covent Garden Street Performers' Association in order to improve compliance in the Covent Garden area. As part of this work, they are also testing the first of the mobile working solutions that are being introduced to assist City Inspectors with these taskings.

3.10 Updates on Additional HMO Licensing

Since the launch of the HMO Additional Licensing Scheme on Aug 30th over 900 licence applications have been received and are currently being processed by officers. A decision was taken to remove Section 257 HMOs, of which there are about 4,800, in order to focus efforts on similar number of Section 254 HMO properties, which tend to be occupied by our most vulnerable residents and where 80% of the housing stock has a serious hazard which should be rectified with some urgency. Landlords of Section 257 HMOs who had applied for a licence have received a refund, but the Council will continue to intervene as necessary, when risks are apparent in such properties, using the powers in the Housing Act 2004.

3.11 Food Safety in the City

Several work streams within the Food Service are underway in order to address the recommendations made by the internal food audit and the Food Standards Agency Recovery Plan. The Food Safety Inspection Programme was affected by COVID-19, which has caused a backlog of food inspections. Five new Environmental Health Officers have now been recruited and some food inspections will be outsourced to address this backlog. The Service is also engaging with the Digital Team on a weekly basis to fast track the mobile working tool for the team and to design an online digital self-assessment platform for businesses.

3.12 Updates for the Local Authority Sisha Working Group

As businesses are reopening and premises are again able to provide shisha smoking, officers are monitoring activity across the City and particularly in key problem areas. Compliance levels are generally good at the moment. Officers are engaging with a small number of businesses where issues have come to light. We have recently received correspondence from MP Kemi Badenoch acknowledging our leading role in this area of work.

3.13 Nuisance from Vehicles Updates

Following an increase in car meets in Waterloo Place and Exhibition Road last year and the first few months of this year, problem solving work has been taking place between partners, specifically to reduce the impact on residents from nuisance noise and reduce the prevalence of these meets. The PSPO went out for consultation in late summer and has just closed with 168 responses, which are being analysed. Enforcement has been fairly effective over the last few months, but the acoustic cameras should provide an added tool in managing this nuisance.

3.14 Short Lets

Investigations are being undertaken in focus areas to identify waste from short term let properties as well as compliance. During lockdown, there was a marked reduction in short let properties, with a few being used instead for Unlicensed Music Events (UMEs). We are now beginning to see short let activity increasing and I have asked officers to examine pursuit the policy approach being taken in the Netherlands to reduce short lets and protect residential communities in their cities.

3.15 Ebury Bridge Regeneration Update

JF Hunt, our contractors, who have managed the mobilisation works for the Phase One site very efficiently and effectively, have now handed over to Bouygues UK. They will begin the construction and piling works in January 2022. Thank you to JF Hunt and welcome to Bouygues, who also have community programmes planned. Main construction and piling works will commence in January 2022. The full professional and delivery team held a 'kick-off' at City Hall in October to introduce and integrate the wider team.

3.16 Parsons North Update

Construction is almost complete, with internal fit out progressing and the public realm and private gardens being landscaped. Our date for the proposed handover will be pushed back to the end of November to ensure process of soft landings ties in with internal handover processes. The Development Team continues to work with Housing Services, Corporate Property and Public Realm in order to ensure finalisation and a successful handover.

3.17 Construction Projects

There are sixteen construction projects underway in Westminster, building just under 400 affordable homes. Market conditions remain a challenge, with inflationary pressures due to material and labour shortages. This means that all our sites are struggling to secure consistent deliveries of materials and recruit and retain specialist tradespersons.