



## **Summary of COVID-19 briefing with the Leader of the Council 20 April 2020, attended by:**

Westminster City Council

Westminster Amenity Societies

Westminster Neighbourhood Fora

### **Council services and committee meetings**

Thank you for the overall positive message of support you gave for the efforts of the Council at this time. Overall the council has low sickness rates amongst staff and services are therefore running at normal levels unless we have been otherwise required to close or limit services. Our staff have responded hugely positively to the challenge we are facing and many have volunteered to be redeployed to frontline services should we need to do so, fortunately at the current time, we do not need to take this step.

Last week, we held our first ever virtual Council committee meeting with the Planning Sub-Committee, chaired by Cllr Rigby meeting, determining a large number of applications. This went well and we will be holding our first virtual Licensing Sub-Committee meeting on Thursday.

We have tried to set up virtual meetings in a way which mimics physical meetings as closely as possible. All our meetings will be run via Microsoft Teams, which is free and open for anyone to use should they have an internet connection and a device through which to access it. Members of the public will be able to join via a link which is published with the agenda and papers for each meeting, in much the same way as we advertise the location of our meetings in normal times. This link will let people in as observers of the meeting, who can view all the proceedings, including documents being reviewed in, real-time. Anyone participating in the meeting i.e. Councillors, officers, applicants, members of the public making representations etc. will be invited to join separately with the ability to speak, share documents on the screen or use any other basic functionality that exists within Microsoft Teams. The meeting clerk controls the meeting in close liaison with the Chairman.

For Planning, we have chosen to suspend public speaking temporarily but, as we have to continue with the right of the public to make representations at Licensing meetings as set out in law, we are trialling public participation in the meeting this Thursday. Based on how this goes, we will determine when this can be reintroduced for Planning meetings.

Extensive training has taken place with officers and Councillors, as well as other regular participants in meetings such as Richard Brown, the specialist, independent licensing solicitor we pay the Citizen's Advice Bureau to provide for hearings.

### **PPE**

Sourcing PPE has been a challenge across London and the country as reported in the press, but Westminster is now accessing supplies through a pan-London system and there are sufficient supplies for our services at the moment.

In response to the question posed about sourcing PPE for St John's and St Elizabeth's hospice, which are having difficulty, it is advised that any independent care organisations which are struggling to source PPE, should contact



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## **Westminster Connects**

Westminster Connects has been created to connect volunteers with those in need of help during the coronavirus outbreak. We are working with organisations across Westminster in order to respond to the needs of our residents. This includes food deliveries through our local shopper service.

There was concern raised in the meeting that there is a blockage between volunteers and those in need with anecdotal evidence suggesting that people are being diverted to the North Paddington Foodbank which is supplying food to people not in financial need.

It was clarified that Westminster Connects service is able to support all those who are unable to go outside to source food. Cllr Caplan has already picked up this point and contacted both the foodbank and those that raised the issue. Anyone who incorrectly contacts the foodbank will be advised of how to contact Westminster Connects to organise shopping for them.

As discussed on the previous call, the Council has now developed a 'dos and don'ts' guide for volunteers and this has been attached for your reference.

The Council is also developing a local shop-finder map, including information on which shops remain open to serve the community or are promoting a delivery or take away service. I'd be grateful if you could ask any local businesses you know who would benefit from being promoted as part of this system to contact Emerson Forde ([eforde@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:eforde@westminster.gov.uk)) in our Business Unit. This information will be gathered together in a simple and straightforward manner and made available to a large number of local residents via the Council's website.

## **Hyde Park**

A follow-up question was asked about the possibility of reopening up the area of Hyde Park currently closed to the public? The Council has approached the Royal Parks about this option and has been advised that this is not operationally possible due to the need to replace and repair grass. Feedback has however, also been received from the team on the ground in Hyde Park that there is currently plenty of space to maintain an appropriate distance and that the area currently closed off is primarily used for picnics and informal sports, both of which are not permitted under the current guidance.

## **Public toilets**

Bayswater toilets are now open again after having been cleaned, but there was concern that public toilets elsewhere in the city (most notably Soho) are now closed. The Council will look into this.

## **Royal Mail**

The Council has lobbied Royal Mail regarding challenges with the postal service and although anecdotally the system seems to be improving slightly, the response from Royal Mail was not wholly reassuring and the Council will continue to make the case on behalf of residents and communities.



