



City of Westminster

Finance, Planning and Economic Development Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Date:	22 September 2022
Portfolio:	Finance and Council Reform
The Report of:	Councillor David Boothroyd
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1. Key decisions made in the preceding period since my last Policy & Scrutiny report dated 28 June 2022:

- 04 July 2022 – Appointment of Reactive Repairs Contractor
- 25 July 2022 – Disposal – 1 St Mary’s Terrace W2 1SU
- 27 July 2022 – Funding for Purchases Under the Right to Buy Back Programme
- 12 August 2022 – Ebury Estate Renewal – Revised Parking Programme (joint decision with the Cabinet Member for Climate Action, Regeneration and Renters)
- 30 August 2022 - Ebury Demolition Contract Variation and Additional Spend (joint decision with the Cabinet Member for Climate Action, Regeneration and Renters)
- 02 September 2022 – Odeon Cinema, Panton Street – Renewal of Lease
- 10 September 2022 – Development Infills: Package B Main Contract Award (joint decision with the Cabinet Member for Climate Action, Regeneration and Renters)

2. The following report includes my priorities and delivery progress to date of the new administration.

Supporting Residents and Businesses

The **support for businesses** during the pandemic through the various Business Support Grant schemes and pandemic related NNDR reliefs has now concluded, as has the support for residents through the Test & Trace payments and pandemic related Benefit changes. All of the above were administered by the Revenues & Benefits service. Businesses that continue to experience financial difficulty can apply for NNDR Hardship relief (applications are considered by the Rating Advisory Panel).

Support for residents is currently via:

- The government’s **£150 Council Tax Rebate scheme**. Local authorities have been asked to administer a mandatory scheme to pay out £150 to residents in Council Tax Bands A to D and also a discretionary scheme for residents that do not qualify for the mandatory scheme. The Council has successfully completed the mandatory scheme ahead of the 30 September government deadline, with 42,906 residents receiving the £150 payment, either through direct payment or credit to their Council tax account. The majority of the £150 payments under the

Council's discretionary scheme have also been paid, with the remainder on track to be paid before the government's deadline of 30 November, i.e., the Council plans to fully utilise its discretionary funding.

- The government's **second Household Support Fund scheme**. The second scheme runs from 1 April 2022 to 30 September 2022. The Council is on track to fully utilise the £1.9M government funding by 30 September, as it did for the first Household Support Fund scheme. The scheme has provided support via:
 - Support for families eligible for free school meals during school holidays
 - Direct support via shopping vouchers for older residents identified as most in need
 - A Local Hardship Fund based on referrals from the CAB and their partner organisations
 - Grants to local food charities (Food banks and food pantries)

A third Household Support Fund scheme is scheduled to be implemented for the period 1 October 2022 – 31 March 2023. Whilst the Council has received provisional guidance, we are awaiting our funding allocation. A Cabinet Member report will follow once the funding is announced by central government.

Revenues Collection

The collection of Business rates (NNDR) and Council Tax at all local authorities was severely affected during the two years of the pandemic, primarily due to the long periods where recovery of debts was prohibited.

Business Rates collection has significantly improved in 2022/23 compared with collection during the two years of the pandemic and it is likely to meet our in-year target of 95% at year end, although the collection is still likely to be below the pre-pandemic collection levels of 97.6%.

Council Tax collection has unfortunately not recovered after the pandemic, although this is primarily due to resources being diverted to administer the government's £150 Council tax Rebate scheme (as outlined above) and the associated cessation of recovery during the scheme's administration. However, collection has started to improve now that the mandatory element of the government's scheme has completed and since recovery has been re-instated for current year debt. It is hoped that the Council can improve collection during the remainder of this financial year in order to achieve the in-year collection target of 93%, but again this will be below the pre-pandemic collection performance of around 96.7%.

Strategic Vision

Developing the pledge tracker: In preparation for the launch of Fairer Westminster, officers in the strategy team have developed a tracker to enable the administration to ensure delivery of the individual pledges and policies to which we are committed.

