

Mayor's Question Time – Thursday 15 October 2020

Transcript of Item 4 – Oral update to the Mayor's Report

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Good morning, Chair. Can I begin with an apology for being slightly late? No discourtesy was intended. Hopefully during the course of the morning, you will understand why I was held up.

Good morning. Since the last Mayor's Question Time (MQT), we tragically lost one of our police officers in London, Sergeant Matt Ratana, who paid the ultimate price for helping keep our city safe. Incidents like this are a reminder of the dangers our brave police officers face every single day. Matt Ratana was an example of the best of our city and I know I can speak on behalf of the Greater London Authority (GLA) and London when I say our hearts go out to his family, friends and colleagues at this difficult time.

Chair, we are at a critical moment in our fight against COVID-19 in London. The virus is spreading rapidly in every corner of our city. We will soon reach an average of 100 cases per 100,000 people with a significant number of boroughs already over that threshold. Hospital admissions are up. More patients are going to intensive care units. Sadly, the number of Londoners dying every day is increasing again.

It is my expectation that the Government will today announce that London will shortly be moving into tier 2 or the high alert level of restrictions. I have had a meeting this morning with the Secretary of State for Health and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), as well as London leaders and scientific advisers. Final conversations with Ministers are ongoing around this as we meet, but I expect Ministers to make an announcement to Parliament later this morning.

This move is based on the expert public health and scientific advice about what is necessary to save lives in the capital. In addition to the restrictions already in place, this would mean different households in London not being able to mix indoors. Nobody wants to see more restrictions, but this is deemed to be necessary in order to protect Londoners by me, by London council leaders and by Ministers.

As part of our discussions, I have also made clear to the Government that we need more financial support for London's businesses, workers and public services as we face more restrictions and I will continue to make this case.

Given how far the virus has already been allowed to spread and given the Government's complete failure to get a working test, trace and isolate system in place, I believe we also need action on a national scale, just as the Government's own scientific advisers have recommended. That is why I will continue to call for a short national circuit breaker. This could save thousands of lives, drive the virus down to manageable levels and give the Government more time to finally get a grip on its failing test and trace system.

In London we experienced the worst of COVID-19 back in the spring. Thousands of lives were lost and our economy has been left reeling. We simply cannot afford for the Government to be slow to act again. The supposed choice between saving the economy and saving lives and between restrictions and freedoms is an entirely false one because the later we take the necessary steps to slow the spread of the virus, the more severe these steps will have to be and the longer they will have to last in order to drive down infection rates. No matter how much some people want to pretend otherwise and bury their heads in the sand, the truth is

that the health crisis and the economic crisis are inextricably linked. That is why getting the virus under control is the only way we can both protect lives and our economy. There is simply no other option.

I must warn Londoners that we have a difficult winter ahead but, just as we have always done throughout our city's great history, I know we will get through this dark time by pulling together. I would urge all Londoners to continue to follow the rules so that we can support our National Health Service (NHS), save lives and protect our economy. Thank you, Chair.

I have also been asked for an oral update from Assembly Member Hall. As the handling of this investigation is an operational matter for the police and the case is live, it is not for me to take a view on the case. As with all investigations of this kind, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) will need to take into account the fundamental right to free speech. I am able to provide a factual update on the progress of the investigation. On 4 July [2020] the MPS was passed an allegation from Durham Police of a public order offence relating to a social media video posted on 30 June [2020]. The matter was reviewed by officers and on 29 July a file was submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for early investigative advice. On 25 September the CPS provided some advice and officers began an investigation. The MPS is investigating because the video is believed to have been posted from an address in London. No arrests have been made and the case remains under review.

Navin Shah AM (Chair): Thank you, Mr Mayor. I have two indications so far from Assembly colleagues wanting to come in. Can I invite Assembly Member Russell, please?

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you, Chair. Very briefly, Mr Mayor, I want to pick up on one point that was in your letter to the Prime Minister this morning that went out on Twitter, which is the point about people needing to pass credit reference checks in order to access home testing. Otherwise, they have to use walk-in or drive-through testing facilities, which I agree with you is hard for older and disabled people, particularly people without access to a car.

Is this a gap you can resolve through our transport services? Have you thought about supplying COVID-secure taxis so that people without cars can get to testing centres? Many taxis are sitting idle at the moment because there is not the volume of work. I was talking to the Licensed Taxi Drivers' Association (LTDA) about that just yesterday.