## **Rough sleeping**

There was a large amount of concern about rough sleeping, in particular looking ahead to how Westminster will manage when lockdown ends and those currently housed in accommodation in Westminster no longer have access to that accommodation. Update provided that the Council is supporting people in this accommodation and all are getting wrap around support including food. There are still c.50 people on the streets who refuse to come indoors or accept other types of support. On top of this there are other people on the streets who have arrived in the past few days and have yet to access our offers of support. The Council is working with Government and partners to plan for the end of lockdown, but we also recognise this as a challenge that we know we need support at a national level to manage. The Leader of the Council wrote to the secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on Friday on this very matter.

Clarity also provided that people should report anybody they see rough sleeping to StreetLink <https://www.streetlink.org.uk/> which results in a referral to our outreach teams, who work 24/7 365 days of the year. It is not however, an emergency response service, so if there is an emergency situation either because you or others feel threatened or there is a medical need to assistance, please call 999.

Although not directly related to rough sleeping, there was another question posed about reporting other issues. The council's ReportIt function is the best first port of call for this and can be found here <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/report-it>

## **Construction**

In response to concerns raised about construction sites, an update was provided that the Government guidance is that construction can continue and is considered 'essential'. Some sites have voluntarily closed and the Leader has written to all construction sites in the city asking for assurances on their plans to ensure adherence to Public Health England guidance on social distancing etc.. We have had a positive response to this letter but if people are concerned or believe workers are not adhering to PHE guidance, this should be reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) via their website <https://webcommunities.hse.gov.uk/connect.ti/concernsform/answerQuestionnaire?qid=594147>

## **Street cleansing and waste collection**

The Council welcomes the support of everyone for the work being undertaken by Veolia staff at this time. An update was provided on the approach to ensuring the health and safety of Veolia employees.

The Chartered Institute of Waste Management (CIWM) which oversees the waste sector has been advising waste companies and local authorities regularly since the virus outbreak in conjunction with Public Health England guidance, particularly where social distancing is more difficult. The Council has been supporting this with Veolia. The key advice is that when staff are sharing an enclosed space, such as in vehicle cabs, and are unable to maintain a 2 metre distance, they should:

- Wash their hands for 20 seconds or longer before getting into, or after getting out of, the vehicle, or use hand sanitiser where hand washing is not possible.
- Where it is not possible to avoid having more than one person in the vehicle, teams should keep the windows of the vehicle open for ventilation, and be careful to avoid touching their face at all times.



At cleansing depots sweepers are returning at staggered times to ensure safe distancing can be managed better around shift changes and breaks etc. Because of the significant drop in footfall most street cleansing depots are supporting waste clearances to assist collection crews too.

As a responsible employer Veolia are also ensuring that their staff have the correct PPE. Council officers are in daily liaison with Veolia to ensure there are sufficient stocks of PPE to enable the continued provision of key services - all services are continuing to operate normally at the current time.

## **Planning**

A response was given to a number of questions about the continue delivery of the planning service and particularly the viability of conducting meaningful consultation given people are not outside as much and the postal system is not working as per normal so residents may not be aware of development proposals in their area. The headline of the update is that the planning system is largely working as BAU with the one minor exception to this being that site visits do not include entering people's homes or enclosed spaces. Site notices are being placed and local letters are going out as usual although this work is done by a contractor, which may be subject to staff shortages. Cllr Green noted that the planning system remains robust but took on board the comments about the need to consult people in different ways. It was highlighted that the manual, paper-based approach taken by Westminster is not a statutory requirement and many authorities do not do this so there must be another way to operate under the current circumstances. It was requested that amenity societies play a role in this with their members. Cllr Green also requested that if there any examples of where planning notices usually placed on lampposts are missing, residents should contact him directly to investigate.

Planning meetings remain open to the public to view, although participation remains under review as noted above.

It was also noted that the Government have introduced permitted development rights for restaurants to convert to takeaways meaning no planning permission is required, only a notification to the Council. This offer has not necessarily been taken up in Westminster as the Council has only had a small number of notifications. The Council will promote this further but asked if participants could share this with any local businesses they thought may be able to take advantage of this change.

## **Business support**

Westminster has administered a significant number of grants under the Government's business support package with figures released yesterday showing that Westminster has awarded almost 80% of the funding allocated and 77% of the businesses eligible under the scheme have benefitted already. No authority in the country with a grant pot as big as Westminster's has administered as much of its grant funding.

The Council recognises that there are still many businesses which may fall through the cracks of Government support, but the Leader continues to lobby the Chancellor. An early success of this lobbying was the commitment from the Government to remove the rateable value cap for businesses in the retail hospitality or leisure sectors which could be offered business rate relief.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-your-retail-hospitality-or-leisure-business-is-eligible-for-business-rates-relief-due-to-coronavirus-covid-19>



City of Westminster