



City of Westminster

## Westminster Scrutiny Commission

**Date:** 26 January 2023  
**Classification:** General Release  
**Title:** Chief Executive's Update  
**Report of:** Stuart Love, Chief Executive

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### **1. Cost of Living**

- 1.1. One in four households (31,000) across the city are particularly at risk from the cost-of-living crisis. In response the Council has published a cost-of-living strategy, declared a cost-of-living emergency and, to date, invested £10 million in providing a far-reaching programme of support to help the most vulnerable households.
- 1.2. A table attached to this report sets out the support rolled out to date (see Appendix 1).

### **2. Affordable housing**

- 2.1. The Council is committed to maximising the delivery of truly affordable housing across our housebuilding pipeline. To this end, Cabinet approved in late 2022 a rebalance of the 60:40 split in favour of intermediate rent housing to a 70:30 split in favour of social rent homes, prioritising their delivery on forthcoming schemes.
- 2.2. Following a review of the Council's existing developments it was decided by Cabinet that the planned market homes at 300 Harrow Road (61 homes) and Westmead (41 Homes) will now be delivered as affordable housing. With limited exceptions, all affordable homes of two or more bedrooms have now been reclassified as social rent and those with one bedroom as intermediate rent at no more than London living rent.
- 2.3. In addition to the benefits to individuals and communities, the creation of more Council owned social rent homes reduces the Housing Benefit burden to the local authority.
- 2.4. The Council has also introduced resident ballots, the successful outcome of which allows the Council to bid for Greater London Authority to enable the building of more social housing. The ballot result for the Church Street regeneration scheme was announced on 12 January 2023, with 73 per cent of residents voting in favour of the plans for sites A, B and C. The plans will transform three key sites in the Church Street neighbourhood, which will re-provide all existing 228 council homes and deliver at least 156 new council homes at social rent levels, create new jobs and training opportunities as well as new shops and community facilities.
- 2.5. A resident ballot for the Ebury Bridge regeneration scheme will open on 23 January 2023 and run for three weeks to give residents an opportunity to have their say.

### **3. Update on the budget process**

- 3.1. The financial planning process comprises different elements of the Council's budget structure and includes:
  - General Fund services and council tax decision
  - Housing Revenue account and housing rent decision
  - Capital Programme
  - Dedicated Schools Grant and budget
- 3.2. The Budget Scrutiny Task Groups, a formal part of the Council's Scrutiny Function met in January over three meetings to review the budget proposals and provide feedback. Cabinet on 13 February will consider a set of reports that comprise the overall budget proposals for recommendation to approve at Full Council on 8 March.
- 3.3. As in previous years, a report setting out the financial planning framework was considered and approved by Cabinet in July 2022. This set out the external policy and financial factors that impact on the provision of Council services and Local Government Finance and set out some planning assumptions for the budget process ahead.

### **4. City Survey**

- 4.1. Each year, the City Survey measures resident satisfaction and understanding of service use, and identifies local issues, concerns and priorities. It is a very rich source of objective data, which helps the Council to understand sentiment and performance across the city.
- 4.2. In 2022, 2,436 residents were interviewed. The sample size is statistically representative of our diverse resident demographic, and appropriate quotas were put in place based on age, gender, ethnicity and working status. Findings were also weighted to account for demographic over- or under-representation, whilst face-to-face interviews ensured the views of digitally excluded residents were captured. The robust statistical sampling means that these results are fully representative.
- 4.3. In summary, this year's results paint a very positive picture. 95% of residents are satisfied with the way that the Council is running the City. This is an unprecedented high and is 31% above the local government average. The extent to which residents feel involved in decision making is much improved, satisfaction with core services now exceeds pre-pandemic levels, and the number of residents reporting issues or problems in their local area has decreased. The survey also highlights the increased financial difficulties experienced by residents in the face of the cost of living crisis.
- 4.4. More detailed analysis of the survey will follow in 2023.

### **5. Our Voice – Staff Survey**

- 5.1. The Our Voice survey is our annual staff survey which is focused on engagement, equity, diversity, inclusion, and wellbeing.
- 5.2. Over the past year, engagement levels have increased across the organisation by 3% to 77%. The independent organisation which administers the survey for us has advised that we are bucking the trend of most good organisations in all sectors which have seen a decline in engagement levels in 2022 following the

pandemic. Our engagement scores are comparable with the best organisations in the world. This is important as there is clear evidence that the more engaged people are the better the service is that will be delivered.

