



Leader's Breakfast speech

Delivered on Thursday 12th July 2018 by Cllr Nickie Aiken

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I told councillors last night, I am humbled by the trust that the voters have placed in the Conservative Group to run Westminster Council for four more years.

This morning I am going to set out how we are going to repay that trust.

Last night my senior leadership team and I set out a forward-looking package of policies and service improvements which will modernise Westminster City Council for the benefit of everyone in the city.

We recognise that public expectations of what councils can deliver for people continue to rise and our service standards have to meet this.

We in Westminster aspire to excellence in city management.

As a flagship local authority at the heart of a global city, we should be matching ourselves for service against the best, most respected and trusted organisations in the world.

We are a City for All, one which takes care of its vulnerable and treats everyone as a human being, not a number on an electoral roll.

We will be a city which is healthier and greener.

A city, led by a council which listens to the community.

And a council not afraid to take tough decisions to stand up for our city.

We called a judicial review on CS11. We launched a root and branch review of CityWest Homes. We launched a review of our planning system.

We did all this because we listen, and we are on the side of the Westminster community.

We also stopped the pedestrianisation of Oxford Street for the same reason. On Monday night, Westminster's Cabinet agreed to invest in a project to develop a real plan for Oxford Street that is both deliverable and has the support of the local community.

The Mayor is right, we did walk away from his proposal. But we did so because we are a brave local authority. We know when to say stop, this is not going to work, let's rethink. The Mayor may call it betrayal. I call it democracy.

I want to run a council that works in partnership with residents, business and stakeholders from all sectors, not against them.

Everyone in this room today is here because you are a key strategic partner of the council.

We value the contribution you make to the city, and we want to take our partnership to the next level.

Together we will take seriously the challenges facing the city.

We take the temperature of our residents every year through the City Survey and we are going to supplement this with an annual business survey to ensure we tap into the views of our partners in the private sector.

This year, we learned from our resident survey that a third of our population in Westminster now regard themselves as struggling financially and we know that the cost of housing in the city is the biggest outgoing for families in the city.

The average house price in Westminster is nearly a million pounds. The average private rent is around £530 a week. These are eye-watering amounts for the average person.

Especially at a time when we are living through the longest period of wage stagnation since the middle of the 19th Century.

If we are to maintain the vibrancy of truly mixed communities in Westminster we must pay particular attention to those who are "just about managing", and ensure families can afford to stay here and prosper.

It is this council's mission to make sure that we never become a borough characterised by the divide between rich and poor. Westminster needs mixed communities to thrive; and we want people on all levels of the income scale to be able to live here.

We are on track to deliver 1,850 new affordable homes across the city by 2023.

And we have identified space to build an additional 2,000 new affordable homes across the city for the next generation.

This will be the largest council house building programme in central London for a generation... so more families can stay in Westminster.

But we can't rebuild Westminster as a truly mixed community on our own. I want to invite everyone to be part of the solution and help deliver on our ambitious vision.

I am inviting developers to come forward with schemes that create more affordable housing for those on middle incomes, whether that is affordable homes to rent, affordable homes to buy, or intermediate schemes which enable people to build an equity stake in their home, like Dolphin Living's excellent home ownership accelerator scheme.

I want to continue to live in a community that supports ambition and opportunity.

I am incredibly proud that Westminster is top of the social mobility league for children, thanks in part to our exceptional schools and our children's service rating outstanding by Ofsted. But there is always more to do and I want to improve access to opportunity across the board.

Young people have incredible businesses and public institutions on their doorsteps here in Westminster. We want them to help them connect with the unique opportunities on their doorsteps and improve their career prospects.

We have worked with our excellent Westminster Youth Council to establish the **#MyWestminster** City Lions – a new scheme for teenagers to broaden their horizons and give our young people the skills they need to get on in life.

By joining City Lions, young people will boost their CV with work experience at some of the city's most prominent organisations. And we are all shortly going to hear from Catherine of Somerset House about how they are working with the City Lions scheme.

As well as raising the aspirations of young people and setting people on the right path, local authorities also touch people at the most sensitive and emotional times in their life.

