

Responses to questions raised at 18 October 2017 event and in feedback forms

29 January 2018

This document lists topics raised for discussion at the 18 October 2017 Open Forum which there was not the time to answer on the night, and questions that were raised in feedback forms at the event. In addition to being circulated at the Open Forum on 29 January, these questions and answers will also be posted online on the Open Forum website.

1. What is the council doing about Spice?

We have campaigned to see Spice reclassified. Spice is cheap, readily available and highly addictive, so it's little wonder our support services are seeing an increase in the number of users. In just two years a new drug epidemic has taken over the streets of London Spice doesn't just present a risk to rough sleepers, but also to the frontline staff who are out every night helping them off the street and into accommodation.

Spice users often exhibit aggressive or non-responsive behaviour, which has seen a rise in reports of abuse from staff, and prevents rough sleepers from engaging with the health, housing, education and employment services the council and its partners offer. It is devastating to see rough sleepers unable to move forward with their lives because of an addiction. That is why I am calling on central government, homelessness charities and health partners to come together and develop a long-term solution to a drug that continues to strengthen its grip on some of the most vulnerable people in society.

2. How can the council afford medical insurance for council staff?

The Council spends approximately £850m per annum on services and clearly prioritises its expenditure, reviewing all budgets on an annual basis, and ensuring it manages its finances prudently and appropriately. The actual cost of the scheme in 2017/18 was £138,000 which would represent circa .02% of that total expenditure and is considered to be a sensible investment in its staff given the need to recruit and retain the best people for Westminster, the impact sickness absence can have on services and in the context of the overall council budget.

3. I am concerned that exorbitant business rates are likely to drive out small shops.

Central government sets the level of Business Rates, including all allowances / reliefs, such as the Small Business Rate Relief, whilst the Valuation Office (Central government) determines the rateable value of the individual businesses properties on which the Business Rates are calculated. The local authority's role is to administer the business rates, through billing, collection and recovery. Any local business experiencing difficulty in paying their Business Rates should in the first instance contact the council on 0208 315 2050.

4. I am concerned about the high level of pollution in central London and would like to know what the council is doing? / Air pollution and idling - issues with private hire vehicles.

Westminster City Council's ongoing #DontBeldle campaign to stop idling has attracted over 5,000 supporters. The campaign is one of a number of significant steps the council has taken to tackle the problem of air pollution including introducing £80 fines for idling drivers and launching a pilot

emissions-based parking surcharge for diesel drivers. The council has a team of full time 'air quality marshals' running a series of road shows across some of the city's busiest areas. The council has already organised over 20 roadshows and action day events across the borough in idling hot spots and the areas of highest pollution. Now the council is renewing its efforts, spreading 'myth busting' messages for colder weather and targeting those most likely to idle. This includes getting taxi companies and delivery firms to support the scheme and sign the pledge too, as delivery drivers and commercial vehicles make up a large proportion of idling drivers. Poor air quality is our residents' number one concern, and we are fully committed to leading the way on this issue.

This year Westminster will also be launching an air quality manifesto asking the government to adopt #DontBeldle and make the pledge part businesses' corporate social responsibility. It isn't always easy immediately to tackle idling in an area but if you report it to us we can target our efforts and try to change behaviour of those likely to idle.

5. There is too much rubbish on the streets

The council is very aware of the constant blight of litter and rubbish dumping on our streets. We are currently in the process of creating a new Street Waste Action Team to provide a highly visible deterrent to this anti-social behaviour. This team will support the activities of our local City Inspectors who provide the front-line response to litter and waste problems and are in regular communication with local residents and businesses to identify particular 'hotspot' locations. Anti-litter media campaigns are better organised and funded at a London-wide or national level rather than by individual council's, but we will continue to lobby the Mayor of London and central Government to prioritise campaigns on this issue. Similarly the scale of fines we can set for littering offences are set nationally rather than by individual councils and we will continue to lobby for higher fines across the range of environmental offences.