- 5.3. Highlights from the results show 80% of staff are proud to work in the Council, 71% would recommend the Council as a great place to work, and feedback on questions regarding wellbeing and collaboration across teams has also improved.
- 5.4. However, there has been an increase in reports of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace by 2% to 13% (previously 11%) which is of concern. 50% of those who said they had experienced inappropriate behaviour said that they reported it. This behaviour was most commonly from a manager in the same department or a colleague. 45% of those who experienced inappropriate behaviour noted it was from a manager/leader in the same department/team and 38% experienced this from a colleague. Nearly twice as many females as males experienced inappropriate behaviour in the last 12 months (124 vs 67) and those with a disability were more likely to experience inappropriate behaviour than those without.
- 5.5. The council is working within teams and with our staff networks to understand what lies behind these results and will take all steps necessary towards the goal of ensuring no one experiences inappropriate behaviour whilst at work. A key focus is on identifying hot spots in the Council and ensuring leaders are accountable for improvements.
- 5.6. The Council is also committed to equality, diversity and inclusion through the celebration and recognition of the contribution of staff in a fair and transparent way, with the Equalities Objectives supporting this work. We are also committed to meeting the standards set by the Tackling Racial Inequality Group, led by London Councils, which set a benchmark for progress and provide us with an opportunity to identify areas for further action and demonstrate commitment to driving long-term culture change.
- 5.7. Several objectives have been set to ensure that the Council progresses towards becoming an anti-racist organisation including:
  - Setting targets to ensure that the organisation at all levels is representative of Westminster communities and seek to reduce pay gaps to zero by 2025. Additional analysis to unpick the common drivers of pay gaps is being led by Strategy and Intelligence, with support of People Services should policy solutions be required.
  - Publish an anti-racism commitment statement and charter
  - Produce a Racial Equity strategy and action plan in collaboration with our communities and partners, ensuring organisational accountability

## **6. Internal COVID review and independent assessment**

- 6.1. A comprehensive internal review was undertaken between April 2022 and June 2022 to ensure lessons learned from the response to the pandemic are identified to shape future outbreak management and emergency preparedness. This involved each of the outbreak management teams undertaking a look back exercise to identify lessons learnt and produce updated outbreak management plans. Furthermore, the refreshed outbreak management plan was tested in a cross council table top exercise.
- 6.2. An independent review of the Council's pandemic response has also been undertaken to interrogate the findings of the internal review undertaken by the Council. The review is being undertaken by Professor Gillian Manthorpe CBE, Kings College London. The findings are due to be advised shortly.
- 6.3. The Council is also taking part in the national inquiry on the COVID Pandemic alongside all local authorities and NHS bodies.

## Appendix 1: Table of support provided – cost of living crisis

	National funding	Council funding	Timescale
Household Support Fund Extension (range of activities such as free school meals to those eligible in the holidays, supermarket vouchers to older people and a local Hardship Fund)	£1.9m		April – September 2022
Household Support Fund 3 (range of activities such as such as free school meals to those eligible in the holidays, supermarket vouchers to households not benefiting from national support and a local Hardship Fund)	£1.9m		October 2022 – March 2023
Council Tax Rebate Scheme (discretionary element) – includes help to households not benefiting from the national scheme	£2.2m		April - November 2022
Food and activities in summer holidays		£240k	July – September 2022
Extension of Green Doctors energy advice service		£10k	June – September 2022
Extension of debt advice (Citizens Advice Westminster)		£189k	October 2022 – Sept 2023
Training / financial capability provision (Westminster Employment Service)		£83k	April 2022 – December 2023
School Uniform Fund		£85k	Until March 2023
Local Hardship Fund (top up)		£200k	From July – September 2022
Local Payment Support Scheme		£600k	April 2022 – March 2023
Healthy Winter Grants for organisations putting on a healthy meal/health promotion activity in a warm space		£200k	November 2022 – March 2023
Westminster council tenants Hardship Fund (for tenants in arrears)		£400k	From January 2022
Additional cost of living support for at least 3,350 vulnerable households		£1m	From December 2022
Further cost of living support for vulnerable households 2023/24		£1m	2023/24
<b>Total</b>	<b>£6m</b>	<b>£4.007m</b>	