



Leader's speech

Delivered on Thursday 5 March 2020 by Cllr Rachael Robathan

I am just at the start of my leadership of Westminster City Council and already I see the huge potential which exists out there, on our streets, with our businesses and in our communities.

Last night, at a meeting of the Full Council, we approved our budget for the year ahead. The budget we set speaks to the ambition of this council and the steadfast determination to deliver on the commitments we have made to the city.

We know that we have to invest in services that no other authority has to provide. We are responsible for running a global city for the benefit of the rest of London and the whole of the UK. The services we provide underpin the largest economic output of any local authority area in the country, totalling more than £53bn every year.

But the budget we approved first and foremost invests in the services most valued by our residents and it provides opportunities to tackle major emerging issues such as the climate emergency.

I am particularly proud that our capital programme will see nearly £2.5bn invested in major infrastructure in the city over the next fifteen years. In a city of just over eight square miles that equates to £117 for every single square meter in our city. And that's without taking into account the fact that we don't actually own the vast majority of the land in the city, all of which can benefit from private investment on top of our own. So in reality, public space and buildings in Westminster are getting a shot in the arm unlike ever before.

But this council has been achieving extraordinary things over an extended period.

Our housing regeneration programme has already delivered more than 600 new affordable homes since 2017 and we're on track to smash our target of 1,850 by 2023.

And it's very easy to think about this in the abstract, as numbers on a page, but we know that where you live and the home you make is a vital part of your identity. And that is why it means so much to me when I hear people like 11 year old Asaelle from Ebury Bridge say things like this about our regeneration programme:

"My experience here has been awesome. I have made many new friends and have met many caring people throughout my time in this estate. Knocking down buildings is a big change, but I know it will lead to a better future for the younger children living in the estate".

In the Autumn our Children's Services were once again rated Outstanding by Ofsted. In fact, we even improved since our previous Outstanding rating and the challenge we have been set now is how to spread good practice across the sector whilst maintaining our exceptional position.

And even for those not in the care system, we have developed and rolled out our City Lions programme. City Lions has directly benefited 1,000 young people whose horizons have been broadened by giving them access to the unique cultural and creative learning opportunities only Westminster can offer.

In the past few weeks, the City Lions programme has supported a young person from Church Street, who has special educational needs, to do work experience with an architectural firm in the city. Speaking after his week in work, he spoke in glowing terms about his experience, saying it had helped him recognise architecture as a possibility for his future and it had taught him about the next phase of life, after school and education. This is exactly what City Lions was set up to do and I am proud of what it continues to deliver.

And on top of all this we have supported 1,000 unemployed residents into work, created 110 apprenticeship opportunities, helped over 1,200 people with our Soho Angels, supported over 1,000 residents to stay in their local community by making improvements to their home and so much more.

This is a record to be proud of, but my commitment is clear – to continue to deliver to the same high standards as Westminster has done for years. But there are areas where we know we need to do more and others where resident and business expectations grow or evolve, and we need to stay ahead of these expectations.

But what does this mean in practice? I'll take each in turn:

One. I want Westminster to be greener and cleaner. Westminster will be the UK city known for leading the way in tackling climate change and improving air quality.

Two. I want Westminster to support its vibrant communities. Westminster will be a city which builds the homes it needs to remain a welcoming, vibrant place for people from every background, at every income level and at every age. An environment where economic growth works to its optimum, creating job opportunities and increasing living standards.

And three. I want Westminster to be a smart city. Westminster will be one of the best connected and most technologically advanced cities in the world. We will harness new technologies to make us the easiest council in the UK to do business with.

But what does this mean in practice? I'll take each in turn:

A greener and cleaner city means taking seriously our responsibilities and commitments to tackle the climate emergency. Last September we declared a climate emergency and under my leadership these won't be empty words – we will act. I have established a Climate Action Group that will set the direction on how we are going to deliver on this critical agenda across the whole council.

Every corner of council policy and business will be put to the test to ensure we are doing everything we can to achieve our ambitious goals of being a carbon neutral council by 2030, and a carbon neutral city by 2040.