We register the birth of children.

We help people tie the knot with their partner.

We put our arms round those feeling isolated and lonely.

We provide a hand up to those that have lost everything and end up living on the streets.

And of course, we care for the elderly in the final years of their life.

We have always been a caring local authority but after years of driving efficiencies, it is important to remind ourselves that when it comes to providing services we have to show we are as human as the people we serve.

We must understand our residents' fears, ambitions, frustrations and joys.

You have to listen, and then you have to act.

If you want to know what would improve an estate, ask the people that live there.

And that is what we have done. We are delivering the regeneration programmes in Church Street and, as agreed by Cabinet on Monday evening, Ebury Bridge in partnership with the local community.

We all have to take responsibility for creating the world in which we wish to live.

While public authorities can set an example to create a fairer and more caring city, strong communities are built on strong family foundations.

In families and through friendships we learn to take care of each other. They are the building blocks for community life, because strong families and friendships provide us with a model for building strong communities.

Strong communities contain other institutions too, and we are often fiercely loyal to our social ties - be they clubs, societies, places of worship or local business enterprises.

Many of these institutions are built on the backs of volunteers.

A society where people give back voluntarily is a richer and healthier society. And that is why I am delighted to announce that we will be taking a fresh look at how the great civic city of Westminster can best support and celebrate people who volunteer and give back to their community.

Local government's role is to support them, not to stifle them: to give people the chance to be more involved in making their community stronger.

In the same vein, I am so proud that, after the first time of asking for the Westminster community contribution, we have already raised more in the first year of the scheme than we ever expected.

With a single letter, we have raised nearly half the amount we would have raised by putting Council Tax up by two per cent across the board.

This was an experiment – an experiment dismissed by some cynics who said that people do not care – but I have been reassured to see the generosity of the residents of the City of Westminster.

I trusted the people to support our scheme and the people have repaid this trust to the tune of nearly four hundred thousand pounds.

In recent years we have launched a series of initiatives to clean up the air that we breathe – from **#DontBeIdle** to the Marylebone Low Emission Neighbourhood, which we will hear more about shortly.

But there is always more we can do to bring down pollution levels across the city and to get us all leading healthier lives.

So we will be launching a Healthier Schools programme which will combine our support offer to Westminster schools to improve air quality and tackle childhood obesity.

Most importantly, we have launched a £1m Schools' Clean Air Fund to reduce the level of pollution around schools and protect classrooms.

Finally, I'd like to finish by talking about how we are making the council and our decision making more open and transparent, particularly in the planning system.

When I became Leader of this council, I took care to listen to criticism that people made to me about planning in Westminster.

The perception was that the planning system was not working for people, but for developers. Such as perception is bad for everyone.

I introduced new protocols governing how senior councillors meet with developers, making sure a planning officer is always present, for example.

I listened again to criticism this March, and took further action by asking the Chief Executive to conduct a root and branch review of the whole planning process.

I want us to be a council, which works in partnership with residents and businesses to find balance for our city.

A council which takes decisions not according to narrow rulebooks, but according to whether it meets the strategic needs of the city and its residents.

A council which gives a platform to local people who wish to express their view and where developers and residents alike have confidence that our planning decisions are open and transparent.

This is going to be a city council of the people, run by the people, for the people – from Bayswater to Belgravia, from Maida Vale to Mayfair, from Pimlico to Paddington.

I think you will look back in four year's time and find that Westminster City Council is very different to today, and the city will be an even better place to live, work or visit.

Civic pride stems from pride in your home and in your street; in turn, it fosters pride in your neighbourhood and in your city; and ultimately pride in your country.

Westminster should be a place where everyone has a voice, a voice that is listened to.

This is the spirit of the **#MyWestminster** programme and this is our vision for Westminster.

A people-centred council which cares for everyone.

A council which stands up for the Westminster community.

And a council which takes action and delivers.

We are building a city with more and better quality housing, safer streets, cleaner air, better outdoor space.

It is going to be a more family-friendly city, as well as a business-friendly city: in short, a City for All.

Thank you.