



City of Westminster

## Westminster Scrutiny Commission

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**Title:** Leader's Update  
**Report of:** Cllr Adam Hug  
**Cabinet Member Portfolio:** Leader of the Council

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### 1. Future of Westminster Commission

- 1.1. The Future of Westminster Commission was agreed by Cabinet on Monday 11 July. It has been established to review and make recommendations on the delivery of key council services to help deliver a fairer Westminster for residents.
- 1.2. The Commission is made up of a core Commission Group with four dedicated work streams, each of which has its own set of expert advisers to help develop new ideas and policy proposals. The four strands of enquiry are: Housing, Fairness and Equality, Economy and Employment, and Energy and Green Transition.
- 1.3. The work streams will report back to the appropriate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, with the work of the overarching Commission reporting to the Scrutiny Commission. The paper agreed at Cabinet on 11 July is appended to this report.

### 2. Bus cuts

- 2.1. Transport for London (TfL) has recently announced a consultation on proposed bus cuts, which affects a number of routes running through Westminster. The cuts are the result of a lack of long-term funding for TfL from central government and will have a significant impact on Westminster's resident and business communities if they are to go ahead.
- 2.2. Communities in Westminster rely heavily on buses and in particular, the most vulnerable. Bus routes such as the 11, 14, 16, 24, 31 and 74 are under threat of being 'withdrawn', with routes 14 and 24 providing a 24-hour service. These routes also run through multiple Westminster wards.
- 2.3. It is deeply concerning that a safe and accessible means of public transport is set to be lost by many of these residents, against the backdrop of a national cost of living crisis. These are residents who have no viable alternative and are more likely to be excluded from travel by extended journeys and broken journey links. Cuts to routes will disproportionately affect users from BAME backgrounds, and in Westminster, nearly one in three Black/Afro-Caribbean people use the bus to get to work with one in five of an Asian background also doing so, in comparison with one in ten white British people.
- 2.4. The council will continue to encourage residents to participate in the online consultation, as well as making representations to both TfL and central government.

### **3. Candy stores and economic crime in Westminster**

- 3.1. There is a growing problem of candy and poor-quality souvenir shops on Oxford Street and in the surrounding West End area. The council is currently investigating 30 shops on Oxford Street for business rates evasion amounting to £7.9m and taking regular action to enforce against various of these properties under various civil proceedings, including planning enforcement action where the premises are advertising illegally.
- 3.2. Enforcing against these stores remains challenging, due to the complex chains or leases, sub-leases, and licences in place. The council has written to 28 freeholders urging them to consider the impact of US sweet shops on Oxford Street, as well as urging owners with voids to take advantage of initiatives like the West End Pop-up scheme, which has helped some landlords secure a reduction of 70 per cent in the business rates liability through the application of a community rate for the council's pop-ups.
- 3.3. The council is also working with central Government agencies on wider enforcement and will be lobbying for legislative reform to close the loopholes. It is hoped this could be achieved through the introduction of the second Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which would also see Companies House be given broader powers to investigate and enforce.
- 3.4. Through partnership working with relevant academics, the council will also be looking to understand how to inform the national policy debate and tackle issues around 'dirty money' in Westminster. Of particular interest are empty or underused homes by oligarchs and their families, as well as opaque investment in commercial property. As a responsible local authority, it is in the Council's interest to see greater powers and resources given to enforcement agencies and responsible bodies, such as Companies House, the Land Registry, HMRC and others to help improve transparency, accountability, and action.

### **4. Cost of living crisis**

- 4.1. The council is looking at a number of ways to support residents as much as possible during the cost of living crisis. Officers are developing a strategy which will be centred around three key pillars: targeting additional support at those most affected and delivering the £11m received from government in the most effective way; working with partners to ensure coordination and maximise impact; and providing support and ensuring residents know where to access help across all key issues such as food and energy efficiency.
- 4.2. The summer offer for families has also been expanded for the first time ever, with an additional £240k available to widen the HAF offer and reach even more young people in Westminster. This will enable young people aged 0 to 25 as well as those who fall just short of eligibility but are experiencing hardship to access the activities and food during the summer holidays for free. Free School Meal (FSM) vouchers will also be provided to all eligible children over the six-week school holiday. The funding will be distributed in the form of supermarket vouchers and equates to £15 per child per week.