6. Deliveries and street cleaning in the middle of the night affects people's health and noise can be avoided if regulated

Street cleaning takes place at a range of times due to the diverse nature of activities happening in Westminster. Where residents are experiencing specific nuisance the street cleansing schedules can be reviewed and potentially changed. The council's leafing removal programme took place throughout November and December and has now been completed. Where recycling is not being disposed of properly, details of exactly when and where the problems are happening should be reported to the council via the Report it tool on the front page of the council's website (www.westminster.gov.uk/report-it).

7. In the light of the increased terror attacks CCTV should be re-introduced

Westminster City Council ceased its crime and disorder CCTV services in January 2017 with all CCTV cameras removed by the end of February 2017. The decision to end the provision of (non-parking) CCTV was a cabinet decision made in June 2016 following years of ongoing discussions with partners around funding for CCTV running costs (of around £1 million per annum) for which WCC did not have a budget. The decision was also made in light of CCTV being a non-statutory service.

However, there is extensive CCTV coverage in Westminster and there are many other cameras operational in central London that are not being affected by the council's decision, for example those

cameras operated by Transport for London and thousands operated by private businesses. The CCTV systems operating in Westminster's housing estates are also unaffected.

Westminster City Council is currently working with the Metropolitan Police who are developing a CCTV service network in Westminster. More information on the decision to cease CCTV provision can be found here <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/westminster-city-council-cabinet-decision-cctv>

8. What are the council's policies regarding hate crime?

Westminster is proud of the diverse communities that make the city such a unique and vibrant place to live, work, and visit.

However, the council also recognises that these diverse communities can be subjected to discrimination, harassment, and hate crime; we are concerned at police reports of an apparent increase in these crimes in recent years, as well as the feedback from our cohesion commission which heard about a rise in hate crimes and abuse in the streets.

The council is working with the police and other partners to ensure we take the strongest action against those that commit hate crime and we want communities to feel confident to report hate crime and encourage them to do so.

If you believe something is a hate incident it should be reported to police either through 101 (non-urgent calls) or in an emergency, always call 999. If you do not want to report to police then there a number of third party reporting routes available through the Community Alliance to Combat Hate (CATCH) - www.catch-hatecrime.org.uk

9. Are City West Homes encouraged to develop tenant involvement?

Absolutely. Residents are involved in a number of ways. For example, there are four residents on the CityWest Homes (CWH) Board, 12 residents on the Resident Council and 48 residents on the four area panels. In addition, CWH talks to residents at village surgeries, through consultation for regeneration and works and focus groups. It also supports 28 resident associations and 8 sounding boards.

They also have a number of contact points like events (Open Door) social media, email and phone. CWH also runs an annual survey to ask residents about satisfaction of CWH's services and a number of past contact case completion surveys.

10. Are all emails sent to CWH yet to be dealt with?

All emails to CWH Customer Services are responded to. When residents contact CWH they will receive a full response within 7 working days. We receive approximately 1,500 to 2,000 emails a week. CWH have improved their processes and our response rate matches the number of those sent by residents. Of course, not all issues are straightforward, and we will let them know what the process is for dealing with your request or complaint if it is complicated and may take longer to resolve. Residents are also asked to contact the customer services team by phone if it is an emergency on 0800 358 3783 (freephone) or +44 20 7245 2990 if you are abroad.

11. Why do you ask so many questions about demographics in your feedback forms?

The council asks questions about age, gender, ethnicity and other characteristics in order to understand how representative Open Forums are of the local residents across Westminster, to assist us in involving all parts of the Westminster community. Apart from supplying postcode information, it is left to individuals to decide whether or not they wish to answer these.

12. I am very concerned about the proposed closure of Oxford Street to all vehicles. I am unable to walk far and get there by bus or taxi - without those I would not be able to shop on Oxford Street!

The project has been designed to take accessibility into account and has involved a lot of engagement with stakeholder groups with expertise in accessibility and mobility needs. Bus services are maintained as close as possible to the pedestrianised areas, taxi ranks are provided in the immediate side streets and the accessibility of Oxford St West itself is enhanced through the provision of more space and well-designed public realm. The project has also suggested that a local mobility service might be introduced to assist with movement within the area.

We have now received an enormous amount of consultation input, and are looking at suggestions and requests as to how we can improve accessibility further including improved the interchange between buses for those travelling through the area. This will be addressed as part of the consultation response report and decision making on any final scheme that might proceed.