And this cross-council approach is critical. For too long, we have seen environmental action in isolation from the day-to-day ways that we run our council, the ways we work with partners and the ways we live our lives.

Going forward, through the Climate Action Group we will coordinate the step change necessary to really tackle the single biggest challenge facing us all.

We will begin by challenging our regeneration programme to be greener, faster.

We will be enhancing planning policy by publishing an environmental supplementary planning guide to set the standard for how developers in the city must build.

And we will look at how we can reduce emissions from city hall and our whole property and housing portfolio.

Although we believe that the council contributes only around 2% of the total emissions in the city, we know that we need to take action to get our own house in order to allow us to have sensible, mature discussions with you, our partners in the city, about how else we can change our habits.

We have already commissioned a baseline study of council emissions. This will help us identify how we can have the biggest impact in the shortest possible time and therefore where we should prioritise our action. We know this will require investment and I am pleased to announce that we have set aside an initial £5m to create a green investment fund.

For my daughter, who presses me relentlessly on this, and her generation, this is the single most important issue and I will not let her or any other Westminster resident down.

Westminster already has some of the most vibrant communities in the country. From Soho to Church Street, Westminster is home to the most rich and diverse mix of people from all backgrounds and traditions and with an incredible breadth of aspirations for themselves and their families.

As I have already said, our regeneration programme is on track to deliver over 2,000 new, modern and affordable homes for our residents. These new homes are much-needed by our communities and residents. They will be built to exemplary architectural and sustainability standards so that people can be proud of their homes in the city for Westminster for years to come. These homes will cater for people of all ages and backgrounds, further embedding that rich mix which so defines Westminster.

Of course, we are not the only house builder in the city. A key foundation for Westminster's ongoing success is the City Plan. The City Plan seeks to make Westminster one of the best places to live, work and play – not just in London or the UK, but globally. The City Plan will enable the building of around 20,000 new homes by

2040, and at least 35% will be affordable. And these homes will be built to the highest building design and environmental standards.

One of our most critical projects in the coming years is Oxford Street. We have already committed to spending £150m and I want to make sure that we get the biggest bang for every single pound we spend on the nation's high street. I want to be ambitious and be able to look back in 20 years' time and be truly proud of what we achieve for Oxford Street. This means being ambitious to go further and deliver the Smartest Street in Europe as well as the highest environmental standards and initiatives that will be the envy of any comparable world city. We are working closely with all partners in the area from the major landowners to the BID and of course the residential community, to identify the tangible steps we can take to improve and future-proof the street. Our vision is to strengthen the globally-renowned status of Oxford Street as key destination of vital importance within the West End and London and as a great place to live, shop, work and visit.

The last of my priorities is creating a smart city. Technology is evolving faster than ever before and when it works at its best, technology goes unnoticed. It supports us to live our lives, do our jobs and enjoy our spare time but it does so in the background, without a fuss.

Technology exists to make our lives easier and there is more we can do for our city and its residents. This means installing assistive technology in homes to promote independence amongst some of our most vulnerable residents. It means having the greenest, technology-enabled waste collection service. It means expanding access to super-fast broadband to make it easier for people to do business and access basic services.

These are big goals to work towards and our progress will also be dependent on us being on the front foot and at the forefront of technological advances but, again, it is a challenge I know Westminster is superbly placed to rise to.

Across all areas of council work, we know there is a limit to what we can achieve on our own. We can only realise the fullest extent of our vision by working with major stakeholders in the city.

For example, we need to speak to the development industry to ensure Westminster is making the most of the opportunities available to us and we are shaping development to make sure it is right for our city and our residents. We need to maintain dialogue with our residents to understand what is right for their area. And importantly we need developers themselves to talk and listen to residents.

I know from my time in regeneration that real engagement and collaboration means investing time in relationships and truly listening to people's concerns, their priorities and their ideas for what can be done. We might not always agree on the solutions, but it is only through genuine dialogue that we can build trusting two-way relationships which allow us to deliver the best results for Westminster as a whole.

To kick start this new era of collaboration in Westminster, I encourage you all to read our vision and strategy for the city and I very much look forward to working with you all in the years to come. I am genuinely excited to discover what we can achieve together for our great city and how we can create a City for All.