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Transport for London (TfL), Chair, is currently in negotiations with the Department for Transport (DfT) and you will be aware of the conditions attached to us in relation to any additional expenditure. I am happy to pass on to the negotiating team the suggestion made from the Assembly Member about the possibility to do just that.

Caroline Russell AM: Thank you very much, Mr Mayor.

Navin Shah AM (Chair): Next is Assembly Member Boff. You indicated?

Andrew Boff AM: Thank you. Mr Mayor, you referred to the support that you were looking for from the Government. Your developments at outer London stations require TfL to provide funding upfront in order to be a development partner. These have stalled due to the state of TfL's budget.

Will you be using any bailout from the Government to restart these schemes or will the bailout be used only to resolve operational issues?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Thank you, Chair. If I have missed the beginning of the question and I get my answer wrong, I am really happy to add more time on, Chair, with your permission.

The short answer, Assembly Member Boff is that I cannot comment on the ongoing negotiations for the second half but all capital projects must come to a pause unless there are contractual commitments or if a significant amount of money has been spent and it is towards the end. If it is the case that any project has not begun, there is a pause until the situations around the second half are resolved. I am afraid we are not going to get into the longer-term or medium-term resolution yet.

I hope I have not misunderstood the question, Chair.

Andrew Boff AM: You were almost there, Mr Mayor. I am just trying to figure out if you will be asking for a bailout to support TfL's property portfolio or solely for operational issues?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): I beg your pardon, Chair. For all capital investment, not just operational issues, because a lot of the capital investment is crucial for the current service we have and also going forward. Also, it fits in with the Government's agenda, which I support, about supporting jobs and shovel-ready projects. That is included in the package of asks.

Andrew Boff AM: Thank you for that answer.

Navin Shah AM (Chair): All right. Mr Mayor, I have two further indications on your oral update. Can I invite Assembly Member Berry with your question, please?

Siân Berry AM: Thank you, Chair. Again, referring to the letter that you sent to the Government, there is a lot in there about the possible crisis with people's incomes and poverty and destitution. You talk about expanding Universal Credit Child Benefit. You talk about the concern that the lowest-paid workers on the new arrangements would fall below the Minimum Wage. You talk about food poverty issues as well.

Is this not the time for a strong, united call from London for the Government to short-circuit the complexity of all this and, alongside the circuit breaker, bring in a universal basic income that would stop anyone from falling through these gaps?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): The short answer, Assembly Member Berry, is that the Government should be extending the furlough scheme that was in for the first part of the spring and summer, which some people characterised as a universal basic income.

The problem with the Government's current plans are that any additional financial support only comes in in tier 3, at the very high level, and even when it comes in then, as you suggest, it is not even at the previous levels of what it was. It is less. It is two thirds, basically speaking. People do not get to pay two thirds of rent or get two thirds of the bill when they go to buy food or other expenses. Therefore, in my view - and it is a view shared, by the way, cross-party with other colleagues around the country - the Government should be replicating the scheme it had in the first lockdown in tier 2 and tier 3. That is one of the things we are lobbying for going forward.

Some people called the furlough scheme a universal basic income. I am not really sure I want to get into that debate at this stage. I am not sure if time allows it, but in these times of crisis it is really important for individuals, families and businesses to be supported.

Siân Berry AM: Thank you very much.

Navin Shah AM (Chair): Mr Mayor, are you able to hear questions clearly? I had difficulties. I have asked them to raise the volume a bit but are you OK with it now?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Yes. It was difficult to hear Assembly Member Boff but I heard Assembly Member Berry a bit better. It is not as loud as it has been in the past, but hopefully it will improve as the temperature heats up.

Navin Shah AM (Chair): No, unfortunately we cannot do anything about the temperature, but certainly we will try to see if we can raise the volume and get a bit more clarity as well, please. Thank you. Yes, Assembly Member Hall, you are the next to ask.

Susan Hall AM: Thank you. I am happy to shout at you, Mr Mayor, if it helps. Mr Mayor, can you just clarify? I am seeing through on social media that you have announced what is happening on Sky. Can you just confirm that is not the case or is it the case that you are confirming the COVID situation?

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): I have done no media today, Chair. I have been busy talking to Government Ministers and London leaders and health experts and then coming to MQT.

Susan Hall AM: OK. All right. I will take that and see what is going on in social media. Thanks very much.

Sadiq Khan (Mayor of London): Chair, I am slightly crestfallen that colleagues are watching Sky rather than watching me, but there you go.