Council meeting reform: I have been developing proposals to change the procedures during the regular full council meetings, which will allow the people of Westminster more opportunity to put their concerns to the council, and also make the meeting more relevant and responsive while not diminishing opportunities for party political differences to be outlined. The work is being assisted by the Director of Law and the Head of Governance. When the proposals are ready the Chief Whips will be able to comment and fix their final shape.

Financial management

Budget process: The process of setting the budget for 2023/24 has begun. I have been meeting with Cabinet colleagues to take their views on the capital programme schemes within their departments and their priorities. Discussion of the revenue budget will be taking place in due course under the usual procedure.

Treasury Management Strategy: As a consequence of the decision to sign the Local Climate Bond pledge, the Full Council on 21 September is being invited to authorise a minor change to the Treasury Management Strategy.

Green finance: Senior officers, together with the cabinet member and Deputy Cabinet member for Climate Action and Biodiversity have met to discuss funding available for environmental schemes. The group intends to write to the new Minister at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to stress how local authority work can contribute to dealing with the cost of living crisis. The council is also investigating how to link with the UK Infrastructure Bank, and whether it will be eligible for funding from the GLA Green Bond.

Pop-ups: Together with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development, I toured two of the retail units which the council has given over to pop-up businesses in order to avoid retail voids and promote economic revival of the West End.

Corporate Property

Seymour Centre: Willmott Dixon have been appointed as the contractor for pre-construction services following a competitive tendering exercise. Following consultation between May and July, several issues have been raised which we will take account of. Work on the architectural designs is progressing towards a planning submission; further user consultation was planned and due to have commenced, but was postponed following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Property Investment Panel: The reconstituted Property Investment Panel, through which outside property industry professionals advise the council about investment property portfolio, has met. I am grateful to officers for arranging it and to Simon Latham and Dr Robin Goodchild for continuing to serve and advise the new administration.

Strategic Asset Management Plan: I have supported the Property Directorate's development of a Strategic Asset Management Plan as a comprehensive strategy across the council.

Following the new administration and the Labour Fairer Westminster Strategy, the Strategic Asset Management Plan is currently being updated and will be shared later this month for Members input. Once this has been signed off by Members the roll out plan will be launched to share the SAMP with colleagues, services and other Members.

Capital Finance

Truly affordable housing: Work is continuing to refocus the council's housing development programme on opportunities for social rented and other lower rent homes. As part of the Future of Westminster Commission, a Housing Supply Review has been commissioned.

Ebury Bridge Estate: I have agreed to expand phase 2 in the regeneration of the Ebury Bridge Estate. This change involves moving two blocks into Phase 2 and reallocating some of the approved budget. Making this change potentially saves a considerable sum on the overall viability by bringing forward construction spending and thereby avoiding inflation in build costs. Connected to this change, we

have also retrospectively agreed to bring forward some of the demolition spend so that Phase 2 design work can commence.

Infills Programme: Together with the Cabinet Member for Climate Action, Regeneration and Renters I have agreed to appoint Geoffrey Osborne Ltd as contractors for package B of the Infills Programme, covering Car Park developments at Adpar Street, Torridon House and Queens Park Court.

Smart City

Report It: The ability to immediately report problems on street anywhere in the City is a key part of the council's digital offer, but almost everyone considers that 'Report It' fails to deliver the level of service that residents have a right to expect. I have agreed to commission a team of digital transformation specialists to work with users and other residents to understand the problems with the service and identify what can be done to ensure it delivers.

Electoral Administration

Electoral registration: I have met Electoral Services Manager to discuss how the City Council can do more to make the electoral register accurate and comprehensive.

Workforce

Staff Survey: I have discussed arrangements for the staff survey with the Director of People Services.

Trade Unions: Following a meeting with representatives of the GMB earlier in the summer, I have been discussing with colleagues what we can do to support them and the other recognised trade unions among council staff.